Teaching and Learning:
Insights from Irish Schools
Online Journal of the Second Level Support Service
Number 1
Summer 2009
## Index

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1.</th>
<th>Foreword</th>
<th>Page 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Director's Introduction</td>
<td>Page 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Reflections on themes and concerns at the heart of practice</td>
<td>Page 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Some techniques for increasing retention in lower stream Higher Level Mathematics classes at Junior Cycle: Lessons learned from Action Research Projects with 2nd and 3rd Year classes, 2004 – 2006</td>
<td>Page 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>‘Cooling off: settling down’ – Designing and implementing a ‘time-out’ procedure for pupils</td>
<td>Page 41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>The Role of the Year Head: a case study examining tensions between Aspiration and Practice</td>
<td>Page 62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Reflections on the continuing professional development of History teachers</td>
<td>Page 75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Junior Science: teaching and learning science in the 21st century</td>
<td>Page 82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Reflections on supporting teachers of Religious Education</td>
<td>Page 89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Notes for contributors</td>
<td>Page 100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

**NUMBER 1 : SUMMER 2009**
Foreword

Alec MacAlister
Editor

Coming to terms with constant change can be both professionally demanding and challenging. In a casual moment, we might jot down the main changes that we have already been alert to in classrooms and in schools over the last decade or so. We can think of these in the wider sense: on-going syllabus review: the introduction of new programmes: multi-cultural enrolments in schools: an increasing expectation around the use of ICT in subject teaching and learning...and many more. Or, maybe more fittingly in the context of a teaching and learning journal such as this, we can try to get a focus on how we understand the extent to which they have had an impact on our own day-to-day work in classrooms and schools.

Reflecting through the lens of our own circumstances, what begins to emerge is a profile not only of whatever changes have come about, but also of what kinds of responses they have evoked, in the personal-professional domain, and, at the levels of schools and systems generally. With such a view before us, we might conclude that our sense of teaching shows just how strongly the work of education demands that one eye be kept on the most immediate concerns; and the other constantly on a distant, and (in times of rapid change and uncertainty) somewhat indistinct, final point. ‘Lifelong learning’ is increasingly promoted as an approach to both leading and managing change. Lifelong learning is just that – life : long. In terms of the social relations of schools, embracing lifelong learning may have the effect of unsettling any distinctions that have conventionally sought to clearly divide the experience of being a teacher from that of being a learner.

As educators, how we come to talk about our teaching experience can be watermarked by many sources. Among these we might like to include some of our own past experiences of being taught; how familiarity with our subject disciplines has helped shape our identity as teachers; the extent to which working in particular school cultures has influenced our practice and what it is we hold dear in our professional lives. John Dewey
suggests that experience arises from our interaction with our environment: it has a dual nature. That is, it has both active and passive elements ‘peculiarly combined’. It is active, firstly, in that experience is a trying, an ‘experiment’: we are acting in/on some particular circumstances/conditions in which we find ourselves. There is also a ‘passive’ element, an ‘undergoing’ in that something occurs in the ‘trying’, so called: such developments have the potential to invoke new understandings, new meanings, both of the work and the unique situations in which it is carried out. Getting some hold on the interplay of these two elements can assist the development of Continuing Professional Learning (CPL) or Continuing Professional Development (CPD) of those immersed in teaching and learning. Grappling with this interplay, then, might go some way towards sketching what lifelong learning might involve from a teaching perspective.

Classrooms can be isolated and isolating places: who will hear us when we talk about our practice? Who will be our audience? The SLSS journal, Teaching and Learning: Insights from Irish Schools proposes itself as a place where educators can speak, can be heard and can engage in conversations about teaching and learning with other colleagues. It invites educators wishing to elaborate how they have grappled with some pressing issue in their professional lives to go public. It invites others to join the conversation by sharing their own professional learning. It wishes to value the uniqueness of professional circumstances. It invites writers to infuse their contributions with this uniqueness: to offer readers/co-learners opportunities to savour the process of making sense of unique professional experiences that are directed to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in classrooms and schools.

My work as editor has been greatly helped by my colleagues, the team of SLSS Regional Development Officers: Mags Amond, Tony Collison, Harry Freeman, Maria Garvey, Pauline Kelly, Fiona Kindlon, Della Meade, Liz O’Keeffe and Cornelius Young. I am indebted to them all. Their support in sourcing material, introducing authors and with the arduous task of proof-reading has been invaluable.

In this instance, however, I am particularly indebted to Harry Freeman who acted in many capacities – principally in the capacity as co-editor as he sourced material, introduced an author, co-read the material initially, made many valuable suggestions and proof-read the final drafts all amid a very demanding work schedule in his own region.
Alec MacAlister,
SLSS Regional Development Officer/Editor.
Spring 2009.
Contact: alecmacalister@slss.ie

References
As Director of the SLSS I am delighted to introduce the first issue of our online journal, *Teaching and Learning: Insights from Irish Schools*.

We live in times of great change and challenge. Never before has society had such need and such heightened expectation of teachers and schools. The Second Level Support Service, like the other national support services in the education sector, seeks to support teachers and schools in meeting those needs and expectations by providing opportunities for professional development which advance quality learning and teaching. In its work, the SLSS respects the purpose, experience, insight and creativity of both teachers and support personnel. The model of professional support the SLSS has developed over the last 8 years engages teachers as co-learners and enquirers and fosters a culture of collaboration and dialogue. Since its establishment in 2001, the SLSS has encouraged teachers to reflect on the values and principles which underpin their teaching and to share with their colleagues the insights which arise from such reflection. The SLSS has provided opportunities for teachers not only to talk to each other about their work, but to work together, and to learn from each other.

As an organisation the SLSS is acutely aware of the challenges facing teachers in their day-to-day work and has sought to explore creative solutions to these challenges. Very often this has involved linking everyday practice to theory and providing teachers with access to new thinking and research findings, which are considered and evaluated together. We have learned that there is no single ‘solution’ or ‘best practice’ that can be applied in all circumstances. The reflection and discussion which the SLSS facilitates is always related to the circumstances in which teachers find themselves. For this reason our courses and workshops are structured around peer conversation, action research, and practice and research-based evidence. In structuring courses in this way the SLSS hopes to generate cumulative knowledge and, in school-based work, to encourage schools to develop as learning communities.
While wonderful and innovative teaching takes place in schools and classrooms right across the country, the SLSS is keenly aware that that experience is seldom shared with colleagues outside of the individual school or indeed sometimes outside of the individual classroom. In launching this on-line journal, the SLSS hopes to provide a forum where this excellence and innovation in teaching and learning can be shared between teachers and schools.

As the journal develops we hope that we will have contributions from teachers and support personnel from all the support services currently supporting teachers and schools at second level. The journal is intended to occupy a space somewhere between the professional talk of the staffroom and the specialist talk of the academic journal. I know that the journal will be as lively, creative and thought-provoking as the teaching profession it is intended to serve.

Finally, I wish to thank all of the contributors to this first issue, the editor Alec MacAlister for the thoughtful care he has lavished on bringing this project to fruition and to Dr. Gerry Jeffers, Education Department, NUI Maynooth for his valuable comment and direction.

Michael Garvey,
Director, Second Level Support Service.
Reflections on themes and concerns at the heart of practice

By Gerry Jeffers, Education Department, NUI Maynooth.

This new journal deserves a warm welcome. The nine insightful, reflective contributions in this first issue are vibrant and relevant. They also enrich the ongoing conversations we need to have within Irish education about practice and they serve as exemplars for others to follow.

Inside classrooms

The opening two articles get straight in to the heart of classroom teaching. Both Larry Cotter and Paul Behan talk frankly about how they altered their practice. Larry Cotter's account will appeal to teachers across a range of subject areas, especially anyone with a touch of technophobia. His journey in pursuit of ‘the possibilities of doing English in a digital age’ is an exciting one, fuelled by pedagogic imagination. As he tells his story, one is struck by his generous acknowledgement of the various lifts he got along the way, demonstrating that, in practice, terms like ‘collegiality’ and ‘professional collaboration’ often manifest themselves in informal and unstructured ways.

Collaboration, this time between students, is also a central theme in Paul Behan’s analysis of his action research in a junior cycle Maths class. This chapter demonstrates how posing questions about one’s own practice in a structured and sustained way can lead to fresh perspectives and prompt innovation. Teachers with an interest in the application of formative methodologies, including Assessment for Learning, will find much of interest in Paul’s chapter. He shows a nuanced sensitivity to the importance of classroom climate and remarks ‘Creating a classroom culture of learning support, rather than success support, of trial and improvement, rather than trial and error, does not happen by accident’.
Leadership

Just as good teachers create positive classroom climates, good leaders enable whole schools to become learning communities. John O’Roarke is refreshingly frank about how initial efforts to engage in collegial reflective practice proved challenging. He is clearly a school principal who has taken seriously the responsibility, as made explicit in The Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998), to develop a school environment that promotes the professional development of teachers. His account of the successes of this particular project adds further evidence to the view that ‘small-scale, school-based CPD ... challenges the views of CPD and in-service teacher education that appear to be based on deficit models, are provider driven, prefer ‘off-site’ learning, and in practice, avoid genuine in-school teacher collaboration’ (Jeffers, 2006, p.204).

School structures

The theme of ‘collaboration’ features strongly in two brave chapters by Evelyn Lennon and Dee Callanan. These authors are realistic in engaging with a key question for the effective functioning of schools: how to operate discipline related systems that facilitate student learning and growth. Both chapters can be read as particular extensions of the discussion amplified in the Report from the Task Force on Student Behaviour School Matters (Martin, 2006). Evelyn Lennon, reporting from a school context where almost one in four students has an international background and one in ten has particular learning difficulties, describes and analyses how a ‘time-out’ procedure is viewed by teachers and by pupils. While reporting many positive views of the particular system, she does not shy away from the complexity of issues of consensus, implementation and follow-up associated with any system. For other schools willing to reflect on some of their procedures for positive behaviour management, her methodology offers valuable guidelines.

