Learning Communities

Discussion Document and Proceedings of the Consultative Conference on Education 2010

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Foreword

Our primary schools are communities of learning for both pupils and teachers. Our challenge is to retain the focus on enhancing educational opportunities for all our pupils in times of adversity, austerity and cutbacks. Supporting our teachers in their task as educators of the next generation remains a core objective of the INTO.

Current policy rhetoric is about encouraging schools to be learning communities. However, the rhetoric must be supported by action. Large class sizes, cutbacks in school funding, and the lack of a comprehensive framework for teacher professional development act as barriers to sustaining effective learning communities. Teachers respond to support and engage enthusiastically in reflection, critical enquiry, collaboration and sharing of practice when they are facilitated by a supportive teaching environment. School principals play a critical role in creating environments conducive to supporting learning communities. Our school leaders must also be enabled, through supportive infrastructure and professional development, to nurture learning communities.

The annual Consultative Conference on Education provides a valuable opportunity to INTO members to engage with topical professional issues. I would like to record the Organisation’s appreciation of our guest presenters, our workshop facilitators, members of the Education Committee and the Education team in Head Office who ensured that the conference on Learning Communities was a successful and stimulating experience for participating delegates. Notwithstanding the challenges, our objective is that schools become true learning communities for all.

Sheila Nunan
General Secretary
January 2014
Part 1

Learning Communities

Discussion Document
Introduction

Defining Learning Communities

A good school for me is a place where everyone is teaching and everyone is learning - simultaneously, under the one roof.

(RS Barth, Improving Schools from Within, 1990:162)

There is no one definition of a learning community and many understandings of what a community of learners might be. In a general sense, a learning community could be described as a group of people who share common values and beliefs and who are actively engaged in learning together from each other. Where schools are concerned, both teachers and pupils are at the core of the school as a learning community.

In the education context, Kilpatrick, Barrett and Jones (2003) describe the twentieth century as the ‘century of the individual, building on Piaget’s developmental theories where the learner is viewed as seeking knowledge alone. However, there has been a move away from an individualistic focus, influenced by Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of social constructivism where the contribution of others to every individual’s learning is recognised. With the increasing use of ICT and the internet, learning communities can expand beyond geographical limitations leading to new and exciting educational dimensions and learning opportunities across schools, communities and cultures. The term ‘learning community’ has become increasingly common in education usage and can mean many different things, from bringing members of the local community in to the school to collaborative learning among pupils or teachers.

In the continuum that is the teaching and learning environment in present day Ireland, attitudes, expectations and roles have changed. Gone are the days that schools simply instructed and children quietly obeyed. Schools today may be described as learning communities inculcating fundamental principles of respect, understanding, knowledge and excellence. Today’s school has multiple educational relationships: teacher to teacher, teacher to student, student to student, teacher to parent, student to parent. Schools today are complex, interwoven, interactive environments where learning flourishes in a spirit of openness and transparency and where principal teachers are more likely to adopt a collegial approach incorporating shared leadership and authority and facilitating the work of the staff. In schools that are learning communities, principals, along with teachers and pupils, are learners too.

The Teaching Council, established in 2006 as a professional body for the teaching profession, has begun to address the issue of the Continuum of Teacher Education. In its deliberations, it has outlined a framework on the continuum of teacher education. This framework by its nature involves a range of learning communities. In the Irish context, for example, changing expectations about teaching, learning and assessment have meant that teachers are expected to adopt a more interactive relationship with students,
teachers, parents and other professionals involved in schooling. Furthermore, in the classroom teachers often work beside special needs assistants, learning support teachers or parent helpers. Outside the classroom, teachers also liaise with a range of other staff in the school about school development planning, whole school evaluations, provision for students with special education needs, among other areas.

Professional practice in regard to teaching is increasingly characterised by collegial rather than autonomous professionalism in an emerging knowledge society, which has significant implications for how best to prepare teachers (Hargreaves, 2003). Drawing upon research commissioned by the Teaching Council the policy document on the teacher education continuum referred to: Teachers’ Practice; Quality Teaching; Professional Lifestyle; Teacher Learning and Professional Relationships. Policy on the teacher education continuum reflects the view that schools today are seen as learning communities, and that teachers are part of professional learning communities.

Professional learning today is more often associated with learning communities, professional learning communities, or communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Lieberman, 2009; Dublin West Education Centre). Learning Communities bring people together for shared learning, discovery, and the generation of knowledge. Within a learning community, all participants take responsibility for achieving the learning goals. Importantly, learning communities are the process by which individuals come together to achieve learning goals. These learning goals can be specific to individual courses and activities, or can be those that guide an entire teaching and learning enterprise. Learning communities are also about connections and interactions between learners which are meaningful. Situating learning in broader experiences and beyond immediate connections enhances learning. Learning communities are more successful when they are inclusive and reflective of diversity (Wenger, 1998).

A group of people who share common visions, values and beliefs and who are actively engaged in learning together may be described as a community of learners. Teachers working collaboratively to enhance curriculum, assessment, teaching strategies and pupils’ learning may be described as a learning community. Learning communities comprise individuals with diverse expertise and knowledge. This diversity is valued and through collaboration, drawn out, shared and used to solve school-based problems. Learning communities foster openness, dialogue, inquiry, risk-taking, and trust. Consideration of the following issues could identify what a learning community means in any school community:

- how effectively a school utilises the diverse expertise and knowledge of the teaching staff to assist student learning;
- the extent to which collaborative learning is fostered among staff;
- the level of collaboration with other schools, other education institutions, industry, business, or the wider community, in building and delivering programmes to assist student learning;
- how the CPD activities undertaken by staff contribute to pupil learning outcomes;
- the extent to which the school encourages/ supports/ leads parents to be actively engaged in their children’s learning- schools working in partnership with parents.

These and other issues are considered in this discussion document.
Schools as Learning Communities

Bringing Professionals together in the Pursuit of Learning

A school learning community could be described as engaging pupils, teachers and principals simultaneously in learning. Learning may involve extending classroom practice into the community and bringing community personnel into the school to enhance curriculum and learning experiences.

Supportive and shared leadership is an important dimension of learning communities. Collective creativity based on shared values and vision is encouraged in a learning community. School management provides supportive conditions for teachers to share personal experience. In Japan, for example, teachers teach fewer classes and use a greater portion of their time to plan, confer with colleagues, work with students individually, visit each other’s classrooms and engage in other professional development activities. A paradigm shift will be needed by both public and teachers here in Ireland to introduce this concept.

A professional community of learners is where teachers and principals seek and share learning and act on what they learn. The goal is to enhance their effectiveness as professionals so that pupils can benefit. Continuous learning and improvement are at the core of professional learning communities (Hord, 1997). Professional learning communities are also seen as a powerful staff development approach and a potent strategy for school change and improvement. Learning communities provide opportunities for collaborative enquiry and learning for teachers, involving shared decision making, and structured time for planning instruction, observing each other’s classrooms and sharing feedback. Therefore, for schools to become learning communities, collaborative approaches and leadership are essential.

The school principal and learning communities

The Education Act (1998) sets out specific functions, rights and responsibilities for principals and teachers in Irish schools. Section 23 of the Act lists functions that apply in particular to the principal. Among these are the responsibility for the daily management of the school, the provision of leadership to teachers, students and non-teaching staff, the encouragement of parents to be involved in their children’s education, and, in collaboration with others, the setting of objectives and the monitoring of achievement of these objectives.

However, without the use of the term learning community, it does outline the principal’s role in the creation of such an environment. Section 23.2(c) of the Education Act refers to the role of the principal teacher in creating a learning environment in the school community. It states that the principal shall be responsible for the following:
. . . the creation, together with the board, parents of students and teachers, of a school environment which is supportive of learning among the students and which promotes the professional development of the teachers’.

(The Education Act, 1998, Section 23.2(c))

The Report of the Working Group on the Role of the Primary School Principal (1999) examined leadership and management in primary schools and concluded that the principal requires an array of skills in order to ‘balance the need for continuity and stability within the school community with the increasing demand for policy makers and the wider community for change, innovation and transformation’ (DES, 1999, p.19). The Department of Education has thus acknowledged the role of the principal as pivotal in the school and the wider community and recognised the need for cooperation between both. The DES (1999) suggests that a challenge for the principal is to ‘change the culture of the school from one where only pupils are learners to one where schools are places of learning for teachers also’ (DES 1999:25).

McDonald (2008) points out the changing nature of education in the 21st century. The belief in knowledge and intelligence as being fixed has been replaced by the idea of multiple intelligences and the development of the knowledge society. Life-long learning has replaced the concept of being educated for a specific role in life. As a result, our institutes of education - primary, secondary and tertiary - all need to adapt in order to reflect this need and to cater for the wider demands of society. According to Coolahan (2005) the learning society places an emphasis on student fluidity and on various types of intelligence. School is thus seen as a learning community for both pupils and teachers alike under a collaborative leadership. Teamwork, shared learning, and the teacher as co-learner are the requirements for a strong learning community. Leading a school as a community of learners and encouraging teachers to be involved in a learning community are challenges for the principal teacher.

According to Fullan (2006) the principal is the ‘nerve-centre’ of school improvement and even the most challenged schools thrive with a strong leader. He believes that schools achieve success through the working closely together of the following five elements, which he described as ‘individual skills and dispositions of teachers; a professional learning community; coherence or focused effort; resources and the principal’ (Fullan 2006:3). Fullan (2006) draws from his own action-research to establish how important the role of the principal is in leading the learning community. In a large district north of Toronto, Canada, capacity-building with school teams in the area of literacy was established. Each of the 40 schools initially involved provided a team of three people which included the principal, a lead literacy teacher and a learning support teacher. According to Fullan (2006) the principal was to the forefront of the capacity-building and the subsequent improvement in literacy levels in the school. While focusing on the core objective of the project the principals also expanded on the brief by taking into account how parents and the community could be involved in education, how schools could work together and learn from each other, and how schools could relate to policies and frameworks devised by the state.

Fullan (2006) draws two conclusions regarding the role of the principal. He believes that school-wide success, and in particular continuous improvement, is dependent on leadership from the principal. This leadership needs to focus on teaching for improvement in pupil learning, and also on the development of leaders from among the teaching staff, who will see these improvements carry on into the future. Fullan also believes that:
the principal has a critical role to play in system-wide reform, development and success . . . by working in clusters of schools, or other networks, principals can influence their colleagues but can also help refine national strategies that get people working on the policy issues of the day.

(Fullan 2006:7).

Therefore, involvement in networks and learning communities can offer significant support to principals regarding their leadership roles in schools. Many primary school principals in Ireland join local support groups where they meet in an informal manner and discuss issues of concern. Some of these networks are facilitated by the various education centres situated around the country.

**LDS**

Leadership Development for Schools (LDS) was established by the Department of Education and Science in 2002 to promote professional development for principals, deputy principals and others involved in school management and leadership in first and second level schools. Since its establishment in 2002 until 2010, when it was subsumed into the new Professional Development Support for Teachers (PDST), over 5,000 teachers have participated in its programmes (LDS, 2010). The LDS provided a number of courses, which are continuing as part of the PDST. *Misneach* is provided for newly-appointed principals, and is available on a modular basis. It is also residential, and provides much sought-after advice for new principals. It also allows principals to network and establish contacts with fellow professionals. Other courses provided by the LDS are geared towards experienced principals, deputy principals and principals teaching in Special Schools.

According to the OECD in *Improving School Leadership: Country Background Report-Ireland* (2007) the establishment of the LDS and the subsequent roll-out of *Misneach* was ‘a significant policy initiative’ (OECD 2007:60). It also points out how the other LDS programmes have encouraged both the development of leadership skills among principals and the participation of school leaders in academic discourse.

**INTO**

The Irish National Teachers’ Organisation (INTO) offers an invaluable learning community through its Principals’ and Deputy Principals’ Forum. Regular meetings bring together the principals and deputy principals in each district of the Organisation where issues and concerns of leadership in schools are discussed. In addition, each INTO district has a representative on the National Committee for Principals and Deputies (PDC), an advisory committee to the Central Executive Committee (CEC). Submissions are brought to the Central Executive Committee (CEC) and, if appropriate, to the DES. Advice, such as legal and employment advice, is always available to principals through their representatives on the CEC and on the Principals and Deputy Principals Committee (PDC), from officials in the union head-office and on the INTO website.

The INTO also organises a biennial consultative conference for principals and deputy principals, which provides an additional opportunity for principals and deputies to network, provide mutual support and to discuss issues of relevance to school leadership. During the school-year 2010-2011 INTO Learning offered online support through a series of modules for newly appointed principals. Practically all principals and deputy principals are members of the INTO.
The Irish Primary Principals’ Network (IPPN) is perhaps the largest learning community available specifically to principals. It is an independent, professional association of school leaders established in 2000, with a membership of 5,100 principals and deputy principals representing 90% of all primary schools (IPPN, 2010). Through its county networks and its comprehensive website the IPPN provides daily advice to principals on such areas as recruitment, school policies and administration, and on legal matters. Advice is available using a free phone number and through its online network e-mail system.

In January, every year, the IPPN holds its annual conference attended by about one thousand principal teachers. It also holds an annual conference for deputy principals. The IPPN publishes position papers and submissions to the DES and other bodies. It also provides online summer courses and a monthly magazine for principals and deputy principals.

The IPPN provides resources and supports for Newly Appointed Principals (NAPs), and through its office deals with any urgent or complex queries that a NAP may have. The IPPN is of the view that all newly appointed principals should be entitled to a professionally trained mentor, and assigns experienced principals as mentors to newly appointed principals, on the basis that research has shown that mentoring is one of the most powerful and effective means of empowering newly appointed principals. Mentors are trained for their role by the LDS. Principal teachers with three or more years’ experience may volunteer to become a mentor. The IPPN suggests that the mentor and the NAP meet on an informal basis, where issues and problems can be discussed and advice can be given. The mentor is generally the first port of call for the NAP if a query or problem arises in the course of work. The IPPN advises that mentoring takes place during the NAP’s first year, after which the NAP is introduced by the mentor to a support group, which generally meets monthly in the local education centre.

As outlined above, it is clear that the principal, while leading the learning community in his or her own workplace, is also a member of other learning communities that serve to enhance his or her own professional development and leadership. It is vital that principals avail themselves of these supports, in order to equip themselves with the necessary skills to enrich and encourage the development of the other learning communities where they hold leadership roles. Blase and Blase (1998) argued that today’s principal is a facilitator of staff and student learning, and a leader of a learning community. In their view, principal teachers are instructional leaders who teach, coach and promote the professional development of teachers. By being available to their staff, principals have a key role in enhancing the motivation, self-esteem, sense of security and morale of their staff (Blase and Blase 1998).

Contribution of middle management

Principal teachers are assisted in their role as school leaders by a deputy principal and by other members of the teaching staff who are in promoted positions. The Department of Education issued a circular in 1997 which had a profound change on the internal management of primary schools. Circular 6/97 built on the proposals contained in the White Paper, Charting our Education Future (Government of Ireland 1995). The objective was the provision of a shared-leadership and management of primary schools through a revised in-school management structure. O’Hanlon (2008), citing McDonagh (1998) refers to the fact that, heretofore, the principal was solely responsible for the
running of the school and despite the fact that posts of responsibilities were first established in 1968 there was an ad-hoc system in the assigning of these duties. According to Circular 07/03 the objectives of the revised management structures were designed to match the responsibilities of the posts more closely to the central tasks of the school, to clearly specify responsibilities for the various posts and to focus on the provision of opportunities for teachers to assume responsibility in the school for instructional leadership, curriculum development, the management of staff and academic and pastoral work of the school (Circular 07/03:1).

These objectives would appear to reflect what was recommended by the DES in its 1999 publication Report of the Working Group on the Role of the Primary School Principal. This report called for the development of curriculum leaders; it also suggested that some of the day-to-day administration in schools would be delegated to middle-management who would also have responsibility for some of the communication within the school.

While there is a substantial body of work exploring and debating the role of the principal teacher there is less published on the contribution of middle-management. Anecdotal evidence would suggest that in the last decade post-holders have indeed taken on many responsibilities such as the co-ordination of curriculum and school policies, administrative areas such as registration of pupils and pastoral areas such as religion and management of special needs pupils. However, there would still appear to be unevenness in the distribution of responsibilities and substantial differences exist from school to school. There is also a commonly held view that the smaller the school the more burdened the middle management team is. For example, prior to the introduction of the moratorium on filling vacant promoted posts in 2009, a school of 30 teachers approximately would have 15 teachers in promoted posts, thus spreading thinly the co-ordination of curriculum plans. Smaller schools have the same number of curricular areas to deal with and policies to develop, with obviously fewer teachers in middle management.

In research published by O’Hanlon (2008) and McDonald (2008) both refer to the paradigm of a collaborative approach to management and leadership. O’Hanlon (2008) claims that while her research found that, in general, school leaders are carrying out their duties and sharing leadership responsibilities, there is little evidence of a collaborative approach. Likewise McDonald (2008) refers to ‘a concern for the collaborative role requirements of the principal teacher in a knowledge-based society’ (McDonald 2008:32). He concludes, however, that despite the fact that many problems were identified during his research with regard to management of schools and lack of collaboration between members of the in-school management teams there was sufficient goodwill by all involved to attempt to solve the problems. In 2006, the IPPN published research entitled Investing in School Leadership. Contrary to the findings in the above research and of anecdotal findings, some principals stated that lack of support from the in-school management team was an issue, especially when it came to people management. Other principals felt they were given a lot of support by the middle-management, considering time constraints and the paltry allowances paid. In their publication, Giorraíonn Beirt Bóthar (IPPN, 2007), the IPPN attempts to promote distributed leadership through the recognition of the very often untapped potential of the deputy principal. According to this and to other research, deputy principals often feel that their role can be undermined by the over-vesting of authority in the principal and by the principal’s own reluctance to devolve leadership.

According to research referred to above, it is suggested that improved communication and defining of duties, along with development of collaborative management of schools as the way forward to creative effective learning communities. The need for professional
development, not alone for principals and deputy principals, but for all members of the in-school management team (ISM) is also suggested by researchers. While there is no doubt that the contribution of middle management, since the inception of the new regime, has been laudable in terms of work within the schools - planning and policy development, running of various projects with the pupils, pastoral work, to name but a few - it is also obvious that a more structured and collaborative approach needs to be developed in order to maximise the potential of all involved.

**Collaboration and co-operative teaching**

In addition to leadership, there is a strong focus on collaboration and shared responsibility for learning in learning communities. Such collaboration and co-operation can take many forms, such as co-operative teaching, co-teaching, or team-teaching.

**Co-operative teaching**

Co-operative teaching usually involves two or more teachers working together with a group of heterogeneous learners in a classroom. The three main keys to success in co-teaching are planning, disposition and evaluation. Numerous co-teaching relationships can exist. It is not unusual for class teachers and resource teachers for special needs to work together in classrooms to meet the needs of pupils with special educational needs.

Planning is required for each lesson and focuses on the whole class in the first instance. Child specific issues may then be addressed. The principal plays a vital role in the organisation of timetables for resource and special needs teachers, which also facilitate planning. The class teacher can provide a general overview of content, curriculum and standards in the class. The resource teacher for special needs can supply individual plans, goals, objectives and possible modifications for students in the shared class. In order to become an effective team, the teaching staff needs to address issues such as fairness, grading, behaviour management and philosophy of teaching and each person’s contribution must be equally valued and each must have equal decision-making powers. The process of co-teaching should be evaluated periodically (for example, monthly) and monitored daily through reflecting on whether the approach being taken is working for all pupils and whether the needs of both the class teachers and the resource teachers are being met.

**Benefits of co-teaching**

There are instructional benefits for pupils arising from co-teaching. These include a richer classroom experience as teachers pool resources, materials, experiences and strengths. Having access to more teachers, pupils are exposed to different and sometimes divergent examples, anecdotes and stories and ways of thinking. Given the diversity of instructional styles, and of the range of tasks, talents and temperaments, co-teaching enables teachers to implement approaches that they might not have considered if teaching alone.

Co-teaching may also benefit teachers professionally. The co-teaching experience enables teachers to learn from each other. Miller and Miller (1997) identify three skills which determine the dimensions of teaching competency. These are, (1) knowledge of subject matter (2) knowledge of instructional planning, delivery and evaluation and (3) personal characteristics and behaviour. Co-teaching provides opportunities for professional growth in these areas. Through co-teaching teachers emerge with a strengthened knowledge base and enriched understanding of areas of the curriculum.
Teachers share activities and materials they had personally found successful in separate teaching experiences and they consult on issues such as strategies to deal with issues of student behaviour and performance. The sharing of responsibility was cited as one of the most enriching and satisfying experiences of co-teaching.

**Strategies Used In Co-Teaching.**

There are a number of various strategies that can be used in co-teaching. The following are some examples:

1. **One teaches one supports.** One teacher leads the lesson and the other takes a supporting role. This is a good starting point for collaboration.

2. **Alternative teaching.** The class is divided into two groups, one large one small. The small group receive remedial help in this case. The risk of this style is that the small group are publicly identified as needing help.

3. **Parallel teaching.** Two teachers teach two groups in the same content. In this case the class is divided into two even halves. The benefit for the pupils is that they are in a smaller group and there is more pupil participation.

4. **Station teaching.** Curricular content is divided into two parts. One teacher teaches half of the content to half of the students while the other teaches the other part to the rest. The groups then switch teachers to complete the lesson. The pupils gain benefits of two teaching styles and points of view.

5. **Team teaching.** Both teachers jointly plan and are equally involved in teaching the lesson. One teacher may begin a lesson by introducing vocabulary while the other provides examples to place the words in context. The benefits for teachers come from rich opportunities to model learning strategies, from question asking and from problem-solving behaviour in the class.

The most appropriate approach will depend on student needs, the subject being taught, the teachers’ experience and on practical considerations such as space and time for planning. Co-teaching must be supported by ongoing professional development opportunities and guiding documents for teachers and administrators.

**The co-operative school**

In a co-operative school students work primarily in co-operative learning groups, and teachers and other school staff work in co-operative teams. Co-operative teaching teams of small groups of teachers work together to increase their instructional expertise and success. These teaching teams set clear goals, include active and committed members and have designated leaders. Teachers across all class levels may come together to form a collegial team with the mutual goal of providing quality education for all students. The teachers in a team are jointly responsible for a group of pupils over a number of years. The strengths of teams are found in positive interdependence among teachers, in shared accountability and in a shared purpose.

**Characteristics of effective teams**

Co-operative teaching or co-teaching will draw on teachers’ skills and experiences in collaboration and team work. Some characteristics of effective teams are as follows:

- all participants understand, agree to, and identify the primary goal for the team;
• the team is characterised by open communication that includes ideas, opinions and feelings;
• team members trust one another and no team member will deliberately take advantage of another;
• team members support each other by demonstrating care and concern;
• team members manage their human differences. They clarify how they are different from one another and use these differences as strengths for creative problem solving rather than as hindrances to problem solution;
• teams meet and work together only when necessary;
• team members have fundamental team skills, including those for communication, those for addressing task goals and those for maintaining effective team functioning;
• teams have leaders but recognise that leadership is shared by all team members.

Co-operative teams may also include task-forces, which may be set up to consider, study and diagnose a school problem, and where teams gather data, consider solutions and make recommendations to the staff as a whole, or ad-hoc groups, which may be formed during staff meetings to involve all staff members in making decisions, where the team listens to a recommendation, considers whether to accept or modify the proposal and reports their decision to the entire staff. How school staffs work together should also reflect the co-operative nature of the school. Formal and informal co-operative groups can be used at staff meetings just as they are in the classroom.

**Co-operative learning**

Co-operative learning is considered to be a prerequisite and foundation of most instructional innovations. These innovations include: a thematic integrated curriculum, whole language teaching, critical thinking, active reading, process writing, materials based problem solving, maths, learning communities and authentic, performance-based assessment.

**Collaboration**

In the past teachers tended to work alone and there was little or no collaboration among teachers. Nowadays educators share ideas, develop plans together, implement those plans and evaluate outcomes. Ideas can be shared, better strategies can be developed and problems solved. Teachers are better able to monitor student progress and to evaluate the approaches used in the classroom. However, collaboration must be voluntary and based on parity where all contributions are valued equally. Collaboration requires a shared goal and includes shared responsibility for key decisions, shared accountability for outcomes and shared resources. Collaboration can also be considered as emergent, emerging as teachers gain experience (Friend & Cook, 1996).

Teachers collaborate in order to engage in shared problem-solving, proposing solutions, evaluating ideas, planning, implementing and evaluating outcomes. Collaboration is also at the core of co-teaching, team-work and consulting with other professionals. For example, a consultative arrangement with other professionals may be described as a specialised problem-solving process in which one professional with particular expertise assists another. The **consultant** contributes specialised information toward an
For collaboration to work best, teachers reflect on their personal belief systems and share ideas. They refine their interaction skills with both colleagues and pupils - listening, attending to non-verbal signals, asking questions, making statements in clear and non-threatening ways, conducting effective meetings, resolving conflict and persuading others. A supportive environment where time is made available for collaboration is also essential.

**Mentoring and the learning community**

**Teacher induction**

The National Pilot Project on Teacher Induction¹ (NPPTI) was established in 2002 as a partnership initiative between the Department of Education and Science, the three teacher Unions, the Colleges of Education (primary strand of the project), UCD (second level strand of the project) and the schools participating in the project. Through the project holistic induction support, including mentoring and professional development, was available to a cohort of NQTs in schools participating in the project. The NPPTI had mentoring at its core, where experienced teachers mentor newly qualified teachers (NQTs). The NPPTI team provided training to experienced teachers who volunteered to become mentors for NQTs.

A mentor can be described as someone who helps another person through an important transition such as coping with a new situation like a new job or a major change in personal circumstances or in career development or personal growth. Odell and Huling (2000) define mentoring as a professional practice that occurs in the context of teaching whenever an experienced teacher supports, challenges and guides novice teachers in their teaching practice. A mentor’s activities typically include giving practical assistance, clarifying roles and responsibilities, identifying and analysing learning experiences, opportunities and gaps; encouraging analysis and reflection; structuring learning and work and confronting through questioning, listening and giving feedback.

Mentoring requires many organisational and interpersonal skills. On a personal level, mentors must be patient, understanding and accessible, and have good communication skills. They offer the NQT guidance and support grounded in trust, with the guarantee of confidentiality. It is also essentially a non-judgemental relationship. The key skills required by mentors, according to the NPPTI are the following: listening and communication skills, empathy, observation and feedback, coaching, goal-setting, other related skills. Mentors provide practical help and guidance to NQTs, particularly in areas such as classroom management. Mentors can also be role models. They are a vital component of induction in primary schools. Important as they are to the NQT, mentors are of equal importance to the system itself, as they pass on the cultures and standards of the community they represent.

¹ www.teacherinduction.ie
NPPTI team also facilitated professional development workshops and seminars for NQTs and mentors. Since September 2010, the project became the National Induction Programme, and aspects of induction are available to all NQTs through the Education Centre Network. To assist in supporting the professional development programme for NQTs at primary level, the NPPTI team trained facilitators, nominated by education centres, many of whom were also mentors, to facilitate the professional development seminars.

The education system is in a continual state of renewal, as teachers retire and newly qualified teachers enter the system. Any community which does not continually renew itself will stagnate and die, and the wider educational community is no different. When NQTs join a school, they are becoming part of a community, which has its own ethos and identity (NPPTI Guidelines for NQTs). NQTs must be helped and supported in their integration into this pre-existing community:

In order to maintain a learning community new teachers must not only be supported in the development of their instructional and management skills but must also be assimilated into the culture of the school. Mentoring is therefore a necessary element of a professional learning community.

(Roberts and Pruitt, 2003)

It is important for NQTs that they develop a sense of belonging, and the role of an able mentor is central to this integration of the newcomer into the community:

Successful mentoring benefits all stakeholders. For school administrators, mentoring aids recruitment and retention; for higher education institutions, it helps to ensure a smooth transition from campus to classroom; for teacher associations, it represents a new way to serve members and guarantee instructional quality; for teachers, it can represent the difference between success and failure; and for parents and students, it means better teaching. Mentoring is not an enterprise for those who prefer to work alone, either as individuals or as organisations. It requires partners.

(The National Foundation for Education, Fall 1999, No. 1)

All members of the school community are partners in the integration of new members. The NPPTI advocated a whole school approach to the induction of new members as all teachers are participants in the ongoing learning community. According to the NPPTI,

It is widely acknowledged that building strong professional learning communities through programmes such as the Induction programme will benefit schools as learning organisations in the long-term.

(www.teacherinduction.ie).

The first years of teaching are challenging times for a NQT. NQTs, therefore, need guidance as part of the process of becoming embedded into the professional learning community within their own school but also within the teaching profession. The role of the mentor is to support the NQT towards independence. The OECD also recognised the important role played by mentors in supporting NQTs:

Creating a structure that allows experienced teachers to work with novice teachers and that acknowledges their expertise will ultimately strengthen the overall organisation, including retaining good practitioners in the classroom.

(Teachers Matter, OECD, 2005, p.121)
According to Johnson and Kardos (2002) ‘what new teachers want in their induction is experienced colleagues who will take their daily dilemmas seriously, watch them teach and provide feedback, help them develop instructional strategies to address the challenges, model teaching skills, and share insights about students’ work and lives’ (p. 13).

Mentoring is defined as a ‘Professional practice that occurs in the context of teaching whenever an experienced teacher supports, challenges and guides novice teachers in their teaching practice’ (Odell and Huling, 2000). Thanks to the pilot programme on induction, it has been possible to put the practice of mentoring on a professional footing and to provide support for it. It has been occurring informally in the practice in our schools for generations, with experienced teachers giving of their time and expertise, without support or recognition, to help new members into the profession. Mentoring brings many benefits to the learning community. The learning community as a whole benefits in having its values and practices passed on. Thus, the stability of the learning community is preserved. The NQT gains by having help in the difficult first year of teaching, in the areas of curriculum and instruction, classroom management, administrative requirements and in policies. NQTs also have access to social and emotional support, if and when required. The experience of the NPPTI has also shown that mentors benefit from their engagement in mentoring activities, as they become increasingly involved in reflection. They often show a heightened zeal and gain fresh perspectives about teaching and learning.

The role of the mentor in the induction process

The NPPTI described the role of the mentor as one of providing support to the NQT and of coordinating the induction plan and induction activities in collaboration with the principal and the NQT. The mentor also liaises with the principal in providing short updates at staff meetings regarding the induction of NQTs and liaises with other staff members in relation to opportunities for the newly qualified teacher to visit their classrooms and to work alongside the class teachers. In addition, the mentor consults with the principal teacher regarding the release days for both the mentor and the NQT in order to make the necessary substitution arrangements in a timely manner. The mentor may also liaise with other schools in the area for the purpose of observing and sharing practice. Mentors seek to enable and empower the NQT to seek/source answers to questions. In terms of their relationship with NQTS, mentors are expected to establish clear boundaries, to ensure the NQT is familiarised with school policies and procedures, to work collaboratively with the NQT in the classroom e.g. observing and giving feedback, to accept and give feedback in a constructive, open and professional manner and to engage in action planning with the NQT. At all times mentors are expected to adopt a professional approach to their role and relationship with the NQT.