Year heads from Donegal to Wexford, from Dundalk to Cahersiveen live, in a special way, with the tension between pastoral care and discipline maintenance. Dee Callahan confronts this issue in the following chapter. Her data from three schools contribute additional evidence to support the view of the role as simultaneously fulfilling and frustrating! This chapter, including her ten practical recommendations, offers any school a readymade framework for an analysis of the year-head role.

National curriculum innovations

It is fifteen years since the Department of Education, as it was then, made the – very logical – decision to promote curriculum innovation through teams of teachers on secondment. At the time it was seen as courageous and mould-breaking. Those of us who had the privilege of working on the initial support services
associated with Transition Year (TY), Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) threw ourselves into the task enthusiastically. By and large we were ‘doers’, keen to effect change. Of course, we reflected, analysed, soul-searched, but we didn’t write enough, particularly about the thinking that informed our actions. Much of the learning from those years is reminiscent of this winter’s snow: a vivid presence in the moment but, in time, a hazier memory.

So it is very encouraging to see four current national co-ordinators committing some of their thoughts to paper. John Dredge integrates very well the fresh thinking that informs the current Leaving Certificate History syllabus and the continuing professional development that accompanies this. There is a clear emphasis of teachers themselves having a vital voice in the process and this chapter is rich in invitation to conversation.

In the following chapter, John Hennessey presents such a succinct account of the thinking that informs junior cycle science that this chapter – especially the first half – could be read by a teacher of any subject and s/he would be informed and energised. As well as making the case for greater cross-curricular dialogue, the argument for a syllabus shift from content knowledge towards key skills is presented well. One can only imagine what revolutions in young people’s thinking might result from a genuine shift towards developing investigative process skills.

If, within our growing pluralist society, being a teacher of Religious Education – a recent arrival in State Examinations – requires extensive knowledge, imaginative pedagogic skills and enormous sensitivity, what is required to support such teachers in their work? Lorraine Gillespie’s reflection captures the passion, commitment and ability for critical analysis that all support programmes deserve. Again, the theme of teacher collaboration is a strong one.

Along with the idea of learning collaboratively, the growing use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in schools is another strong theme threaded through the chapters. In the final chapter, Gerard Synon’s outline of how the use of widely accessible Scoilnet Maps is transforming the teaching and learning of Geography is hugely instructive. It offers more than a glimpse of how ICT might be harnessed to create the kind of schools fit for the 21st century.

I hope that each one of these articles is widely read by practising teachers – across subjects – and that they stimulate staffroom discussion, debate and prompt experimentation, innovation and professional collaboration.
References
Approaching teaching and learning English in the ‘digital age’: 
A story of professional learning

Larry Cotter

In this article, the writer reflects on the extent to which positive influences of colleagues and their relationship with the emerging new technologies exercised a gently persuasive influence on his own developing approaches to teaching English. Prompted by this, the writer outlines a course of professional learning. By referring to collegial dialogue and sharing on issues of concern, the writer invites readers to consider how any group of teachers in a school might become a more vibrant ‘community of practitioners’. To that extent, a model of professional learning is outlined: in this case how to draw purposefully on elements of ICT in order to assist the teacher to enhance the quality of learning that intimately arises from the work being done in the English class.

...Asdf ;lkj...I never learned touch typing. Lack of discipline, impatience, laziness all combined to ensure that as I compose this article I clumsily pick out the keys at a rate of ten words per minute. When I bought my first Brother electric typewriter in 1992 I thought I was taking a bold step. For me it was cutting edge technology. A Good friend had assured me that this gadget would transform my teaching style. Sure enough I graduated from producing handwritten notes and worksheets to typewritten documents which had, I imagined, a quality of gravitas missing from the more primitive handouts.

This is my earliest recollection of an experience that I believe haunts many teachers, the fear that there is a plethora of sophisticated labour-saving machinery that we ought to be utilising in order to become better teachers. I bought the typewriter partly because Tom encouraged me and also, I suspect, because of a species of status anxiety that all the really good teachers were enthusiastically embracing new innovations and I might get left behind if I didn’t take the plunge.

When I reflect now on my practice as a teacher of English, who occasionally uses information technology, I
recognise a pattern in operation. Every innovation I have introduced was as a result of some recommendation from a trusted colleague who had found a way to improve teaching and learning using I.T. Often these were professionals whose area of expertise differed from my own.

When I joined the staff of St. Kieran’s College in 1993, I had never turned on a computer and was intimidated by the idea of learning how to use one. At that time, a colleague, a teacher of Maths, Technology and Physics, was offering night classes to any adults who wanted an introduction to computers. I signed up; partly again, because I didn’t want to seem like a Luddite or technophobe. After six weeks I could find my way around the desktop of the Apple Mackintosh Performa creating my own documents, databases and spreadsheets. One of the hooks was that most of the staff in St. Kieran’s used the computer to generate professional-looking exams for the Christmas tests. The first benefit of this technology to me was that I was able to print and save useful exams rather than relying on the literal method of cutting and pasting old exam questions.

I don’t know what became of the Brother typewriter; but once I discovered how to produce material for class using a word processor application on the computer, I never went back. The range and quality of notes, worksheets and questionnaires I could use in the classroom dramatically improved because I found out how easy it was to use the technology. In a similar way, my approach to classroom presentations was transformed when my school received a laptop and data projector as part of the NCTE project ‘ICT for English’. Throughout that project I learned that programs like PowerPoint could be used to great effect. I had my suspicions that the beautifully formatted notes on poetry, drama and novels were scanned briefly and then forgotten. Now my strategy was to elicit a different quality of attention through a more stimulating and dynamic presentation. In the area of poetry I think this proved quite successful. Initially my students assumed that the material must be of a superior quality, as they were convinced it was someone else’s work! In a sense they were returning to a process akin to the monotony of dictation; but on the other hand, by physically writing the text of the presentation, they were attending to the ideas in a more active way.

Recently, however, I have moved away from this more limited use of PowerPoint. Last year I made a slide show using only images and sound clips to act as a form of ‘advance organiser’ for teaching about the aesthetic use of language. Keats’ ode “To Autumn” was the basis for this show and the students were shown it as a prompt for their own creative writing, well in advance of any analysis of the poem itself.

I was quite taken aback by the way the pictures and sounds managed to awaken in the students a heightened awareness of the sensitivity to the senses, which was the perfect preparation for reading the poem.
In future my plan is to choose certain texts and have the students produce their own slideshows along the lines of my “To Autumn” presentation. This introduces the difficulty of arranging for a large group to have access to the computer room but the exercise is one which I think will enhance their appreciation of the aesthetic possibilities of language.

Freemind is a computer application which resembles PowerPoint in its capacity to appeal to the visual as a way of stimulating student responses to a text. I first came across this application at an English in-service where the presenter used it to great effect to generate mind maps and illustrations of student brainstorming sessions. All of the students’ responses to an idea or image are recorded and presented by means of an interactive whiteboard although a more conventional projector can also be used. The beauty of the programme is that links between ideas are made manifest in a visually appealing way and this replaces more conventional board work.

I am a very poor artist so if I can prepare an illustration using clip art or saved images then I can present a better quality graphic and save myself some embarrassment in front of the class. The graphic below was produced in order to consolidate students’ responses to a prop box for Shakespeare’s “King Lear”.

(Rest in Harvest by Alfred Francois Delobbe: the Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma, a detail from my “To Autumn” slide show.)
(A Freemind mind-map graphic showing six props from a prop box for “King Lear”)

We saved a number of student responses to each prop and then I added them to the Freemind graphic. All of this was by way of a preparation for some student creative writing which would lead into and inform their later reading of the play.

(The wreath branch expands to give students’ response to the prop.)
When I click on the image of the wreath the branch expands to show the variety of ideas linked to the prop. This is also an application which students could use when planning their own individual work.

My recent work on “King Lear” also includes an internet dimension. I belong to a local reading group and one of the other members is the former IT advisor in my local Education Centre. Last spring he launched a blog to record some of the responses to the books under discussion. When I realised how easy it was to start a blog on sites like wordpress.com I created one to host some students’ stories. This September I began a “King Lear” blog. The idea is to fill the web log with coherent student responses to the play. In time I hope a form of national discussion will develop. Please visit and post your comments at http://shakespearskinglear.wordpress.com/. This is a very democratic approach to generating ideas about themes, characters, and key moments and crucially students’ personal responses as they engage with the text. If there is a difficulty, it centres on the problem of access to computers with internet access, many students do not have access at home and there is great demand for the facilities available in school.

One form of technology where the issue of access raises very different concerns, is mobile text messaging. My recent innovation in this area was not prompted by a close personal connection but rather through reading a newspaper article by a man I have yet to meet. David Crystal is Professor of Linguistics at the University of Wales and the author of many books on language. I read a review of his most recent book “Txtng The Gr8 Db8” in the Guardian and I found his analysis of the nature and value of text messages challenging and provocative. Crystal addresses many of the popular anxieties expressed in the media about the impact of texting on language. He clearly shows how contractions, abbreviations and initialisms have long been a feature of language. Non-standard spelling predated the invention of the mobile phone text message. A trawl through the etymology of certain words in the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary for example reveals that “‘Cos is there from 1828, wot from 1829”. If we accept that there are a variety of language types then the various styles in evidence in text messaging may present creative opportunities in the interface between English and technology.

As I was reading Crystal’s book my fifth year students had reached that scene in “King Lear” where Edmund gives Gloucester a forged letter ostensibly written by his ‘legitimate’ brother Edgar. The fraudulent missive is read aloud by Gloucester who displays none of the modern parental reticence over invasion of privacy regarding the private correspondence of one’s children.
'This policy and reverence of age makes
the world bitter to the best of our times; keeps
our fortunes from us till our oldness cannot relish
them. I begin to find an idle and fond bondage
in the oppression of aged tyranny; who sways, not
as it hath power, but as it is suffered. Come to
me, that of this I may speak more. If our father
would sleep till I waked him, you should half his
revenue for ever, and live the beloved of your
brother, EDGAR.'

I set my students the initial task of rendering the letter in a more colloquial register so that the meaning would be clear to a contemporary reader. When they had done this for homework I challenged them to transpose their letter into a 180 character text message. We agreed that in a modern dramatization of the play, Edmund could plausibly steal his brother's phone and send a text from that number to his own mobile. Since both men were brothers the register would be casual, and intimate, as befits that type of correspondence.

Each student was given a number to send this homework to. I used the school's mobile and once I had collated the texts I deleted them from the phone. Over twenty messages revealed a wide range of texting styles. Some used a form of language which was close to Standard English. Others used varying degrees of non-standard spelling, abbreviations, pictograms and logograms. As part of their October test I set them the task of reading all the text messages and selecting the one they felt was most faithful to Shakespeare's original text. The most popular message read:

I dnt tink we shud w8 4 de man 2 go 2 rest, cos we wil b 2 old 2 njoy de €! Im sic of it- txt bac & if der is a mistk ;-) , we split de € & u b my bro 4 life

One student, Michael, chose it because ‘like Edmund’s forgery it insinuates the idea of murder without actually saying so outright’. Jamie on the other hand was impressed by how the ‘smilie ;-) is giving a wink…it’s as if you’re being led into the plot. ‘These responses show an appreciation for the skills of writing in a very deliberate style. While the task of summarizing a message may be deemed a relatively simple one, the introduction of subtlety and the dramatic potential of ‘emoticons’ can show how texting can be a form of creative modelling.
I use my mobile phone with the same clumsy inefficiency as I typed the first word search on my *Brother* typewriter. A short while ago I would have been embarrassed to admit that I had set students a text message for homework. I realize now that this is just the next step for me in exploring the possibilities of doing English in a digital age. We are not dispensing with the books merely searching for stimulating and authentic modes of exploration in an era where language and communication is mediated in rapidly changing ways.

**References**


Some techniques for increasing retention in lower stream Higher Level Mathematics classes at Junior Cycle: Lessons learned from Action Research Projects with 2nd and 3rd Year classes, 2004 - 2006

Paul Behan.

The writer explains about the beginning of his search to unravel a mathematics-teaching puzzle. He frames it like this: “It began with a question. It arose in a meeting with a colleague, about students learning algebraic long division – how do you get students to re-check their work when their answer clearly shows an error? The error in this case is when the remainder from the long division is not equal to zero. Only students of highly reflective mathematical awareness tended to be triggered into action by the sight of a non-zero remainder. It seemed no matter how often students were reminded they generally did not re-check. Questions emerged: was it down to (i) a lack of motivation? (ii) an inability to reflect? (iii) ineffective teaching strategies? These started the action research journey.”

Introduction

Generally students find the method for long division easier than other higher level topics, and the students involved in the action research project were no different. So it was time for me to do something different. I asked the students to work in pairs to create their own questions for one another, as part of the learning
strategy of this topic. Video evidence shows that because the question was coming from their partner, they were more actively engaged in thinking about whether the long division would work out or not. When some of the students got non-zero remainders, they had to interrogate their own method of long division and their partner’s method of multiplication in formulating the question. In other words, they lost blind acceptance of the process of doing the method, and they found an active enquiry of how the process worked, or did not work. By sharing responsibility with their partner for carrying out a successful exercise, they increased their ownership of their own learning. The video further shows that when I asked them to suggest why they may not get a remainder equal to zero, they immediately pointed to the possibilities of errors in both the formulation of the question and in their method of answering. When we returned to this topic some time later, the reflective element appeared to be embedded in the understanding of most students, and mistakes and difficulties in this topic were seen as signposts to improved learning.

**Motivation for Action Research in the Classroom**

A central finding of the research was that when 2\(^{nd}\) Year is used to scaffold learning in 3\(^{rd}\) Year, it had real benefits for number retention, without compromising standards, in a lower stream Higher Level Mathematics class. One of the conclusions of the research was that when students broadly understood Higher Level Mathematical concepts in 2\(^{nd}\) Year, instead of a lesser amount of concepts to great depth, it had a significant positive effect upon motivation as students progress into 3\(^{rd}\) Year. In the case of Higher Level classes made up from across the streams, the conclusions and findings were similar. In general, the diverse range of abilities was reflected in the standardized scores for the NFER-Nelson abstract reasoning assessment, which ranged from 72 to 119. A score of 72 means the student is in the bottom 3% of students in that age group, or what NFER-Nelson would call a percentile rank of 3. A score of 119 places the student in the top 10%. From these statistics, and from experience, there would inevitably be a wide spectrum of possible progress, and of different rates of progress. This presented different challenges and posed the two central questions that motivated these projects.

**A move to formative teaching and learning methodologies**

How do you retain numbers doing Higher Level Mathematics in the Junior Cycle amongst the students in the lower stream while being sufficiently stimulating for the top stream student? What teaching and learning strategies could be used in Junior Cycle Mathematics to ensure as inclusive a learning environment as
possible is nurtured for all levels of learner in the class? Overarching these questions was my own continuing professional development both as a teacher of Mathematics and as a student of how learners learn. The conclusion I came to is that formative methodologies, including Assessment for Learning (AfL) techniques, are characterized by greater inclusion of all learner types in the learning process (Black et al, 2002). The absence of grades, and consequently of grade comparisons in class tests, an increased emphasis on peer collaboration and peer assessment, plus the promotion of autonomous learning, served to retain numbers in the class whilst maintaining standards: all of these issues are not without their difficulties. However, as seen in Figure 1, the results of a common test that the students took compare favourably with a top stream class from a previous year. Whilst the top stream had a considerably higher proportion of students with grades higher than 70%, the distribution of the Action Research class was less skewed, resembling the Normal Gaussian Distribution more closely. The Formative methodologies used consistently throughout this project were:

- Peer Assessed No Grades Class Tests
- Comment Only Marking
- AfL Folders containing Traffic-Lighted content of course
- Peer Collaboration
- Peer Tutoring
- Group Work in Geometry
- Students Creating their own Questions
- Greater Student Involvement in Setting Homework
- Richer Questioning by Teacher and Students.

Of these techniques, from this practitioner’s point of view, the most effective ones were Peer Collaboration, Students Creating their own Questions and Greater Student Involvement in Homework. Or at least these were the most appealing to my preferred mode of teaching and learning in the classroom.
Scaffolding the learning in 2nd Year.

In one of the 2nd year classes, the decision to complete the Ordinary Level syllabus during 2nd year was taken for many reasons. For example, an agreed target set by the teacher and students which is realizable is a very powerful motivator throughout the year. Completing the Ordinary Level syllabus provided students with a tangible sense of achievement. All students were brought to a common platform of knowledge by the end of 2nd year, what MacGilchrist, Myers and Reed (1997) call ‘a scaffold’ and exploring appropriately framed Higher Level concepts was now, for the students (a bungee jump from the scaffold?) hopefully with all the fears and thrills of such an experience (mathematically speaking). It provided a safety net for students who may have had doubts about their abilities and who may have seen their efforts at difficult Higher Level topics as wasteful. Some of these reasons only crystallized as a result of reflections during the Action Research project. The process of completing this 2nd year programme and reflecting upon its wider, Junior Cycle context, brought me to the belief that…

Figure 1

SOME TECHNIQUES FOR INCREASING RETENTION IN LOWER STREAM HIGHER LEVEL MATHEMATICS CLASSES AT JUNIOR CYCLE

FIGURE 1  Distribution of 2nd Year Christmas Test Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class Intervals (%)</th>
<th>No. of Students per Interval</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-10</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-20</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-30</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-60</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-70</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70-80</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80-90</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90-100</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Action Research Class  Top Stream Class

Figure 1

NUMBER 1: SUMMER 2009
learning and development are an inextricable part of the same process. The two concepts are not mutually exclusive. The teacher does not have to wait for the right developmental stage to be reached, but has to provide the scaffold for the learning to occur. (MacGilchrist, Myers and Reed, 1997, p.21)

What was more important to me, during this stage of the Junior Cert programme, was that the students were prepared to use and retain their new knowledge and sufficiently trust in their own learning and in their relationships within the classroom.

Outline of 2nd Year Course Content

In this 2nd year lower stream Higher Level class, all 27 students completed this programme, some requiring much encouragement. All the objectives of creating a scaffold were met. The programme was hierarchical in nature, and designed to increase students' awareness of the differences in the two levels of Mathematics. In each topic I identified fundamental concepts which I felt had to be fully understood and in which the student attained a competency in the associated skills, before the full Higher Level course could be studied by these students in 3rd year. The philosophy of this 2nd Year was to establish a scaffold of mathematical competence and confidence (this programme is outlined below). The main concepts and skills are ones that I felt the students should grasp to build competence in order to scaffold the higher level course in 3rd year. Higher Level concepts are denoted by the \(^{H}\) superscript.

1. **Algebra - Key Concepts Taught**

   Transposition of Equations and Substitution techniques:
   - Solving Simultaneous Equations:
   - Solving Quadratic Equations (by factorization and by the (-b) formula \(^{H}\)):
   - Linear Inequalities and using Equations to Solve Problems: – leading to simultaneous and quadratic \(^{H}\) equations. These topics were spread out over the year e.g. word problems leading to simultaneous equations were done before coordinate geometry to introduce the idea of English sentences to Mathematical syntax. It also reinforces methods for solving simultaneous equations before the method of finding points of intersection revises the concept again. This idea of returning to the same concept in a different context is echoed in Orton (1993, p179), what he calls a spiral curriculum: “One advantage of a spiral curriculum, in which topics are returned to with a view to development and extension is that each new visit to the topic allows a different approach with a steady shift along a concrete/abstract continuum.”
2. **Perimeter Area Volume.**
The full syllabus was taught, including cones \(^4\), with emphasis on algebraic and substitution technique.

3. **Sets**
There was much discussion on the meaning of symbols and terminology. If students missed a concept, other students were given 10 minutes of class to explain this concept to those students, and assessed by the rest of the class. Much use was made of students being formed into sets at the top of the class and explaining for example how double counting works to calculate the number of elements in the intersection of two sets. Learning to use numbers and Variables \(^4\) in Venn Diagrams and solving subsequent equations.