Activities that take place as part of school-based induction include mentor/NQT meetings, observation by NQT of other classes in own school or in another school, demonstration or modelling of lessons, observation of teachers teaching in NQT’s own class, co-teaching, observation of NQT by mentor, planning time, co-planning with another teacher, visiting other educational settings and meetings with other school personnel such as special needs assistants, learning support teachers, language support teachers and resource teachers.

Our most valuable resource in schools is our teachers, and the NQTs are vital to the education system. Integrating them into existing schools, while benefiting from their fresh perspective, is one of the more positive challenges facing teachers. Buddy systems
among pupils may also be considered a form of mentoring, where older pupils my assist with the integration of newer pupils into the school community.

Mentoring is, and has always been, happening in our schools. It is a valuable and often invisible part of the fabric of our learning communities. The experience of NQTs and the induction programme have served to highlight the centrality of mentoring. Perhaps, given the current challenges facing teachers through the system-wide introduction of ICT, for example, consideration should be given to examining to what extent a mentoring model, properly resourced and funded, can make a difference to all teachers, in addition to the successful induction of NQTs into our schools. The process of mentoring does not always entail a more experienced teacher mentoring a newly qualified teacher. Peers can also mentor each other, and much teacher learning can take place within school communities.

Teacher professional development partnership with schools project

A Teacher Professional Development Partnership with Schools Project was launched in St. Patrick’s College, Drumcondra in 2005. It has successfully involved many third year B.Ed. students, dedicated teams of college supervisors and a cluster of different schools. Bernadette Ní Aingléis, Project Co-ordinator and Head of Teaching Practice in St. Patrick’s College commented as follows:

Whilst the focus in the project is on the learner teacher (the student teacher), this emphasis does not exclude the simultaneous learning of teachers, principal teachers and the College. A recognition that all participants are learners in the collaborative process prevails throughout.


One of the key aims of the Project is ‘to create new spaces for the student teachers in which to learn reflectively about teaching and learning during teaching practice’ (Ní Aingléis, 2008, p.2). The structure of teaching practice for the project student differs somewhat from that of other students. Through pre-teaching practice seminars the student builds up closer links with the college supervising team. Through working closely with the class-teacher, who acts as a mentor, the student builds up a relationship of trust with the teacher. The teacher observes a number of lessons each week, and gives detailed feed-back and support to the student. The student is also involved in what is known as the ‘Wednesday Experience’, where on each Wednesday afternoon the student becomes involved in aspects of school life other than class-teaching. This might include observation of Learning Support teachers at work, accompanying a class on tour, doing yard duty or being involved in extra-curricular activities. The student might be afforded the opportunity to learn about the role of education welfare officers, to complete roll books or to sit in on parent teacher meetings. Some of the other aims of the Partnership Project are as follows:

- to explore roles, responsibilities and expectations of schools, student teachers and the College in the context of teaching practice and communities of learners;
- to provide professional development for schools in working with student teachers e.g. relationship building, reflective practices, observations etc.;
- to provide a forum for schools, student teachers and the College to articulate and share an understanding of partnership, of teacher learning, of pedagogy and of professional knowledge.
The project offers seminars for the participating schools. These seminars deal with teacher learning and mentoring, reflective practices and collaboration. As mentioned above, students are prepared for working closely with the teacher on how to get the most out of school-life. Joint seminars for schools, students and supervisors are held. The key role of the principal teacher in leading the project at school is also recognised. According to Ní Aingléis (2009, p 17) school principals play ‘a key role in developing the kind of in-school culture which encourages student teachers, affirms teachers in their roles as professional mentors and welcomes collaborations which strengthens schools as learning communities’.

Parental involvement and community partnerships

This section will examine what parental engagement means in the context of an effective Learning Community. Obstacles that can sometimes hinder that meaningful engagement and how such engagement might be developed to become integral to the educational system will also be considered.

Traditional understandings about parental / community involvement

It is now widely accepted that collaboration is the key to school improvement; furthermore it has been found that teachers /schools are the prime influences in deciding to what extent that collaboration between teacher and parent, teacher and student and student and parent, occurs (Chrispeels and Coleman, 1996).

In our discourse on learning communities perhaps the narrower concept of parental involvement could be more appropriately replaced by home school community partnership. In general teacher education has not prioritised building home/school partnerships. Many schools have focussed on fixing parents by involving them in initiatives in schools without any rethinking as to how schools need/could restructure and develop staff skills towards more meaningful home/school partnership (Chrispeels and Coleman, 1996). Home school community (HSC) partnership is defined as the mutual collaboration, support and participation of families, community members and agencies, and school staff, at home, in the community, at school, in activities and efforts that directly and positively affect the success of children’s learning and development (Coleman, 1996).

Interpretations of parental involvement

Attitudes, expectations and approaches need to be examined if a level of ‘parental involvement’ or ‘HSC partnership’ that both informs and enriches practice is to be established. Practical parental involvement, for example, running the school library or accompanying children on school trips, is to be welcomed but cannot substitute for the more deliberate dissemination and discussion of information that will help parents to help their children to learn. The use of the word ‘involvement’ for a range of such activities has served to obscure the key issues. Schools may have a great many parents providing assistance and see this as a thriving system of parental involvement whereas very little dialogue or learning by either parents or staff may be taking place. Furthermore, such practical involvement in a school could serve to limit access to information from schools if only those parents who are able and willing to ‘service’ the school gain an insight into the curriculum (Jowett and Baginsky, 1991).

In the context of a learning community parental involvement must not be something that is ‘done’ to parents – it’s an attitude that is implicitly acknowledged or ignored in
much of what educational professionals do. It demands an approach to learning that
recognises and draws on the influence and contribution of the home and in viewing
contact with parents on a variety of issues as fundamental. A climate of real
approachability and one which offers opportunities for dialogue should prevail.

At school level the teaching staff needs to understand the value of struggling with
parents and community members to define roles and responsibilities – this must be seen
as a process and not a quick fix. Teachers are the primary partnership builders with
families and communities. However, they cannot do it alone or without the support of
both state and school. One study showed that where teachers’ sense of efficacy increased
in regard to their own craft, their willingness to reach out and work in partnership with
parents and community agencies increased (Chrispeels, 1992; Rosenthalz 1989). A
clearer understanding of the level of state actions and policies that best support both
school level change and classroom practices but which also actually engage teachers,
children, parents and their communities in learning partnerships is necessary (Moles,

Chrispeels (1996) argues that building stronger home school partnerships or learning
communities which provide the vital context for more positive student attitudes and for
improved student achievement must be done as part of school-wide improvement
efforts. The research on effective family practices combined with effective schools
research and placed within a typology of partnership roles - offers schools a conceptual
framework through which to re-examine current practices and relations with parents
and to develop ways to close the gap between home, school and community in order to
enhance student learning.

One study Learning Together: The Student/Parent/Teacher/Triad found that there
were sharp differences in perceptions of collaborations / partnerships between parents,
teachers, and students; teachers show little awareness of its strength, collaboration
between parents and teachers is perceived by both ‘partners’ as being one sided, each
‘partner’ sees the other as being unresponsive while it is invisible to the pupils. The
study also found that collaboration between teachers and pupils varies between
classrooms and seems to be based upon individual teacher’s perceptions of students’
acceptance of responsibility and that parents are very keenly aware of such collaboration
where it exists; classroom level differences are also strong and teachers’ attitudes and
practices clearly determine the level and extent of collaboration in schools (Coleman,
Collinge and Tabin, 1996).

Whether or not partnership practices between parents, teachers, community are any
more meaningful in 2010 would make for interesting research especially in light of
Education Act 1998 – in which schools are mandated to work in partnership with
parents and work at bringing them closer to their own children’s learning. An
examination of each school community in terms of it being an effective Learning
Community could produce fascinating findings.

**Student councils**

Pupils are at the core of learning in primary schools. Pupils, however, can no longer be
viewed as passive recipients of teaching. It is a core principle of the Primary School
Curriculum that children are active in their own learning. Children are also increasingly

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2 The information in this section was published in the INTO publication on SPHE (2006).
recognised as citizens in their own right. Therefore, involving children more actively in the life of the school and in decision-making on issues of concern to them is emerging through the establishment of student councils, even at primary level.

In general, the aims of student councils is that pupils, representative of their peers, join with other stakeholder groups within the structures of the school and have as real a voice as teachers, parents and management. A wider aim is to improve the citizenship status of all pupils. In reality the issues that impinge on school pupils in their daily life are often quite solvable minutiae. The aim proposed for the children’s deliberations is always ‘How can we together make our school a better place?’

One school described its approach as electing a student council each September. This is done by the pupils of fifth and sixth classes, with a total of six classes involved. It includes two representatives per class, one boy and one girl. Representatives are elected democratically, usually the person that receives the most votes, but some classes use a form of PR (proportional representation). One teacher, as part of a post of responsibility, encourages and supports the council. The student council in this school was involved in organising charity events and school events, on discussions on policies affecting pupils, and on participation in the Green Flag programme. The Student Council has been very positive for the school and is an example of the broader experience of learning gained by the pupils as part of their own school community.

**Concluding comment**

While there are children attending primary schools today who are thriving as members of vibrant learning communities, there are some children who find school challenging and the system may not be meeting their needs. The reasons for this are multi-faceted and complex and are not explored in depth here. Inclusive learning communities are successful when the diverse backgrounds and experiences of learners are used to inform the group’s collective learning. To that end activities should be sought to help participants reach out and connect with others from diverse backgrounds. Learning communities provide supportive and shared leadership and encourage collective creativity based on shared vision and values. A learning community takes note of the learning needs of its locality in a spirit of partnership where the leaders in learning communities use the social and institutional relationships which are embedded in that community to influence and to consolidate shifts in perceptions of the value of learning.
Learning and Professional Development

Teachers and CPD

The quality of any sector of the educational service is to a large extent determined by the quality of the teacher (INTO 2006). In many parts of the world, improving the performance of teachers has become a high priority in educational policy, and improving the job-related learning of teachers is seen as one of the main ways of achieving this improvement (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2005). Fullan (2001) highlights that pre-service teacher training does not, and could not, fully equip teachers for the realities of the classroom. In their Consultative Conference on Education, November 2006, the Irish National Teachers’ Organisation (INTO) acknowledged that since professional knowledge pertaining to primary teaching is growing at a rapid rate it is not possible to address all issues during the Initial Teacher Education (ITE) process. They emphasised that ITE should be seen as ‘only the beginning of a process of lifelong learning as members of the teaching profession’ (INTO 2006:9).

Ongoing learning and professional development are recognised as being key issues for teachers. Rapidly changing contexts and changes in the nature of teachers’ work render it imperative that teachers constantly learn. Sugrue (2004:196-197) refers to the ‘complex and diverse educational landscape that teachers must learn to navigate with increasing sophistication if the aspirations….are to be achieved’. This landscape is changing rapidly. The Education Act 1998, The Education Welfare Act 2000, The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 and The Teaching Council Act 2001 continue to present teachers with new demands. Societal changes, by definition, also present primary teachers with professional challenges.

In light of the ‘dramatic metamorphosis’ undergone by society and the terrain of the school organisation in recent years (INTO 2006) and the exponential rates of change that our world is facing, much teacher learning will, of necessity, be called for. It is no longer appropriate to view professional development purely as an event that occurs on a particular day of the school year or in intermittent blocks of formal in-service training; rather, it must become part of the daily work life of educators. Accordingly, the potential of workplace learning needs to be explored more fully.

Workplace learning

Workplace learning has, in recent years, gone from being largely unnoticed to attracting widespread interest (Hager, 1999). Policy discourse about education and training tends to focus predominantly on formalistic aspects of provision and achievement, with provision being defined in terms of qualifications and credits rather than on gains in knowledge, skills or capability which escape formal assessment (Eraut et al. 2000). Although a significant amount of important learning is attributable to formal contexts, this paradigm fails to capture much of the learning that occurs in the workplace. Nevertheless, it is now generally acknowledged that learning at work constitutes a large portion of the learning undertaken by adults during their lives (Boud and Middleton,
This chapter probes a key aspect of workplace learning: learning from, through and with others via the workplace, with specific reference to the learning that is rooted in learning communities. This will include learning that takes place as one engages in activities involving learning communities that are associated with the workplace, although not exclusively within the physical constraints of the place of work or school building.

While ‘tidy images of knowledge and learning are usually deceptive’ (Eraut 2000:28), it is nevertheless useful at this point to consider workplace learning from a number of angles. By enhancing our understanding of workplace learning, and specifically workplace learning through involvement in learning communities, we may come to a greater awareness of how learning occurs and how it can be fostered within the workplace.

Although workplace learning is multifaceted, in broad terms, it can be viewed under two key headings: firstly, incidental, unintentional and implicit learning that takes place as a side effect of work, and secondly, intentional and goal-directed learning which is aimed explicitly at the development of expertise (Collin and Tynjälä, 2003). Both of those forms of learning are relevant to our consideration of learning communities. As Howes et al. pointed out:

> At the heart of most significant changes in school is a group of teachers making sense of day-to-day challenges in a way that leads to the development and adaptation of practices and policies.

(Howes et al. 2005:134)

As we engage with our colleagues and partners in education in the common pursuit of enhancing the teaching and learning of students within our care, we are simultaneously boosting our own learning and adding to the knowledge base of educators. Formal or informal, the aim of learning at work may be viewed as the development of vocational or professional expertise. It is interesting to note that by far the greatest proportion of organisational learning, possibly as much as 90%, occurs incidentally or adventitiously – this includes learning through exposure to the opinions and practices of others also working in the same context (Matthews and Candy 1999) or, to consider this from the circumstances of a teacher, learning by virtue of being part of the teaching community.

**What constitutes learning?**

However, in order to understand more fully the nature of learning through learning communities via the workplace, it will first be necessary to consider, briefly, a number of views regarding what constitutes adult learning.

> What we think about learning influences where we recognize learning, as well as what we do when we decide that we must do something about it – as individuals, as communities, and as organisations.

(Wenger 1998:9)

Wenger goes on to say that if we believe that knowledge consists of pieces of information explicitly stored in the brain, then it follows that it makes sense to package this information in well-designed units, to assemble prospective recipients of this information in a classroom and deliver this information to them. However, the alternative perspective presented by Wenger has contrasting implications i.e. if we believe that information stored in explicit ways is only a small part of knowing, and that
knowing involves primarily active participation in social communities, then the traditional format of professional development ‘delivery’ does not look so productive.

The formalistic paradigm which has dominated traditional approaches to professional development has ensured that, in order to be valued, practical knowledge has to be specified, assessed and codified in propositional form - the term ‘knowledge’ is often defined so that it refers only to what has been formally codified. Eraut et al. (2000) argue that to study both learning in non-formal settings and the unrecorded learning which takes place in formal settings, an alternative definition is needed. They refer to two competing definitions of the term ‘knowledge’.

Codified knowledge (C Knowledge) is viewed as propositional knowledge – knowledge that is codified and stored in publications, libraries, databases and so on and is subject to quality control by editors and peer review. It is knowledge that is given foundational status by incorporation into examinations and qualifications. This definition regards skills as being separate from knowledge. Personal Knowledge (P Knowledge) is presented to us as that which people bring to practical situations that enables them to think and perform. Such personal knowledge is developed not solely through the use of public knowledge but is also accumulated through personal experience and reflection. It includes propositional knowledge along with procedural and process knowledge, tacit knowledge and experiential knowledge in episodic memory. Under this definition, skills are regarded as a constituent part of knowledge rather than as separate from it.

These two domains are not mutually exclusive. P Knowledge incorporates a great deal of C Knowledge, but in a personalised form. On the other hand, the creation and the use of C Knowledge will depend on the development of the creators’ or users’ P Knowledge.

This definition of knowledge, in its P and C forms, has clear implications for teacher learning. While affording clear recognition to the vast body of knowledge that has grown over the years, it emphasises the role of the teaching community in not only accessing existing knowledge but in augmenting it further. It suggests that teachers are not just ‘recipients’ of professional learning but are ‘co-creators’ of ongoing professional knowledge. It prompts one to think of teachers as part of one vast learning community, augmenting and fine-tuning our professional know-how on an incremental and spiral basis.

In the context of exploring the whole area of learning communities, in particular with regard to workplace learning, it is appropriate to consider in greater depth the whole notion of learning. Hager (2004:24) sees our present society as widely misunderstanding the notion of learning. He contends that ‘traditional understandings of learning give learning in general a bad press, let alone lifelong learning’. Citing Lakoff and Johnson (p.24), he refers to the dominant understanding of learning which views the mind as a ‘container’ and ‘knowledge as a type of substance’. In this product view of learning, the learner is projected as someone who has yet to acquire all the products or mental items that are required in order to carry out the work in question. Accordingly, to be a learner under these terms has negative connotations. It implies that the ‘learner’ has the following:

1. a deficit, e.g. lacking sufficient experience or incompetent to some degree;
2. limited power or recognition;
3. a need to leave behind the role of ‘learner’ as quickly as possible. (Hager refers to the latter as the ‘L plate’ syndrome).
Hager advises that such an account of learning, which he refers to as the ‘folk’ theory of learning, means that being both a worker (or professional) and a learner at the one time can create tensions. Citing Boud and Solomon’s research (p.26), he sees the act of describing a person as a ‘learner’ as being much more controversial than the act of naming something as ‘learning’.

Sfard, cited by Hager (2004:28) argued that two basic metaphors – learning as acquisition and as participation – have underpinned educational thought to a significant degree. The acquisition metaphor subordinates the process of learning to its products – to something that is acquired (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, behaviour, understanding, etc.). Sfard contrasts this metaphor with the participation metaphor – a metaphor which has gained substantially in recent years - claiming that neither metaphor by itself is adequate to understanding of the full complexities of learning. He asserts that the acquisition metaphor emphasises learning as a product and the ‘folk theory’ of a mind accumulating stable, discrete substances or atoms. The participation metaphor, on the other hand, presents learning as either a product or a process. This is because while participation itself is a process, the learner belongs more and more to the community of practice by acquiring the right characteristics (products of learning).

Teacher learning and school improvement

Since professional learning is central to school improvement, for schools to improve, it is necessary for teachers, individually and collectively, to develop in a professional sense on an ongoing basis. Indeed, the whole notion of school improvement and school development planning has received significant focus in recent years. As Ainscow et al. (2000) pointed out, although teachers do indeed develop their practice on an individual basis, if the whole school is to develop then it is essential that there are many opportunities for the staff to learn together. It is erroneous to suggest that collaborative learning needs to be something extra to do – while it can, of course, be treated as an additional and purposeful activity in its own right, it can often occur as part of teachers working together. Indeed, learning at work frequently results as a by-product of the pursuit of work goals rather than from the pursuit of work goals per se (Eraut et al. 2000). Accordingly, when considering learning communities in the workplace, it is appropriate to consider not only learning communities in the workplace that have been formed with the explicit purpose of the learning of the participants or members but also what might be regarded as ‘informal learning communities’.

Wilson and Berne (1999:194) contend that ‘teacher learning ought not be bound and delivered but rather activated’. This conjures up the notion of a school which is conducive to teacher learning. Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2005) emphasise that much learning in the workplace is unplanned and unintentional and point out that learning is an integral part of everyday workplace practices. They contend that teacher learning is best improved through a strategy that increases learning opportunities and enhances the likelihood that teachers will want to take up those opportunities. This, their findings suggest, can be done through the construction of more expansive learning environments for teachers. An expansive learning environment is one that presents wide-ranging and diverse opportunities to learn, in a culture in which learning is valued and supported. This is relevant to our deliberation on learning communities insofar as it directs our attention towards how we might enhance the opportunities/possibilities for learning by teachers and others who work in our schools. Accordingly, it is worthwhile to probe this more fully at this point.
The research conducted by Hodkinson and Hodkinson revealed various forms of teacher learning. For convenience, these can be subdivided into individual and collaborative activity. Since the focus of this document is on learning communities, it is appropriate to direct the bulk of our attention to collaborative activity.

A significant proportion of teacher learning occurs through collaborative interaction with others. This collaborative interaction can be quite varied. To apply this to the Irish situation, it could range from direct collaboration with teaching colleagues in teachers' own schools to 'boundary crossing', which involves, for example, dealings with co-professionals such as educational psychologists or occupational therapists, or involvement with various working groups such as Cumann na mBunscol or the Teaching Council. As different individuals or groups have common interests regarding the teaching and learning and general wellbeing of children in their care, a chain of variously-overlapping yet distinctive learning communities can develop. It is worthwhile to bear in mind that organised work-related courses - which teachers often attend in an individual capacity in response to needs that are manifest in the workplace - can also be a site for collaborative as well as individual learning. It is possible to view the cohort of participants in an in-service course or course as a type of 'short-term' or 'transient' learning community, as, over the period of the course, those participants collectively grapple with and seek to address or reflect upon issues of common concern to them in their professional work. Such collaborative interaction can be rooted in the discussions or deliberations that form part and parcel of the main body of the course or may indeed be centred around the fringes of the course during break times, for example. The significance of the coffee break in forming networks which may ultimately lead to learning communities - albeit of a loose form - should not be underestimated.

Hodkinson and Hodkinson see collaborative learning as including the following: - conversation and discussion, observing and taking an interest in what others do, and joint activity. It can be formal or informal. Liebermann and Miller note the following:

> Professional learning is most powerful, long lasting and sustainable when it occurs as a result of one 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. (Liebermann and Miller: 1999:62, cited in Jeffers 2006)

This understanding of professional learning has significant implications for the whole notion of the teaching staff in a school as constituting a powerful learning community. It also has implications for other non-teaching staff such as SNAs in terms of learning communities in the workplace. How might the school, as a workplace, be tailored so that the potential learning of teachers (and of other employees who are directly associated with the learning experiences of the student body) will be nurtured and supported?

Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2005) note that it is important to acknowledge that different teachers will respond differently to the same circumstances – there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach in terms of promoting teacher learning. Nevertheless, on the basis of their research, they advocate the creation of a more expansive learning environment at work so that teacher learning will be advanced and enhanced. Their findings suggest that one of the most effective ways of enhancing teachers’ learning is through creating and developing more expansive features of teachers’ learning environments, in line with what may be appropriate to particular schools or departments within schools.

The concept of expansive and restrictive learning environments was initially developed by Fuller and Unwin (2003: 2004) in one of the projects in the Teaching and Learning Research Project. Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2005) found that the expansive-
restrictive model applied to schools in a similar way. The table below sets out a number of factors which have an impact on the expansiveness of the teacher workplace learning environment.

Table 1 shows the continuum of expansive- restrictive learning environments for teachers. Even though the table appears to represent two contrasting scenarios, it is more accurately interpreted as a series of continua. Of course, it is important to acknowledge that it simply would not be possible to be completely expansive in a working school, as teacher learning priorities can cut across other school priorities. Teacher learning, although having a clear impact on pupil learning, can never take precedence over the prime activity of the school which is the learning of the pupils. Nevertheless, the aim should be to maximise expansion as far as possible.

Table I  the continuum of expansive- restrictive learning environments for teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>&lt;&lt;&lt;Expansive</th>
<th>Restrictive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Close collaborative working</td>
<td>Isolated, individualist working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleagues mutually supportive in enhancing teacher learning</td>
<td>Colleagues obstruct or do not support each others learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An explicit focus on teacher learning, as a dimension of normal working practices</td>
<td>No explicit focus on teacher learning, except to meet crises or imposed initiatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supported opportunities for personal development that goes beyond school or government priorities</td>
<td>Teacher learning mainly strategic compliance with government or school agendas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out of school educational opportunities including time to stand back, reflect and think differently</td>
<td>Few out of school educational opportunities, only narrow, short training programmes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities to integrate off the job learning into everyday practice</td>
<td>No opportunity to integrate off the job learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities to participate in more than one working group</td>
<td>Work restricted to home departmental teams within one school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity to extend professional identity through boundary crossing into other departments, school activities, schools &amp; beyond.</td>
<td>Opportunities for boundary crossing only come with a job change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for local variation in ways of working and learning for teachers and work groups.</td>
<td>Standardised approaches to teacher learning are prescribed and imposed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers use a wide range of learning opportunities</td>
<td>Teachers use narrow range of learning approaches.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Hodkinson and Hodkinson 2005:124)

The challenge is to explore how such an expansive learning environment in the workplace might be ‘exploited’ in terms of fostering and nurturing teacher learning communities. A few simple and practical examples of how the above framework might be applied to the professional learning community needs or constraints of a given school are given below. Alternatively, these suggestions could serve as a springboard for further thinking.
In the opinion of Jeffers (2006), schools should be learning communities that are characterised by cultures in which shared reflection is valued and in which professional conversations are nurtured. He recognises that owing to the nature of school life, professional conversations are often 'bitty' or interrupted – brief conversations on the corridor, perhaps. Valuing such professional interchanges and allowing time at the fringes for them in the course of the school day might do much to convey to teachers a sense of collective responsibility in addressing the challenges of teaching. As Beckett and Hager (2002) pointed out, the messy, confusing and frustrating problems which are part of the day-to-day working life can lead to powerful learning and are potentially educative. Locating teachers with common focus, for example, special education teachers, in rooms/areas within easy access of each other could have quite an impact on the nature of opportunities available to them to confer and to co-create responses to the needs of children within their care.

Enhancing workplace learning for teachers – some suggestions

An explicit focus on teacher learning as a dimension of normal working practices could do much to nurture teacher learning communities within schools. Teachers value opportunities to involve themselves in discussions during staff meetings or to work on teams. This development has been noted by the Inspectorate (DES 2006). Shifting the balance of time allocation during staff meetings from dissemination of information to professional conversations either as a whole staff or in subgroups could be of benefit in two ways. The professional dialogue in itself would be indicative of a learning community in action at that time. Additionally, the allocation of time to such could potentially send a strong signal to the staff that their collective learning was valued and might do much to nurture a positive attitude to learning communities in the school as a workplace. The value that is placed on collaborative work must be both said and demonstrated, and the opportunity for it must be visible in the working week. The contexts within which schools operate vary considerably. Learning communities centred on the workplace might be more productive and enriching for smaller schools through cluster groups. ICT infrastructure and ICT initiatives such as shared network drives, chat groups and various on-line contacts can do much to alleviate the problems presented in terms of timing and access. Learning communities centred around a community of peers – be they in-school or on-line or otherwise - can be a crucial source of new ideas and a catalyst for further professional learning.

Team-teaching also has much potential in terms of the sharing of knowledge among teacher communities of practice. It can provide regular opportunities for interaction with colleagues and build up habits of collaboration and shared reflection. It may be the case that enthusiasm about participation in collaborative activity is diminished somewhat by fears about how time thus spent might have a negative impact on teaching commitments. When the process surrounding team-teaching is in itself simultaneously the collaborative activity or, in effect, the learning community at work in a dynamic way, this obstacle could be significantly eroded.
Online and Networked Learning Communities

Human beings are social entities, and as such, have strong feelings of community and belonging, socially constructed and historically and geographically based. The interconnectedness we experience within communities has to a large extent depended on physical location. With the advent of the world-wide-web and increasing use of the internet, the understandings we have traditionally had of community and belonging are shifting. Wellman (2001) defined community as networks of interpersonal ties that provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging, and social identity. Wellman also talked more about networks than groups online which is another important angle into the definition of online community. Communities are found in networks. According to Freeman (1992), people often view the world in terms of groups but they function in networks (cited in Wellman 2001). It is how we inter-relate, rather than what we are, that has come to be the defining mover behind the growth of online communities. Through their usage of the internet, and following their interests, people start to become part of communities online. People who engage with others online, sharing their interests and goals, develop a sense of belonging to a community, reaching out beyond traditional communities to forge links and bonds which do not have physical constraints.

Online communities are essentially social, dynamic and interactive. Even users in remote locations can overcome physical isolation through becoming members. The growth of online communities has led to their becoming the subject of discussion and research. A typology of online learning communities, as described in the proceedings of the 34th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences, is as follows:

One major success factor of new media based on information and communication technology (ICT), as for example, the Internet is their social aspect. They enable ubiquitous meeting spaces, which satisfy one of the basic human needs – communication. As a result we can observe new online communication paradigms, one of them being online communities. Distinguishing features of online communities are:

- strong social relationships between participants;
- a community specific organisational structure and modes of discourse;
- a common vocabulary, shared history, community rituals and a common online meeting space.

(Stanoevska-Slabeva and Schmid 2001:1)

Teachers are increasingly engaging in online networks, and finding a sense of community in interacting with other teachers. Teacher specific online communities are a case in point. The INTO has been cited as an example of a learning community by the company who are enabling their website:
INTO are one example of an online learning community Digilogue have helped. This teachers’ union has one of the most vibrant education/union communities in the whole World. Managing and sending tens of thousands of emails per week across a number of mailing lists and having hundreds of educators in private discussion fora, chat rooms, interactive calendars, technical support facilities, their very own Education sites Search Engine, online facilitators and much more - all combine to facilitate a thriving community enabled by Digilogue.

(www.digilogue.net)

An online learning community may be seen as a common place on the Internet that addresses the learning needs of its members through proactive and collaborative partnerships. Through social networking and computer-mediated communication, people work as a community to achieve a shared learning objective. Through their membership of, and participation in, online learning communities, teachers are working together, learning from each other and sharing experience and knowledge. They contribute to teacher-specific websites, to Facebook, to blogs and to online discussion forums, such as those run by the INTO. The collaborative learning happening through this medium is rich with experience, complex and dynamic.

The collaborative learning is based on constructivist theory that knowledge is socially produced by communities of people, and each man could get this knowledge if he would join these communities. People share their ideas, experiences, feelings, information, and within this process of exchange they come to the understanding of what is valuable and acceptable for the other members of the group, and for the group on the whole.

(Moisseeva, Steinbeck, and Seufert 2010)

The whole experience with online learning has coined a new term – ‘e-learning’. Learning communities in schools are using ICT in evolving ways, reaching out beyond the confines of the traditional classroom/school through websites, blogs, and school linkage. The potential for collaboration within schools and between schools through the use of ICT has been explored by many bodies. For example, learning communities refers to how schools use ICT to extend learning beyond the school to support and connect students, staff and families to local and global learning communities by:

- planning for and using ICT and virtual environments to enable communication, interaction and collaboration focused on purposeful learning, among learners, teachers, experts, and other local and global learning communities;
- developing collaborative cultures and protocols, so that learners can operate effectively in connected, digital environments in the wider school community and beyond;
- engaging learners in authentic learning activities that connect with knowledge networks, partnerships and real world communities of practice beyond schools, enriching learning environments and improving learner outcomes.


The experience of teachers within online learning communities would appear to conform with Vygotsky’s (1978) ‘zone of proximal development’ - that a person’s learning may be enhanced through engagement with others which enables the extension
Learning Communities

of that person's capability to a new, higher level. Online learning is also increasingly used in higher education, facilitating access to knowledge and information across geographical boundaries. For example:

Virtual communities of practice and virtual learning communities are becoming widespread within higher education institutions thanks to technological developments which enable increased communication, interactivity among participants and incorporation of collaborative pedagogical models, specifically through information communications technologies. They afford the potential for the combination of synchronous and asynchronous communication, access to and from geographically isolated communities and international information sharing.

(Gannon-Leary and Fontainha 2007:1)

Online networks and communities

In Ireland there are many examples of the use of technology to support learning. TeachNet Ireland is an initiative of St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, run in association with the Teachers' Network New York, which funds innovative Irish teachers throughout Ireland to publish curriculum units that demonstrate the integration of ICT into classroom teaching in a meaningful and practical way. TeachNet is described as both an 'on-line and off-line professional community of teachers who are integrating technology into the school curriculum' (www.teachnet.ie). The Innovative Teachers Programme aims to create a community of teachers who will learn from and inspire each other. The programme provides training on and access to e-resources that integrate ICT into the learning process (www.teachnet.ie).

The Scoilnet initiative promotes the use of the Internet in education. The scoilnet website (www.scoilnet.ie) is at the core of this programme and provides an online resource providing curricular support and information to students, teachers and parents.

The NCCA has also developed support structures for Irish education, using the idea of online learning communities. The NCCA's ACTION Website, which stands for Assessment, Curriculum and Teaching Innovation on the Net, was developed to support teachers in the 'how to' of teaching and learning through the use of multimedia. ACTION's focus is on 'showing' rather than 'telling' the features of effective teaching and learning in different settings (www.ncca.ie).

There are also websites posted by teachers who are willing to share their practice with their peers, for example 'Seomra ranga' (www.seomraranga.com) which aims to share practical resources for the primary school classroom on the web. The downloadable resources provided on the site are simply personal resources put together by a teacher who wishes to share them with other teachers.

Pupils also use ICT to enhance their learning. Programmes such as e-twinning and 'FÍS' offer exciting opportunities to pupils and their teachers to engage in collaborative learning using ICT. E-Twinning is supported by Léargas, which provides information to schools on how to establish e-twinning communities across different school communities both within Ireland and internationally.

FÍS is a DES initiative in the Republic of Ireland, which was designed to introduce the medium of film as a support to the Revised Primary School Curriculum. The FÍS project is managed by the National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE) in collaboration
with Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art Design and Technology (The National Film School) (www.fis.ie). As part of the FÍS process, schools participate in regional screenings of the films that they have made – these events offer students and teachers the chance to share and celebrate their work and the work of other schools involved in FÍS. A selection of films is chosen from the regional screenings to participate in the National FÍS Film Festival. Participation in FÍS provides learning experiences for pupils where they develop their understanding of film as a medium of expression and acquire key skills in communication, teamwork, problem-solving and critical thinking. Teachers participating in FÍS receive training through their local education centres in film-making techniques and theory, using digital video recording equipment, film editing and building an understanding of how the methodology in FÍS underpins the Primary School Curriculum.

The introduction of filmmaking to the primary school has also provided an opportunity to foster collaborative learning among teachers within the field of film. It has also been a catalyst in the creation of a number of overlapping learning communities – teachers and students collectively undertaking activities and reflection in order to enhance their skills in the constituent areas of filmmaking; teachers within schools and across clusters of schools collectively grappling with the new challenges which such a novel undertaking present and reviewing their response to same; teachers, students and parents collectively pooling expertise as the parent body may have expertise that may be drawn on in the course of the filmmaking project; and personnel from NCTE, IADT, local education centres and the DES building up the knowledge basis around filmmaking and film appreciation insofar as those areas relate to the primary school.

**Networked learning communities (NLC)**

The Networked Learning Communities programme was launched in September 2002 by the National College of School Leadership in the UK. It ran until 2006 and was probably one the largest programme for learning networks in the world to date. More than 134 school networks took part, involving approximately 35,000 staff and over 675,000 pupils. The programme no longer exists though many networks have continued to develop beyond the end of the programme and their work has been a major influence on the formation of other partnership initiatives. Through their work, the participating schools demonstrated the massive potential benefits that can come from working together – benefits that are visible at all levels, from pupils to school leaders. Collaboration rather than competition was the motivation for many schools that became involved in the pioneering programme of networked learning communities (NLCs) which transformed learning experiences for children, teachers and school leaders. NLCs changed how educators thought about learning at every level of the education system. NLCs capitalised upon and celebrated the diversity which exists within the system. In NLCs schools, teachers, pupils and leaders learn from each other, with each other and ultimately on behalf of each other. They experimented with new and innovative approaches in the classroom working in creative partnerships within and across schools to develop and share good practice. Inspired and challenged by fellow professionals they began to learn together in new and interesting ways.

Collaboration is a more powerful and more positive motivating force than competition. Networks are about schools learning from each other, working smarter together rather than working harder alone, enhancing learning at all levels of the education system.

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3http://www.nationalcollege.org.uk/networked-learning
Strong networks make it easier to create and share knowledge about what works in the classroom, to learn from each other's experiences, to find solutions to common problems. By working in networks schools make professional practice visible and transferable.

NLCs were built around a shared purpose to encourage support and enjoyed continuous co-operative learning at all levels of the education system. The starting point was to improve pupil learning, but staff learning and professional development, leadership for learning and leadership development, school-wide learning, school-to-school learning and network-to-network learning were also features. In NLCs schools and teachers created and exchanged knowledge collaboratively, continuously and systematically. Children were supported to become powerful learners by creating a community where adults also learned.


In the Irish context an example of a networked learning community is the TL21 project which was a collaborative professional development and research project drawing together principals, deputy principals, and teachers from 15 second level schools and the Education Department of National University of Ireland, Maynooth (NUIM) (2003 - 2007). The project’s aims were two-fold:

- to enhance teachers capacity to critically analyse their teaching thereby nurturing a focus on forms of teaching that were innovative;
- to encourage students to become more active and responsible participants in their own learning.

Fifteen schools were involved with principals, deputy principals, two teachers per subject as follows: science, Irish, English and later ICT. Regular out of school workshops enabled teachers to meet with colleagues from other schools on issues pertaining to teaching and learning. As the project developed efforts were made to widen developmental initiatives to include the whole school. Reflection and shared discussion lead to cultivation of mutual trust and openness among workshop participants especially on issues such as teacher's own classroom experiences, their students’ learning and on the cross fertilisation both within and across subject departments in individual schools. Defining features of the project included clearly defined tasks, active participation, meaningful collaboration and the provision of feedback.

TL21 revealed that there are real benefits to be gained in encouraging teachers to engage professionally with other teachers both within schools and outside them in order to learn from them and in turn contribute to their learning. It is this sharing and peer learning which TL21 participants stated they enjoyed most of all and which they say the system least encourages. The Education Department of NUIM embarked on a second L21 project, working closely with four education centres and involving 30 schools. The second project which commenced in September 2008, focussed on clearly defined tasks, active participation, whole –school learning communities and offered accreditation.
Supporting Schools as Learning Communities

The education system in Ireland has gone through major changes in recent years, which have impacted on all sectors. The background to these changes is formed by:

- Social partnership model for social and economic development;
- Education Act 1998;
- Education Welfare Act (2000);
- Teaching Council Act (2001);
- Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004);
- Clarification of functions and responsibilities of stakeholders;
- Establishment of agencies for effective delivery of services;
- Public Sector Management Reforms – Strategic Management Initiative (SMI).

Arising from these developments, changes have taken place in how the Inspectorate operates and in relation to how schools are supported.

The Inspectorate

The Inspectorate is a division of the Department of Education, with a statutory remit under the Education Act of 1998. The Inspectorate’s remit includes:

- a programme of inspection in schools;
- promoting compliance with regulation and legislation;
- an advisory role for schools and for the Department;
- contribution to policy development.

The role and functions of the Inspectorate were clearly outlined in the Education Act 1998. Section 13 of the Education Act defines the functions of the Inspectorate and clarifies the roles of members of the Inspectorate in relation to evaluation. The Inspectorate is committed to evaluating schools and teachers in a spirit of professional collaboration and in accordance with the highest professional standards. The Professional Code of Practice on Evaluation and Reporting for the Inspectorate (2002) sets out general principles and guidelines under which members of the Inspectorate operate.

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4 Some of the information in this section was obtained from a presentation on quality assurance made at a summer course on school Development Planning in 2007.
engage in the process of evaluation and reporting. The general principles of the code are that inspectors will be consistent, fair and courteous, and will work with members of the school community in a climate of mutual respect. Inspectors are also committed to basing their judgements on firsthand evidence and to applying evaluation criteria objectively and reliably.

The Inspectorate sees itself as part of an interactive and complex matrix feeding into school and system improvement and evolution. This role has been evolving in recent times, moving from a traditional guidance model, where an inspector would offer help and advice, into a more evaluative one. This has been evident in the changing nature of the WSE. It may be timely to examine anew the composition and brief of the Inspectorate itself, and their role in evaluation of schools. The following diagram illustrates how the Inspectorate itself sees its role.

![Diagram of Quality Assurance and School Development](Quality_Assurance_School_Development.png)

Quality Assurance and School Development – SDPI Summer School 2005
(Office of the Chief Inspector)

As part of their role, inspectors conduct evaluations of the work of teachers on probation, whole-school evaluation and thematic or focused evaluations.

As part of its evolving role, the Inspectorate expects to employ a range of evaluation modes in order to meet a range of system demands. It will also communicate its evaluation findings to a range of partners and the public, sharing evaluation procedures and processes with others and promoting capacity for school self-evaluation and development. The Inspectorate is building its own expertise and capacity in evaluating areas such as school leadership, disadvantage, special education and parental involvement. It’s also working to build professional capacity in schools, in governance, in management and in teaching and in further refining evaluation processes and procedures. The Inspectorate has a role in supporting local and system strategies for improvement, developing systems to support and evaluate self-evaluation processes in schools and in identifying how best to assist schools in responding to the outcomes of evaluation.

The Inspectorate sees learning as a continuum and has identified the school as a key site for learning. The Inspectorate, therefore, supports the development of schools as learning communities, which the Inspectorate sees as critical in improving schools. If schools are to improve, it is envisaged by the Inspectorate that teachers will engage in self-review and development planning, with a focus on improving outcomes for pupils. Professional development (including informal learning), leadership, professional dialogue within and between schools and research and development into the school’s
Learning Communities

work are also considered essential aspects of the school improvement process. The Inspectorate sees school improvement as moving towards teachers who are committed to lifelong learning and link professional development activities, improvements in their own practice, student progress and overall school improvement.

As outlined in *Teachers Matter* (OECD 2005), the movement towards improved teaching and learning depends on personal competences that make a difference to the quality and effectiveness of teaching, sound subject knowledge, communication skills, ability to relate to individual students, self management skills, organisational skills, classroom management skills, problem-solving skills, a repertoire of teaching methods, teamwork skills and research skills.

**Whole school evaluation**

Whole-school evaluations (WSE) are carried out in accordance with section 7(2)(b) and section 13(3)(a)(i) of the Education Act 1998. WSE is a process of external evaluation of the work of a school carried out by the Inspectorate, which is designed to evaluate key aspects of the work of the school and to promote school improvement. Under the Act, schools are expected to accord inspectors every reasonable facility and co-operation in the performance of their duties.

According to the guide to whole-school evaluation, which has been prepared by the DES, the WSE report is concerned with the work of the school as a whole. It affirms positive aspects of the school’s work and suggests areas for development. It is intended that the report’s findings and recommendations will facilitate development and improvement in the work of the school and school self-evaluation. The WSE report, which provides an external review of the school’s work, is issued to the school and is published on the website of the Department of Education and Skills. The report identifies strengths and areas recommended for development. The recommendations in WSE reports can provide important direction for the board of management of the school, its patron and trustees, and to the principal and staff as they seek to bring about ongoing improvement in the school.

WSE is part of a quality assurance process which seeks to ascertain how well schools are meeting their objectives. Therefore, WSE provides the following:

- support for leadership and management;
- critical analysis and commentary on teaching and learning and on the school’s functioning in its context;
- clearly articulated rationale and realistic proposals for action planning;
- where necessary a strong message about things that must be done better;
- findings that affirm professionalism and foster development.

According to the Inspectorate, external evaluation is a professional input into the action planning and programme implementation in a school with a view to school improvement. School improvement is seen as a management and organisational responsibility within the school, and teachers play an essential role in managing the change process within schools. The evaluative process falls broadly into the following areas:

- **Area 1**: Quality of school management
- **Area 2**: Quality of school planning
Area 3: Quality of curriculum provision
Area 4: Quality of learning and teaching
Area 5: Quality of support for students.

WSE may be summarized as a systematic, evidence based inquiry into an aspect of school life, which seeks to find out how well the school is doing in relation to accepted standards of good practice and guides the school to select planning priorities for improvement. The WSE process incorporates a Fóirm Eolais, completed by the principal giving relevant school information; a review of school policies; observation of teaching and learning; a review of the work of in-school management team; management of pupils, an audit of school resources and interviews with the board of management, principal, in-school management team, teachers and parents.

Self-evaluation

WSE may also be seen as complementing a school’s own process of self-evaluation. To express purpose and goals a community of practice needs to look at itself. Learning communities carry out self-evaluations in order to recognise and understand themselves. The process of evolving and developing as a learning community is closely linked to self-reflection. Schools as learning communities engage in a process of self-reflection and self-evaluation as part of an internal review and planning process. School development planning has been adopted as a model of quality assurance through internal school review and self-evaluation. To facilitate schools in the process of self-evaluation the Inspectorate published *Looking at Our School: An Aid to Self-Evaluation in Primary Schools* (2003), which includes evaluation indicators and is designed to assist the school community in reviewing and evaluating the work of their schools. This framework is also used by the Inspectorate in conducting a WSE. Self-evaluation is highly recommended by the Inspectorate. Both WSE and self-evaluation are considered as supporting teachers develop as communities of learners. Teacher learning and professional development are seen as linked to school improvement. The Inspectorate promotes a culture of improvement through the development of school development planning activity within schools, and supports schools with their internal school review and self-evaluation processes.

*Looking at Our School* presents a set of themes through which a primary school may undertake a review and self-evaluation of its own performance. These themes encompass five broad dimensions, or **areas**, of the operation of a school, as follows:

- school management;
- school planning;
- curriculum provision;
- learning and teaching in curriculum areas;
- support for pupils.

Each of these areas is divided into a number of aspects, which represent the different activities collectively constituting the area of the school’s operation that is to be evaluated. The aspects are further broken down into components each of which has a number of themes identified as a basis for evaluation.
The recommendations in the WSE report should be addressed in the school staff’s action planning. Members of the school community should reflect upon the report and give equal consideration to the strengths identified and to the recommendations for further development. The outcomes of external evaluation such as WSE should help to inform and complement the outcomes of a school’s self-evaluation and should be used by the school community to improve the quality of the school’s work.

School self-evaluation complements external evaluation. Schools were supported in developing self-evaluation skills and processes by the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI), which was established in 1999. The School Development Planning Support Service (SDPS) provided seminars for schools and facilitated school staffs with self-evaluation and planning. The SDPS team advised and supported schools in selecting priority areas for planning and improvement and encouraged schools to use *Looking at Our School*, as a self-evaluation tool. SDPS advised schools, once a priority area was selected to:

- determine what good practice is;
- gather reliable data on actual practice;
- collate and interpret the data – evidence;
- reach valid conclusions that you can stand over;
- prioritise for planned improvement.

The SDPS team has now been subsumed into the new Professional Development Support for Teachers (PDST).

The Inspectorate sees on-going self-evaluation leading to improvement as being integral to the work of the school. As part of their evaluation of a school, inspectors will look at the school’s self-evaluation, which will provide a clear framework for a school’s external evaluation. In short, inspectors will be looking for how we look at ourselves. Self-reflection and self-evaluation is becoming an integral part of practice in primary schools, and finding effective and meaningful ways to manage and control how teachers engage in this process will be of increasing importance in schools’ development as learning communities.

**Role of support agencies**

The introduction of the revised curriculum in 1999 saw the establishment, by the then Minister of Education and Science, of two professional development services, the Primary Curriculum Support Service (PCSP) and the School Development Planning Support Service (SDPS). This was to be the first time that every teacher would be afforded the opportunity to engage in professional development during school time. These two support services encouraged professional dialogue between schools and between teachers in a way that had not been possible before. Teachers had the opportunity to meet colleagues in a professional setting and were encouraged to discuss and review practices and methodologies in use in their own school and their own classroom. Teachers were encouraged to open their classrooms to other professionals and to share good practice. In other words, schools were acknowledged as being learning communities. A further key support service, established to support school leaders was the Leadership Development Support service (LDS). All of these services have now been subsumed into the new support service established in September 2010, the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST).
Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST)

The Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) was established in September 2010 following a reconceptualising of teacher support services within the Department of Education and Skills. At primary level the PDST incorporated the Primary Professional Development Support (PPDS), which had been established two years before, in September 2008, following the amalgamation of the PCSP and the SDPS. The PDST also incorporated the LDS, the second level support service (SLSS), the Child Abuse Prevention Programme (CAPP) and Substance Misuse Prevention Programme. Support will be provided to schools by PDST personnel working in multi-disciplinary teams on a regional basis, working in close co-operation with the Education Centre Network to respond to needs identified by schools. As this service is new, and has yet to make an impact, a brief description is given here of the main support services at primary level, that supported the development of schools as learning communities since the introduction of the Primary School Curriculum in 1999.

SDPS

The School Development Planning Initiative (SDPS) was established by the Minister for Education and Science in May 1999. At the time, school development planning was seen internationally as a major component of the quality assurance debate in education and it was against this backdrop that the requirement on boards of management under the Education Act 1998, to prepare, regularly review and update the school plan, should be seen. It was envisaged that over the period of the school plan, it would be subject to ongoing review internally and at the end of the period it would be evaluated in relation to the extent to which the objectives it set out had been achieved.

School Development Planning, School Self-Review and an assessment of the Plan’s outcomes were designed to enhance school performance through the involvement of all the education partners. In summary these processes, working together, provided that every school:

- will assess its current strengths and weaknesses;
- will set effective and realistic objectives for building on its strengths and addressing its weaknesses;
- will monitor and review its objectives on an ongoing basis;
- will, at the end of the period of its plan, evaluate the extent to which it has achieved its objectives.

The school development planning process involved a number of stages. The first stage was to conduct a school review, which enabled a school community to identify its particular strengths and challenges. Typically, school review would address the school climate, ethos or characteristic spirit of the school, curriculum, organisation, staff development, resources (physical, human, financial, other), the school in its community, and national or local context factors. The school would then develop its vision, which would describe the ideal to which a school aspired with reference to past achievement, current success and future dreams. A vision statement would encapsulate what it is hoped the pupils will have achieved by the time they leave school in these areas: academic, physical, moral, emotional, spiritual, aesthetic, cultural, social personal and other. The school would then set its priorities, enabling a school community to define areas for action and respond appropriately. Prioritisation was encouraged as not everything could be tackled at once. Priorities were developed using the many types of
evidence available to the school such as test results (teacher tests / standardised tests),
teacher observations, parent and pupils’ feedback, and school evaluations. A school
would then prepare a long term or strategic plan, or an action plan, enabling the school
to manage, pace and build capacity for change and to build on good practice. Schools
then assessed the implementation and effectiveness of planned change. Schools
developed policies to provide clear guidelines for the school community.

SDPS provided a variety of services to schools, customised to meet the needs of the
individual school or cluster of schools. SDP facilitators were assigned to each school who
worked with the school staff in developing their school plans and in selecting their
priority areas. At the beginning of each school year SDP facilitators consulted initially
with staff, parents and board of management in relation to progress made on matters
addressed in previous years and to identify any issues outstanding. National priority
areas which schools were asked to consider and for which SDPS provided support were:
literacy, numeracy, assessment, individual teacher preparation, developing a three year
plan (of particular relevance to DEIS schools) and NEWB (National Educational Welfare
Board) guidelines on developing codes of behaviour. Facilitators worked with schools
staffs, or with clusters of schools during school planning days, during staff meetings, by
email, phone or post. SDP facilitators also provided support to boards of management
and parent associations.

**PCSP**

The revised Primary School Curriculum was launched on September 9th, 1999. It was
the culmination of many years of development and planning by the Department of
Education and Science and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
(NCCA) that involved all the partners and interests in primary education. The Primary
Curriculum Support Programme (PCSP) was established prior to the launch of the
revised curriculum in order to support teachers in mediating and implementing
the curriculum.

With the introduction of the primary curriculum, sustained support was provided by the
PCSP for schools for a period of time. The Support Programme incorporated a number
of elements, some of which involved attendance at in-career development events. A
range of other responses was also developed to support the implementation of the
curriculum. The support programme combined the delivery of a national programme,
organised on a local basis, together with additional optional activities determined at
local level. The Education Centre Network played a key role in the support programme
which was also supported by other bodies such as the colleges of education and the
INTO.

The Primary Curriculum Support Programme involved whole-staff attendance at in-
career development events in all subjects, over a period of years. The support
programme aimed to develop new knowledge, concepts, skills and attitudes in each
subject, on a sequential basis. The aim, also, was to support the changes in classroom
practice which are required for the successful implementation of the curriculum. In-
career development events were organised using a combination of lecture and workshop
formats. The workshop formats afforded opportunities for exploration of the approaches
and methodologies recommended for the various subjects in the curriculum. However,
skill development, particularly in the areas of methodology, was enhanced over time as
teachers practised and refined their actions. This required a focus at individual school
level and through support networks and cluster groups which embrace the concept of
the learning organisation as well as that of lifelong learning.
The principles underpinning the Primary Curriculum Support Programme aimed to complement the principles of the Primary School Curriculum, through the:

- promotion of ownership of the curriculum by schools so that each child's educational experience was enriching, meaningful and relevant to his or her life;
- adoption of a partnership approach to planning the support programme at national, regional and local level;
- facilitation of quality in-career development events whereby teachers became familiar with the content, principles, teaching methodologies and assessment approaches of the curriculum;
- on-going evaluation of the support programme whereby future activities are informed and shaped accordingly;
- encouragement for the development of school clusters and networks towards sharing best practice and developing learning communities;
- accessibility of support and advice from the Primary Curriculum Support Programme personnel, personally and through ICTs.

In addition to the seminars on each curriculum subject, the PCSP also offered seminars on topics identified by the DES as national priorities. These included seminars for learning support teachers on standardised testing and seminars for DLPs (Designated Liaison Persons) and deputy DLPs on child protection.

The Primary Professional Development Service (PPDS)

In September 2008 the School Development Planning Support (SDPS) and the Primary Curriculum Support Programme (PCSP) were amalgamated and the Primary Professional Development Service (PPDS) was established as a professional development support service, thereby initiating the creation of a single cohesive support service for the primary school sector. In September 2009, the Substance Misuse Prevention Programme (SMPP) and the Child Abuse Prevention Programme (CAPP) were included under the broad remit of the PPDS.

The overarching aim of the PPDS was to support the development of schools as professional learning communities, in which teachers’ professional development is closely linked to school development and improvement and pupil progress. The service aimed to be flexible in responding to the self-identified needs of individual schools and teachers, as well as national system priorities, thus providing a top-down, bottom-up approach. The PPDS sought to provide opportunities for continuous professional development in the interest of improved learning outcomes for pupils. It worked with schools and teachers to enable them to review whole-school and individual teacher practice, to identify areas for development and to plan collaboratively for improvement. Through empowering schools to address their curricular and organisational priorities, the PPDS aimed to support schools in building internal capacity to lead and manage the implementation of change.

In September 2010, the PPDS was subsumed into a new cross-sectoral support service for teachers in both primary and post-primary schools, the Professional Development Support for Teachers (PDST).
Leadership Development for Schools (LDS)

Leadership Development for Schools (LDS) was a National Programme established by the Department of Education and Science (DES) in 2002 to promote professional development for principal teachers, deputy principal teachers and others involved in school management and educational leadership in first and second level schools. LDS was based in Clare Education Centre. LDS was established in recognition of the importance of supporting school leaders, as leaders of learning in their own schools.

The Leadership Development for Schools team envisioned a programme in which leadership is understood as a collaborative process based upon respect and the valuing of collegiality. LDS aimed to build capacity and was divided into four domains: the personal, the transformational, the organisational as well as teaching and learning. Informing these domains are five principles: Moral Purpose, Modelling, Situational Awareness, Courage to Act and Sustainability. LDS provided seven programmes which were available at both primary and post-primary level. They are:

Misneach: A programme for recently appointed principals/acting principals. The Misneach programme seeks to help new leaders to meet these challenges by developing their personal and professional capacities. Misneach consists of four modules across the following four themes - Leading Learning, Leading People, Leading the organisation and Personal Development.

Forbairt: A programme for experienced principals and deputy principals designed for principals and deputy principals working as a team.

Tánaiste: A programme for recently appointed/acting deputy principals. Tánaiste Primary aims to develop the skills necessary for deputy principals to approach their role with confidence and to work effectively with the principal teacher and other school leaders to ensure high quality teaching and learning in the school.

Cothú: A programme for principals/deputy principals of special schools.

Cumasú: A residential programme for school leaders working in DEIS/DAS schools.

Tóraíocht: A programme for future leaders offered in conjunction with NUIM and accredited as a Post Graduate Diploma in School Leadership. The Tóraíocht programme aims to enhance participants’ current work and to support their preparation for future senior leadership and management positions. It will develop the knowledge, understanding, attitudes and skills required for successful modern school leadership. The course is co-funded by the DES and the National University of Ireland Maynooth with a view to expanding leadership capacity in the system, and preparing teachers for senior leadership positions in schools.

Spreagadh: A day release programme (three days) for primary principals, in collaboration with IPPN and local education centres. The programme aimed to:

- provide professional development based on expressed needs;
- examine leadership and management style;
- encourage reflective practice and networking;
- facilitate collaborative practice.
In September 2010 the LDS was subsumed into the new Professional Development Support for Teachers.

**Education Centres**[^5]

Education centres are key partners in the provision of teacher CPD. The Education Centre Network is viewed by the DES as a major strategic resource within the system (*Centre for Management and Organisational Development, 2002*). Since the designation of a National Network of Education Centres by the Minister for Education more than a decade ago the Network has worked in collaboration with the DES to implement a comprehensive Professional Development Programme for teachers and school communities in accordance with its remit under Section 37 of The Education Act 1998:

> education support centre means a place in which services are provided for schools, teachers, parents, boards and other relevant persons which support them in carrying out their functions in respect of the provision of education which is recognised for that purpose by the Minister in accordance with subsection (2).

*(Education Act 1998)*

During this period of unprecedented change in Irish education the role of the Network has been critical to the successful implementation of the National Curricula (new and revised), the ICT in Education agenda and many other National Initiatives, which have been undertaken by the DES. The Education Support Centres, Teachers’ Centres and Education Centres of Ireland, which comprise the Network, are known in association as the Association of Teachers’ and Education Centres of Ireland (ATECI Constitution). Membership of the ATECI is open to centres whose names are entered on a register of such centres maintained by the Minister pursuant to the provisions of Section 37 - (2) of The Education Act (1998). The Network comprises 30 centres of which 21 are full-time and nine are part-time, and is distributed over the six ATECI regions [www.ateci.ie](http://www.ateci.ie). Each centre is managed by a voluntary management committee, elected annually at the Annual General Meeting and occupies an autonomous position within the Network.

[^5]: Information supplied by ATECI
The Network is ever mindful of its primary role i.e. the personal and professional development of teachers (CPPD) and the support of school communities at local level and each Centre’s Management Committee is deeply committed to this responsibility. Facilitating teachers and school communities to engage with each other and engage each other, to share a vision or common purpose, to learn and to apply that learning reflects the essence of the work of centres. It is concerned with creating dynamic and proactive learning contexts, which support this.

A core element of the strategic approach to the provision of continuing personal and professional development (CPPD) adopted by the Network is the belief that an analysis of needs regularly undertaken by individual education centres at local and regional levels and supported by a national perspective (Network National Needs’ Analysis) is a critical element in facilitating a coherent and relevant programme of support. Centres are committed to providing a support infrastructure, which will facilitate schools, teachers, parents, boards and other relevant persons who will support them to make the best possible education provision available to their communities. The infrastructure must support the endeavour, which has teaching and learning at the core. Each centre promotes a quality professional service, which may be provided in collaboration with other partners. Centres adopt a variety of approaches to making this provision, which include CPD interaction with whole-schools, subject departments, teacher teams, individual teachers, management fora, teacher networks, school networks, virtual networks, teacher design teams etc. The ultimate goal is to promote and disseminate best practice developed through inquiry-based, self-evaluative and reflective processes which build the capacity of teachers and school communities. Centres have the capacity to organise and administer this provision and this is an important function. Their main function, however, relates to their educational leadership role. This role facilitates individual centres and the network to reach out and forge links with school communities individually and collectively to identify and respond to their needs within an inclusive learning framework, which is mutually beneficial. This model potentially promotes continuous inquiry and learning, developmental and solution-based approaches, opportunities for networking and the sharing of expertise and best practice. Interestingly, these are some of the characteristics that are often applied to professional learning communities.

Centres have, for many years, expressed a commitment to the concept of the professional learning community. The ‘study group’ of teachers - regarded as a quaint description today - was the cornerstone for the development of some of our modern-day centres. The ‘study-group’ reminds us that teachers came together to ‘study’ some aspect of their work by sharing their experience and expertise. Very often and in the absence of a more formalised support structure collegial support was all that they had. When necessary they sought support from external sources but in the main they relied on each other - a concept of CPPD that bears some similarities to the professional learning community under discussion in this document.

The Network has many examples of teachers who learn together in a variety of different contexts. They learn within the context of the ‘Infant Support Network’ or the network for teachers working in multi-class contexts at Primary. They learn within the context of their own schools, for example, ‘The Learning School Project’ or in the context of networks such as the ‘Development of Oral language’ or ‘Transition from Primary to Post-Primary Education’. They learn within a virtual network, a particular forum or design team. They learn around and through an initiative or innovative task. They connect with each other across schools in certain regional and local contexts. They plan, implement and evaluate the programme with the support of the Centre’s Director and sometimes with other support personnel.
Teacher Professional Communities

The Network promoted the concept of the Teacher Professional Community with particular reference to sustaining CPD for teachers and schools in relation to the implementation of the revised primary curriculum. Innovative teachers frequently find themselves convening and participating in what are essentially professional learning communities. In 2007 Dublin West Education Centre with the support of the Teacher Education Section of the Department of Education and Science created an opportunity to formalise such communities of primary teachers under the umbrella of the Education Centre Network and with the assistance in most cases of support programmes.