4. **Co-ordinate Geometry: Key Focus**
Understanding Formulae and using substitution techniques, finding the Point of Intersection and its association with Simultaneous Equations. Learning how to associate words like **Perpendicular** and **Parallel** and associating these in turn with the term slope \(^4\).

5. **Geometry: Key Focus**
Obtain a working knowledge of Geometrical concepts, Congruent Triangles, Circle Problems and Similar Triangles \(^4\). The use of GeoStrips was particularly effective here.

6. **Theorems: Key Focus**
Only the first six, most straightforward theorems, were learned and spread over the last term.

7. **Functions: Key Focus**
Understanding the concept of inputs and outputs, concentration on understanding graphs and reading graphs and some Higher Level exam technique explained.

8. **Trigonometry: Key Focus**
Working knowledge of solving right-angled triangles, particularly calculator skills, inverse trigonometric function written explicitly when solving trigonometric equations. Developing a working knowledge of how and when to use the Sine Rule \(^4\). One small example of increased responsibility for their own learning was most students created their own mnemonic, involving their own names, for example, **Shucks Oh Hell Can’t Ashleigh Have Time Off Algebra** (SOHCAHTOA).
When this programme was fully covered, the students were tested that summer in what was essentially a difficult Junior Cert Ordinary Level test. No Higher Level concepts were tested. In a survey at the end of 3rd year, many comments reflected positively upon the scaffolding approach. Identified as important to most students was...

...covering the ordinary level course in second year, which gave me the foundation for higher level and the confidence needed.

The importance of modeling good mathematical technique on the board is crucial to effective teaching of Mathematics. Another student, when asked what worked well this year:

I found taking down notes and examples from the board was great help.

Pre-Mocks Preparation

Following consultation with the students, I began the revision of the papers with their preferred topics which were broadly similar to the topics they had previously chosen in a project survey. I felt this helped to create a positive learning environment during a period which I have previously found to be potentially de-motivating.

The topics they chose on Paper I were – Long Division in Algebra, Estimation/Calculation, Income Tax/Arithmetic and Word problems particularly those leading to quadratic equations. The topics they chose on Paper II were: Statistics, Area & Volume especially in terms of π and Coordinate geometry.

Here again is evidence in favour of choosing to complete the Ordinary Level syllabus in 2nd year with a Higher Level emphasis. Considerable class time in 2nd year was spent on solving word problems i.e. creating equations out of situations described mainly in words with no diagrams. This contributed to a positive attitude towards traditionally difficult problems which involve significant abstraction. During this revision period, students’ recall from memory and assimilation of methods must improve. This did not happen for a number of students, some of whom dropped from pursuing the Higher Level. A small number of the remaining students did not show signs of sufficient improvements that should have been expected. Common reasons for discontinuing with Higher Level were:
Some Techniques for Increasing Retention in Lower Stream Higher Level Mathematics Classes at Junior Cycle

- Difficulties with open, abstract questions
- Future career ambitions did not loop back into motivations
- Did not do enough work over the two years
- No family history of 3rd level education/only one older sibling completed 3rd level course
- Standardised Scores in Abstract Reasoning close to, or below, class average.

In this context, it is well to consider the extent to which the expectations of both teacher and learner can be seen as mutually interdependent...the teacher may know what she wants to teach but the learner has control over what is learnt. (MacGilchrist, Myers and Reed, 1997, p.23).

Post-Mocks Follow Up

The first week after the Mocks was entirely given over to the students’ analysis of their returned papers. Each student was asked to identify the topics that needed the most work and then encouraged to draw up their own programme for study, focusing on specific problems within those topics. This type of strategy arose out of my research into the importance of metacognitive skills for many of these students coupled with their increased collaboration and responsibility for their own learning. It seemed the most promising methodology to accommodate the wide range of abilities within the classroom. The students’ comments and subsequent exam results seem to bear this out.

It is easier to understand my own mistakes myself, than the teacher telling me all my mistakes. And it lets me know how much I know. (Student G)

During this time the marking scheme was circulated among the class. Of the 27 students from the lower stream setting, 22 went on to take the Higher Level Junior Cert exam. None failed with most attaining a C or B grade.

Final reflection

There is much scope for further research as a result of this project. During the project, and beyond, the students created their own questions (Geometry, Factorization, and Long Division in Algebra). It is difficult to find suitable topics in which students can do this, but it would be a worthy area of research. Suitable topics for
peer assessment are difficult to create in such a way as to encourage peer collaboration, but are hugely beneficial. The development of further methods for incorporating peer assessment into the course, while at the same time extending these to colleagues, would advance formative assessment in Mathematics. International methods of teaching Geometry differ greatly from our own, and research into this field would be of value. Also of considerable benefit to formative techniques would be appropriate criteria for success in Mathematical topics. Indeed, addressing many of these challenges and hopefully nurturing and encouraging wider action research in our classrooms will be a main concern for 2009. Creating a classroom culture of learning support, rather than success support, of trial and improvement, rather than trial and error, does not happen by accident. Nor does it happen in isolation from all other aspects of the classroom or because the teacher has decided to adopt formative methods. Students and teachers need support to enable them to experiment with formative methodologies in a climate of safe and confident learning. This classroom climate can be nurtured without formative methodologies but formative methodologies cannot be nurtured without this classroom climate.

References

MacGilchrist, B., Myers, K. and Reed, J. (1997), The Intelligent School, UK, Paul Chapman Publishing Ltd.
The Learning School and the Continuous Professional Development of teachers - some reflections from Mercy Secondary School, Mounthawk

John O’Roarke

In this article, John O’Roarke, Principal of Mercy Secondary School Mounthawk, Tralee, Co. Kerry, outlines how over the past two years he led a group of teachers in developing a structured response to the needs of ‘more able’ students in the school and has co-ordinated the school’s involvement in the ‘Learning School Pilot Project’ and the ‘Equality of Challenge Initiative’. He writes: ‘Writing this article has triggered my own reflective cycle on the experience of being part of that developing Learning Community in Mounthawk. That experience and my reflection on it in the light of literature leads me to suggest that we ought to explore further the value of linking teacher professional development, school-based learning communities and reflective practice, both locally and also as a national agenda. We can certainly learn and develop as professional practitioners from reflecting on our experience, but, I suggest, we learn more by reflecting together’.

A little background

Adults do not necessarily learn from experience, they learn from reflecting on experience.

The sentiment, attributed to Socrates, about the futility of living an unreflective life is surely as true of teaching as it is of life in general. It seems somewhat strange then that principals and staff can feel a sense of novelty about

Number 1 : Summer 2009
the promotion of ‘a learning school culture’ in our schools and yet, in a real sense, that can be the case in Ireland. Our engagement with this agenda in Mercy Mounthawk set us on a journey of discovery as a school: a journey which I reflect on in this article with the intention of distilling and sharing a few significant learning insights.

As a first step we conducted a school review using the booklet ‘Looking at our schools: an aid to self evaluation in second level schools’ (DES 2003). This laid the basis for the 2006-2009 school-plan that identified the need, amongst others, to develop a structure for continuous professional development for teachers (CPD) within the school. The approach adopted by school management, based on literature review of projects in England (Cordingly et al. 2005; Bolam et al. 2005), was the development of communities of learning (teams of teachers) in the school, centred on particular areas of interest and subject departments. This model resonated very much with our Mercy / CEIST ethos which emphasises the development of community in the school. Mercy Secondary School Mounthawk is an amalgamation of two Mercy schools, with 1,160 students, and since inception we have been aware of the need to identify a process to promote community in a large setting. The idea of smaller cells within a larger entity held together by a common value system (in this case the promotion of and engagement in learning) made sense to us in the school.

The first area to emerge was a concern among teachers with the performance of more able students in first year. Mercy Mounthawk has a representative cross section of the school-going population in Tralee. While we had spent much energy since our amalgamation in 2001 on the development of an SEN department, there was a growing concern among staff regarding the needs of the more able students, particularly in the mixed ability classes in 1st year. Often it can be assumed that ‘more able’ students will just get on with the work and manage fine. This can be true of the more compliant student, yet other profiles of learners such as those with ‘double exceptionality’ or those identified as ‘the Undergrounds’ and ‘the Challengers’ (NCCA 2007,) require a more structured approach to nurture their gifts and talents.

Building a learning community in the school

This process began in February 2007 with the formation of a group of 10 interested teachers who self-selected to complete the online ‘Pr ofexcel’ (ICEP) course on teaching gifted and talented students. It was important that the group self-selected since, as Hargreaves (1994) tells us, real collegiality can be difficult to establish if groups or teams are not voluntary in nature. Rather than doing the course individually on line, as is usual, the
group met together once a week, for the duration of the course, to discuss the materials from the course. General requirements in and of schools can constrain the holding of those teacher meetings that are essential elements of whole-school developmental projects such as that being described here. Teachers in Mercy Mounthawk undertook to meet for a working lunch. Management provided a light lunch and paid the course fees – the least a school can do to support the generosity and enthusiasm of teachers who give of their own time.

Reflecting back in the light of research literature, the structure we adopted in the school for this course began the process of laying a number of the building blocks of learning communities (Bolam 2005, i). Managerial support facilitated the group meetings, allowing us to develop a common shared language around working with ‘more able’ students. We clarified, through the meetings, our values and priorities in working this agenda in the school, which provided us with clear goals in respect of what we wanted to achieve in developing the learning experience for students in the school. More importantly, there grew a team of teachers who became more comfortable with each other in sharing learning about the needs of ‘more able’ students, questions around appropriate teaching methodology and stories of each others’ successes and failures. Happily, this experience created a sense of readiness in the school, which allowed us to benefit from the pilot project on the Learning School, when this surfaced in May 2007. The project was undertaken by the Education Centres in Region 4 in conjunction with the support services: SDPI, LDS, SLSS, SESS and supported by the TES, with the aim of promoting school-based activities encouraging the ongoing development of the Learning School.

Essentially, the training provided through the pilot project offered to the team leaders (two of us from the group undertook this training course) up-skilling in facilitating teamwork, the processes of reflective practice and active research methodology. For the pair of us who attended the training, the sessions allowed us to reflect on our efforts to support the in-school team and guided us in our own learning. I suppose it is when one goes through a process such as this that it becomes clear just how much in need we were of such professional development. This external expertise and training was essential to the development of the fledgling learning community in Mounthawk, (the group which had met for the ICEP course decided to stick together to undertake the pilot project), as it developed the necessary capacity within the school in facilitating projects and teams.

**Project structure**

In establishing a learning community through the project, we chose reflective practice as a core process for the group. We adopted a version of the reflective cycle, based on Kolb (1984), as a framework for the work of the
team (see Fig 1). Such a cycle is a four-stage systematic process which supports learning from experience — good old Socrates! Using this process, the reflective practitioner seeks first to describe a particular experience followed by reflection which initially registers personal feelings and thoughts. This is followed in stage three by a more critical analysis using literature and research to link theory with practice in order to make sense of the experience. Finally, an action plan is created based on informed decisions regarding how to change and improve on the original action next time around. The aim is transformational learning leading to a beneficial change in practice. Such reflection is not just rumination: it is dedicated to improved action and learning.

Our introduction to the reflective cycle was a bumpy one to say the least. From September, the work was divided into three phases – or three reflective cycles (see Fig 2). Phase one ran from the start of September to the end of October. During this time, each teacher delivered a unit of work to their class and prepared appropriate extensions for the ‘more able’ students. Teachers focused on a number of methodologies and reflected on the success of these methodologies, noting any implications for the next cycle. It took the 1st cycle to discover exactly what we wanted to do and, as we realised later, we did not give enough time to explaining the process and reflective cycle to all the members of the group, with consequent confusion!

---

Fig 1: Generic reflective cycle (after Kolb 1984)
A further challenge was at the resource level. We had difficulty identifying suitable methodologies for use in a mixed ability class which would target the ‘more able’ pupil. Allied to this was an almost complete lack of differentiated material based on the Irish curriculum. In response to these needs, the external support of the pilot project team was invaluable. Firstly we availed ourselves of a whole school in-service by the SESS on differentiated learning. From this we took on board the ‘must, should and could’ model outlined in the workshops, identifying the ‘could’ level as the extension for the ‘more able’ students. From here, Subject Departments began to rewrite the 1st year curriculum in this paradigm, thereby allowing those teachers in the project an easy commerce with the 1st year course in general. A second worthwhile experience in the process, as reported by the teachers in their evaluation, was an in-service designed by the teachers themselves in consultation with the SLSS team which explored possible methodologies for class focused on the ‘more able

Number 1 : Summer 2009
student’. The experience of having in-service tailored to specific needs was refreshing for all involved and indeed, through the evaluation, we are determined on the necessity of in-service and up-skilling for the success of learning communities.

Reflective practice

To embody reflective practice, we initially encouraged the use of reflective diaries by the teachers – a frequently used tool in reflective practice. However, theory did not translate well into practice in this instance and journals proved not to be the most convenient method for reflection in the busy work day of a teacher. We learned that if we are to introduce reflective practice in our school, it must not be a chore or an added burden. Teachers reported finding the reflection in the group sessions more beneficial or, at least, more engaging. Teacher evaluation at the end of the process indicated that they felt that having time to reflect together on their teaching strategies and practice was key. One teacher wrote:

‘We had a chance to learn about the effectiveness of methodologies used and how best to tweak these methodologies for the needs of a particular class’.

So we changed our approach to reflective practice after the first cycle – part of the learning for us as team leaders – and we developed templates to structure the reflections using prompts based on the stages of the reflective cycle (see Fig. 1). Using these templates at the end of each cycle, a review of the teaching experiment was written by each teacher. This facilitated discussion and sharing by the group at the end of the cycle (advance preparation for the group meetings is vital – otherwise group members arrive cold). The template also allowed us to co-ordinate the agenda of the group sessions, making collaboration more structured and meaningful. As we progressed, the importance of structuring group reflection became clearer – otherwise, in our experience, a group meeting can melt into a directionless conversation. It is also necessary to minute meetings and to ensure progress from one meeting to the next. Such structured meetings supported progress through the cycle, facilitating teachers to adapt their approaches from one cycle to the next based on their own learning and the shared practice of the group. Hence, each teacher, and the group as a whole, concluded three reflective cycles over the course of the project. The aspect of the pilot project that proved most challenging was the analysis (stage three of the reflective cycle).
If the analysis of one’s own teaching method was to have some reliability in terms of producing learning that was reliable and thereby reportable and transferrable to other situations (an aim of the Learning School Project), then it had to be based on some objective indicators such as student results, feedback, or observation which could then be interpreted in the light of research. There was a sometimes uncomfortable ‘déjà vu’ feeling of half-forgotten Higher Diploma experiments and in truth it took some time for us to grasp the importance of reflecting in this systematic way. If we were to make reliable evaluations of the efficacy of particular classroom approaches to differentiated teaching and learning aimed at the ‘more able’ student, we would have to base those judgments on some objective evidence and data! Having to design experiments and analyse results proved a challenge and yet, as became clear in the teacher evaluation, the process forced us to really stand back and consider that the basis on which we make evaluations of our own practice cannot remain on the purely subjective level of whether or not we feel a methodology or strategy went well in the class. We need to develop a more objective stance that would guide the process of evaluation.

While there was huge value in engaging in data-based research, it placed significant demands on teachers as a way of introducing objectivity into evaluation. In comparison, the use of reflective practice in the ordinary sequence of a teacher’s life would not, and does not, necessitate the level of rigour and objective data required in such formal research techniques. In one sense we had pushed reflective practice too far towards action research for it to be sustainable in the school. This was an important learning for us in ensuring the sustainability of reflective practice in the group and in clarifying our understanding of reflective practice itself. In clarifying the nature of reflective learning we had to consider such questions as – is reflective learning personal learning based only on anecdotal recollection of one’s own experience? Can such recollection have the objective reliability of data-based research? Learning comes from interpreting personal experience in the light of literature and research (thereby providing an objective dimension) and this becomes meaningful when it leads to transformative change for the individual teacher. Most importantly, in our experience, reflective practice has the advantage of being more easily integrated and sustainable in the busy life of a teacher.

Outcomes and Learning

There was useful learning about working with ‘more able’ students in mixed ability classes in 1st year relating to the use and organisation of group work, the use of worksheets, the importance of structured discovery learning, and the usefulness of the materials supplied by NCCA. We learned a lot too about the identification
of ‘more able’ students, the reliability or otherwise of standardised testing, and the necessity of tracking student progress over the years. We reached a point at the end of ‘08 feeling that we might be ready to begin the process of writing a school policy on our approach to addressing the needs of ‘more able’ students. But more fundamentally, our real learning in the school was in relation to structuring and supporting of learning communities. The following three points present a brief summary.

1. The value of learning communities to teachers’ professional development
As the research suggests, collaborative CPD is linked with positive outcomes regarding teachers’ attitudes to working and reflecting collaboratively with colleagues on a sustained basis (Cordingly et al, 2005 p.11). The positive response from our own teachers in the self-evaluation of the work during the pilot project reflects these research findings.

- ‘Very useful. Meeting at lunchtime is painful of course, but the input and experience of others – especially those who have taught in UK and NI is very valuable’.
- ‘Doing the course (ICEP course) on one’s own would not have been as beneficial as doing it in a school-based group. The interaction with other colleagues on a weekly basis was really worthwhile’.
- ‘Regular meeting time and discussion with teachers teaching the same class group enabled us to create cross-curricular links in subjects … Cross-curricular communication as part of a working group within the school was beneficial’.

Perhaps the soundest indication of the value of collaboration was the enthusiasm of the group to sustain itself into a second academic year. The group has undertaken collaboration with the SESS in the ‘Equality of Challenge Initiative’ to develop some resources for ‘more able’ students within the Irish context. Further to this, a second group of teachers opted to undertake the ICEP course and are now involved in their own learning group. The positive experience of those in the team has had a ripple effect through the staff.

Our experience seems to indicate the potential in the formation of teams of teachers within schools as a basis for CPD as suggested by Granville:

‘the formation of teams of teachers, within schools and across schools, engaged on specific projects has been an important success factor in professional development to date’ (Granville 2005, p60).
Going forward with the CPD agenda, it is important that the dynamics of learning communities within schools be supported by the system and most importantly by the DES. In this regard I agree with the SLSS recommendation that:

‘schools should be encouraged and given incentives to introduce staff development programmes as part of their core operation’ (Granville 2005, p60).

2. School Management and Department of Education and Science support.
With regard to such incentives, the capacity of in-school management to support and encourage learning communities is significantly bounded within DES parameters. In our experience, and as suggested in the literature (Bolam et al, 2005), the development of learning communities requires management support and encouragement as this provides an impetus for and validation of the work. However, from a purely practical perspective, there is a real challenge for management in relation to providing time for teacher collaboration within the current contractual and timetabling provision in schools. Our teachers were generous in their willingness to meet outside timetabled hours, but how sustainable is this expectation? One fears that, in a time of increasing financial constraint, the task of providing support for such meetings will become all the more challenging without a reconsideration of the professional role of the teacher that radically acknowledges the centrality of, and necessity for, collaborative practice and CPD to enhance both the nature of the job and provides resources and structures of support for such professional practice (c.f. Coolahan 2003, 4.3.5.).

3. Professional development, in-service and building capacity in schools.
From our experience, the establishment and on-going support of a learning community also necessitates the building of capacity in facilitation and management of projects and teams within school. Our efforts in Mounthawke to build a learning community have been helped significantly by the training the team leaders received through the Learning School Pilot Project particularly in the areas of project organisation, team building and especially in the structuring of reflective practice and evaluation. There is a significant skill set here which is not a part of the initial training for teachers and needs to be acquired. There is also a clear need for teachers to have access to specific targeted in-service that answers their questions and meets their stated and identified needs in relation to methodology and resources. In this regard the most valuable in-service we experienced was that designed by the teachers themselves in consultation with the SLSS and SESS with the support of The Education Centre, Tralee. This partnership approach to in-service provision (Coolahan 2003, 39) has real potential to effect change in teaching practice and to promote professional development. As a model
of in-service and professional development, it deserves serious consideration, not least because it acknowledges the experience of teachers and their felt needs.