Initially the Primary Curriculum Support Programme and later the Primary Professional Development Service worked in collaboration with Dublin West Education Centre and other education centres to create, develop and support communities of learners (TPCs). The stated purpose of the TPC was, in the words of Fullan, to ‘enable the collective development of new knowledge, skills and competencies, new resources and new shared identities and motivation to work together for change’ (www.dwec.ie). A TPC is therefore a proactive support group of teacher learners who meet regularly and who seek to share their learning with a view to developing their practice.

The goal of teachers’ participation in a TPC is to enhance their effectiveness as professionals and to have a positive impact on children’s learning. A TPC may comprise teachers from various local schools, or teachers from the same school who share a common challenge or purpose with regard to best practice in their teaching. Members of a TPC usually develop a shared vision for the group in relation to a theme such as teaching in a multi-grade context, developing worthwhile SESE resources, creating artistic and dramatic learning opportunities in the context of an Arts or Drama circle or improving competence in Gaeilge or another language. More than fifty TPCs were established under the auspices of Dublin West in recent years. Vibrant Gaeilge or Tús Maith TPCs emerged in some locations, while a number of TPCs addressed the worthwhile and rewarding challenge of ‘enhancing teaching and learning’ in the multi-class context. Several TPCs have emerged from the Maths Recovery programme and from the Modern Languages Primary Teachers’ Network. The Cork Arts Circle is one of the better known TPCs where teachers participate and create at monthly meetings. Some practical outcomes of a TPC focused on aspects of the SESE curriculum can be viewed on www.historyofmayo.com where life through the ages, landmarks, local poets and legends were all encountered.

The Network is committed to the development of this model of support for teachers and school communities. Building the capacity of teachers and schools in this manner requires sustained investment and resourcing. Educational leadership, supportive conditions, enabling cultural contexts, collegial professionalism, shared goals and clarity of purpose are only some of the dimensions of a learning community. It is imperative that the development is supported through on-going monitoring and evaluation. The Network is committed to the development of the model on-site and off-site locally, regionally and nationally but it is also committed to the on-going exploration of the model and is open to further discussion on this aspect of the theme in question. The Network has been greatly facilitated to implement this model under the auspices of Dublin West Education Centre. It acknowledges this support and hopes that it will continue into the future. This is central to future development in relation to the effectiveness of the model. Teachers and schools are invited to engage their local education centre directors in any discussion or with any proposal relating to Teacher Professional Communities.
Teacher Professional Networks

At second level, the Teacher Education Section (TES) of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) has developed a scheme to provide supplementary funding to support the work of teacher professional networks (TPN), including those focusing on subjects and specific programmes. The scheme is now over seven years old. It is recognised that TPNs have other sources of funding including membership fees. To avail itself of the funding scheme, a TPN must submit a proposal to the Steering Committee which is representative of the interests involved and is chaired by a senior inspector in the Teacher Education Section of the DES. If the programme of activities is approved, the funding is made available to the TPN through an education centre nominated for the purpose by the TPN. Funding is available in two categories, CPD activities and National Executive activities.

TPNs are teacher organisations which afford professional peer support to members. They comprise Subject Associations and other networks which support teachers of curricular programmes spanning a number of subjects (e.g., Leaving Certificate Applied, Transition Year etc.). The objective is to provide funding to TPNs in a manner which:

- is coherent, equitable and transparent;
- is consistent with national and DES priorities;
- supports the continuous professional development of teachers;
- complements the continuous professional development work of national programmes, support services, education centres and third level colleges;
- supports capacity building in the system;
- fosters a partnership approach;
- reflects levels of planned relevant activities.

The TPN scheme is administered by Blackrock Education Centre on behalf of the DES. An official register of Teacher Professional Networks has been established. These networks include existing subject associations and new networks. Where a subject or subject area is currently represented by a number of associations, these must come together to register as a network. New networks must also register with the scheme’s administrator.

One of the challenges inherent in establishing inclusive learning communities, involving all the stakeholders as partners in education, may be how to develop the education centres, both part time and full time, to enable learning communities within individual schools to connect with each other. Any debate on learning communities within Irish primary education must take into account the existing and potential role of full and part-time education centres nationwide.
Challenges for Learning Communities

‘Better build schoolrooms for the boy, than cells and gibbets for the man.’

Eliza Cook (Victorian poet) In ‘A Song for the Ragged Schools’

While there are children attending primary schools today who are thriving as members of vibrant learning communities, the education system in Ireland is still failing many children. The reasons for this are multi-faceted and complex. This chapter provides an overview of some of the challenges within our system in ensuring all pupils reach their potential.

There is a lack of properly targeted and fully staffed early and highly intensive educational and therapeutic intervention, which has, by definition, to include the provision of a comprehensive, fully staffed National Educational Psychological and Child/Adolescent Psychiatric Assessment Service particularly in disadvantaged areas. There are incontrovertible and highly significant associations between concentrated socio-economic deprivation, serious literacy/numeracy difficulties, intellectual disability, special educational needs or psychiatric/emotional/behavioural difficulties on the one hand, and involvement in anti-social and criminal activity on the other. For a child subject to any of the above variables the risk is high, and negative life outcomes are inevitable.

The lack of high quality early childhood education (pre-school) and the serious understaffing of the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) and of the HSE Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), means that too many primary school pupils with highly complex social, educational and mental health problems are not being identified early and individually, and as a result, cannot be adequately catered for either within or outside of school. The inevitable life outcomes for these children include educational underachievement, poor school attendance, frequent suspension/expulsion, early school leaving, lack of qualifications, anti-social behaviour, early teenage pregnancy/parenthood, juvenile delinquency, unemployment/poverty, gang membership, imprisonment, poor health, alcohol/drug addiction, mental illness, homelessness, social welfare dependency, suicide, death by misadventure/crime and shorter life expectancy.

The higher incidence special educational needs - Mild General Learning Disability (MGLD), Borderline Mild General Learning Disability and Specific Learning Disability (SLD) are most often associated with educational disadvantage, as are very high rates of literacy and numeracy problems. The most disadvantaged schools in Dublin, Limerick and elsewhere have extremely high levels of special educational needs, emotionally disturbed children and ‘at risk pupils’.
Research on prison populations

The Prison Adult Literacy Survey conducted for the Irish Prison Service by Mark Morgan, Education Department St. Patrick’s College of Education and Mary Kett, Further Education Co-Coordinator, Department Of Education and Science (2002) states the following:

There is a considerable body of evidence showing that poor literacy skills restrict a range of life choices (particularly employment), and thus become a pre-disposing factor in criminal activities. In this regard, we draw attention to the parallel with serious drug misuse, where studies have shown that people with serious drug problems are much less likely than others to have acquired qualifications....poor literacy skills may be an important contributory factor in both cases.

(Morgan and Kett 2003:10)

According to the study, 41.2% of prisoners in Limerick Prison scored at Pre-Level 1 on internationally recognised literacy tests, a standard which is so low as to be regarded as what was traditionally known as illiteracy. A further 41.1% scored at Level 1/2, levels indicative of the most basic literacy standards. Only 17.6% scored at the higher levels 3/4/5. The report highlighted the importance of literacy, stating:

Interventions that are focussed on the primary prevention of crime should give attention to the centrality of literacy in educational achievement and the importance of literacy in social, emotional and personal development. These, in turn, are important pre-disposing factors in criminality. In this regard, it is particularly striking that serious literacy problems were particularly common among violent offenders and among young male prisoners.

(Morgan and Kett 2003:61)

In its recommendations, the report highlighted the need for interventions to be sustained over time in order to be effective. The report stated:

In devising interventions, it is crucial that they be of long duration, are intense and engaging and that they be maintained over the years. They will necessarily be expensive. However, these costs should be seen in the context of the potential savings.

(Morgan and Kett 2003:62)

A further study on the level of learning disability among prison populations in Ireland, carried out for the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform by Michael Murphy, Dr. Mark Harrold, Dr. Sean Casey and Mark Mulrooney in 2000, also found that prison populations had difficulties with learning. This Study found that 28.8% of the sample scored below 70 on the Kaufman Brief Intelligence Test which is suggestive of a significant degree of intellectual disability/mental handicap. This would be the same level of intellectual disability as Mild General Learning Disability (formerly known as Mild Mental Handicap), which would affect less than 2 % of the general population. Among the prison population it is over 14 times the national average. Critically the study discovered that:

- 80% of the prisoners in the study had never seen a school counsellor or psychologist while at school;
- 65% of the prisoners had been suspended from school at some point;
• 56% of the prisoners never sat Inter-Certificate/Group Certificate (Now Junior Certificate) or Leaving Certificate Examinations;

• 44% of the prisoners demonstrated a significant deficit (i.e. achieved below the 3rd percentile) in the maths sub-test. This is 15 times the national average, i.e. only 3% of the national population would be expected to perform as poorly on the same test;

• 37% of the prisoners demonstrated a significant deficit (i.e. achieved below the 3rd percentile) in the spelling sub-test. This is 12 times the national average, i.e. only 3% of the national population would be expected to perform as poorly on the same test;

• Only 45% of participating prisoners reported receiving remedial (learning support) education while at school. This implies that up to 55% of participating prisoners had no learning support or resource teaching at school.

The report found that many children with learning disabilities who were at high risk for later delinquency were not being provided with appropriate supports in school. According to the report the average school dropout age for prisoners with learning disabilities was 13.7 years of age. Crucially the report recommended that Government streamline services for identifying children with learning disability, particularly those with behavioural difficulties, as early as possible and provide special education throughout their school careers.

A third study, also carried out for the Department of Justice by Dr Paul O’Mahony in 1997, on Mountjoy Prisoners; a Sociological and Criminological Profile, found that 33% of the prisoners in the study had never attended school beyond primary or special school level. Only 25% sat any public examination, 4.6% had the Leaving Certificate and 77% entered prison with no educational qualification whatsoever.

**Schools designated disadvantaged**

Schools designated as disadvantage have significantly higher levels of learning difficulties and special educational needs. According to the results of the NEPS Dundalk-Leitrim Screening Study (2003) 18% of Urban Disadvantaged Pupils may have Disabilities (Special Educational Needs) and a further 23.7% (who achieve at or below the 10th percentile in Standardised Maths and/or English Tests) would be eligible for Learning Support (Remedial Education) under the DES guidelines, applicable at that time. This is a total of 41.7%.

Percentile rankings are based on an overall national standardisation. Thus nationally 20% of pupils would be expected to score at or below the 20th percentile. Similarly 20% would be expected to score at or above the 80th percentile. In disadvantaged schools far more pupils score poorly and fewer pupils score highly.

According to the Report on Literacy and Numeracy in Disadvantaged School (DES 2004), in literacy, 43% of the pupils overall scored at or below the 20th percentile. In the Senior Classes 47% of the pupils scored at or below the 20th percentile. In half the schools more than 50% of the pupils scored at or below the 20th percentile. In two schools, more than 60% of the pupils scored at or below the 20th percentile. In the study only 6% of the pupils overall scored above the 80th percentile. In individual schools the proportion of pupils scoring above the 80th percentile ranged from 2% to 11.5%.
In numeracy, 64% of the pupils overall scored at or below the 20th percentile. In the Senior Classes 73% of the pupils scored at or below the 20th percentile. In half the schools more than 60% of the pupils scored at or below the 20th percentile. In two schools more than 80% of the pupils scored at or below the 20th percentile. In the study only 3% of all the pupils scored at or above the 80th percentile. In individual schools the proportion of pupils scoring above the 80th percentile ranged from 0.3% to 14.3%.

Mental Health (UK)

There has been no major national study of the prevalence of Emotional/Behavioural Disabilities or Mental Health Difficulties among children and adolescents in Ireland. In Great Britain, a national survey of: The Mental Health of Children and Adolescents aged between 5 and 15 was carried out by The Office for National Statistics in 1999. It used the International Classification of Diseases-Tenth Revision, (ICD-10) to define the Mental Health Disorders (this was the term used in the study) it investigated. These were:

- emotional disorders; anxiety, depression etc.;
- hyper kinetic disorders; Autism, ADHD, ADD etc.;
- conduct disorders; aggression, anti-social behaviour, Oppositional Defiance Disorder etc.

A representative sample of over 10,000 children was surveyed. The survey found that the prevalence of mental health disorders among children was over 20% in families where parents had never worked, was 20% in families without a working parent and was 17% in families living in local authority/ housing association rented properties. It also found that the prevalence of mental health disorders increases with a decrease in family income; 16% of children who lived in households with a gross weekly income of less than £200 had psychiatric disorders compared with 6% in households with a gross weekly income of more than £500; (1999 earnings figures). Prevalence also increased with a decrease in the educational level of the interviewed parent; 15% of children whose parent had no qualification had a mental disorder while 6% of children whose parent had a degree had one.

The survey also investigated the links between the mental health of the children and their scholastic ability and education. The report noted that the prevalence rates of Mental Disorders (the term used in the report of the survey) increased in proportion to the level of special educational need (SEN). For example:

- 44% of pupils at either Stage 4 (Statutory Educational Psychological Assessment) or Stage 5 (Statement of SEN issued) of the SEN Scale were found to suffer a mental disorder compared to 6% of pupils without any level of SEN;
- 49% of children with a mental disorder had some level of SEN compared to 15% of children with no such disorder;
- 71% of children with a hyper kinetic disorder (Autism, ADHD, ADD) also had some level of SEN compared with 56% of those with conduct disorders and 37% of those with an emotional disorder;
- among children with Specific Learning Difficulties (such as dyslexia), 22% had a mental disorder.
In addition, it was found that 25% of children with Emotional Disorders, 21% of children with Conduct Disorders and 14% of children with Hyperkinetic Disorders were absent from school for more than 11 days in the school year.

**Absenteeism in Irish schools**

A brief analysis of school attendance data for the years 2003/4 to 2005/6, as outlined in the Report to the National Welfare Board indicates that absenteeism is a problem among certain pupils. According to the report, the percentage of student days lost through absence is 6% in primary schools and 8% in post primary schools. Over 55,000 - 27,000 primary pupils and 28,000 post primary pupils miss school each day. This is a loss of, on average, 12 school days per pupil in primary schools and 13 in post primary schools. One in ten primary pupils and one in six post primary pupils were absent for more than 20 days. Primary schools with high non-attendance have a high proportion of pupils from lone parent families, from families where parents are unemployed, were living in local authority accommodation, and attending schools designated as disadvantaged. It also found that non-attendance is 30% higher in cities and towns than in rural areas. A total of 16 pupils were expelled from primary schools, and 118 pupils were expelled from post primary schools.

**Concluding comment**

The DEIS initiative has invested significant resources in schools that are designated disadvantaged. There is a strong emphasis on supporting literacy and numeracy and in supporting teacher professional development. There appear to be positive results emerging in schools participating in DEIS. However, support and interventions must be sustained over time if they are to have any lasting impact.
Findings from INTO Focus Groups

Introduction

The Education Committee of the INTO hosted four focus groups on the topic of Learning Communities during 2010. It was decided that, given the nature and breadth of the topic, organizing focus groups to allow teachers to tease out the issues arising would be the most appropriate approach to gaining an insight into the attitudes of practising teachers to the whole area of Learning Communities. The focus groups were held in early 2010 in Clonmel, Cork, Dublin and Tuam. Each focus group was facilitated by members of the Education Committee and consisted of between 10 and 12 teachers who discussed a series of prepared questions on aspects of Learning Communities.

‘We are learning all the time, every day.’

The above assertion by one of the focus group participants is a useful starting point from which to approach the research findings in that it is a brief but fitting summary of the overall perspective on learning exhibited by all of the groups. Analysis of the focus group findings indicates that learning is regarded as something that is part and parcel of the way we as teachers go about our work. It is evident that the various focus group participants see it as important that teachers and those involved in enhancing the teaching and learning of children not only seek to advance their own learning but also value opportunities that they are afforded for advancing their own learning.

Many and varied themes related to our investigation of learning communities emerged in the various focus groups. For ease of analysis, these will now be probed under a number of headings. Of course, there will be aspects of the findings that do not lend themselves to being confined to one heading or strand of analysis. The approach taken in the presentation of findings will be such as to reflect the contributions of the groups in a fair and accurate fashion, and this will, of necessity, demand that there will be some overlap of subthemes or, indeed, that there will be some subthemes or strands of thought that do not readily lend themselves to neat categorisation. The findings are analysed under the themes of collaboration, professional activities, and professional development.

Collaboration

Throughout the focus groups sessions, collaborative activities among staff members were consistently presented as opportunities for professional learning. These opportunities varied in form, including in-school whole-staff activities, pursuits or initiatives involving teachers from clustered schools or schools sharing specific areas of focus, and cohorts of teachers who had identified common areas of professional interest or learning need. It was clear from the participants’ comments and reflections that they see themselves as part of a professional learning community, although they did not
typically refer to it as such. Teachers presented themselves as having a common purpose in maximising the potential of the children within their care and indicated that collective reflection and problem-solving with their colleagues was a key avenue through which they could heighten their capacity to meet this need.

‘You almost think of it as a professional team as such, in that the team is working together in tandem to bring out the best or potential from each child’

**Staff relations/ school climate and the impact on collaboration**

The importance of good staff relations was emphasised by the participants. While it was acknowledged that ‘the dynamics within each staff are so different’, the importance of professional support from colleagues was underlined. Teachers indicated the need to ‘have somebody that you can bounce a question off and not be made feel stupid’. A strong awareness of the collective and interactive learning that takes place among the teaching staff in any given school was highlighted throughout the discussions – a climate of openness and honesty was seen as essential in harnessing and advancing the potential learning of the teaching staff:

‘It is important that everybody knows that we all have hassles, and, like I said, we are all learning and all trying to improve the way we teach every day.’

Focus-group participants revealed an awareness of the importance of engendering an atmosphere which would be conducive to promoting shared learning experiences among the teaching staff in a school. Such an atmosphere would be characterised by elements of what a learning community is all about, colleagues who are ‘actively engaged in learning together from each other’, as detailed in chapter one. The school setting was presented as a learning community in which all staff members, regardless of age or experience, have the potential to learn and add to the learning of the group, themselves and other individuals – the degree to which learning could take place was seen to depend to some extent on the prevailing atmosphere among the staff or their explicit willingness to acknowledge and promote the need for professional learning.

‘It has got to do with the culture of the school as well. When somebody is proactive, especially somebody with a bit more experience than younger members of staff, and if they ... put it out there, it creates the atmosphere that would make people a bit more confident about asking questions and asking to share ideas ... to break down the invisible barriers of seniority and to say that this is a collective experience and a collective place and we can all benefit from each other.’

Focus-group participants underlined the importance of mutual professional respect within school communities –presented as a key facet of a school climate which has the power to facilitate groups and individuals in terms of realising their learning potential.

‘I think the core thing is respect. And if you have an ethos of respect in the school; that the staff are all respecting each other ... If they respect themselves then they will reach their potential and if they are happy within their environment and it’s a happy learning environment, then you’ve succeeded.’

**Whole-school approach**

Leadership, management, policy, curriculum planning, resourcing, teaching, learning, school culture and environment, partnerships with parents and community, assessing,
recording and reporting achievement – the whole school approach is an interwoven, complex and dynamic mix. Teachers are aware of the ongoing need to work together as a cohesive unit, a view that permeated the various focus groups.

‘I think it is very important for the whole school to be singing from the same hymn sheet … that everyone decides and identifies what is needed in the school and what is needed to get there, and uses everybody’s strengths to achieve that.’

Teachers expressed a need to feel part of their school as a whole, and pointed out the importance of being willing to support each other, of developing inter-classroom and interpersonal relationships, and of fostering an inclusive working and learning environment. Various comments by the research participants underlined the importance of fostering a sense of collegiality in schools, and mentioned the link between collegiality and learning communities.

‘It’s shared. It’s a team. It is a smaller community but within the wider community, and the principle that we all together share collective responsibility for delivery of curriculum within the school, I think is a very sound one and I think it is part of what it means to be a learning community.’

The importance of engendering a spirit of open-mindedness to new experiences was highlighted by one of the respondents, who commented, ‘but to be open to these ideas it is really a fundamental part of our philosophy of the school … all it takes is open-mindedness.’ There is a real understanding of the fact that when one teacher learns something new, or brings new ideas to the mix, it is to the benefit of the school as a whole.

‘The professional development of the teacher would naturally raise the standards within the school.’

‘If you say to another teacher that I’ve used this and it works, and it works with this type of job - that can save a teacher who is looking for something an awful lot of time.’

A certain sense of realism was to the fore, with teachers noting that schools are not homogeneous places of teaching and learning, where all teachers are of the same mindset. The challenges involved in fostering collaborative learning and in developing in-school learning communities were acknowledged during the focus-group sessions.

‘You will always have the few who are willing to learn and you have to get everyone on board … it makes the learning exciting if you’re doing something new.’

Leadership/the role of the principal

Leadership within the school is seen to influence directly the structure and effectiveness of learning communities associated with the school. This whole area will now be considered in a number of intertwined layers that reflect the complexity of life in our primary schools, as evidenced by the contributions of the research participants. Given that ‘the creation and communication of a vision of learning and development for the school in a way which creates the environment for pupils and teachers to maximise their development’ has been identified as one of the core elements in the role of the principal

[6 Defining the role of the primary principal in Ireland, Hay Group, (undated) p.4]
in schools in Ireland today, it is no wonder that the role of the principal emerged as a key topic arising in the focus groups.

The role of principal is essentially a leadership role. The nature and extent of this role underpins the influence of the principal teacher, and can be seen as a key factor in determining the structure and success of the learning communities in our schools. The style and format of this leadership role are seen as key elements in enabling school personnel and pupils to achieve their potential via learning communities. A ‘positive, open attitude’ with ‘more of encouragement’ was highly praised by the participants of the focus groups. The principal needs to be aware of the individual talents, both present and latent, within their staff.

‘If the principal identifies somebody in the school who they feel has that knowledge and expertise ... that the encouragement or the empowerment is there to help that person go along and do something or to share that expertise to the whole staff.’

This implies that the principal needs to have in-depth knowledge of his/her staff, of the expertise, interests and qualifications they have, and also, by implication, the places where professional developmental needs may exist. The human resource management role has increasingly been seen as central to the role of principal. As part of this role, the principal must lead and motivate the teachers in the school, creating an environment in which individual skills, expertise and talent can be fully developed to the benefit of all stakeholders in the learning community. One teacher commented that ‘the principal shouldn’t put him or herself up on a pedestal’ but should be closely involved in the day-to-day classroom work of the staff. Being involved with day-to-day of classrooms is easier to achieve as a non-teaching or ‘walking’ (administrative) principal, than when the principal also has classroom duties. Although the core accountability of each is the same, the extent to which they can achieve their goals is constrained by the amount of time available to them to interact with their staff in a meaningful and effective way. A principal who has the time and space in the working day to interact with the others members of staff and to consider, plan and think, can have a positive effect on the nature and structure of the learning community of which he/she is a vital part. Lack of such time can create difficulties, as identified by some respondents.

‘When you’re teaching yourself it’s very difficult.’

‘In my school the principal is a teaching principal so the transfer of information and knowledge is much harder in these circumstances.’

**The contribution of experienced teachers**

Experienced teachers have a competence born of their professional knowledge and understanding of curriculum, teaching methodologies and classroom management, as well as professional knowledge of their subject matters, and assessment and evaluation methodologies. Over time, these skills become honed and perfected, as was expressed in one of the focus groups.

‘How you build up your expertise in a particular area of teaching or learning ... a lot of it is through trial and error etc and then over time you learn what works and you discard what doesn’t work and you build up your arsenal.’

It follows that the experienced teacher has a lot to offer within the learning community. Within a school there can be varying levels of experience, and it is reasonable to assume
that the levels of competence may also vary. This range of experience feeds into the creation of a learning environment, which is a complex and multilayered dynamic zone of activity which embraces not only individual classrooms, but also the whole school. All of this professional knowledge and experience built up over time, and is coupled with the day-to-day experience of effective communication with parents and colleagues. Essentially, experienced teachers can bring to a learning community what has been called ‘the wisdom of practice’, individually grown and experienced. In the words of one of the contributors to the focus groups:

‘So it is down to yourself working and developing your own professionalism. It is down to reacting with other professionals and other teachers with whom you work and over time refining how you actually work.’

Some newly qualified teachers who contributed to the focus groups were swift to acknowledge about the teachers they encountered that ‘they have a wealth of experience’ and that much of their interaction with them proved to be a valuable experience. There was ‘so much that we gained from experienced teachers by watching and observing them.’

**Time/lack of time for collaboration**

Although the research participants placed high value on learning through collaborative interactions with their colleagues, there was a sense of frustration regarding the limited opportunities for such collaboration. Lack of time for collaboration with colleagues features strongly in their comments.

‘I feel there is never enough time to do it properly.’

It was pointed out that, ‘a lot of the professional development is going on after school’ when teachers voluntarily give up their own time for meetings related to professional matters. Although limited time is available for collaboration during the day, teachers convey a willingness to use the fragments of time that are available - often in relatively informal or unstructured time-slots such as at break time - to engage with colleagues on matters of professional concern and to advance their mutual learning. This willingness to give freely of personal time in terms of advancing areas of professional concern may have been eroded somewhat by recent cutbacks that have been applied to primary schools.

‘I’d say (collaboration and collegiality) … is not as strong as it was because of the moratorium on posts … because that made everyone part of a team and people were working together … but the cutbacks have nearly killed that. There was a lot of goodwill and people helping each other and all that stuff was being done extra … But now there’s a little of ‘I’ll do my job and go home at three o’clock because nobody appreciates what I do’. Now, that’s just a certain area of feeling and I’m sure there are people who feel there is a lot of positive as well.’

The importance of structuring staff meetings in a manner which would maximise potential for professional dialogue, upskilling and the sharing of expertise was voiced by a number of participants. Staff meetings, if well organised and followed through in an efficient fashion, were viewed as an important vehicle for allowing teachers to bring their ‘own expertise and knowledge to the whole staff and the whole school community’. One principal cited the example of a teacher in his school who was carrying out research at Masters Level in relation to peer mediation with children – the school were hoping to
introduce this initiative to the rest of the school and, accordingly, the teacher in question was allocated time at staff meeting/s to share her research with her colleagues.

Lack of time for collaboration with colleagues contrasts with the experience of one teacher who had gained her initial teaching experience in Scotland. In that system, she had been allocated a specified amount of time each week for non-teaching activities e.g. participation in a course, meeting with other teachers for planning purposes or observation of teacher/s in another school. Substitute cover was provided during those periods.

Although drawing attention to the lack of official time for collaborative professional activities, the teachers in the research groups gave many examples of collaborative activities that had a strong professional learning dimension. Some of these activities were rooted in the day-to-day business of enhancing the teaching and learning of the pupils – some developed in response to ongoing learning needs that the teachers themselves had collectively identified. The teachers’ reflections on these forms of professional collaboration mirrored an underlying shared enthusiasm to advance their collective professional knowledge and to enhance their own battery of skills – this common sense of purpose with regard to actively learning with and from each other in the context of ultimately improving the quality of service that they provide suggests that there are many learning communities at work in evidence in our schools, at times almost inextricably linked with the teaching day. By making reference to some specific instances of those collaborative activities, it is possible to illustrate the whole notion of learning communities at work in Irish primary schools.

**Team work - ICT**

ICT is a relatively new and rapidly evolving area, not just in primary schools but in society at large. As such, ongoing and rapid learning is necessary if teachers are to keep abreast of current developments and be in a position to employ them in the classroom. One teacher referred to ICT as an area where there are ‘lots of learning gaps’ which of necessity had meant that ‘teachers have collaborated to work together and learn from each other’. ICT, however, is not merely a focus of teacher learning but, as evidenced by the teachers’ contributions, is also a vehicle through which collaborative learning of teachers, both in-school and beyond can be promoted and facilitated. For example, one teacher referred to shared network drives on their school’s computer network, saying that, ‘teachers’ ideas and resources are often shared on this drive.’ Another teacher referred to the ‘IT Platform’ that the Comenius Project used to facilitate collaboration between the teachers and schoolchildren who participated in this programme – for example, live video links were used to boost interaction between participating schools. Various other ICT channels are being used by teachers to enrich not just their own learning but the learning of their colleagues in their own and in other schools – among those mentioned were discussion boards, email groups within the INTO, the IPPN website and videos of teachers in action in the classroom which formed part of the pilot project on Induction.

**Teacher-to-teacher learning (including team teaching)**

It is clear from the research conducted that teacher-to-teacher learning, in its various guises, is a dominant and valued part of teachers’ professional development. Nevertheless, teachers’ experience of this form of learning would appear to vary considerably. The size of the school and number of teachers therein were mentioned by a number of research participants as having a bearing on the possibilities for collaborative activity, with teachers in smaller schools not having the benefit of access to teachers of a
parallel class or not having another learning-support/resource teacher (LS/RT) with whom they could work collaboratively. On the other hand, having a number of teachers who taught the same class level in the school was presented as an asset in terms of the potential for teacher learning.

‘Doing plans together...and particularly in the larger schools where there may be two or three infant teachers working there together...is fantastic.’

It was mentioned that teachers of infant classes may have an advantage in terms of having an opportunity for collaborative planning on account of classes for infants finishing earlier than classes for other children. Liaison between LS/RTs and classroom teachers through team teaching or through conferencing/dialogue centred on testing and planning was presented as a powerful collaborative tool through which teachers with a common goal or purpose could hone their skills and knowledge. Speaking of a LS/RT and class teacher working in collaboration in the classroom, one teacher made the following remark:

‘And that sharing of the work is a learning experience in itself... it is shared...it’s a team...and I think it is a part of what it means to be a learning community.’

The existence of learning-support teams were also viewed as a type of learning community in their own right.

‘We test and plan collectively and that’s a time that we can really share ideas ... as you get different people joining learning support or resource with different levels of experience...’

It was noted that LS/RTs have greater opportunities for collaborative activity by virtue of their work – the class teacher ‘can’t just leave a class’.

**Isolation in the classroom**

The scenario of the teacher as a lone practitioner in the classroom situation for a large part of the school day was presented as something that was limiting the potential for collaborative activity with colleagues. Being alone and separated from others in one’s working life is not unique to the teaching profession, but the physical layout of schools can lend itself only too easily to isolation. This point was made in the focus groups.

‘We can experience quite a bit of isolation in the classrooms.’

‘You are very much on your own I think.’

‘Especially, young classroom teachers can feel very isolated.’

‘At the end of the day you go in and you close the door and you are there with your five children or your thirty seven children.’