Professional development, learning communities and reflective practice

The centrality of experience as the ground out of which learning grows is a key principle of andragogy (Tennant 1996). And, as such, a strong argument can be made that teacher professional development should be based in the reality of teachers’ own experience and practice (Cordingly et al, 2005). In a small way, we have come to realise the truth of this perspective as we have sought to establish a learning community in our school based on experiential learning through reflective practice.

Notes

1 There is a profusion of terms in the literature ranging from ‘exceptionally able’ to ‘gifted and talented’ to ‘more able’. Early on in the process we adopted the term ‘more able’ student as distinct from ‘exceptionally able’ (EA) as preferred in the NCCA guidelines. We considered the use ‘exceptionally able’ category to be too tight and wanted to focus on the top 10% of the school cohort in our own school.

2 An effective professional learning community (EPLC) fully exhibits eight key characteristics: shared values and vision; collective responsibility for pupils’ learning; collaboration focused on learning; individual and collective professional learning; reflective professional enquiry; openness, networks and partnerships; inclusive membership; mutual trust, respect and support.

References

Bolam, R. et al, (2005), Creating and Sustaining Effective Professional Learning Communities, Bristol: University of Bristol


Institute of Child Education and Psychology (ICEP), Available at: www.icepe.eu/gifted.html Date accessed: 18/11/08


‘Cooling off: settling down’ - Designing and implementing a ‘time-out’ procedure for pupils

Evelyn Lennon

The Department of Education (1995) states: “second-level education aims to provide a comprehensive, high-quality learning environment which enables all students to live full lives, appropriate to their stage of development, and to realise their potential as individuals and as citizens.” In attempting to achieve this aim and to manage pupil behaviour, the writer recounts the process of developing a system of ‘time-out’ in the school where the case study was undertaken. The purpose of the study was to explore the potential of ‘time-out’ as a solution used throughout the school. It aimed to chart the usage of the system, to discover the teachers’ views of its advantages and disadvantages, to elicit teachers’ opinions on a Reflective Tool to be used by students as part of the system, the possible contents of such a tool and to explore the usage of other time-out methods in use in the school. The writer maintains that in order to give agency to the pupils who are co-users of the system the study aimed to explore the system from their point of view also and to discover the extent of concurrence between the parties involved. The findings indicate that the system is well used, well thought of and very useful with degrees of concurrence between both parties about the system. Areas of concern about the system include follow-up, the reasons for using it and how to avoid it becoming a reward for bad behaviour.

Introduction and rationale

The ‘Q System’, as the time out system is called, is an organised method of safely removing disruptive pupils from a classroom (for outline of ‘9 step process’ see figure 10 at end of article). It was specifically designed in
and for the school where I work – a VEC co-educational school with 560 pupils, 23% of whom have an international background and a further 10% have learning difficulties. The staff arrived at the system's title by randomly selecting a letter of the alphabet which would become a code letter for ‘Help!’ Breaches of discipline were discussed and those that would warrant time-out were identified. Under certain specific circumstances or in situations where a teacher judges it necessary, a student can be removed for time-out. It was felt that such a study might further illuminate, in context, Rogers’ (1998) conclusion that “…time-out is a necessary part of the process of teaching students responsibility for their behaviour” (p.170), for numerous reasons, including its appreciation of the rights of the group to be taught.

Suspension, frequently requested by teachers and reluctantly granted by pressurised principals, is often used as a means of handling discipline problems in schools. Daniels and Williams (1998) state that “Current approaches tend towards exclusion as the main response to difficult behaviour, be it local (removal of pupil from classroom to another part of the school), fixed-term or permanent.” (p. 234). In-school suspension or time-out can be seen as either a useful tool or just a holding exercise particularly if it lacks efforts to help the student to see how the identified behaviour is unacceptable. William Glasser (1969) is an advocate of the idea of time-out but significantly only when part of an overall behaviour management programme. For him the focus is both on the ‘time’ and the ‘out’ aspects. He particularly emphasises the aspect of time, time to reflect, to understand what rule has been broken, to construct a way of fixing the problem and to find a way to get back ‘in’ again.

Rogers (1998) believes that a principal condition for time-out to work is that the “time-out area or room is non-reinforcing” (p. 166). Porter (2007) further reflects on the issue of reinforcement and stated that “…time out should not be used at all for behaviours that are reinforced by avoidance of task demands, as it will be ineffective or, worse still, disruptiveness may actually be reinforced by the opportunity it provides for escape.” (p. 66). In its discussion of Behaviour Support Classrooms, School Matters (2006) advises that preparing the student for “reintegration into his/her regular classroom with support and encouragement to do so from school staff” (p.102) should be among the significant roles of such time-out rooms. Until such identified rooms become available in-school, time-out should similarly aim for such social re-integration. Reporting on in-school suspension Cotton (1990) states: “In-school suspension programs which include guidance; support; planning for change and opportunities to build new skills have been demonstrated to be effective in improving individual student behaviour...” According to Rogers (1998), “As a practice it [time-out] can be open to abuse and it certainly is no panacea in the discipline context. Like any management practice, it needs a clear
philosophy of practice before and after its use to be effective” (p.64). These were important considerations in my decision to proceed with this particular case study.

**Case study approach**

This case study was carried out using the mixed methods of questionnaires, discussion with key personnel and examination of the complaints about pupils’ behaviour that were recorded in five Complaints Books, (one for each year group).

The teachers’ questionnaire was designed to:

- Explore the usage of the ‘Q System’ throughout the school.
- Discover the teachers’ views of the advantages and disadvantages of the system.
- Elicit teachers’ opinions on a Reflective Tool and its possible contents.
- Explore the usage of other time-out methods in the school (Fig. 4.).

The students’ questionnaire was designed to:

- Explore the usage of the ‘Q System’ from the pupils’ point of view (Fig. 5, 6, 7).
- Discover pupils’ views of the advantages and disadvantages of the system.
- Explore pupils’ experience of other time-out methods used (Fig. 9).

Questionnaires were distributed to forty-two current staff members (100%). The response rate was 80% (34). Teacher profiles differed in terms of age (from early twenties to sixty): employment status (permanent, temporary, whole-time and part-time): teaching qualifications (those without teaching qualifications who have just started teaching, the recently qualified, and the highly experienced). Questionnaires were anonymous in order to respect potential sensitivities when making inquiries into classroom management. Failure to control pupils can be equated with a personal failure or can be seen as indicating professional ineptitude. While anonymity may enhance respondents’ spontaneity in expressing personal feelings, it also may impact on the capacity of the researcher to comment adequately on the relationship between using the ‘Q System’ and level of teacher experience. To an extent, the pupils’ questionnaire mirrored that used for teachers. Fifty-nine
students in mixed ability groups (twenty-four First Years, seventeen Third Years and eighteen Fifth Years) participated. Second and sixth year groupings were omitted for practical rather than philosophical or ethical reasons. A discussion with a group of Fifth years focused on exploring their opinion of the ‘Q System’.

The period covered by this study extended from the last week of April to the third week of May, 2007. This is a significantly busy time in schools: state examinations have begun, teachers and pupils are very aware of the proximity of the end of term and of examinations. Teachers have a good knowledge of their pupils at this stage in the year and know what discipline strategies are likely to work. Some teachers can be (more) tolerant of pupil misbehaviour when they know the pupil well – perhaps the misdemeanours are measured against a scale of previous problem behaviour and therefore they may not use the ‘Q System’ as much. Students have learned the limits of behaviour with particular teachers and may modify approaches accordingly which leads to fewer uses of time-out strategies. Equally, while exam pressure may see pupils engaging in more disruptive behaviour than at other times of the year, the ‘Q’ system may be used more frequently as a result of teacher fatigue. This in itself would invite further investigation but it falls outside the remit of this particular case study.

**Two Perspectives: Teachers and Pupils**

**Perspective 1: Teachers.**

(i) The first section of the questionnaire (Questions 1 – 8) attempted to assess the use of the ‘Q System’ as a behaviour management tool.

1. **Frequency of usage.** Twenty-five of the thirty-four respondents had sent pupils on time-out between one and three occasions (74%). The remaining nine had not used the ‘Q’ system during that time. Even assuming that the eight teachers who did not return the questionnaire that they did not use the system, it still indicates that the intervention is well used. Overall, 60% of the school’s teaching staff used and admitted to using the system during the weeks in question.

2. **Categories of pupils sent out.** Twenty-six respondents said the students they sent out the same student more than once and five said they sent out different pupils each time. The remaining three respondents did not use the ‘Q System’.
3. **Total numbers.** Twenty-two teachers sent out between one and three pupils during the four weeks in question. Ten did not send out any pupils and two sent out four or more. At its most conservative that is thirty pupils, more than one per day. Thirty-seven 'Qs' were recorded in the Complaints Books. Precise numbers involved cannot be ascertained as not all incidents were recorded. (See responses to questions 11 and 12.)

4. **Year group involved.** In the school in question, the perception is that Third Year is considered to be the most difficult group. The results of question 4 bear this out.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year Group</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Year</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Year</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Year</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifth Year</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sixth Year</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LCA</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Seven teachers choose more than one year group as the ones most often ‘Q’d’.

5. **Taking in disruptive pupils.** This question attempted to ascertain the extent of whole-school co-operation with the ‘Q System’. Without this extensive co-operation the system would be less effective. Twenty respondents occasionally take in pupils under the ‘Q System’. Eight frequently take in pupils and six did not take in any pupils. For health and safety reasons students are not brought to practical classrooms. Other reasons why teachers may not take in pupils include (a) classrooms already full (b) the receiving class group is itself disruptive or (c) the material being covered is unsuitable for the in-coming student. The physical isolation of some classrooms would militate against their being an immediate port of call for teachers wishing to place a ‘Q System’ student.

6. **Average usage of the system.** Thirty-two respondents use the ‘Q System’ occasionally (94%). This gives a clear indication of the popularity/effectiveness of the system.

7. **Reasons for infrequent use (Fig.2).** Infrequent use of the system is attributed to the following. 56% cite ‘I prefer to deal with my discipline problems myself whenever possible.’
Other reasons cited included:

I have small, manageable classes / I have been lucky with my classes.
I feel the system does not work as it is used as a ‘Get out of Jail Free’ card by disruptive students.
I don’t like placing additional burdens on my colleagues.
Sometimes, if I don’t ‘Q’ early in the class, at a later stage I feel it’s not worth it.

8. Reasons for frequent use (Fig 3). The rationale behind asking this question was threefold. I wished to ascertain the reasons why pupils are being sent out, the types of misbehaviour that occur in classrooms and to see if any amendments were needed to the ‘To Q or Not to Q?’ document. In order to verify the types of misbehaviour I also looked at the Complaints Books for the period of the study. The following results were found:
Other

i. Violence towards another pupil.
ii. Prevention of a more serious situation developing for example in the case of X (A student diagnosed with ADD).
iii. Maybe all or a mixture of the above.
iv. Answering back in a rude manner.

It is noteworthy that the most frequently cited type of misbehaviour is not mentioned directly in options for answering.
(ii) The second section of the questionnaire was designed to get a flavour of teachers' feelings on the efficacy, advantages and disadvantages of the system.

9. For the teacher. It is instant, helps to defuse situations, reduces teacher stress level and allows teaching and learning to continue. Teachers know they are not alone in dealing with incidents because help is available. It is a concrete demonstration of the support of the school for teachers. It sets the discipline procedure in motion. It helps teachers cope with their annoyance and prevents them taking it out on the whole class. It gives teachers cooling-off time before they deal with offending pupils and they can be more considered in approaching the issue.

For the pupil. It allows for a ‘cooling off’ period. It assists pupils to recognize limitations and unacceptable nature of bad behaviour. It can ‘arrest’ negative activity thus preventing potential escalations. It prompts the pupil to consider behaviour and increases awareness of being able to subsequently ‘self-check’ in that teacher’s class. Being put into another class allows opportunities both to observe and learn more valued behaviour from peers. Alternatively pupils may perceive leaving a particular classroom as ‘a bonus’ for any number of reasons. Such attention can enhance the existing reputation of a student because of the potential for ‘acting out’ in front of their peers.

For other pupils in the exclusion class. There can be a calmer working environment. Teaching and learning relationships can be re-established where all rights are recognised and valued. Distraction is reduced and positive behaviour reinforced. It is of value particularly to individual students who need more of teacher's attention: removal of disruptive pupils can increase this availability. Pupils' exposure to upsetting displays of anger or conflict is minimised: they feel respected and respect each other in turn. However, the ‘Q System’ is not a cure-all: this is evidenced by the awareness teachers have of its disadvantages which are outlined below.

10. Disadvantages for the teacher. Delays can occur between sending for a colleague to remove an offending pupil and the actual collection. In the interim, a tense partisanship may emerge. Original confrontations may continue with a heightened sense of grievance: ‘You’re always picking on me’. Teachers feel obliged to devote time to a returning pupil to help them catch up with have missed work. This is time-consuming. Follow-up administration paper work takes time. Failure to complete this allows offending students to return to class. Bullying may be an issue: the opinion was expressed that some pupils have refused to go to the staffroom to get a teacher to implement the ‘Q’ process because of fear of the disruptive pupils. Teachers’ ‘felt obligation’
to co-operate with the system may result in their accepting a lot of disruptive pupils which can in turn cause problems. The original misbehaviour can continue when placed in another classroom resulting in being ‘double Q’d’ as it were. Teachers can begin to question their own capacity to deal effectively with discipline issues. There can be a fear of using the system lest school authorities view them as being unable to cope with discipline problems. It can become a game for pupils and eventually may undermine the teacher’s credibility.

**Disadvantages for the offending pupil.** Bad behaviour is being rewarded by virtue of the very attention. There may be no follow-up sanctions. (I should point out that if the incident is reported in the agreed manner there is always a follow-up but at times unless the teacher checks this up themselves they may not be aware of this follow-up.) The number of repeat offenders might put a question mark over the system’s capacity to effect change. Being no longer the centre of attention/dominating classroom interaction may be seen as a disadvantage for the pupil. The potential exists for uninvolved other teachers to view the student negatively. Pupils may be humiliated by the students in the ‘host’ class. They may be embarrassed in front of their peers. As a result of their removal from class some crucial piece of learning may be missed. On their return more disruption may result from a feeling of being ‘lost’.

**Disadvantages for the other pupils in the class.** They do not see any follow-up. Delays in resuming teaching can occur as the teacher waits for the offending pupil to be collected. Some pupils are afraid of being bullied later by the offending pupil if they go to the staffroom to get a teacher when directed to do so. The student who is sent to the staffroom to fetch a teacher may miss out on learning because lessons may proceed in their absence. Other pupils may imitate disruptive behaviour in order to get out of class because they see others so doing.

11 & 12. **Recording incidents on and follow-up.** Eighteen respondents said they always recorded incidents in the Complaints Book to facilitate proper procedures for follow-up action by the Year Head. It ensures (i) that parents are informed and (ii) the building of pupil profiles and (iii) that written evidence is provided in support of a teacher’s case if required. Non-reporting of incidents breaks the support chain: it reinforces the message to the pupils that there will be no consequences for their actions. One teacher expressed the strong preference that the Principal should read the Complaints Books as well as the Year Heads.

Fifteen respondents said they do not always record the incidents: follow-up is unclear. One commented on the system being inconvenient and time-consuming. Another felt that making entries in the book could be akin to
an admission of ineffectiveness but admits to sometimes using the system for 'instant relief' rather than for teaching the pupil a long-term lesson. Some respondents reserve recording for very serious incidents. Sometimes teachers forget to write up or they may resolve the issue themselves. As some students can appear in the system with greater frequency than others, one teacher prefers to keep personal records and not to (overly)bother Year Heads with some of the incidents. The mounting books of evidence may be ineffectual as Year Heads' hands can be seriously tied and options for action can be limited.

In order to ascertain whether there was a difference between teachers' perceptions of what pupils think of the system and what pupils actually think, questions 13 and 14 were asked.

13. **What pupils might think of the system.** Teachers reported a degree of indifference to the system by some offending pupils. Other pupils dislike being removed. Isolated from the group, and possibly embarrassed by having to go into a class of younger/older students, some see it as a game or an opportunity to get out of class. To these, disrupting the class can be a goal achieved – removal, a 'badge of honour'. Some take it very seriously avoiding recurrences: some students prefer removal to being involved in potentially tense and/or confrontational situations. System over-use for possible trivial reasons could diminish its credibility among students. It was also felt that the lack of obvious follow-up had reduced its impact and/or that the consequences of removal were not severe enough. Teachers believe that well-behaved students regard the system seriously, approve of its use, are relieved when it is used but are also entertained by the 'show' that may accompany it. However, five teachers were of the opinion that those pupils not directly affected at the time think that (i) it is a joke (ii) it is overused by some teachers (iii) lacks power in terms of follow-up and (iv) is even an inviting prospect for some – getting out of class. These opinions were accurate perceptions of pupils’ attitudes as was verified by the pupils’ questionnaire where similar views were articulated by the pupils, albeit in different language.

**Designing a Reflective Instrument**

"Numerous studies have shown that, in order for a school to decrease its number of In-School Suspensions (ISS), the ISS experience needs to be more constructive than punitive". (Morris & Howard 2003)

Having foreseen that the issue of 'follow-up' would appear (i) in responses to the questionnaire and (ii) in the subsequent staff-room discussions and, with a view to enhancing positive behaviour management in the
school, I designed a follow-up sheet for affected pupils for inclusion in the system. I wanted to ascertain teachers’ views on the possible contents of such a reflective instrument. A question (15) was included in the questionnaire. The findings are as follows. General approval was expressed for such an instrument: it could have positive outcomes for the whole school community. It could (i) indicate to Year Heads where more discipline support might be valuable (ii) add significantly to pupil profiles (iii) help the students to realize the seriousness of the ‘Q System’ and add to its weight (iv) require the pupil to explain her/his part in being removed thus leading to some acknowledgement or understanding of the unacceptability of disruptive behaviour and encourage the taking of responsibility for own actions. Empowering students in this way promotes a collaborative approach where students could be involved in disciplinary issues but only in the context of a very clear-cut discipline structure being in place. Deci & Ryan (2000), when citing deCharms (1968), indicate the value of such an approach “providing choice and acknowledging feelings can enhance the sense of self-initiation—of being an origin—thus providing satisfaction of the need for autonomy and resulting in more positive outcomes” (p. 234). One respondent disagreed totally with the idea of a reflective sheet on the grounds that pupils will always take opportunities (i) to defend themselves by holding firmly to the belief there is nothing wrong with their disruptive behaviour (ii) to deny its unacceptability and (iii) to confirm the fact that injustice has been done.

Questions that caused respondents most concern were “How did your teacher react?” and “How did your classmates react?” It was felt that it is not the pupil’s position to report on a teacher’s reaction nor should they be allowed to comment in writing on teacher’s reactions. One teacher expressed a concern that questions should not provide the pupil with an opportunity to criticize the teacher. Bringing their classmates into it was felt to be a bad idea because of the potential for bullying as mentioned earlier. On the issue of bullying, concern was expressed that ill-mannered pupils could band together and attempt to build up a body of written evidence aimed at discrediting and bullying a particular teacher. General suggestions included the idea that the use of such a sheet would have to be based on the realization that it is written from the students’ perspective and may be heavily biased and possibly inaccurate. One teacher suggested that this problem could be overcome by the clear inclusion of “In your opinion” before many of the questions. Concern was also expressed about what would happen to the sheet, would it be acted on or just recorded. One respondent who recorded low scores on all the questions said she would be afraid of being seen in a negative light if these questions were asked about an incident in her class.
The use of some other time-out methods.

Figure 4

The most popular method of in-class time-out is moving pupils to a different seat and the least popular is putting the pupil standing outside the door. This complies with Department of Education's view (1991): “Pupils who are removed from class should not be left in an unsupervised situation.”
Teachers' general comments and suggestions.