Some teachers spoke highly of the potential teacher learning involved in team teaching or observation of colleagues at work, with one teacher voicing the following opinion:

‘An opportunity to observe somebody else or somebody more experienced in any subject...is unbeatable. No amount of books, theory or anything can match it.’
A cautionary remark was made by another teacher, however, who said ‘I would still say that there is a certain percentage of teachers who actually would find it difficult enough to have somebody else in their room with them.’

Teacher-to-teacher learning is also seen to take place in what were referred to as ‘informal get-togethers of teachers’, where the ‘general sharing of knowledge or ideas takes place...over a cup of coffee etc.’ It was interesting to note also that the research participants viewed in-service training opportunities as having potential for learning not only centred on the formal agenda of the day but through the possibilities afforded by having teachers from different schools or working contexts assembled together. This theme featured in a number of the focus groups. It is summed up quite accurately in the following comment:

‘That’s what I miss about the in-service. You learn all this from other teachers (about) what happens in their schools. I miss this collaboration from in-service ... and the collegiality.’

**Professional conversations**

Opportunities for professional conversations with other teachers appear to be highly valued in terms of the professional learning opportunities that they create. This was, in itself, evidenced by the enthusiasm with which the teachers in the focus groups participated in the discussion of professional issues and was articulated by one teacher, saying that ‘even the opportunity to come here this evening like this throws open further opportunities to learn from one another.’

Another teacher emphasised the value placed on interaction with other teachers in terms of probing professional matters. Historically one of the only ways teachers could get to meet together outside of school in professional terms was at their local branch meeting of the INTO:

‘The whole reason I go to union meetings is to meet other teachers as, traditionally, it was the only time we could meet and discuss issues.’

‘Without INTO meetings ... you don’t really get a great opportunity to meet up with colleagues.’

**Interschool collaboration: interschool activities**

Interschool collaboration takes place on a number of different levels and for a number of different reasons. The Comenius project, through which schools from various European countries engaged in collaborative activities over a number of years, had collaborative learning as a key aim. The comment of a teacher involved in this project would suggest that it did indeed result in learning communities being created for the children and the teachers who were involved.

‘You did get the feeling that the children in each school ... were learning together and the teachers who worked on the project were also learning together and learning from each other.’

Other examples of interschool collaboration on an ongoing basis included cluster meetings of Home School Community Liaison (HSCL), or groups of schools with similar characteristics such as gaeilseolanna arranging common sports days or meetings of
principal teachers. However, teachers pointed out that distance between gaeilseolai, for example, can render it ‘impractical’ to meet on a regular basis.

**Interschool collaboration: pilot project on induction**

Interschool collaboration is a feature of the Pilot Project on Induction for newly qualified teachers (NQTs). In the course of the focus group sessions, many positive comments were made relating to the learning benefits accruing to teachers through involvement in this induction programme. The learning is not confined to the mentee.

‘(it) affords teachers the opportunity to work together ... observing teachers ... beneficial for both teachers, the mentor and the teacher who is learning …’

Those who had experience of the mentoring programme spoke highly of the value of observing teachers and visiting other schools. Focus-group participants’ perspectives on the whole area of teacher induction and the associated challenges and possibilities in terms of learning communities will be examined more fully later in this chapter.

**Collaboration with other professionals**

Collaborative work engaged in by teachers also encompasses dealings with other professionals. Teachers expressed confidence in their own expertise, as ‘the core educator who interacts with the child ... working with that child on a daily basis’, yet they also showed a willingness and enthusiasm to engage with other professionals so that the whole body of learning around education of children can be collectively advanced.

‘People coming from different areas (i.e. occupational therapy, psychology etc.) have their own expertise and we as teachers are experts in our field ... but we really need to be afforded the opportunity to gain from other relevant professionals so that we can collectively meet the needs of each other ... the benefits of it are absolutely massive.’

Teachers are keenly aware of the learning benefits of collaborative activities with other professionals, for all parties concerned ‘It’s not all a one-way street’. While taking cognisance of the learning value of collaboration with teachers, other professionals and other parties, the research participants were nevertheless aware of the negative impact that such interactions can have on the overall flow of the teaching day.

‘In our school recently ... one teacher actually noticed that from 9am to 11 am there were 25 disruptions at his door ... somebody coming in or heading out or wanting to see somebody.’

School location seems to play a part in the volume of external personnel who may visit the school e.g. on work experience or conducting studies or pilot projects. While some schools may be ‘inundated’ with requests for teaching practice or work placements, the converse can be true for other schools, who may feel a little isolated from such projects.

‘I think that rural schools are a bit deprived in this area. If you are not on a good train or bus route then you don’t have people applying to your school because they can’t get to you.’
**Collaboration with parents/BOM**

Communication and dialogue between teachers and parents were presented by the research participants as being critical to problem-solving and to improving practice. Collaboration extends beyond the school staff and includes parents and students as well as the wider community. Again, there is a sense of mutual and collective learning taking place via such collaboration, in the comment, ‘I think it can work both ways’ - i.e. parents/teachers learning through, from and with each other as they seek to address the child’s needs. One teacher pointed out that ‘if they [parents] are informed and know what is going on ... you have a better learning relationship with them.’

Another teacher spoke of a course that had been set up by teachers in the area in response to a need manifested by parents who wanted to help their children with Irish at home. The success of the course was such that the parents themselves decided they wanted a follow-on course. The comment of the teacher on this whole venture is very enlightening.

‘Where the need can be established by people who want to go on with it ... that’s where the real learning community works.’

Parents are also viewed as a direct learning resource to the teaching community as their expertise is drawn on to boost the knowledge base in the school as needs emerge at a local level. For example, parents who are psychologists have expressed willingness to share their knowledge, or those with expertise in areas such as landscape gardening have liaised with school personnel on related areas. While acknowledging that school communities include parents, the board of management (BOM) and the wider community in addition to the teachers and pupils and other support services and agencies, the centrality of the teacher in the school as a learning community gained mention by a number of research participants.

‘The buck stops with us (teachers). The BOM is great, the Parents’ Association is great but at the end of the day, you are the person who is responsible.’

‘The BOM in a lot of schools are figureheads and it’s the principal and the Chairperson that’s the practical end.’

However, support from management bodies was seen as key in fostering a positive framework for professional learning.

‘It has to be valued by your employers ... because if they don’t value that the whole school should be doing training, well then...!’

**Professional activities**

**Mentoring and support for NQTs**

A common theme that emerged in the discussion groups was that much learning that is necessary for effective teaching, such as the ‘practicalities of how to teach and manage in a classroom’ takes place on an ongoing basis after Initial Teacher Education (ITE) has ceased. This view fits in with the whole notion of lifelong learning of the teacher. One teacher expressed the importance of ‘building up or nurturing a young/beginning teacher’ and emphasised the ‘responsibility’ of the Colleges of Education to prepare the
student teacher who is arriving in a classroom ... for the work they will be doing’. The discussion that ensued suggested that teachers in schools who accommodate student teachers in their teaching practice feel a sense of professional interest in helping those teachers in their first steps as beginning teachers.

‘There is a heavy emphasis on academic learning in the college in the run up to teaching practice instead of the more appropriate emphasis on the practicalities on how to teach and manage in a classroom.’

‘It hasn’t always been the case that the student teachers have arrived in schools well prepared for the work they have to do.’

There was consistent acknowledgement in the focus groups that NQTs have needs and gaps in their education and training which can only be addressed in a school/classroom setting. The constraints of time arise again and again.

‘The supports have to be there for NQTs. I don’t think they are. We try to support but with the best will in the world, nobody has the time.’

Some of the participants in the focus groups were NQTs, and all were aware of the Mentoring/Induction programme. Indeed, some of the participants had direct experience of it. One of the focus groups also contained a mentor who commented on the programme:

‘I think personally, as a mentor, that it is an excellent programme for when you’re starting off. I remember my first day. You go in and you close the door and it’s, ‘Oh my God! Let me out!’

The fact that induction was not available nationwide was a cause for concern.

‘I think it is just a pity and a shame that it is not rolled out nationwide.’

NQTs at the focus groups maintained that the meetings in the education centres were of particular value.

‘Having those meetings in Galway, I remember thinking in the first one, ‘Oh! The work in going to Galway! ... but they were actually very useful.’

The fact that recent developments mean that induction will be more widely available was welcomed.

**Role of the mentor**

NQTs value and acknowledge the importance of having ‘someone there for them’ in their first year of teaching. The mentor is someone the NQT can turn to for personal, professional and pedagogical support throughout that crucial first year. As one of the NQTs in the focus groups said:

‘It is great to have someone that you can go to and I think that is what it comes down to. Everyone needs someone that they can go to.’
Sometimes mentoring was as informal as what one NQT referred to when she said that she found it of great benefit in her school ‘...to have someone that you can bounce a question off and not feel stupid like you’re silly’. In many schools, teachers did this in a somewhat flexible fashion ... ‘whoever wanted to mentor would stay behind, just give up their time’.

**Observation**

Observation has long been seen as a key component of the induction programme. Opportunities for observation include the following: observation of a specific lesson in another class, observation of another class in a similar class range to NQT, observation of a class at next level to NQT’s class, observation of mentor or another colleague teaching a lesson to NQT’s class, or a demonstration lesson by another teacher/mentor - not classroom based- e.g. nature/maths trail. NQTs at the focus groups were unanimous in their appreciation of opportunities for observation. The opportunity to observe was broadly welcomed.

‘I just found it so valuable listening to experienced teachers who went through the chalk and talk and learn the basics.’

While NQTs were aware of the amount which they have learned while in college, they freely acknowledged that not everything you need to know and understand to be an effective teacher can be learned in the academic setting of the colleges.

‘I think we certainly should have an opportunity to observe somebody else or somebody more experienced in any subject, I think it is unbeatable – no amount of books, theory or anything can match it.’

Observation is not only ‘one-way’. The induction programme also recommends that the NQT be observed by the mentor, or by an experienced teacher, who then give feedback and suggestions to help them. Experienced teachers, however, also acknowledge that they can benefit from exposure to the newly acquired knowledge and skills the NQT brings to the learning community.

‘I have a student teacher from St. Pat’s, and learning all the up-to-date skills and on-line interactive board is brilliant! So I’m learning and passing on all my tips and it’s great!’

Such opportunities for observations may be perceived as being all the more valuable when one considers that, historically, teachers have operated in a kind of independent isolation within the confines of the classroom.

‘We have few real opportunities to watch each other at work as it isn’t built into the system’.

**The role of the principal with regard to mentoring**

The focus group discussions revealed an awareness by teachers that the role of the principal in schools has always included an element of mentoring, even if it was as informal as taking a new teacher ‘under his/her wing’ and showing them the ropes.

‘It’s part of the principal’s duties that there is mentoring and observing.’
It may happen that the non-teaching principal will have the time and resources to meet this challenge, but for the teaching principal, who also has responsibility for organising and teaching a class, it may not be attainable without the provision of support. Teachers spoke of the difference it can make to their school when their principals are non-teaching. They literally see more of them, and have the opportunity to interact during the working day.

‘But he is a walking principal, so he has time to come into us.’

The particular challenges faced by teaching principals are not sufficiently addressed in the system at present.

**The role of the Inspectorate**

The role of the inspector has evolved through the implementation of WSE - from the traditional guidance model, where an inspector would both ‘inspect’ and offer help and advice, into a more evaluative one. Some of the more experienced teachers in the focus groups spoke of this change.

‘The job of the Inspectorate originally was to come in and make sure you are doing what you are meant to be doing and help out and give advice.’

There would appear to be a certain amount of nostalgia for this approach. The inspector is now seen as a more distant figure who only appears when he/she has to. For example, ‘you don’t see an inspector unless there is a diploma going on’, or as part of the WSE, where their role has become evaluative. A certain element of negativity is colouring the view teachers have of the Inspectorate which may perhaps derive from the feelings coming through of the impact of the intense scrutiny now associated with the WSE.

‘The scary knock on the door of an inspector can have a very negative impact on teacher confidence and on the teachers’ attitude to their own professionalism.’

Whole-school evaluation is concerned with the work of the school as a whole and involves the Inspectorate, teaching staff, school management, parents and pupils. The procedure allows for members of the school community to have opportunities to interact with the evaluation team to discuss issues relating to the work of the school. Teachers broadly welcomed the need to have an external viewpoint feed into their evaluation of what they are doing.

‘How do we know we have achieved the best? I suppose the WSE or outside assessment is a way of looking at that.’

The potential for engagement may be somewhat limited though, insofar as it is perceived that not all aspects of teachers’ work lend themselves to evaluation through the existing WSE framework.

‘Certain parts of our jobs are measurable other parts aren’t – an awful lot of them aren’t.’

**Affirmation**

There is no doubt that positive or negative statements can impact on self esteem. In the simple, everyday words of one participant in a focus group, ‘it is nice to be told that you are doing a good job’. It is also felt that, ‘one negative comment can set you back’. It is a
human need to want affirmation, but a viewpoint emerged through the focus groups that, ‘we don’t get affirmation as teachers’. This point may warrant consideration and scrutiny. Certainly, the increased involvement of non-teachers in schools - board of management members, parent associations, other professionals such as psychologists and therapists, SENOs and ancillary staff - has widened out the sphere of experience of interpersonal contact for teachers. This has perhaps led to an increased feeling of being under scrutiny.

‘But we’re being judged on what can be seen the whole time.’

The possible impact of such perceptions on the scope for developing teacher and inter-professional learning communities may be worth probing further in its own right.

**Networks and education centres**

Teachers can and do form networks, either informally through knowing each other and coming together socially, or through structures such as the INTO or IPPN, through other shared interests and activities, or in the setting of an education centre. Such networks were referred to incidentally in the course of the focus-group discussions. It is interesting to note that the NCTE on its website calls Education Centres, ‘a network of learning communities for teachers’ a view supported in one comment:

‘Looking at the education centre as a network, we have built a network in terms of all the schools that you have...’

Teachers in schools in the catchment area of an education centre can, with regular attendance, start to form a learning community with a broader base than that which is possible within the school itself:

‘... through these networks of groupings ... in terms of like-minded people coming together where straight away you are going to get everything discussed and that is maybe where the next step could be for the likes of the centre ...’

The courses provided by the education centres do not in themselves represent the full contribution that they make to the learning communities with which they interact. The education centre in itself is perceived as a ‘pleasant environment’ where teachers can discuss issues of professional concern ‘away from the school itself”. The possibilities for professional learning when teachers assemble in a semi-formal or informal context, or at the fringes of courses, are again emphasised here:

‘I think what it does is it provides teachers (with) an opportunity to get together like the INTO meetings etc. You don’t really get a great opportunity to meet up with colleagues and invariably you go to the business of the day ... but it’s that cup of tea that you raise ...

Education centres are seen to be responsive to system needs, putting on courses and training for teachers on an ongoing basis, in a manner in which they can access them, usually in out-of-school hours.

‘Whereas hitherto maybe schools were happy to take maybe a menu … made by maybe a director of an education centre … now it changes in terms of the teachers stating their need.’
In one of the focus group discussions, it became clear that the teachers felt that a real attempt was being made by the local education centre to match course provision to the needs of the area. Teachers spoke of being asked to prioritise courses that they would like to be provided. Accordingly, some areas that were being addressed were ‘Numicon’ and the ‘Interactive Whiteboard’. The learning needs in the catchment area were seen to extend beyond those of teachers.

‘I don’t think a learning community in terms of the education centre will revolve around teachers only – I think the education centre has to be caught up right in the middle of society.’

Education Centres were portrayed as being dynamic and proactive sites of learning.

‘If people are coming together in the education centre and they are beginning to find that the education centre works for them and they are going back and are more professional as a group or feel they are doing more, I think that is where the future of the education centre rests.’

They are viewed as being much more than just a physical structure, as the following comments illustrate:

‘The life blood of the education centre is actually the people who are using it.’

‘The education centre, I believe, is just a building and we can move any place and it would work as well but I think what it does do is provide teachers an opportunity to get together.’

‘We are learning communities - it’s the time externally and the time off from school that we don’t have ... and education centres are sites where this can begin to happen ... maybe not traditionally but I think, going forward, a lot of what you have said has to do with inter school relationships, and people coming together ...’

Education centres are regarded as being a valuable resource which must be used. As one participant commented, ‘use it or lose it’, while another participant said that ‘you are still learning. It is just as important to avail of courses and it is a great resource to have.’

**The role of part-time education centres**

Part-time education centres are valued by the teachers who use them. Their size and their immediacy to their community were noted:

‘We’re building up a network … you are building up that element of a cohort of people who are definitely interested in sharing this shared vision...’

In the discussion that evolved around part-time education centres, there was a sense that the part-time education centres are rooted in their local community and can be extremely responsive to the needs of schools around them.

‘There was a need for training because of the need within the schools and the teacher saw an actual need for it and actually went looking for it.’
Above all, the issue of being sited within the learning community all around them was emphasised as a key asset, where ‘I think it has to be local.’ The sense of being part of a community came across very strongly in the focus group which had members from the local part-time education centre.

‘The whole idea would be to provide courses that teachers want but my whole idea of starting here was that this was not just going to be for teachers, it was also going to be a centre that we were going to develop for all of the partners…’

The concept of a learning community situated in an education centre embracing all the partners in education, as mentioned above, was prominent in the discussion. It was pointed out that the part-time centre ran courses for parents, on literacy and numeracy, and on Irish. These courses were very well received. The issue of being in daily contact with parents and in recognising their needs within our learning communities is an interesting one.

‘The advantage in being right in the middle of the community and from talking to parents every day… you know exactly where and what the needs are.’

There are perceived advantages of having a part-time centre run by a practising teacher whose daily practice is in the classroom, a teacher who interacts with all the partners in education and can see the needs which exist across the system - from teacher needs, to school needs, to parental needs. Because the centre’s director teaches, s/he is ‘probably more aware’, in that ‘the longer you are away from the chalk face the more out of touch you become and you do need that element of reality attached to what you are doing’.

It was suggested that smaller schools may have a greater need to reach out into the wider community to counteract their isolation. The education centres can provide opportunities for teachers in small schools to network.

‘If you are teaching in that rural two teacher school it is a very lonely existence.’

‘The large school almost becomes an education centre in its own right … but in the two-teacher school … that is where the support is needed.’

This comment may indicate a view that the professional learning needs of educators associated with a small school may be somewhat different to the professional learning needs of those associated with larger schools. It may be the case that a possible lack of diversity which can be a feature of the small school can be overcome within the shared experience of the learning community situated in the education centre. Larger schools may have a greater pool of talent and experience to draw on, and may be somewhat more self-sufficient. Smaller schools may tend to turn to their local education centre for support, help and advice, and for their professional development needs.

One of the challenges inherent in establishing inclusive learning communities, involving all the stakeholders as partners in education, might be how to develop the education centres, both part-time and full-time, to enable learning communities to thrive.

‘An education centre, I would hope, will get to the stage where it is being looked on as a place where, number one, professionals can meet but also that you are likely to meet a parent here and they are a partner in terms of education … break down that divide between the teacher and the parent and make it a bit more harmonious.’
However, the running of a part-time education centre was presented as placing a burden on the teacher responsible, a burden which often goes beyond the brief of course organizer where ‘the director has also to be the secretary, the care-taker, the cleaner and everything else’. The supports offered for this responsibility were regarded by one participant as being insufficient, given the onerous workload.

‘You’re teaching a class all the time ... and you’re entitled to 15 days a year to take off to run a centre of this magnitude with over 300 teachers in the area.’

There are ongoing issues of concern in the present economic climate, with the cuts in education spending hitting hard. This concern emerged in the focus groups and the potential negative impact on what the education centre can provide was mentioned, in that ‘the funding isn’t there’, and ‘the big issue at the moment is funding’.

**The role of the INTO**

Education centres can provide teachers with a place where they get together and share concerns. An education centre ‘provides teachers an opportunity to get together like the INTO in some ways’. A number of representative bodies were referenced in terms of their networking potential – these included the INTO and the IPPN. Mention was made of the positive development which the INTO website has been in terms of facilitating learning and interchange of ideas among teachers.

‘I think the INTO website is fantastic in particular when searching for information’.

The value of meeting and engaging professionally with other teachers was a constant theme throughout the various focus groups. The perceived value of INTO meetings with regard to providing a platform for professional conversations has been highlighted earlier in this document but it is worthy of reiteration at this point.

‘It is very important, I think, for teachers to meet because we all pretty much have the same problems and union meetings are a good place to meet.’

The recent exodus from the teaching profession of active, healthy teachers has opened an interesting debate as to their possible future role. The once frequently-used option of working as substitutes during retirement appears to be dwindling, as the numbers of unemployed NQTs remain high and the policy of prioritising them for employment is in place. The feeling that teachers have lost valued colleagues, whose wisdom and experience will be long missed, was expressed during the focus groups. Their potential value in terms of broadening the teacher learning community through accessing the knowledge and experience of those teachers was suggested.

‘I would love in some way to allow these teachers back into the education system or back into our schools....’

**Self-evaluation and reflective practice**

The importance of reflective practice and self-evaluation was highlighted in the course of the focus group discussions. This is evident in many of the quotations already cited. The individual and collective need for teachers to engage in such practices was underlined.
‘If we are part of a learning community - that means that teachers as much as the children - and we can only increase our skills by trying to develop ourselves professionally and personally.’

The need for planned periods of reflection at whole-school level was recognised and was considered to be good practice.

‘There has to be a reflective period at some time in the year.’

‘It gives the opportunity for people to bring their own experiences ... we call it a reflective week.’

‘Maybe a week of just reflection on what is working well and what is not working well and just sort of slowing down for a little bit before taking off again.’

Aforementioned difficulties with lack of time for collaborative activities have a negative impact on the possibilities for whole-school self-evaluation. The lack of time for self-evaluation and reflection was also noted.

‘It’s a hit and miss situation in a lot of schools ... you might have staff meetings once or twice a term and I often feel that it is not enough time to get to find out what everybody’s strengths are.’

**Training and time**

Many teachers are committed to the concept of continuous professional development to the extent that they attend a course, or, increasingly, do an online course, every summer. Ideally, this new expertise and information should feed its way back into schools.

‘If somebody comes back with an idea we bounce it off one another.’

In reality, in the words of one of the participants ‘there isn’t the time then for feedback’. This can create some degree of frustration, because teachers can exit courses enthused about what they have learned, but then wilt in the face of the reality in their schools.

‘We never get around to telling and explaining what we heard. And it never sounds as good coming from us’.

The issue of time keeps arising. It is one of the very real constraints which teachers feel, and it is consistently felt by all teachers, no matter what their role or school setting.

‘This is reality, isn’t it? We are snatching a minute here and there.’

‘Time constraints are a big problem ... sometimes it is impossible and there are double classes in each class and in a small school there is always somebody on break duty.’

**Curriculum planning**

Teacher planning and preparation are regarded as being key components of effective teaching. A teacher needs to have clear goals, and have prepared plans that will facilitate the organisation and delivery of their lessons, and lead the pupils towards the educational objectives. The more organised a teacher is, in general, the more effective
will be the teaching/learning process. As one contributor put it, it is not just a question of writing reams of notes, ‘you have to be sensible about it’. Planning must include learning objectives and learning outcomes, materials used, methodologies, differentiation, and evaluation.

‘We have a really broad curriculum and I don’t think there is a teacher out there who doesn’t feel they could do a specific topic a little bit better or in a different way that could be more effective and part of our own teaching practice is to reflect.’

Such a sentiment indicates the close link between curriculum implementation and reflective practice. Some teachers’ experience of the WSE process found an overemphasis on written notes, and has led teachers to query what is being asked of them.

‘You have to question what benefit it is having to your teaching, is it making a huge difference – I know planning is essential, but the level of detail that is being required, is that benefiting what you are doing in the classroom?’

The view was expressed that if the planning is not directly related to classroom practice, it becomes redundant and irrelevant.

‘Sometimes planning can be great lofty notions that look good on paper.’

‘I think we have to be careful not to go to the extreme of having it all lovely on paper but in practice it is a different story.’

The above comments convey a sense that teachers want to use the scarce resource of professional time wisely in terms of advancing not only the learning of the pupils in their care but also their own professional learning through, for example, reflective practice. Curriculum overload is a reality for teachers in their classrooms, a view that came across strongly in the focus groups.

‘Too much happened too quickly ... there is a lot being thrown at us and teachers are expected to cover this that and the other programmes and what happens is that they are trying so hard trying to catch up with all these different things that at the end of the day very little gets done.’

It is possible that some of this perceived overload issue may stem from teachers’ own view that ‘you are constantly under pressure because there is so much expected of you.’ However, the fact that frustration with curriculum overload is so widely and consistently expressed - by teachers across all settings - has made it imperative that it be investigated, as the NCCA are currently doing.

**Sharing talents**

It is clear that the primary school curriculum is acknowledged to be broad. Given that there are eleven subjects, it is reasonable to assume that not every teacher is skilled to the same degree in all eleven, but that all teachers bring their own unique talents to their schools. Teachers can and do learn from one another. Some schools have set-ups which include one talented teacher taking responsibility for one particular area. This is often seen in the field of physical education or music, or to a lesser degree, art. Often, when a teacher attends a summer course, they bring back to their school what they have learned, sharing it with their colleagues. Bearing in mind the aforementioned
frustrations regarding time constraints, teachers place value on opportunities to learn from each other.

‘It is the opportunity to be able to see and learn from each other.’

This enthusiasm for tapping into the expertise of peers has been explored in earlier sections of this document – it was a recurring theme throughout the discussions.

**Professional Development**

**In-service - limitations of current experience**

As indicated earlier in this analysis of the focus group discussions, teachers value in-service professional development not only in terms of the specified subject matter of the particular courses but also in terms of the opportunities that it affords for engaging with other teachers in a professional setting and for ‘bouncing ideas’ off each other. Nevertheless, it was clear that teachers are not entirely satisfied with the current nature of provision. There is a perception that class teachers have fewer opportunities for attending courses than is the case for LS/RTs.

‘I think very often (LS/RTs) have the opportunities to go on courses much more than class teachers would as they don’t have a class ... our resource team are gone on a course yesterday, today and tomorrow and it is class teachers who wouldn’t have a chance (to attend the course) who are dealing with the problem for most of the day.’

This perception of imbalance in the opportunities afforded to teachers to attend courses was echoed by a number of participants – it is clear that teachers feel that all of the teaching staff are not getting similar access to courses. Bearing in mind the enthusiasm the participants exhibited for attending in-service courses, it is important to point out that not all experiences of in-service course participation were positive. One teacher spoke of coming home ‘angry’ after attending in-service training, saying that ‘we were really treated like children at a lot of those courses.’ The services provided by the ‘cuiditheoirí’ were spoken of as being of crucial importance in linking the in-service professional development in a meaningful way to the individual school communities.

‘But we weren’t afraid to speak to the cuiditheoirí when they came. We were afraid (to speak out at courses involving other schools) as you were clustered or whatever and you didn’t want to be seen as the only idiot who hadn’t got a clue what was going on.’

The above comment suggests a tacit understanding of in-school collegiality and the role it plays in facilitating collaborative learning by teachers. The teacher in question continued to explain that each school has different challenges to address depending on a number of variables – support by ‘cuiditheoirí’ that was directly relevant to the context in which teachers operate was highly valued.

‘It was fantastic when the ‘cuiditheoirí’ came into our school and we said, ‘Look, this is what is happening in our school community.’

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7 Now called advisors in the Professional Development Service for Teachers
This comment suggests a common sense of purpose among the staff, an awareness of their unique challenges and an eagerness to work together and to avail themselves of outside expertise so that the collective learning of the staff might be advanced.

**Multiclass challenges**

The challenge of teaching in a multi-class situation was highlighted by some of the teachers who participated in the focus groups. One participant observed that ‘multiclass is skimmed over by so many organisations’. Learning communities within these settings present their own challenges.

‘There is definitely a huge difference between training for multiclass and training for general.’

Additionally, since multi-class situations are more likely to be a feature of smaller schools, it is likely that teachers in such schools have fewer in-school opportunities to establish learning communities centred on addressing the needs of teaching multi-class groups, owing to the smaller size of the staff, and, possibly, geographical location.

‘In the two-teacher school, that is where the support is needed – they don’t have the expertise in the staff.’

**CPD - Collective Responsibility/Personal Responsibility**

The focus group discussions revealed an awareness on the part of teachers of both personal and collective responsibility with regard to Continuing Professional Development (CPD). It was considered important ‘to get everyone on board’. The importance of individual teachers being open to learning so that the collective learning of the teaching body can be enhanced was underlined in the following comment – the teacher in question was referring to professional learning needs associated with the introduction of interactive whiteboards to the classroom:

‘The onus is on all of us. If we are part of a learning community, that means the teachers as much as the children ... and when the teachers are open to new experiences you find that things can go in any direction and wonderful things can happen in schools.’

**Accreditation**

While much of the discussion in the groups centred on learning of an informal or incidental nature, or learning through courses of a short to medium duration, reference was also made to longer courses of study, such as Diplomas or Masters, which resulted in accreditation. These were seen to be of benefit not only to the actual teacher engaged in the course but also, potentially, of benefit to the school community and the teaching community at large. Indeed, one teacher suggested that it might be appropriate that those who are in receipt of an additional qualification allowance would be expected to ‘spread (their) knowledge and expertise’ and that they should be ‘accommodated’ in this regard. Another teacher, (a principal teacher), stressed the need for the principal to ‘empower’ those with expertise to develop it further or to ‘share that expertise with the whole staff’. He spoke of a situation in his current school whereby he discussed with a teacher the nature of research she was undertaking for her Masters. Considering the research to be of significant interest, he encouraged her to do the following:
‘Introduce it within our own school and to go to other schools and see how it works there ... and then to bring it back to our own school and do a pilot project on it, which she is doing now as part of her Masters.’

Subsequent to this, he told how he saw the need to ‘sell (this idea) to other teachers’ and for ‘all (to) move together to implement it’ – in other words, the research engaged in by the teacher in various schools would filter through to the school community to which she belonged. This is a very interesting example of overlapping learning between the individual and the collaborative – between formal accredited learning and ongoing professional learning in the school and across schools.

**Life-long learning**

This personal and collective responsibility for professional development runs parallel to the whole notion of lifelong learning. Throughout the various discussions, it was clear that the participating teachers did not regard Initial Teacher Education (ITE) as something which fully equipped the teacher for an entire professional career. Ongoing learning is presented as being a key facet of being a teacher. This lifelong learning can be on an individual level or as part of the school community or the broader community of teachers.

‘I suppose you have a hunger of finding out better ways in which we do things and I think that goes on continuously.’

‘(It) is tied up with being professional. You’re always going to be moving on and being a reflective practitioner, reflecting on how we’re doing and (on) what you’re doing ... It doesn’t mean changing completely what you’re doing, just tweaking it a bit here, a bit there.’

**Supports**

Supports for professional development are presented as being of fundamental importance with regard to maximising its potential. While practical support in the form of substitute cover and access to appropriate courses was advocated, it is interesting to note that the importance of support in the form of stakeholders demonstrating that they valued the professional development of teachers was emphasised by a number of teachers.

‘It has to be valued by your employers, first of all...and the whole staff has to see the value of professional development. There has to be substitute cover as well, and that has been cut back.’

Referring to the Reading Recovery programme of support for teachers, one participant referred to the ‘ongoing support within the programme of peer support’, which ‘definitely works’. Support for teacher professional development such as that provided to teachers undertaking Reading Recovery, or through providing substitute cover, is necessary, if teachers are to enhance their professional learning and practice.

**Courses**

While much professional development is seen to take place in an informal capacity such as through routine interactions with other teachers throughout the day, the value of formal courses was also stressed. School-based courses were seen to be of clear value in
boosting enthusiasm or, as one participant put it, ‘giving your batteries a boost again’. It was felt by some teachers that courses are more productive overall if they are available to the whole teaching staff rather than to just some of the teachers.

‘The best type of CPD courses are those that you can work around a whole school.’

Not surprisingly, accessibility in terms of distance was mentioned as being a factor in terms of teacher engagement with courses. However, teacher engagement with courses and the potential benefit that might be derived from same was also seen as being linked to the relevance of the courses to the perceived needs of the teachers themselves. A number of teachers stressed the importance of having a ‘needs analysis about the different (needs of) people in the learning community ... what people want rather than providing a prescribed, ‘this is what’s on’!’ The difficulties in identifying and responding to teachers’ needs in the form of course provision were also recognised in the course of the discussion groups – teachers’ needs are constantly evolving and there may be an immediacy to some of those needs.

‘My needs right at this moment in time ... when the course come up in two months’ time might not necessarily be a need anymore.’

**Concluding comment**

Participants in the four focus group discussions on the theme of learning communities welcomed the opportunity to contribute their views on professionalism, learning and schools as communities of learning. Learning was seen as an integral part of teachers’ work, whether it was pupil learning or teacher learning. Though teachers recognised that there was a changed economic climate, nonetheless they were very positive about their work as teachers in schools.

Participants highlighted the importance of good staff relations and communications in creating a school climate which facilitated collaboration and cooperation. Teachers indicated a willingness to collaborate but emphasised the lack of time in the school day for structured collaborative work. Teachers also emphasised the need for a whole-school approach, stating that although they worked in isolation in their classrooms, there was increased collaboration between learning support, resource teachers and class teachers, and more team-teaching.

Leadership was considered crucial to supporting a school in becoming a learning community for all. However, the difficulties for principal teachers in small schools, who had full-time teaching responsibilities were acknowledged. Participants recognised the potential contribution of experienced teachers who shared their expertise both formally and informally with their colleagues. Teachers welcomed opportunities to learn from other teachers as they felt a certain sense of isolation in their own classrooms. Learning from other teachers occurred through professional conversations and through attendance at professional development courses. Participants also highlighted the importance of induction for new teachers. Teachers who had participated in the National Pilot Project on Induction (NPPTI) found the experience very supportive, while teachers who had experienced mentoring found the process professionally rewarding.

Participants referred to the role of other members of the school community such as parents, who were considered a resource to the school, inspectors, who came to know a school community through whole school evaluations, members of the boards of management, and other professionals with whom they worked. In addition, participants
spoke of the important role of education centres in providing opportunities for teachers to meet and engage with colleagues from the broader teaching community. INTO meetings were also mentioned as important opportunities to network with other teachers.

In summary, teachers who participated in the focus group discussions accepted their responsibility as professionals, to reflect on their practice, to engage in continuing learning and to collaborate with colleagues and other members of the school community. While acknowledging that there were some barriers to achieving optimum professional engagement, teachers appreciated the fact that they were members of a strong professional community of teachers as they strived to ensure their schools were vibrant communities of learning.
Conclusion

Learning communities now exist in many different formats, growing organically from a group of enthusiastic learners or established specifically to cater for an identified need. However, common to all effective learning communities are the fundamental principles of respect, understanding, knowledge and excellence. Equally, while the impetus of a learning community should be fuelled by a shared goal, there may be multiple goals dispersed throughout the community recognising diverse needs within the group. As has been clearly shown in this document there is no black and white template governing learning communities and therefore the possibilities for their establishment and growth are endless.

Recent decades have seen a growing number of teachers tentatively reach out from the professional isolation of their individual classrooms to seek information, affirmation and consolation in collegially-spirited learning communities. Learning communities in schools require a greater interaction with fellow professionals than may have traditionally existed and relies on the broader and further development of collegiality within individual schools and throughout the education sector. In studying the creation of effective learning communities Carnall (2007) observed five stages in the cycle of change leading to effective staff development. First, there is denial where there is a lack of acceptance of the need for change that results from an implied criticism of past performance. Second, there is defence usually to protect territories and maintain the status quo. The third stage involves discarding the old, which is followed in stage four by adaptation of the new. Finally, the fifth stage involves internalisation. Therefore, a culture of proactive change, though it may be inconvenient or off putting initially is essential within a learning community. Effective learning communities necessitate a willingness in teachers to share, the confidence to credit themselves as experts and the humility to identify and acknowledge their individual weaknesses in order to open up to development opportunities both as an expert and a learner either in turn or in tandem.

Revised initial teacher education programmes may offer many teachers access to a new sense of community through the increased emphasis on observation of best practice for the student teacher. This formalises the recognition of the experienced practitioner in the classroom to be both knowledgeable and excellent while cultivating mutual understanding and respect between the practising teacher and student teacher, a relationship which in itself encompasses the four fundamental principles of a learning community - respect, understanding, knowledge and excellence.

Induction also offers an invaluable opportunity to develop and/or enhance a learning community. The National Induction Programme for Teachers (NIPT) provides a useful structure around which learning communities are established. There are multiple layers whereby inter-school groups of teachers come together to train as mentors while newly qualified teachers gather for modules to assist them in their first years of teaching. The skills and knowledge gained at these assemblies in turn enrich the school community to
which the mentors and newly qualified teachers return. Further opportunities for inter-school learning communities present themselves when a mentor from a neighbouring school provides support to a newly qualified teacher and also inter-school observation is encouraged within the programme. In September 2012 participation in the National Induction Programme became obligatory for all newly qualified teachers.

Parental and community involvement can significantly enrich a school. Expertise within the broader community can often go untapped and with correct management a fruitful collaboration can bring further skills and knowledge to the learning community.

The principal teacher plays a pivotal role in the successful creation of a learning community within a school. Enthusiastic teachers often establish and progress initiatives, however, if the principal is not supportive of an enterprise the longevity of its success is generally compromised. A principal must value the notion of collaborative learning and foster a culture of openness to new ideas. However, the success of a learning community does not require the principal to micro-manage each project. Rather it necessitates genuine encouragement and assistance from the principal. Many assistant principals or special duties teachers take on the responsibility of leading learning communities either for curricular areas or general staff development. Therefore, it is important to note at this point the destructive nature of the moratorium on appointments to posts of responsibility. For example, the principal may not always lead or indeed attend every group or sub-group meeting but should enquire as to the outcome or progress made at such meetings. Meaningful engagement is key. Meetings should only be held when required as unnecessary meetings would be counterproductive. Equally it is important that the principal supports the group in practical ways by making an appropriate time and venue available. The principal should also lead the board of management in valuing the continuous professional development of teachers through, where possible, providing financial aid for courses or substitute cover where appropriate. Also time should be prioritised at staff meetings for reports from teachers who have attended courses or are involved in a special interest learning community internally or external to the school. Genuine interest and support should be evident from the leadership in the school as a fundamental element for a flourishing learning community.

Rapidly changing contexts and variations in the nature of teachers’ work render it imperative that teachers constantly learn. However, opportunities for informal learning communities in schools are lessened due to the short period of breaks and so conscious efforts to create space and time for learning communities is all the more important. Teachers have a tradition of giving their own time to continuous professional development but this is not always conducive to creating a community. Therefore, staff meetings are crucial in bringing staff members together to share learning experiences. And of course every cloud has a silver lining, the cloud being ‘Croke Park’ hours and the silver lining being greater time during which all staff are available to come together. External experts can serve as an important catalyst in starting a project or imparting knowledge. However, in order for learning communities to excel the expertise within the group must also be recognised. Teachers who upskill should be facilitated in sharing their expertise with their colleagues. Every teacher has a noteworthy strength which should be identified and capitalised upon while they improve on their weaknesses by gaining from the know-how of their colleagues, working as ‘co-creators’ of professional knowledge.

Online networks are a natural outward progression of learning communities inside the school. Sometimes a common interest may only be found with teachers from outside a teacher’s immediate colleagues and the focus of any learning community should not
undermine the individual learner. The internet opens many doors to niche fields of learning or simply offers an alternative view. Online networks can also spark curiosity in children and give them access to expertise beyond what is available within the walls of their school.

Another external catalyst for a learning community is the Inspectorate. Increasingly the Inspectorate is emphasising the need for more self-evaluation in schools. There is rarely an area for development that an inspector identifies that personnel within the school have not recognised themselves when given a chance to reflect on practice in the school. Self-evaluation is important for a learning community to keep it relevant and helpful to its participants. WSEs can place a renewed focus on areas for improvement for individual teachers and for the school community as a whole. Equally, a WSE can serve to affirm a learning community. The Inspectorate may also provide valuable support and advice to a learning community. In fact the Inspectorate’s guide to quality descriptors identifies many elements of a good learning community.

Statistics show that the learning outcomes of children in disadvantaged areas are significantly lower than those of children from more advantaged socio-economic backgrounds. The 2005 report *Literacy and Numeracy in Disadvantaged Schools* (LANDS) reveals that in literacy, 43% of pupils tested scored at or below the 20th percentile. In standardised numeracy tests 64% of pupils scored at or below the 20th percentile. This is considerably below the national average whereby 20% of pupils overall would be expected to score at or below the 20th percentile. The DEIS scheme is making a difference to disadvantaged communities and central to the successful implementation is a thriving professional learning community. Appropriate CPD is provided for all relevant staff to ensure successful implementation of intervention or strategy and achievement of targets. There is evidence of a whole-school focus on achievement of targets and the implementation of interventions. Agreed strategies and interventions are familiar to all teachers, pupils and other relevant personnel and are effectively implemented (An Evaluation of Planning Processes in DEIS Primary Schools 2011:25). Significantly, pupils are explicitly included in the sphere of the learning community when identifying significant strengths in the implementation and impact of DEIS strategies.

Successful learning communities can impact positively on pupil learning. Successful learning communities are also of benefit to teachers. The concepts of learning communities, communities of practice, networked learning and professional conversations have entered the discourse of teaching since the 1990s in particular. Such discourses sit well with the focus on collaboration and collegiality, which are at the core of teacher professionalism for the 21st century (Hargreaves 1994; Sachs 2003). The challenge will be to ensure that learning communities remain within the professional domain of teachers and do not become solely a lever for school improvement and school reform (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 2009).
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Appendix I

Developmental framework for programme developers

The following framework has been developed as a touchstone for programme developers, instructors or facilitators as they develop the learning goals and evaluation plans for their participants in their programmes. It is also meant to guide their own practice.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guiding Questions</th>
<th>Conceptualization</th>
<th>Well developed understanding, systematic and ongoing action</th>
<th>Some understanding, moderate or irregular action</th>
<th>Cursory knowledge, minimal action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>How do I promote shared discovery and learning among my learners?</strong></td>
<td>Shared discovery and learning promotes all participants to share responsibility for achieving the learning goals.</td>
<td>Practitioner understands the value of collaborative learning, has the skills to implement, implements them, and intentionally evaluates these activities to improve his/her approach to enhance learning.</td>
<td>Practitioner understands the value of collaborative learning and other group-learning techniques, and skillfully implements some of them, but in a non-integrated fashion and without an evaluation plan.</td>
<td>Practitioner uses collaborative learning or some other group-learning technique, but it’s just ‘dropped in’ with no understanding of the impact on other course or learning activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>How do I support meaningful interactions among learners necessary to achieve the learning goals?</strong></td>
<td>Interactions throughout LC and among participants are functional and necessary for the learning goals to be accomplished.</td>
<td>Practitioner understands the value of, and knows how to fully integrate functional interactions between learners necessary to achieve the learning goals, implements them, and has built in a plan to evaluate the effectiveness to improve their teaching and participant learning.</td>
<td>Practitioner understands the value of functional interactions among learners to accomplish learning goals and intentionally builds some into the learning activities, but in a non-integrative fashion and without a plan to evaluate the effectiveness.</td>
<td>Practitioner uses sporadic interactions among learners without an understanding of the value and impact of these interactions on their learning and other activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>How do I connect my materials and activities to other related topics and experiences?</strong></td>
<td>Implicit and explicit connections are made to other learning and life experiences.</td>
<td>Practitioner helps learners feel fully connected with learning opportunities beyond the course, makes explicit the impact on the learning experience, and evaluates the impact of these connections.</td>
<td>Practitioner helps learners connect to a variety of broader teaching and learning assignments/activities but does not make explicit the impact on the course learning experience; and no plans for evaluation.</td>
<td>Practitioner has ‘add-on’ assignments/activities beyond the primary learning activities that have no other connections to the primary learning goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>How do I create an inclusive learning environment?</strong></td>
<td>Inclusive learning environment welcomes the learners’ diverse backgrounds /experiences and is used to help accomplish the group’s collective learning.</td>
<td>Practitioner creates an environment where all learners from a variety of backgrounds rely on each other to achieve the learning goals by recognizing how the diversity of backgrounds enriched their learning. Practitioner evaluates and makes changes based on how diversity enriches learning goals.</td>
<td>Practitioner uses LC techniques to enhance diversity, such as creating a welcoming environment, or intentionally creating small groups based on diverse backgrounds, but connects these techniques in only limited ways to overall learning goals; has no plan to evaluate the impact.</td>
<td>Practitioner ‘drops in’ LC techniques, such as asking learners to talk about their backgrounds, or creating small groups mixing men and women, without using these techniques in any other way, or without any follow-through to connect these techniques to learning objectives.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Center for the Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning [http://www.cirtl.net/files/LCframework.pdf](http://www.cirtl.net/files/LCframework.pdf)
Part 2

Proceedings of the Consultative Conference on Education

November 2010

Cork
Opening Speeches and Presentations

Welcome

Milo Walsh, Cathaoirleach, Education Committee

This is the 25th Consultative Conference on Education. I remember my first Education Conference in Bundoran in 1987. It was the second ever Education Conference. That Conference had a profound effect on me as a young teacher. In those days one tended to close one’s classroom door, jealously protecting your techniques and methodologies while at the same time floundering to come to terms with the mathematical contortions of “an rolla”, the linguistic nuances of a new town and the complexities of the experienced teachers’ operational idiosyncrasies. It was at that first conference that I had the opportunity to engage in professional discourse about my teaching for the very first time. I met teachers with the same problems, similar philosophies and shared enthusiasm. While the group discussions whetted my appetite it was during the casual chat around the cup of coffee or the occasional pint that I realised I had definitely chosen the correct career path. It was great to talk to fellow professionals - I didn’t know it at the time but it was my first experience of a learning community. It had such an effect on me that I endeavoured to recreate the experience for the members in my own Branch and annoyed them with mini-educational conferences in local hotels. I think most of them have forgiven me at this stage. I believe that my experience is not unique and indeed it is very rewarding as a member of the Education Committee to read the positive comments from teachers on the evaluation sheets each year at the end of conference. We do read all comments and take on board suggestions made in order to improve each conference.

I would like to spend a few moments highlighting the work of your Education Committee. We are working at the moment under the broad umbrella of Teaching in the 21st Century. Last year we covered the Arts in Education – this year Learning Communities and we have already begun researching Literacy for next year’s conference. We are also looking at investigating at a micro level the professional relationships between teachers and students. As well as working on remits for our conference the committee discuss and debate many educational issues of the day and are prepared to change tack if necessary to facilitate the needs of primary teachers or the teaching profession.

Each conference takes a great deal of organising – the organisation of this conference began the week after the closing session in Gorey last year.

As chairperson, I would like to thank a number of people. While we meet in plenary session five occasions during the year most of our work is done in sub-committees. I would like to thank the learning community sub-committee who are responsible for the research and the writing up of the document you have before you. I would like to thank the full committee for their many hours of work at home during the past year - reading,
reviewing and writing; Aidan Gaughran for keeping us on track; Deirbhile Nic Craith for final editing of the document and for her guidance and direction during the year; the as always hard working Claire and Ann from Head Office; the teachers who gave of their time to attend focus group meetings around the country; and the committee members who facilitated these focus groups, I say thank you very much. The document you have before you is the eight draft and is not yet complete as now we need your input. I wish you well in your discussion groups and want to say that it is you, the delegates, that will make this a successful conference and a rewarding learning community.

Overview of conference theme – Learning Communities

Deirbhile Nic Craith, Senior Official

Cuirim leis an bhfáilte chuig ár gcomhdháil Chomhairleach ar oideachas – an cúigiú ceann is fiche. Nach méanar dúinn a bheith ar ais anseo i gCorcaigh. Ní raibh mé féin i láthair ag an gcéad cheann. Bhí mé ró-mhall ag bunadh ag cuairt mo lámh ag cruinníú na craoiúbhe. Ach sin mar a bhiomh!

Milo has indicated to you that the Education Committee’s work over the next few years will focus on a number of themes under the overall framework of Education in the 21st Century. This is quite a daunting task. I wonder if we had to come up with a way of educating our children in and for the 21st century, would we still invent schools like we have now?

I’m sure, however, in spite of all the cutbacks - we’ll still be here at INTO conferences well into the 21st century reflecting and debating aspects of primary education and our role as primary teachers. We should continue to scrutinise and interrogate our practices, our curriculum and our philosophies about primary education – and not only at conferences like this but as integral part of our work as professionals.

As you probably saw from the discussion document there are many ways to understand Learning Communities. Schools as learning communities, teacher professional communities and even virtual learning communities – all of which you will be discussing in some form this afternoon and tomorrow.

So why did the Education Committee consider it a relevant topic? We know that one of the core aims of the new Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), and of the PPDS before it, is to support the development of schools as professional learning communities, in which teachers’ professional development is closely linked to school development and improvement and pupil progress. You might in your discussion groups give some consideration to the significance of this statement – not only in relation to learning communities, and what that might mean, but also in terms of our understandings of teacher professional development.

The idea of learning communities has entered the discourse of teaching in recent years in the context of enhancing our professionalism. Looking at some definitions of new professionalism, we see a move away from traditional isolation and individualism of teachers to highlight the importance of collaboration and collegiality. Schools have been supported in this process since 1999 by the PCSP and SDPS teams.

We’re not alone in the teaching profession in highlighting the importance of collaboration and teamwork, as such practices are also reflected in other professions and
in the business community. Collaborative knowledge is considered greater than individual knowledge. It can also be a means to capture the non-visible and tacit knowledge within a group of co-workers and co-professionals.

Vonk’s definition of open professionalism (Vonk 1997), focuses on lifelong learning, shared planning, collaboration and shared authority - where professional development includes professional ethics and professional responsibility towards society.

Judith Sachs definition of transformative professionalism (Sachs 2003) is about collaboration, collegiality, activism, enquiry, and knowledge-building - where professional development is about learning and dialogue with other teachers.

There’s plenty of food for thought here as we explore what learning communities might mean for us.

We do know that there is an interest at policy level in encouraging schools to develop as learning communities and in seeing schools as places where teachers as well as pupils are learning. The Department has been involved in networking with their colleagues at European level, in a Peer Learning Activity on the topic of schools as learning communities for teachers as well as pupils.

There also has been a switch in focus in teacher professional development from attendance at seminars or courses to professional development at school level, with the profession taking more responsibility for their own professional development. I have taken these quotes from some fairly recent reports:

‘There is a need, therefore, to plan school-based professional development programmes that would support coherent whole-school responses to the particular needs and contexts of each school.’

(LANDS, DES, 2005)

‘Most ICD (incare development) should be implemented within schools on an ongoing basis.’

(The 2004 National Assessment of English Reading, DES, 2005)

‘Schools and teachers should assume responsibility for their professional development…..’

(An Evaluation of Curriculum Implementation in Primary Schools, DES, 2005)

A school therefore, is as much a learning site for teachers as it is for pupils. And you will hear more about this later.

Our curriculum supports a constructivist approach to learning. We can apply some of the same thinking to teachers. Drawing on constructivist principles, we recognise the need for scaffolding to support the participation of NQTs into our professional community, through induction support and mentoring.

We cannot ignore the role of ICT in developing learning communities, and we will have some examples of using ICT to promote learning communities during our conference. As you’re probably aware some funding has been made available to schools this year to purchase ICT equipment. We have had a number of reports outlining policy on ICT, but we often lack follow-through. This time, the Government has set up an ICT in Schools Steering Group to oversee the implementation of the Strategy recommendations. The
INTO is represented on this group. One of key areas identified for investment is the professional development of teachers. We would welcome your suggestions about the best approach to take, given the different starting points that are out there. We have a brief questionnaire which we will invite you to complete later.

Learning Communities cannot be legislated into existence, but they can be recognized, supported, encouraged and nurtured. Our conference this weekend is hopefully more than a beginning in encouraging and supporting learning communities in our schools and in the teaching profession.

Bainígí tairbhe agus sult as an gcomhdháil.

**Introduction to learning communities**

*Aidan Gaughran, Education Committee*

For the past two years the members of the Education Committee have been looking into the area of learning communities as the basis for a consultative conference. Today, I will briefly outline our work thus far and give an overview of the document which we present to you as delegates.

In a general sense, a learning community could be described as a group of people who share common values and beliefs and who are actively engaged in learning from each other. Schools today have multiple educational relationships: teacher to teacher, teacher to student, student to student, teacher to parent, student to parent.

In 21st century Ireland, we need to examine our approach to teaching and learning to ensure not only that the pupil remains at the core of the learning experience but that teachers, as learners themselves, have the time and resources to allow them to reflect upon their practices with a view to improving them.

Schools have changed dramatically in recent years with the creation of additional posts. Irish schools may have posts for teachers of travellers, EAL posts, HSCL posts and a learning support/resource team as well as mainstream class teachers. This presents challenges as well as opportunities. Teachers need to collaborate more in order to enhance the education of their pupils. Informal collaboration has always existed. However, we need to put formal structures in place to allow teachers to dialogue professionally. I would suggest that a staff meeting once or twice a term does not allow adequately for the type of professional dialogue needed.

We are fortunate in Ireland to have a highly educated teaching workforce. Nevertheless, there will be many changes in educational thinking over the course of a 40 year career. Initial teacher education does not, and can not fully equip teachers for the realities of the classroom today and in the future. Due to the rapid nature of change initial education should be seen as ‘only the beginning of a process of lifelong learning as members of the teaching profession.’ Shortly, my colleague Anne English will present our committee’s deliberations on the continuum of lifelong learning and continuous professional development.

The document which we present to you today examines many facets of schools as learning communities. This includes the role of the principal and in-school management team, collaborative and co-operative teaching, mentoring, parental and community
partnerships and student councils. Tomorrow morning, Áine Dillon will examine the area of leadership in our schools and how the principal teacher is ‘responsible for the creation, together with the board of management, parents, students and teachers of a school environment which is supportive of learning among the students and which promotes the professional development of teachers.’ This document also examines the role of outside agencies involved in schools such as the Inspectorate, NEPs, support agencies and education centres. Tomorrow morning, also, Siobhán Lyskey will examine in further detail the existing and potential role of full and part-time education centres nationwide.

As part of our deliberations the Education Committee hosted four focus groups on the topic of learning communities early in 2010 in Clonmel, Cork, Dublin and Tuam. Each focus group was facilitated by members of the committee and consisted of between 10 and 12 teachers who discussed a series of prepared questions on aspects of learning communities. In chapter seven of the document the views of teachers in the following areas are reflected upon: collaboration, staff relations, whole-school approaches to education, leadership and the role of the principal, lack of time for collaboration, teamwork, teacher to teacher learning, ICT, classroom isolation, inter-school collaborations, dialogue with parents and the board of management, support and mentoring for NQTs, WSE, networks with particular reference to education centres, reflective practice, curriculum planning, curriculum overload, continuous professional development, accreditation, multi-class challenges and life-long learning. Interestingly, while acknowledging that there were some barriers to achieving optimum professional engagement, teachers appreciated the fact that they were members of a strong professional community of teachers as they strived to ensure their schools were vibrant communities of learning.

Unfortunately, the education system in Ireland is still failing some children. There are highly significant associations between concentrated socio-economic deprivation, literacy/numeracy difficulties, psychiatric/emotional/behavioural difficulties on the one hand, and involvement in anti-social and criminal activity on the other. There are low levels of literacy and numeracy in designated disadvantaged areas. There appears to be evidence that the supports employed in DEIS schools are having a positive impact. However, support and interventions must be sustained over time if they are to have any lasting impact. It is timely that we examine all inputs (or lack thereof) into the school community in areas where children are not performing as well as they could. We must examine our professional relationships with psychologists and social workers so that each individual child can achieve his or her potential.

In recent years the introduction of various forms of ICT has created exciting new challenges for teachers. Not only can modern technology contribute to pupils’ learning, it can also be a catalyst for further professional learning through online courses, schools networking together and groups of teachers establishing online networks in order to enhance their own learning. Whilst not throwing the baby out with the bath-water, we must be willing to be open to discourse on the merits of change and the possibilities which technology affords us.

To conclude, we will discuss and debate these and other issues in the next two days as well as take part in workshops which may bring new learning opportunities for us. On behalf of the Education Committee, I wish you well in these deliberations.
Workplace learning and learning communities

Anne English, Education Committee

For my thesis leading to a Master of Studies in TCD, I carried out some research centred on the workplace learning of teachers in primary schools. What I propose to do now, in the short time that is available, is share some aspects of my research, reading and thinking that are directly relevant to the conference topic: Learning Communities. I will also draw on the findings from the recent INTO research based on learning communities. I hope that these thoughts and reflections on the workplace learning of teachers will serve to prompt your own thinking in this area.

First of all, I’ll give a little background on the whole notion of workplace learning, with specific focus on the workplace learning of teachers. I’ll then give some consideration to how we might enhance the workplace learning of teachers.

The primary school is typically viewed as a site of learning for children. This is hardly surprising since facilitating and promoting the learning of children is, broadly speaking, the ‘raison d’être’ of schools. However, a huge amount of professional learning also takes place on the part of teachers, and indeed on the part of other persons who have connections with schools, as they go about their school-related work. This is aptly summarised in one of the comments of a focus-group participant who said, ‘we are learning all the time, every day’.

Initial teacher education (ITE) does not, and could not, fully equip teachers for the realities and the complexities of the classroom. Indeed, ITE should be seen as only the beginning of a process of lifelong learning for members of the teaching profession.

Much of the professional learning of teachers is associated with formal courses or ‘official’ in-service opportunities – and this is, of course, valid and important learning. However, ongoing professional learning is not confined to one day in the year or to a five-day in-service course in the summer months – it is also part and parcel of our daily working lives.

In recent years, the notion of workplace learning - in all walks of life - has gone from being largely unnoticed to attracting widespread interest. I think it’s important at this stage to clarify what it is that I mean when I refer to ‘workplace learning’ of teachers – I’m referring to teacher learning that takes place in, for, and through the school context and I’m including formal, informal and incidental learning. So, I’m not just referring to formal courses or SDP days or support sessions with cuiditheoirí but also to the informal learning that takes place as part and parcel of our work of teachers. I’m referring also to the knowledge and skills that we pick up and develop along the way, in the course of our work and in the course of interactions with others perhaps learning new skills as we work collaboratively with a colleague in a team-teaching situation or teasing out a challenging situation with a NEPS psychologist – some of this learning is planned and some of it is unplanned – much of it may go unnoticed or may be unrecognised as learning at the time, but it all adds to our own knowledge base as individual teachers and indeed can add to the richness of the professional knowledge available to the teachers as a professional community - basically, I’m talking about all the ‘know-how’ and expertise that we develop as teachers through our work in, through and for schools.

It’s important to be clear on what it is that we mean by ‘learning’ because what we think about learning will impact on our perception of what needs to be done when we want to
enhance the workplace learning of teachers. Hager refers to a perception of learning which views the mind as a ‘container’ and ‘knowledge as a type of substance’. This perception of learning portrays the learner as someone who has yet to acquire all the products or mental items that are required in order to carry out the work in question. To be a learner under these terms has negative connotations. It implies that the ‘learner’ has a deficit, and has a need to leave behind the role of ‘learner as quickly as possible. Hager refers to the latter as the ‘L plate’ syndrome (2004:26).

However, if we focus more on learning as a process rather than as a product, it can have a hugely positive effect on how we view lifelong learning. Much current thinking on workplace learning centres on learning through active participation in social communities. And, in reality, much teacher learning comes about through our collaboration with colleagues or co-professionals or other persons. Much teacher learning comes about as we seek to confront and address the problems and challenges that don’t always fit in with the solution offered in a teacher’s manual or in the pack of notes that we received on a course. We’re not just learning from others – we are also learning with others and co-creating knowledge with our peers.

So how do we promote or enhance the workplace learning of teachers? Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2005) suggest that one of the key means of fostering teachers’ workplace learning is through creating what they refer to as an ‘expansive learning environment’. Basically, this is about creating a school environment in which there are wide-ranging and diverse opportunities to learn, in a culture that values and supports learning. It’s about creating an environment that is conducive to teachers learning with and from each other. This notion of an expansive learning environment is visited in more detail in the conference discussion paper – I will just touch on a few aspects of it now that are particularly relevant to the conference theme: Learning Communities.

Features of an expansive learning environment would include opportunities for close collaborative working on the part of teachers. However, a recurring theme in our focus-group research was that of the isolation of teachers in the classroom. Many teachers spoke of the potential benefit of working with or observing other teachers, as the following comment illustrates: ‘An opportunity to observe somebody else or somebody more experienced in any subject ... is unbeatable. No amount of books, theory or anything can match it’. Examples of ways that we might include more collaborative activity among teachers would be team-teaching which would afford teachers the opportunity to collaboratively address challenges or observe one another at work or to share and collectively build up expertise in target areas. This might be when a class teacher and SEN teacher work together in the classroom. Or the school’s IT network might be used to collectively prepare planning documents across class levels. Of course, IT also creates the opportunity for what Hodkinson and Hodkinson refer to as ‘boundary crossing’ or developing connections with other departments or groups both within and beyond the school – teachers can also source ideas or engage in dialogue with various groups on the Internet. Such boundary crossing is not restricted to IT links, however – in an expansive learning environment, teachers would be encouraged to forge professional contacts with teachers and others beyond the school perimeter and to involve themselves in such networks or learning communities – they would be actively supported in this. While there is a wealth of expertise within every school, engaging in professional conversations or in joint initiatives with teachers from other schools helps minimise the risk of our becoming insular - such boundary crossing helps us to expand our professional horizons. Involvement with groups such as local ILSA branches or teacher professional communities in the local education centre brings to mind, but the possibilities are endless. Similarly, in an expansive learning environment, teachers would be afforded the opportunity, insofar as is possible, to meet with visiting co-
professionals such as NEPS personnel or Visiting Teachers for children with diagnosed disabilities or Visiting Teachers for Travellers – interactions and exchanges with various other personnel have the potential to advance our collective learning as we share our ideas and co-create knowledge in response to new and emerging challenges.

Expansive learning communities would have an explicit focus on teacher learning as a dimension of normal working practices. Of course, teachers may, justifiably, be concerned about how time spent on teacher learning might detract from the efforts they could put into their existing teaching commitments. However, it may be possible to use available time more productively without any negative effect whatsoever on pupil learning. Indeed, time thus spent is likely to ultimately benefit the teaching and learning in the school!

Shifting the balance of time allocation during staff meetings from dissemination of information to professional conversations could be of significant benefit. Teachers value the opportunity to have professional conversations – to tease out, argue and debate professional matters that are of direct relevance to them. Such professional dialogue is a key part of teacher workplace learning – it enables teachers to reflect on their practice, to share ideas with others and to draw on the ideas of others. Of course, a simple matter such as locating teachers of similar classes near each other might be another simple way of creating a more expansive learning environment for teachers – proximity to another teacher with similar challenges may enhance the likelihood of those teachers engaging in professional dialogue and thus collaboratively learning.

Of course, it is important to point out that Hodkinson and Hodkinson acknowledge the impracticalities of being totally expansive in a working school, as teacher learning priorities can come into conflict with other school priorities, the obvious one being the learning of the children. Additionally, it is important to bear in mind that while primary schools have much in common with each other, the contexts in which we work differ greatly, and teachers are unique individuals – a one-size-fits-all approach to teacher workplace learning or to promoting learning communities within and across schools is unlikely to have the same result in all situations.

I’ve just given you somewhat of a ‘whistle-stop tour’ of some ideas of workplace learning. Although learning and work can be understood as separate activities, we do actually learn a lot through our work. Greater focus on workplace learning has the potential to do much to enhance our individual and collective professional learning as teachers.

I’ll close with another comment drawn from the focus group research on Learning Communities. The teacher said, at the end of the focus group session – ‘Even the opportunity to come here this evening like this throws open further opportunities to learn from one another’. This comment could equally apply to our Consultative Education Conference here in Cork - I’ve no doubt that we will all learn much with and from each other in the discussion groups later this evening and in the various presentations, activities and get-togethers over the weekend.
The current economic crisis

Sheila Nunan, General Secretary

Today’s INTO Education Conference is being held against the backdrop of an unprecedented financial catastrophe, created by our own government, that allowed idiotic lending by financial institutions fuel an unsustainable property bubble which spectacularly burst. In their attempt to rectify the damage done government policy has destroyed jobs, accelerated emigration and mortgage defaults, reduced living standards, increased poverty and now it seems placed economic recovery in the hands of international money lenders.

While not subscribing to all of the hysteria being whipped up about loss of sovereignty and economic independence, we can now clearly see the full extent of this government’s staggering economic incompetence and the failure to manage a decade long economic boom, to ensure that gains were equitably distributed among all citizens and now, to chart a course for economic recovery.

And if our task of protecting the living standards of members and preserving social infrastructure like primary education wasn’t difficult enough, we know only too well we are up against the same government, the same political and financial system that continues to put the interests of speculators ahead of society, the interests of the wealthy before the workers and the interests of private capital before public good.

And to add insult to injury this government continues to treat the citizens of the country with contempt. For too long, and particularly for the last three months, we have been subjected to ‘Alice in Wonderland’ economics, an argument that austerity will lead us out of recession. Indeed we can now see, in contrast to what Dermot Ahern said about talks with the IMF being fiction, every government pronouncement in recent months about the state of the economy and the banks was a work of fiction. So now that we know the truth about our national finances I say it is time for government to change course.

The trade union movement has consistently opposed the view that austerity is the only road to economic recovery. And whether the government pawns our future to the IMF, the EU or the British Tories and they too peddle an argument that ‘there is no other way’, we still say the road to recovery does not begin with the level of austerity planned and that it is time to change course.

The trade union movement has always known there is a better fairer way. The developments in the last few days have only reinforced that view. The ESRI has backed this analysis. Several international experts also agree that slashing public spending during a recession is economic lunacy.

The trade union movement has long argued for government retrenchment over a longer time frame. Crucially we have argued that economic recovery will only be driven by a coherent strategy for growth along with protection for homes and jobs. Ruthlessly driving the living standards of the Irish people over a cliff to bail out bankers and developers is not only morally wrong, it is economically suicidal. It is time to change course.

Last month we saw the projected bill for this economic lunacy rise from 7 billion to 15 billion. This month because of the bank guarantee scheme, we now see our government
going cap in hand to the IMF for a loan to pay that bill projected at somewhere north of 100 billion. What can we, as ordinary citizens and workers, do about this?

Today, I am urging each and every one of you to exhort your colleagues and friends to join the ICTU demonstration next Saturday in Dublin. Do not wait until the 8th December when you see the shape of the budget. By then it will be too late. By your presence in Dublin next weekend, send a strong message to the government, the IMF, the EU that the austerity only course of action does not have your support. Don’t leave it to others to show your opposition to government policy. Don’t rely on others to represent you there. Don’t say to yourself, ‘what’s the point’? I urge you all to be there and to maximise the turnout among colleagues, friends and neighbours.

It is not a public service demonstration. It is not a demonstration by vested interests. This is a people’s protest, a citizens’ campaign against an economic policy that promises doom, disaster and desolation. If you are angry about what your government has done to your future and your children’s future, be there.

We need your presence in Dublin next weekend to drive home the message that austerity of this kind and at this pace is self-fulfilling prophecy and ultimately self-defeating. If you want a change of course, show that by turning out to support the ICTU next weekend. Show them by your presence, that it is time to change course.

In the meantime, our job as teachers and trade unionists is to be determined, hopeful and remain strong. As you know, last year we had a financial assault on public servants and their families through the pension levy and a budget pay cut, assisted by a sustained campaign of vilification led by vested interests. Those cutbacks more than wiped out the value of Benchmarking, yet as late as today Mary Harney was describing Benchmarking as a mistake. She will never admit that her government’s policies of egging on greedy bankers, developers and speculators is what really brought this country to its knees.

This union, in particular, was not prepared to lie down and be rolled over and almost immediately engaged with employers to prevent further cuts. Our members unambiguously backed the strategic decisions of the Executive and supported the Croke Park Agreement. The Croke Park Agreement is our only mechanism to provide some level of certainty in relation to both pay and education issues. It is the only game in town and I for one am determined to make it work.

It is the only framework in which we can protect pay and provide a level of certainty for public servants who are retiring. It provides a level of protection for primary education, not absolute guarantees, but a mechanism within which we can work to position education to be the cornerstone of future economic success and social cohesion and that schools are resourced properly to deliver it.

In terms of public service reform it is well known that primary teachers have not only been willing to adopt best practice but have been way ahead in terms of delivering real reform. You are the people who for years have turned inadequate government investment in primary education into above average outcomes for your pupils. Your work here this weekend shows that you and your colleagues are ambitious for your pupils, ambitious for the education system and ambitious for the future of our country.

I would not underestimate how difficult the resolution of our national difficulties will be at the current time. However, we cannot accept the unilateral imposition of cutbacks in services and salaries while those who contributed most to economic collapse have yet to be asked to make an appropriate contribution to recovery. We cannot accept that the
young, the old and the poor will be asked to pay while those with wealth, power and privilege walk away.

Our task in the coming days, weeks and months is to hold our collective nerve and make the Croke Park Agreement work. You can already see the massed ranks of our opponents out to sabotage it, as late as this morning. The blitzkrieg against the public service is framed in the usual mantras of public service numbers, salaries and pensions and claims that there has been no reform and little productivity. Primary teaching provides a very good example of these lies. If we have a bloated public service how come Ireland has the second highest class sizes in primary schools in the EU? When it comes to educational administration and bureaucracy Irish primary schools have one of the smallest leadership core in the EU with 75% of principals teaching full time and all schools run by voluntary boards.

One thing is certain there are no surplus workers in primary schools. There is a clear threat to class sizes which the Green Party has pledged to resist. I welcome that. Over the next two weeks I ask you to make sure that every parent in your schools understands clearly the lie that a change in the staffing schedule in primary schools will only mean one extra pupil per class. It will not, but will see Irish primary school classrooms become the most crowded in Europe.

We must also stand up to the lies about overstaffing in the public service. Over the boom years, spending and employment growth in the public service never kept up with population and GDP growth. Ireland’s real average annual growth rate in public expenditure between 1995 and 2005 was 5.1%, significantly slower than GDP growth of 7.5%. Government policy actually decreased the total number of public sector employees as a percentage of the labour force and decreased the overall public sector wage bill as a percentage of GDP.

As compared with other OECD countries, general government employment in Ireland is about 14.6% of the total labour force, which is relatively low among OECD countries and is significantly less than the level of public employment in Norway, Sweden, France, Finland and Belgium. Olli Rehn acknowledged this during his recent visit to Ireland. Since cutbacks began we now have 11,000 fewer public servants all earning on average 14 percent less than two years ago. Public servants have made a significant contribution to economic recovery and will continue to work within the framework of the Croke Park to ensure that savings are made in the more effective delivery of public services.

Traditionally IMF interventions in countries have been associated with cutbacks for the public service and there is a great deal of scaremongering in relation to this. Irish public servants have already endured significant cuts and are not prepared to be scapegoated again. As part of ICTU we will be seeking a meeting with the IMF to ensure that our viewpoints are presented directly and not mediated through government spokespersons. We will be arguing to them that the Croke Park Agreement is the only way to ensure a quality public service delivering quality public services.

Throughout its long history the INTO has always adopted a strategic approach to crisis management and we will continue to do the same. At this point in time the Croke Park Agreement is our strategic plan. If it works it will deliver significant improvements in the public service, if it doesn’t there will be an industrial relations disaster.

In the short term ordinary working men and women must remain hopeful and strong. Although all around us the effects of government policies are being felt and you as teachers see this in your schools every day. You meet the hundreds of thousands who
have been condemned to low pay, reduced living standards, unemployment and pension penury. Yet because of government policy and despite a sustained growth in exports, the economy is still declining, businesses are still closing and people are still losing their jobs. Government policy is delivering neither jobs, revenue nor recovery. It is time to change course.

In overall terms of what is happening at the moment, we are now being forced to take a Greek style bailout and a great deal of effort is being put into ensuring that countries like Ireland, Greece, Portugal, Spain and Italy are seen as identical. They are not and it is important to put this on the record.

The governments of Greece, Portugal and Italy over-borrowed for much of the last decade. Spain and Ireland did not. Ireland was running a budget surplus before the global financial crisis struck in 2008. That’s why we had to campaign against overcrowded classes. Our problem was private debt, not public debt and that private debt stemmed from idiotic lending by banks, which pumped up housing bubbles which our government saw fit to take on to the state’s balance sheet. The IMF is not here because of the public service, it’s here because of the private sector’s financial cowboys who brought this country to the edge of ruin aided and abetted by a rotten political culture.

It’s time to change course. Ireland’s public service has served the state well and will continue to do so. Let’s make sure that Ireland supports its public servants.

**Overcoming adversity and resilience**

*Mark Morgan, St Patrick’s College*

Chairperson, colleagues and friends, any attempt to follow that inspiring address is bound to be difficult but I know from my experience that you will be sympathetic and friendly. I cannot think of a greater honour than to be addressing you this evening because it is indeed my third time to address the Education Conference. The first time was when I was Education Officer for the Curriculum Review Body in 1990; nearly ten years later I spoke about the results of International Adult Literacy Survey and I am delighted and really honoured to be here again.

I am going to talk to you about two aspects of adversity - one of which echoes what the General Secretary has just talked about in the historic sense of the adversity that teachers encountered in the last hundred years. Secondly I will talk about adversity and overcoming adversity in the lives of individual teachers.

**Context**

I am going to start by raising your morale by telling you two bits of information about primary teaching that I think very few of you would know. Last year 142 students who did the Leaving Certificate got 600 points, a perfect Leaving Certificate. You may have thought that all of these are in dentistry or medicine or law; but that is not the case. My search indicated that there are at least eight of those students in the B.Ed. This degree (the B.Ed) is one of the few programmes that have a major difference between the minimum points and the average. A huge number of the students entering teaching still have points that would enable them to go into any course that they would want. The second piece of good news emerges from a study that was published about a fortnight ago by the Higher Education Authority and which is concerned with completion and
non-completion in higher education. What course has the highest rate of completion? Well, in contrast to every country in the world the highest rate of completion is in education, in the B.Ed where 96% of people who go into teaching complete the course. Contrast this with computer science where only 73% do so. So we have a situation that it absolutely and entirely unique and in a sense that is part of the theme that I am going to talk about.

You hear of stories in the US and the UK about the situation where if test results aren’t good they close down the school. Believe it or not the Irish primary system from 1870 to 1900 had a system that was even more barbaric than that - because what happened was that your pay depended on how children learned and this was simply done by the inspector. What was really interesting about the system was its impact on what was taught: as in the case of every ‘high stakes system’ it has the effect of restricting and narrowing the curriculum to what was tested. The result was certain features that could be tested became prominent (table and spellings) while aspects that could not be easily tested were simply discarded. What is surprising is that people continue to be surprised at the impact of high stakes testing, especially as it has emerged in the US and UK. A system driven by tests always results in this kind of restriction.

I will fast forward then to the 1930s when there was a very ferocious competitive system - a rating system of teachers that lasted about 25 years. Primary teachers were rated by the inspectors as inefficient, efficient or highly efficient and the problem with that was that only a certain percentage of people could be ‘highly efficient’ in any given area so it meant that if you were highly efficient, somebody else lost that rating. In order words it set up - what would now be called a performative system - one teacher in competition with the other. Nowadays we would say that this was a ‘neo-liberal’ development. This shows that new systems are not new but are re-invented.

Scholarship examinations brought the same kind of competition and there were several consequences that were quite unintended. Very few of you will remember that streaming was quite common in primary schools. Very rigid streaming was quite common until the late 50s, early 60s where you had a, b, c, d - as you have in rigid streaming. Because of the scholarship system a small number of boarding schools drew the brightest students; the scholarship system was biased in favour of boarding schools as it allowed a child to go to boarding school while a smaller award was made if the child went to a day school. In other words, the system was driven by extrinsic rewards and driven by fear and competition.

The recently published book by John Walshe (2009) who works in Trinity College is certainly worth reading and for any INTO member it would certainly warm their hearts. He describes in detail how the abolition of the rating system took a great deal of political nuances and manoeuvring. This was followed by the end of the Primary Certificate in 1967, followed by free education a short-time afterwards and the end of the scholarship system. And then what brought us to the real era where the work of teachers was driven by intrinsic rewards of teaching was that there was a great many very laudable individual teachers who were curriculum leaders at the time. The 1971 Curriculum didn’t come just out of the blue and wasn’t devised from the top. It actually came from the ground where individual teachers who were just disillusioned with a system of education that catered for only a minority of kids who were going to get scholarships. They said that education was for everybody.

I will fast forward again from the 1971 curriculum to the major conclusions of the Review Body for which I was Education Officer. There were two main conclusions of the report of the Review Body. One of them was that the biggest change that had happened...
for primary children’s experiences was that children were enjoying school. Now I notice that people say sometimes that this doesn’t matter but I suggest that this was of huge importance because what it means is that it is the intrinsic interest in learning that motivates them. It is easily the biggest change of the last couple of hundred years in schools that children go to school with smiles. From the time of Shakespeare to John McGahern and in between, children disliked school intensely. Do you remember in Shakespeare the child with his ‘satchel and shining morning face creeping like a snail unwillingly to school’?

**Beginning teachers’ experiences**

I am now going to move on to talk about individual teachers’ experiences of satisfaction and adversity – a study which was carried out with Karl Kitching who was recently appointed to the Education Department of UCC. He and I have done work that involved beginning teachers keeping a diary of what made them feel good during the day and what made them feel bad during the day. What is really striking about it is that every teacher’s day is a mix of positive and negative and also that things change very dramatically even in the course of an hour. The other thing is what determines the quality of a teacher’s day is not major events - rather what matters are a whole lot of small things, small things that are repeated. It is that sort of accumulation of events that go on and on. That’s why of course classroom management and class size are such massive issues because the controlling of issues is very different with a large class as opposed to a smaller class. The other distinction that we drew is that some of the events that happen in school have their origin out there in society while others have to do with school - the dynamics of a school like we talked about earlier, the school as a learning community. Some others are just between you as a classroom teacher and the children. What this research showed in a very straightforward way was that the most powerful influence is what happens just in front of you. It is the case that national policies make a difference, but what we are now finding out from the US and the UK as well, is that an awful lot of reforms that have happened in those countries - an awful lot depends on how they are interpreted at local level.

So what does a good day feel like? Well, some of you have may have seen this before, it is a paper entitled *It’s the Little things (2009)* - what made you feel good this week? Here’s just a sample.

> Children showed greater understanding of the concepts involved in recycling and composting… some told how they got their parents to recycle… I felt their learning was worthwhile and how teaching can really make a difference.

We asked them to rate how they felt about this and they said that got a rating of 10 from that teacher.

> A child completed a sentence scrambling exercise, recalling words learned since last September, completely and independently. I felt the work was paying off.

The kind of events that emerged from this revealed a number of interesting outcomes; particularly that the kind of happenings that made teachers feel good was as much about engagement as it was about achievement. That is very significant because we now know that a lot of the reasons for dropping out of secondary school are as much about failure to engage and ceasing engagement with school. The other finding is that the interpersonal dimension between the teacher and the student mattered greatly as well. As illustrated in some quotes the full class mattered as well as individual students. So many teachers in these reports talked about the achievement of low achievers. Also a lot
of the teachers gave a priority to student well-being - how the students felt about themselves and not simply about boosting their self-esteem. At no time at all did anybody talk about external incentives or pressures being brought to bear on them. What I find very interesting about that is going back to why people go into teaching in Ireland is that they go in to make a difference and this is what I like about these results - that it shows what making a difference is about and how it translates in the classroom.

**Adversity: what made you feel bad?**

Here is a sample from the same diary study:

> In the staff-room, a teacher made a remark that some of my previous class cannot read. I feel so worried that I didn’t do enough for them … was my teaching good enough? Is it good enough at the moment? Are children losing out by being in my class? **Rating 1**

Notice the speed by which that comment undermines the teacher; you can see that she/he went from a casual comment to ‘I'm useless’ and the speed is really what is interesting about that. So in other words ‘I'm pathetic’ just from one instance – very significant in the light of the events that motivate teachers.

Next example:

> A little girl in the class is really struggling… I feel uncertain as to what I should do… and feel guilty I have not done enough to date… I am really frustrated. **Rating 2**

So you are thinking to yourself that you have two pictures there - one very successful teacher (in the positive instances) who is having a great time and everything going well and another one who really isn't (the negative instances). I know you are going to guess what I’m going to say next - because not only is that the same school and the same week but also the same teacher. You might think that the first set of positive experiences would overcome the second? It may in certain circumstances and we will come to that.

**Teachers' resilience: bouncing back**

The study I have just done on resilience is centred around what is it that makes teachers resilient? First of all what we have to do. Stress is inevitable in everything, it is the nature of work and there is a lot of evidence that stress is good for you - not too much of it - just enough of it. So you cannot get rid of stress in the interaction that is teaching, considering the very emotional business that teaching is. So setbacks are inevitable but it is how we teach people to deal with them that matters. I gave great attention to your paper on Learning Communities and your earlier presentations here because it does link directly with this. This is a quantitative study which is just about to be published and I will give a brief overview.

The most significant thing that helped somebody get over a bad event and gave them a sense of getting over it are other positive things. Now that doesn't surprise you because so many times you think of when a child does badly at something if there is something else that they are good at you can build on. If a child loses a parent, if they are good in school they can bounce back from it. If a child loses a parent, if they are good in school they can bounce back from it. If a child’s parents split up and they are in a difficult situation, other things can make them resilient that have nothing at all to do with their parental break-up like being successful in school, like having friends in school. The same thing operates here - having other strengths or something like that, the fact that you know you are doing other things can make a huge difference. So having other strengths is a crucial component of bouncing back.
The next important factor in bouncing back is social support which is where learning communities come in. If there is anything that we know for certain it is that social support is probably the most significant event that can happen in any adversity. Let me give you an extreme example; if you get cancer the chances of your recovery are about twice as good if you have the support of relevant people. In the research on children’s illnesses, like recovery from burns, you get the same finding. Now what I would add to learning is that social support in school is also emotional in nature; it is not simply cognitive and that is the one thing that I would to add to the excellent paper that you have heard earlier on. This is because teaching is an emotional business and if you do have an encounter with a parent or the principal or another teacher, the emotional support of somebody who just cares for you, is very significant. The one that surprised me in our study was that the single biggest factor in getting over things that went badly in school was satisfaction with your life outside of school. Any people to whom I mention this - they all nodded wisely and said ‘yes that makes sense’. But I would like to reinforce all the other things that came through in that paper and add the one about the emotional side because teaching is an emotional business. People in teaching care about children, they are in there because they care. That is why people with high points are in teaching.

Different ways of coping are also very significant; in this study I found rumination - that is thinking over and over again if what you did was right - was not a good way, but on the other hand seeing choices and then moving on. In other words, there is a time to indulge in emotions but the important consideration is not to get stuck in the feeling.

The need for self-care in teaching is something that has got no attention. If you talk to counsellors or people like doctors, psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, they have what they call ‘supervision’ - it is not supervision in a traditional sense but rather an opportunity to talk to a mentor.

**National Induction Project**

As part of the context of this work, I want to mention the importance of support in the context of the National Induction Programme under the direction of Mary Burke. This has achieved great success in several respects; for one thing over 90% of participants regard the project as making a great contribution to their success as beginning teachers. But what is very interesting about it is that the mentors in the schools and the principals indicated to us that what made a success of the induction project was that it made a difference not only to the beginning teachers but also to the participating teachers, including mentors. All of the beginning teachers talked about the satisfaction that they derived from having a mentor and of seeing somebody watch their teaching and watching somebody else’s teaching, and all of the sharing that went on - but the most interesting thing was the difference to the school as a whole. A recently published paper carried the title ‘On their Own and Presumed Expert’ to indicate that many beginning teachers are relatively unsupported and left to ‘sink or swim’. However, we have gone past that era and really it wouldn’t be appropriate ever to go back there - so the emphasis on learning communities in this conference - I can only endorse it based on the induction project.

You need a context for things to happen so you need to be planning around a project. That is why the work of mentors makes such a difference to schools. Among other things, the Induction Programme:
Learning Communities

- provides opportunities for other teachers to reflect on their own teaching;
- enhances communication, encourages collaboration and improves confidence of staff;
- facilitates a culture of sharing and professional dialogue eg. sharing of good practice, observing in other classes, being observed by other teachers, feedback;
- opens up the whole school as a community of learning, benefits the pupils / de-privatises practice;
- gets rid of the sense of isolation;
- affirms more experienced teacher;
- shares responsibility and leadership.

Let me mention another matter regarding development of expertise. Once you become a teacher you are at a certain level of expertise but where do you go following that? In my view, mentoring gave people the opportunity to share what they do and in that regard to understand and develop their own competence as teachers and that is something that is really badly needed. Another day I would like to talk to you about the possibilities of teachers evaluating teachers; there are all kinds of possibilities in that.

Final thoughts

I am going to leave you with some final thoughts. The first one is about Chapter Six on the discussion document on ‘Learning Communities’ which talks about failures of learning communities. It mentions work that I did on literacy in prisons. However, I would not mention that as a failure of the schools at all because what I found out was that while it is the case that about 40% of prisoners had no literacy skills -and when we ask the question ‘At what age did you leave school’, many said that they left school ‘before they started’ in the sense that they never engaged with school at all. Obviously it is very hard for someone to learn with prolonged absences. In this regard, I know the National Education Welfare Board have an important role. There is evidence that exists for many young people at age fourteen or fifteen and who say that it wasn’t that they that left school but that school left them. In other words, what I am saying to you is to draw a distinction between the things that you can change and those that are not under your control.

The second matter is around the prescription of the curriculum; prescribed curricula are the flavour of the month around the world. The most liberal state in the United States, California, now has a situation where if you go to Reading in North California and San Diego in South California - 600 miles apart - you would find the same reading scheme, the same lesson, and the teacher asking the same questions. That is the level of prescription and a teacher will get into trouble if they fail to adhere to that. I would say that that is quite wrong. It demeans professionalism like no other policy.

The third thing I would say to you has to do with programmes. When I say ‘programmes’, I don’t mean the curriculum, but a package that specifies method as well as content. Some of these can be very good as in the case of Reading Recovery - but there is an issue with them. What these programmes demand is fidelity, a teacher must do exactly what the programme says and I have a difficulty with demands that take away teachers’ professionalism and judgement.
And finally, the thorny issue of teacher supply is one that we need to think about. Currently we have one source of teacher supply that is strictly controlled and another one that is controlled by the market. In my view this matter needs attention and relates to the status of teaching – that feature that makes most of us feel so proud.

References


The role of leadership in learning communities

Áine Dillon, Education Committee

The Education Act (1998) sets out specific functions, rights and responsibilities for principals and teachers in Irish schools. Functions listed for the principal are: the responsibility for the daily management of the school, the provision of leadership to teachers, students and non-teaching staff, the encouragement of parents to be involved in their children’s education, and in collaboration with others, setting objectives and monitoring achievement of these objectives.

However, without the use of the term *learning community*, the Act does outline the principal’s role in the creation of such an environment. It states that the principal shall:

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

In the *Report of the Working Group on the Role of the Primary School Principal (1999)* the DES suggests that a challenge for the principal is to ‘change the culture of the school from one where only pupils are learners to one where schools are places of learning for teachers also’.

In an essay for *Oideas* 2008, McDonald points out the changing nature of education in the 21st century. The belief in knowledge and intelligence as being fixed has been replaced by the idea of multiple intelligences and the development of the so-called knowledge society. Life-long learning has replaced the concept of being educated for a specific role in life. As a result, our institutes of education all need to adapt in order to reflect this need and the wider demands of society.

According to Professor John Coolahan, the learning society places an emphasis on student fluidity and various types of intelligence. School is thus seen as a learning community for both pupils and teachers alike. He mentions the fact that the teacher is viewed as being under collaborative leadership. However, this may prove a challenge for
learning communities. Teamwork, shared learning, and the teacher as co-learner are the requirements for a strong learning community.

But how can the principal promote learning communities within the school? How can he/she encourage the school staff to be involved in learning communities? And what learning communities are there to support and help the principal?

According to Michael Fullan (2006) the principal is the ‘nerve-centre’ of school improvement and even the most challenged schools thrive with a strong leader. He believes that schools achieve success through the working closely together of the following five elements: individual skills and dispositions of teachers; a professional learning community; coherence or focused effort; resources and the principal. Fullan also believes that:

‘the principal has a critical role to play in system-wide reform, development and success . . . by working in clusters of schools, or other networks, principals can influence their colleagues but can also help refine national strategies that get people working on the policy issues of the day.’

(Fullan, 2006:7).

Recent findings of the Education Committee from focus groups organised for this conference emphasise the crucial role of the principal in influencing learning communities within the school. The influence of the principal in encouraging the development of teachers professionally, as both a mentor for NQTs and for life-long learning is alluded to. According to one participant:

‘if the principal identifies somebody in the school who they feel has the knowledge and expertise ... that the encouragement and empowerment is there to help that person go along and do something or to share that expertise to the whole staff.’

So, besides the learning community that is the school, what are the other networks and learning communities that the principal in Ireland can find him or herself involved in? Many primary school principals join local support groups where they meet in an informal manner and discuss issues of concern. Some of these support groups are facilitated by the various education centres situated around the country.

Leadership Development for Schools (LDS) has over the last number of years provided training courses for principals. This is a National Programme which was established by the Department of Education and Science (DES) in 2002 to promote professional development for principals, deputy principals and others involved in school management and educational leadership in first and second level schools. In the past five years, in excess of 5,000 school leaders have participated in LDS programmes. While it has recently been subsumed into the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), LDS will still continue to provide training for principals and deputy principals.

The LDS provides a number of courses. Misneach is provided for newly-appointed principals. This course is available on a modular basis, is residential, and provides much sought after advice for new principals. It also allows principals to network and establish contacts with fellow professionals. Other courses provided by the LDS are geared towards experienced principals, deputy principals and principals teaching in Special Schools.
According to the OECD in *Improving School Leadership: Country Background Report - Ireland* (2007) the establishment of the LDS and the subsequent roll-out of Misneach was ‘a significant policy initiative’. It also points out how the other LDS programmes have encouraged both the development of leadership skills among principals and the participation of leadership in academic discourse.

The Irish Primary Principals’ Network (IPPN) is perhaps the largest learning community available to principals. This is an independent, professional association of school leaders which was established in the year 2000. It has a membership of 5,100 principals and deputy principals representing 90% of all primary schools. Through its county networks and its comprehensive web-site the IPPN provides daily advice to principals in every corner of Ireland. The latest education news, legal advice, advice on such areas as recruitment, school policies and administration are available on the web-site. Advice is available using a free phone number and on-line advice is given and received by thousands of principals through its network e-mail system.

Every year, the IPPN holds an annual conference for principals and another for deputy principals. It publishes position papers and submissions to the DES and other bodies. It also provides on-line summer courses and a monthly magazine for principals and deputy principals.

The IPPN also provides resources and supports for Newly Appointed Principals (NAPs). The individual mentor may be one of the most useful resources for the NAP. According to Virginia O’Mahony, Assistant Director of the IPPN, research has shown that mentoring is one of the most powerful and effective means of empowering newly appointed principals. The IPPN believes that all NAPs are entitled to professionally trained mentors.

A principal with three or more years experience may volunteer to become a mentor and when trained the mentor is assigned to a NAP. It is suggested that the mentor and the NAP meet on an informal basis, where issues and problems can be discussed and advice can be given. The mentor is generally the first port of call for the NAP if a query or problem arises in the course of work. It is advised that the term of mentoring lasts only for the NAP’s first year and that the mentor introduces the NAP to a support group, which generally meets monthly in the local education centre.

Another invaluable learning community is provided by the Principals’ and Deputy-Principals’ Committee of the INTO. Each district has a representative on the committee, which is a national committee of the union. Regular forum meetings bring together the principals and deputy-principals of the district where issues and concerns of leadership in schools are discussed. Submissions are brought to the Central Executive Committee (CEC) and, if appropriate, to the DES. Advice, such as legal and employment advice, is always available to principals through their representatives on the CEC and Principals’ and Deputy-Principals’ Committee, and from officials in the union’s head-office.

As outlined above, it is clear that the principal, while leading the learning community in his or her own workplace, is also a member of other learning communities that serve to enhance his or her own professional development and leadership. It is vital that the principal avails of these supports, in order to equip him or herself with the necessary skills to enrich and encourage the development of the other learning communities where he or she leads.

And what about the in-school management team? The Department of Education issued a circular in 1997 which had a profound change on the internal management of primary
schools. The objective was the provision of a shared-leadership and management of primary schools through a revised in-school management structure. Heretofore, the principal was solely responsible for the running of the school and despite the fact that posts of responsibilities were first established in 1968 there was an ad-hoc system in the assigning of these duties. The objectives of the revised management structures were designed to

- match the responsibilities of the posts more closely to the central tasks of the school and clearly specify responsibilities for the various posts;

- focus on the provision of opportunities for teachers to assume responsibility in the school for instructional leadership, curriculum development, the management of staff and academic and pastoral work of the school (Circular 07/03 p1).

While there is a substantial body of work exploring and debating the role of the principal teacher there is less published on the contribution of middle-management. Anecdotal evidence would suggest that in the last decade post-holders have indeed taken on many responsibilities such as the co-ordination of curriculum and school policies, administrative areas such as registration of pupils and pastoral areas such as religion and management of special needs pupils. However, there would still appear to be unevenness in the distribution of responsibilities and substantial differences exist from school to school.

Research published by O’Hanlon (2008) and McDonald (2008) both allude to the paradigm of a collaborative approach to management and leadership. O’Hanlon (2008) claims that while her research found that, in general, school leaders are carrying out their duties and sharing leadership responsibilities, there is little evidence of a collaborative approach. Likewise McDonald (2008) refers to ‘a concern for the collaborative role requirements of the principal teacher in a knowledge-based society’. He concludes, however, that despite the fact that many problems were identified during his research with regard to management of schools and lack of collaboration between members of the in-school management teams there was sufficient good-will by all involved to attempt to solve the problems.

In 2006 the IPPN published research entitled Investing in School Leadership. Contrary to the finding in the above research and anecdotal findings, some principals stated that lack of support from the in-school management team was an issue, especially when it came to people management. Other principals felt they were given a lot of support by the middle-management, considering time constraints and the paltry allowances paid.

The IPPN, and other researchers mentioned above, suggest improved communication and defining of duties, along with development of collaborative management of schools as the way forward to creative effective learning communities. The need for professional development, not alone for principals and deputy-principals, but for all members of the ISM team is also suggested by researchers. While there is no doubt that the contribution of middle-management since the inception of the new regime has been laudable in terms of work within the schools: planning and policy development, running of various projects with the pupils, pastoral work, to name but a few, it is also obvious that a more structured and collaborative approach needs to be developed in order to maximise the potential of all involved.
We are living in changing times. It appears that we are experiencing an erosion of the advances that have been made in our education system over the past number of years, advances that were beginning to meet the needs of all children.

We need to promote our schools as learning communities where we all collaborate for the sake of the pupils we teach and the communities in which we live.

I would urge that we all keep in mind the need for good strong leadership within that community and it is imperative that schools have adequately staffed in-school management teams, who have access to appropriate training and time allocation for cooperation and collaboration to ensure the provision of the best possible education for this and future generations.

The role of education centres in supporting learning communities

Siobhán Lynskey, Education Committee

Introduction

As part of the research that formed the background to the discussion document for this conference, focus groups were conducted nationwide. And one of these groups focussed on education centres. I am just going to give you a brief history of the education centres, where they are located, their role, their current operation, the future and challenges for them and us and their potential especially in light of our conference topic – learning communities.

A brief history of teachers' / education centres

Teacher centres were first established in 1972 and all work was conducted on a voluntary basis by teachers. The first full-time directors were appointed to the Blackrock and Drumcondra Centres in 1975. These were teachers on secondment from their schools. The first allocation of an administrative staffing resource took place in 1979 when four full-time centres had a clerk typist appointed on a similar basis as staff appointed as secretaries in national schools. In 1994/1995, the first national programmes were assigned by the Department of Education to a number of selected centres. In addition to seconded professional staff, these programmes provided funds to centres for recruitment of temporary administrative staff to service programme needs.

Since 1995 centres have had a central role in the delivery of national programmes of professional development for primary and post primary teachers. The expansion of the network of fulltime centres in 1997 was indicative of a new awareness of the central role of continuous professional development of teachers in the modernisation of Irish education.

Formal statutory recognition was granted to the centres under the 1998 Education Act where centres are referred to as Education Support Centres. This name change to Education Support Centre refers to the new and wider remit of centres to reach out and forge links with the wider school community in the context of the promotion and enhancement of teaching and learning. In those early days the role of the Teachers' Centres was:
1. to provide an opportunity and meeting place for primary and post-primary teachers to discuss issues related to their work;

2. to act as a resource centre which would enable teachers to prepare and construct equipment and materials for use in their own schools and, if necessary, for distribution among schools in the locality;

3. to arrange in-service courses.

But let’s look at their role under the Education Act.

An Education Centre is ‘a place in which services are provided for schools, teachers, parents, boards and other relevant persons which support them in carrying out their functions in respect of the provision of education which is recognised for that purpose by the Minister…’

(Education Act 1998)

They have a role in post-primary, but the focus today will be on their role in primary education.

**Education Support Centres**

There is a regional network and I think it is very important to look at where they are situated around the country. There are 21 education centres with full-time status and nine part–time centres and they are distributed throughout the country in six regions.

[Map of Regional Network]

http://www.ateci.ie/education-centres.html
They support the in-service needs of local teachers, support locally identified needs and provide a range of activities for the educational community.

The Association of Teachers’ Education Centres in Ireland is the representative and policy-making body for the national network. There are 21 directors of full time centres and representatives from each part time centre – nine. There is a management committee representative from each region and they meet six times a year. The Directors meet monthly.

They have core functions. Teacher professional learning is at their heart. They also have a core role in national support services and national programmes, in organising them locally. They also organise locally driven programmes for teachers and they develop expertise and initiatives in collaboration with local teachers and they organise modular third level courses. They are very busy places and there is an awful lot happening.

Let’s look at their vision and mission. Some very interesting things start to emerge here. Their vision is – to inspire and support teaching and learning in the education community, but look at the mission - the sharing of ideas and the communication of knowledge within the learning community through the ongoing provision and development of services and resource. I took this from one of the education centres websites. Here we have the very interesting concept of networks. The NCTE on their website identified the education centres as a network of learning communities for teachers and it came through in our focus group:

‘looking at the education centre as a network, we have built networks in terms of all the schools that we have…’

So we have these learning communities being formed within the education centres. Teachers have been coming together to do courses for many years, they attend in-service and attend elective courses and this ability to form and support networks of teachers is latent in the structure and the location of education centres. Learning communities of teachers are being formed through the work of the education centres. Another quote from our focus groups:

‘…Through these networks of groupings… in terms of like-minded people coming together where straight away you are going to get everything discussed…’

Teachers are coming together for a shared purpose, to enhance their teaching and learning.

Early courses and early programmes delivered through the education centres were often addressing system needs and were perhaps decided on by external bodies. The roll-out of curriculum inservice is an example and some of the national programmes as well. Look at this quote:

‘whereas hitherto maybe schools were happy to take a menu that was made by maybe a director of an education centre … now it changes in terms of the teachers stating their needs.’

Teachers are increasingly looking for courses that address a perceived need and that can often be locally focussed. Some centres have run courses for other stakeholders in the education process in conjunction with teachers, for instance, courses delivering Irish for parents or information on the new curriculum.
Teachers are finding that doing courses or even coming together with other teachers in the education centre is helping them develop both professionally and it is feeding into their practice. Another quote:

‘if people are coming together in the education centre and they are beginning to find that the education centre works for them and they are going back and more professional as a group or feel they are doing more - that is where the future of the education centre rests.’

And this coming together of teachers, not as passive recipients of courses, but as active and self-directed learners within this framework that lends itself to community formation that is beginning to give rise to teacher professional communities. We are building a network. You are building up that element of a cohort of people who are definitely interested in sharing this shared vision. There was a strong sense that came through to us that this needs to be sited within their community. Look at that quote:

‘ I think that it has to be local…’

There is a strong sense that courses need to be relevant and they need to develop learning communities relevant to real life practice and real community practice and that came through very strongly in the focus groups:

‘...the longer you are away from the chalk face the more out of touch you become and you do need that element of reality attached to what you are doing.’

Full time education centres are sited largely in big urban areas. They are hugely important to teachers who can access them. Often, but not always, they draw from large schools. Here is another quote:

‘The large school almost becomes an education centre in its own right … but in the two-teacher school … that is where the support is needed.’

This isolation which can be felt by rural teachers based in small schools - that can be helped by the proximity and relevance of their local education centre. If they are near one of the larger urban areas, they can access the centre with little difficulty, but if they are in a rural area, it can be that their local part-time education centre is more relevant to their experience as it is sited within their local community, and can reflect the needs and experiences unique to their area.

Support for NQTs

Take for instance the happenings with NQTs. These courses that support them which continues the programme that has been rolled out is being offered in the 21 full-time education centres nationwide, but we can’t forget that it is very important that they be offered also within the part-time education centres if the need can be seen for it to be there. Newly qualified teachers, you must understand, they don’t have the resources that we have. It can be difficult for them to travel long distances and they might find it hard to access some of these courses. It also might be of more benefit to them in facilitating their integration into a local community of schools and a local network of teachers.

PDST

There is a lot of good work going on in the education centres at the moment and you have heard about the Professional Development Service for Teachers. The Professional Development Service for Teachers or PDST is the name given to the newly created CPD Service for teachers. PDST will operate on a regional basis, providing teacher professional development and school support through multi-disciplinary teams of
seconded teachers, who will work in close co-operation with the Education Centre Network, to respond to professional development needs identified by schools.

The regional teams include both primary and post primary teachers and will be supporting both primary and post primary schools. The capacity of the regional teams will be augmented by the work of local facilitators and associate trainers. Other support services/programmes will continue on a stand-alone basis and will not form part of the PDST at the current time. These include: the Project Maths Development Team and the Special Education Support Service.

**NCTE**

But I would like to draw your attention to the NCTE. We have to recognise that the educational landscape at the moment is changing. The recent allocation of funding - I think is like €24 million of ICT going into schools - and that presents a range of opportunities and challenges for teachers and the Education Centre Networks. The NCTE have a quote on their website:

> What good is technology if teachers and pupils don’t know how to use it?

The NCTE have put in place a comprehensive training programme for teachers centred around a three phase approach ranging from basic skills, through professional skills to pedagogical skills development. These can be delivered through the education centres and through teachers establishing professional networks.

A key challenge is to examine how the Network can lead in responding to the emerging developments and how it can best meet the needs of teachers to facilitate their upskilling and confident participation in the dynamic ICT teaching and learning process. The future embedding of an improved ICT culture in all schools will need to be underpinned by the targeted use of ICT in the teaching of specific subjects and its integration into the curriculum. There is also a need to enable all teachers to use this new technology effectively in their classrooms.

**Teacher professional communities**

The location and role of the education centres are giving rise to the development of teacher professional communities. There are some based in Carrick-on-Shannon, there are a few here in Cork based in the education centre. There is a support group for teachers in multi-class and the modern languages primary teacher network. But I would like to draw your attention to Dublin West. Dublin West Education Centre is offering support for the formation of teacher professional communities (TPCs). These TPCs can be formed by teachers from various local schools, or by teachers from the same school, who share a common challenge or purpose with regard to best practice in their teaching. And these teachers, for example infant teachers or language support teachers, can get together to support each other. One of our workshops will outline how one of these professional learning communities developed.

A TPC may, for instance, create resources in a locality, for example, a history or geography resource in an area, and may share or disseminate such resources.

The future - well we won’t focus on funding that is the key issue at the moment - but we are hoping that these education centres will keep providing for local continuous professional development needs and we can’t deny the on-going importance of continuous professional development.
**Challenges**

We hope that the education centres will continue to be resourced and continue to be structured to provide continuous professional development. We hope also that this will be driven by teachers’ needs. I would appeal for the support of the part-time centres as much as the full-time centres - that these be supported and we attend them and we do our courses with them but also that we use them to form learning communities that are going to lead us forward to a brighter future.

**Area learning communities in Northern Ireland**

*Brendan Harron, Senior Official*

I just want to give a brief overview of a particular type of learning community that has emerged in the North in the last few years. They are actually called area learning communities or ALCs. They exist in the post-primary sector. Not every delegate will be aware that the INTO in the North recruits in both the primary and post-primary sectors and we have over 2,500 members in post-primary schools. So, we have a very direct interest in what is happening in these learning communities. If they work in the way they are designed to work they would be a very good model for any type of area learning community. They came about in the last four years as, in 2006, the Department announced its new policy Entitled to Succeed, part of which was the Entitlement Framework which stated at that time that by a date to be determined (that date has now been determined as September 2013) every post-primary school in the North must be able to offer to every pupil, when they come to age 14 and are going to chose their subjects for GCSE - which is broadly equivalent to the Junior Certificate - they must be able to offer a minimum of 24 subjects, at least one third of which must be general/academic type subjects, one third must be vocational/applied type subjects and the other third can be either. Again, at age 16, when pupils are selecting their subjects for A level, which is broadly similar to the Leaving Certificate, they must offer 27 subjects, at least one third of which must be general/academic type subjects, one third must be vocational/applied type subjects and the other third can be either. When the Department announced this policy in 2006 there was no school in the North, and there probably still isn’t any school in the North, that could offer that full breadth and balance of subjects. In the North of course we have a two-tier system. We have grammar schools which are largely selective and secondary schools which are non-selective. Two years ago the Education Minister abolished academic selection and we all thought ‘wow! that’s great’, but what happened was that, last year, the grammar schools introduced their own entrance tests. This is the second year of these tests and as we sit here this morning there are 7,000 children in the North, aged around ten or eleven, sitting entrance tests over the next four Saturdays, some of them paying for the privilege, and of course, the North being the North, there are entrance tests for Protestant grammar schools and separate entrance tests for Catholic grammar schools. Nach ait an rud é sin!

So what has happened in each area? To give you an example, in the town that I taught in, Limavady, a market town, medium sized, there are five different post-primary education providers in that town, there are 15 in Derry city and there are nine in the Omagh area. It varies from area to area. Those schools had to sit down together (and they must do it very quickly now as there are only two school years left before the deadline), and say how are we going to offer our pupils at age 14 the breadth and balance required and at age 16 the broad choice as well. So they had to set up area learning communities. They are meeting regularly and they are looking at how to timetable provision so that they can offer the full range of courses. They have had to collaborate
with the local technical college for the more vocational type of subjects and so on. So you can see the aim is that every child, no matter where that child is born, no matter where the child lives; when he/she leaves primary school by 2010 they will know that, no matter which post-primary school they select, when they get to 14 they are going to have a broad and balanced choice of subjects – it is a wonderful vision. The nice bonus or by-product from it of course is that those barriers between secondary and grammar, Protestant and Catholic, affluent and less affluent, those barriers are going to be broken down. Children will be going for particular parts of the week to maybe the Catholic co-ed secondary school to do their arts subject and going to the Protestant grammar school to do their science subjects and to the local further education college to do other subjects. So there is going to be pupils mixing, teachers mixing, and movement and barriers breaking down. I think it is a very good vision from that point of view.

Not to finish on a negative note but there are issues arising with teachers having to travel to different schools, there are different policies in each of the schools - homework, discipline, pastoral care, attendance policies and so on - but those problems that are emerging can all be ironed out by the regular meetings of the head teachers or senior managers or the teachers themselves within each of the schools through the ALC. I would hope that in 2013 we will see the vision come to fruition. It makes total sense then that, if it works at post-primary level within an area, it would make total sense to extend that to the primary schools, to special schools and nursery schools and so on. Then we would have what would truly be a comprehensive area learning community. So we will see what happens there and perhaps we will be reporting back positively in the future.

**Mobile technology and learning communities**

*Peter Creedon, St Aidan’s Primary School, Enniscorthy*

In today's world, knowledge and information are moving from the physical, such as libraries and encyclopaedias, to the virtual world of the internet. More and more, we access this knowledge digitally and immediately through the use of hand held devices which are mobile and connected wirelessly. We are moving away from the desktop and PC to our mobile phones and other hand held devices, not only to communicate but to access information. We have entered an era in which mobile technologies are fundamentally changing our culture and impacting on every aspect of our lives including our learning. Mobile learning is all around us. Knowing how to use them is becoming a very large part of being literate. Indeed digital technologies are becoming ‘the pen and paper of our time, the lens through which we experience much of our world’ (Warlick, 2006).

It is in this background that Kilkenny, Sligo and Wexford Education Centres approached four schools to become involved in a project to explore the use and potential of in-hand learning devices in the classroom. The schools are

- Ramsboro NS. Co. Sligo.
- St. Colman’s NS. Clara, Co. Kilkenny.
- The Faythe PS. Wexford, Co. Wexford.
- St. Aidans’ PS. Enniscorthy, Co Wexford.

The chosen hand held device used in the project was the iPod touch. The three centres purchased iPods and loaned them to the schools. Apple organised technical support.
Multimedia resources such as filmstrips, tape and video recorders and DVDs have long been used in schools to engage students and support learning. The iPod Touch is a multimedia device which combines a number of these resources. The iPod can:

- play and record and download audio;
- record and play video;
- take and display photographs;
- access the internet;
- email;
- use applications;
- calculate;
- access weather;
- download podcasts;
- play music;
- be interactive.

**Web applications**

Web applications are downloadable applications which can be added to the devices via a WiFi connection. Currently, there are over 200,000 apps on the iTunes website with over 10,000 being added each week. While not all these are of educational use a significant number of apps can be used in the classroom. Many can be downloaded for free or for a few euros at most. These can then be loaded onto each iPod, making them very cost effective.

Examples of the applications used across the schools include the following:

- Maths - Pop Math, Math Magic, Clockmaster;
- English - Rory’s Story Cubes, Super Why, Phonics Lite, ABC Phonics, Dictionary;
- Gaeilge - Gaeilge Study Buddy, Greann;
- Geography – EU App, Google Maps, Google Earth, Safari, Countries;
- History – Safari;
- Science – Identify Tree, 10,000 science facts, Bugs;
- Art - Art, Jackson Pollock, Faces I make;
- SPHE – Simplemind Xpress.

Each centre purchased a class set of iPods and loaned them out to the schools for the five month duration of the project. With the use of an airport extreme the classroom became WiFi enabled and the teachers and pupils set out to explore the use of these devices to support teaching and learning in the classroom. Putting the technology in the pupil’s hands is the first step. The next was how to use it.

The iPods were used in maths, Gaeilge, English, phonics, art, history, geography, science and music. They were used from first to sixth class.
Findings

- **Transforms children from passive to active learners**
  Instead of the traditional approach of providing the pupils with the knowledge through textbooks, the pupils source the information in real time. They are no longer passive recipients of information but active constructors of their own knowledge. It places the technology into the hands of the pupils. They learn to source information, critically evaluate it and present this knowledge in a proper format. The devices replace the textbooks and workbooks.

- **Facilitates individual, group and interactive work**
  Children quickly become very adept at using the internet to source data, they learn how to filter their searches and find information appropriate to their ability which they share and discuss with their peers. Learning is enhanced by greater peer collaboration as pupils share their sourced knowledge or the methods they used to acquire it.

- **Enables differentiated learning**
  The one-to-one nature of the interaction between the pupil and the hand-held device promotes true differentiation as each pupil works to his/her own ability. This in turn supports independent learning and inclusion as children access content and resources that meet their need. As no longer the provider of the knowledge the teacher is released to support their pupils through the learning process.

- **Increases pupil motivation and engagement**
  Pupils are excited and engaged by the use of the devices and are extremely motivated by their use. The personal nature of the devices are key. It personalizes their learning and they feel an ownership which motivates them and keeps them on task. This motivation has been maintained for the duration of the project.

- **Improves learner behaviour and attitudes**
  Greater engagement reduces off task behaviour and the need to deal with behaviour issues. Learning becomes an enjoyable experience and pupils develop a positive attitude towards their learning. ‘There is ordinary class time and there is iPod time’, is how one teacher expressed it.

- **Improves learner’s confidence and self esteem**
  As pupils use the devices they gain in confidence and put forward ideas of their own as to how they can be used. They take pride in contributing in whole class sessions and this has a positive effect on their self esteem.

- **Greater portability and mobility**
  The devices can be easily moved from class to class as a set or in pocket if on an outside class project. Learning can take place outside the classroom, learning becomes mobile.

- **Instant use**
  Pupils instantly knew how to use the devices as their touchscreen technology mirrors one they are familiar with. No time is wasted teaching the technology but instead focuses on using it. The focus is on the learning and not the technology.
• Cross Curricular
The multimedia element of the devices facilitates integration of different subjects. They become an integral component of everyday teaching.

• Assessment
As the teacher role changes to being the director of learning it provides more time for teacher pupil interaction and allows the teacher to assess each pupil’s progress through the learning path.

• Cost Effective
While the initial cost of the devices may seem expensive, if one was to buy each multimedia element separately it would cost a lot more. The cost is lessened as they can be used on PCs and laptops already in schools. Once the initial cost of the app is paid for, or downloaded for free, it can be placed on any number of devices so schools do not have to pay multi – user devices. As one teacher noted, ‘the ability for the children to have individual internet access without having a computer room and all the associated complications is priceless.’

Challenges

• Charging
Charging and syncing the devices can be time consuming and needs planning so they are ready for use when required.

• Apps are not rated
Apps provide very little information on their uses but there are more and more websites appearing on the internet which review educational websites.

• Internet Access
The ability of the devices to access the internet is dependent on the schools internet access which is not the same in all schools.

Certainly, the evidence provided from this small project would point to very positive effects on learning and teaching in the classroom, through the use of hand held devices in the classroom. Without doubt, learning will move away from wired to wireless small devices that will make learning mobile and instant. If an aim of our education system is to produce independent learners for the smart, economy then hand-held devices such as the iPod Touch will play a large part in the process.
Reports from Discussion Groups

Delegates attending the conference were divided into groups which were facilitated by members of the Education Committee, to explore the themes addressed in the discussion document and by the various presenters. Members of the Education Committee also acted as rapporteurs. Reports from the different groups have been collated and are presented below under a number of thematic headings.

The school as a learning community.

Delegates expressed many views regarding schools as learning communities. There was a general view that there will always be tension between the needs of individual parents and the needs of the school community as a whole. There were some delegates of the opinion that inviting individual parents into school to share expertise with the children would enhance the school as a community. Many agreed that there was a need to involve parents as partners in the learning community. Schemes such as paired reading were referred to as good examples of parental involvement. Others were concerned about confidentiality regarding children’s ability or behaviour. It was felt that careful selection of those who respect boundaries was a prerequisite for parental involvement. The centrality of the role of the teacher as the educational professional was seen as vital where outside expertise was being utilised.

Some delegates felt that school buildings were under utilised and that after school activities would help bridge the gap between school and community.

Delegates from small rural schools made the point that these schools were very much a part of their communities. In contrast it was pointed out that it was easier for staff members in bigger schools to develop professional learning communities and to act as mentors and share expertise. All agreed that an atmosphere of openness and sharing of ideas were essential for staff development.

It was felt that the PDST was not able to cater for enough schools and that smaller groups working through education centres might be the way forward. Teachers in small schools felt that clusters of schools in an area could meet to form their own learning communities and invite outside speakers. One speaker suggested that these clusters would facilitate distributed leadership within smaller schools.

One teacher suggested that staff members should take ownership of their learning and share expertise without outside facilitators. This view was challenged by another speaker who said that the PDST were facilitators and that there were advantages in having an outside voice. All agreed that the reduction in numbers at middle management will present many challenges for schools.
Collaboration and collegiality

There was a consensus that a willingness to share ideas and classroom practices was essential for the establishment of a collaborative school regime. Many speakers referred to the need for time to plan and organise collaborative learning and teaching in our schools. The ‘extra hour’ was seen as an opportunity for teachers to take control of planning and professional development. One delegate expressed a preference for after school meetings for planning because of the difficulty in getting substitute cover.

Literacy Lift Off was identified as an example of team teaching. This graded reading scheme involved collaborative planning and showed improved scores in standardised tests of reading. A number of speakers referred to assembly time as an opportunity for collaborative planning. Different class levels held team meetings while their classes were supervised by colleagues at school assembly. Staff members were enabled to review policies and prepare for the next school planning meeting.

Teaching as a profession

A number of delegates felt that being professional meant continuous upskilling. One expressed it as, ‘our duty is to learn’. The role of the teacher was seen as enabling children to express themselves by developing their social skills. It was felt that we define ourselves in relation to others. While we impart knowledge to children we ourselves are also learning. Some expressed the view that teachers will fall behind their pupils in the area of IT in particular if they don’t constantly upskill.

A contrasting view was that teachers should not be forced into attending courses at their own expense and in their own time out of a sense of duty to their school. Some felt that formal CPD should take place within school hours but that those who wished to attend courses in their own time should receive recognition of some kind.

Most delegates were of the opinion that CPD should not be compulsory but most felt that it was necessary and wanted by the majority of teachers. There was agreement that CPD needs a proper framework to ensure that it is incentivised, school-based and accredited. Many suggested that the extra hour should be used for CPD. One delegate felt that CPD should be run on a regional basis rather than centralised in Dublin.

There was some debate as to the obligations of teachers as regards their standing in the community. A number of speakers felt that doing a professional job in the classroom was the only duty on teachers. These teachers were insistant that their private lives should not be held up for examination at the school gate.

NQTs

There was general agreement that a supportive environment was vital for NQTs to help them with induction and probation. One speaker suggested that observation of other teachers was important right through a career. There was a strong feeling in the group that mentors should have training opportunities and be rewarded for their efforts. There was criticism of the fact that mentors had to give up their own time to train. A number of delegates also pointed out that experienced teachers also learn from NQTs who have fresh ideas and ICT expertise to offer. It was felt that the culture of sharing was established by the principal.
Principals were worried about their future role in probationing NQTs. They saw a conflict between their role as mentors and facilitators as against assessors of NQTs’ ability to teach. Principals were of the view that the Teaching Council had a big role to play in probation as principals were not qualified to assess NQTs. There was a feeling that the Inspectorate should not shirk its responsibility for probationing NQTs. There is a need for linkage between intake, induction, mentoring and probation. The National Induction Programme was seen as a vital element in developing NQTs in the early stages of their careers. Teachers commented that teaching practice was inadequate in its present form.

ICT

One delegate said that ICT is a very important tool for learning and that, ‘we will get out of it what we put into it’. Another pointed out that ICT will never replace the teacher. The general view was that ICT will enhance learning and will play a major role in shared learning both in the classroom and between schools. One speaker mentioned the Irish Computer Society which links 80 schools in a learning community. It was felt that teachers would embrace ICT if they felt confident in its use because of the huge array of free resources available to them.

A number of delegates pointed out that ICT also introduces challenges to schools in the form of Facebook bullying and uncontrolled access in the home to computer games.

Leadership

There was general agreement that the embargo on posts of responsibility was causing stress and conflict in schools. Principals have to struggle with increasing demands to cover middle management workload. Teaching principals said that they had no time to enhance their leadership skills. There was a concern expressed that if staffs stretch themselves to cover missing posts the DES will say that those posts were not needed anyway. One delegate made the point that school leaders face a huge challenge with low morale in staffs as salaries are cut and workloads increase.
Reports from Workshops

Helen Hallissey - Teachers Networking as a Professional Learning Community

The presentation had a Christmas theme. Activities included getting attention and calming children after the activity. The group meet and share ideas before introducing the activity to the children. The handouts for participants were very much in demand.

Helen O'Sullivan - One School as a Learning Community

Helen explored the meaning of a professional learning community (PLC). She emphasised that PLCs are not support groups but professionals enquiring into their own practice and learning new and better approaches that will enhance pupil learning. She said that these communities must have trust, respect, communication and inclusivity. There was good participant involvement in the workshop with many suggesting that mentoring was an important aspect of schools as PLCs. The importance of peer feedback on our teaching approaches was emphasised. Teachers will have to learn to give proper feedback and to ‘open the classroom door’ to others. Many participants referred to the problem of time allocation for observation and feedback during the working week.

Mary Roche - Schools as Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

This was a four part presentation. Mary spoke about the role of picture books in creating a diological classroom community. She spoke on the three Cs - courtesy, care and consideration - which were a prerequisite for good dialogue in the classroom. Catriona McDonagh gave the example of Dyslexic pupils informing others about their condition and how they dealt with it. She said that these pupils were the ‘experts’ in this case and that teachers and other pupils were learners. This type of encounter provided freedom, motivation and validation for the participants. Bernie Sullivan spoke on the importance of dialogue between teachers. She stated that in conversation we discover the ‘who’ of a person. Máirín Glenn spoke about the importance of collaboration and the sharing of lived experiences in the development of PLCs.

Zita Lysaght - Teacher Learning Communities(TLCs), Site Based and Virtual

The focus of this workshop was on:

1. the challenges facing change in teaching and learning;
2. alternative models of CPD;
3. three projects that used TLCs to provide teachers with CPD;
4. opportunities and challenges involved.
There was an examination of assessment for learning in which the importance of high quality formative assessment was emphasised. Peer critique was the focus of a video presentation in which the benefits of honest formative feedback for all concerned were highlighted. Zita quoted research findings that indicated that ‘It matters more which teacher you get in school than which school you go to’. The presentation was very well received by the delegates.

**Joan Keating- Mentoring and Induction**

Joan was accompanied by a mentor teacher and principal of a school involved in mentoring for a number of years. She said that the Mentoring Programme had opened up the school as a Learning Community. The programme has led to more openness in the school and promoted learning conversations which are good for academic self-esteem. The programme encourages a clear school mission and a focus on learning, both of which are essentials for an effective school. Teachers were encouraged to consult [www.teacherinduction.ie](http://www.teacherinduction.ie) to find answers to FAQs on the induction programme.

**David O’Gara - Film and Learning in Education**

David showed two films made by children in a Sligo school. He pointed out that production spilled out into the local community and improved the positive atmosphere in the school and its locality. Collaboration and integration of subject areas were important aspects of film making. Maths was involved in problem solving and spatial awareness. English was integral to script writing and reading of acting parts. Local history, music and arts and crafts were all part of the production of the films. Time constraints meant that there was no opportunity for participants to discuss the presentation.