- The system is very worthwhile and has many benefits. (See question 9 above). It is very useful when aggressive situations arise and the pupil needs to be removed. It is also effective in helping the whole class to settle down. It is a good form of peer support.
- However, the follow-up procedures need to be more stringent. One teacher suggested the following: one ‘Q’ merits detention, three should involve informing the parents, detention or a more serious punishment, five should involve bringing in the parents for a meeting and any ‘Q’ after that merits suspension from school. It was felt that all agreed sanctions should be communicated to all parents and members of staff, in particular those who have recently joined the teaching staff. It was pointed out that students themselves need to be well informed on the whole system, what it entails and what the outcome of a ‘Q’ may be. Pupils need to be taught rules and behavioural expectations. It was felt that teachers need to be reminded of the type of offences that merit a ‘Q’: when it is used for minor offences like not having a pen or paper it loses efficacy. The distinction needs to be made between low level disruption and serious incidents. The opinion was expressed by another respondent that after three ‘Qs’ a student should be brought before the Principal for a meeting and that if they fail to improve after that they should be suspended from school.
- A tally should be kept of the number of times a pupil had to be ‘Q’d’ which should be recorded in their file.
- Pupils should have to apologize to their teacher following a ‘Q.’
- There can be problems when a teacher takes in an offending pupil as they sometimes refuse to follow instructions from this teacher also.
- It was felt that the system could be tightened up and perhaps combined with a yellow and red card system where students would be removed from class with a specific punishment for a specific period of time.
- Teachers need to follow a ‘Q’ through, write it up, discipline the student themselves and get the support of the Year Head when needed.
- Reports of incidents should be sent home to parents.
It was suggested that when a pupil is being sent on a ‘Q’ they should be put outside the door straight away and collected from there rather than remaining in the classroom where perhaps the confrontation will continue. Problems may arise with this. Students who know they are in serious trouble are likely to have the ‘fight or flight’ response to their increased adrenaline and could easily be in danger of leaving the school, harming themselves or others or damaging property if they are left unattended. This is a health and safety issue.

Perspective 2: Pupils.
These are the responses to the pupils’ questionnaire on their experience of the ‘Q System’.

1. Frequency of use

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Year group</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>1 to 3 times</th>
<th>4 or more times</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How often was ‘Q’ used?</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5th</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. When asked whether it was the same or different pupils who were sent out the majority of both 1st and 5th Years said it was different students each time, whereas 3rd Years reported that it was mainly the same pupils every time.

3. Total numbers sent out

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Year group</th>
<th>None</th>
<th>1 to 3 times</th>
<th>4 or more times</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How many sent out?</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5th</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Year groups involved. In 1st Year 42% said they had been sent out at one time or another, in 3rd Year the picture was similar (41%). In 5th Year it was 28%. These percentages are surprising considering the 3rd Years’ reputation as referred to earlier.
5. **Reasons for not being sent out.** The most common reason for not being sent out often, cited by both 1st and 5th Years, was (a) I generally do not misbehave. I find it very interesting that the most common reason cited by 3rd Years was (b) “My bad behaviour is not serious”. I believe this shows an awareness of their bad behaviour and I wonder if this is because they know they have a bad reputation and if so has this reputation become a self-fulfilling prophesy. An alternative interpretation is that the standards teachers apply with their 3rd Years can be not as exacting as previously: students do behave badly but only the very worst offenders are sent out.

When given an opportunity to give other reasons for not being sent out frequently many left the section blank. I observed that among 1st Years the students who believe they behave well are the more articulate pupils.

**Types of disruptive behaviour – Pupils’ perspective.**

![Disruptive Behaviour, 1st Years](Image)

Figure 6
Figure 7

Disruptive Behaviour, 3rd. Years

- Using offensive language: 11%
- Constantly causing trouble, like talking and messing: 14%
- Not having homework done: 7%
- Not paying attention: 19%
- Because the teacher is in a bad humour: 13%
- Refusing to follow instructions: 9%
- Disrupting other pupils: 7%
- Because the teacher usually picks on me: 9%
- Refusing to hand over an item: 11%

Figure 8

Disruptive Behaviour, 5th. Years

- Using offensive language: 14%
- Constantly causing trouble, like talking and messing: 13%
- Not having homework done: 5%
- Not paying attention: 14%
- Because the teacher is in a bad humour: 4%
- Refusing to follow instructions: 14%
- Disrupting other pupils: 18%
- Because the teacher usually picks on me: 14%
- Refusing to hand over an item: 0%

'COOLING OFF: SETTLING DOWN' - DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING A "TIME-OUT" PROCEDURE FOR PUPILS

Figure 7

Disruptive Behaviour, 3rd. Years

- Using offensive language: 11%
- Constantly causing trouble, like talking and messing: 14%
- Not having homework done: 7%
- Not paying attention: 19%
- Because the teacher is in a bad humour: 13%
- Refusing to follow instructions: 9%
- Disrupting other pupils: 7%
- Because the teacher usually picks on me: 9%
- Refusing to hand over an item: 11%

Figure 8

Disruptive Behaviour, 5th. Years

- Using offensive language: 14%
- Constantly causing trouble, like talking and messing: 13%
- Not having homework done: 5%
- Not paying attention: 14%
- Because the teacher is in a bad humour: 4%
- Refusing to follow instructions: 14%
- Disrupting other pupils: 18%
- Because the teacher usually picks on me: 14%
- Refusing to hand over an item: 0%

NUMBER 1: SUMMER 2009
It is interesting to note the differences between the different year groups. 1st Years believe they talk and mess a lot, 3rd Years that they do not pay attention and 5th Years that they disrupt others. I think this shows an increasing social awareness as students mature. Also, what happens to teachers’ humour? It seems to improve with the age of the students they are teaching!

Advantages and Disadvantages: Pupils’ perspective.
The advantages of the ‘Q System’ from the point of view of the students surveyed are that when the teacher uses a ‘Q’ then the messing stops and the teacher can work without being disturbed. One 3rd Year said “They don’t have to put up with us.” This tells me that these students are aware of how difficult they can be and of the reputation of their year group.

The reported advantages for the pupil who is sent out are that they do not have to do any “boring” work and miss out on homework. “We get a free class its (sic) grand”. They also said that the pupil will not cause more trouble and this is a good thing. They get a chance to learn from their mistakes and they won’t do it again.

The other pupils in the class benefit because they are not being distracted, they can listen and learn. “to stop the student disturbing the class”. (It stops the student disturbing the class.)

The disadvantages for the teacher are that she gets angry and the class is disrupted. The teacher will stop teaching while they wait for someone to come. Then they have to tell the Year Head and this might be hard for them (A statement that shows sensitivity). The teacher has to go over things again.

The pupil who is sent out misses out on valuable lessons. (This point is seen as good by some and bad by others.) They are stressed and are in big trouble. Their parents might have to come into the school. They have to stay longer after class to study. They feel guilty. They get detention with their Year Head. They have to work on their own in the class they are sent into. They get a bad name (3rd Year response).

These answers show the pupils have quite a clear understanding of the system and the consequences involved in it.

It was noted that pupils who are very interested in the subject being taught will stop working while a ‘Q’ is happening. Also, the other pupils lose a class-mate.

Many students expressed the opinion that it is a good system overall but some would prefer extra detention instead. It was noteworthy that pupils with negative attitudes towards the system were mainly those who had been sent out of class either occasionally or frequently. As with the teachers, some felt the system could be linked with definite, clearly defined consequences.
Figure 8 indicates that the most commonly experienced methods of in-class time-out are moving to a different seat and standing at their seat. This concurs with the findings in the teachers’ questionnaire.

Conclusions

This case study indicates that the time-out system, the ‘Q System’ was widely used during the last week of April and first three weeks of May 2007. It is highly approved of by the majority of the staff as it helps in positive behaviour management, respects the rights of teachers to teach and of pupils to learn. It complies with TUI policy (2004) “…the rights of an individual in the education context cannot be severed from the rights of other individual students who share the same classrooms”.

One of the main concerns users of the system have is the follow-up. Sanders (2001), as cited by
Hrabak and Settles states that: ‘Lack of follow-up tends to allow a student to fall back into old patterns. Consequently misbehaviours persist and quite often, students miss instruction just as if they had received an out-of-school suspension.’

The system needs to be more structured, more accessible or user-friendly and more transparent. It should also be publicised more among all the partners – teachers, pupils, parents and management. I agree with Rogers (1998) when he says that it is the responsibility of the teacher who initiates the time-out to follow up on the action and to stay with it until the process is completed, i.e. the follow-through.

The study indicates that when students receive a time-out for less serious issues like failure to have the appropriate equipment, its effectiveness as a method of behaviour management is seriously undermined and diminished. This leads me to conclude that the acceptable reasons for using the system need to be clarified and publicised.

The study verifies the anecdotal evidence that Third Years are the year group most often involved in disruptive behaviour and are aware of this reputation.

As Visser (2000) mentions, students do need to be taught how to behave, it is not necessarily something they are born knowing: ‘Behaviour has to be learnt and pupils can make genuine errors in learning how to behave as they do in learning how to learn’ (p. 48). This case study indicates to me that the ‘Q System’ is one valid method of teaching good behaviour.

Hugh Williams (2006) states that ‘Your attention often equals a reward for a pupil even when it’s negative attention. If you give attention following a bad behaviour you may unintentionally increase the chance of it happening again’ (p. 18).

One important finding of the study is that time-out may be a reward for pupils and this issue will have to be addressed if we are to be guided by Porter (2007) who states that ‘...while time out cannot be punitive (e.g. by causing students embarrassment or anxiety at their confinement), neither can it be positive; it must be neutral’ (p.65). The closing finding is the concurrence between the views of pupils and teachers on many of the aspects of the system and the belief of all involved that it is a useful, reliable and acceptable positive behaviour management tool.
Outline of ‘Q System’s 9 step process.

1. Pupil misbehaves
2. Teacher corrects pupil
3. Pupil refuses to co-operate
4. Good student sent to staffroom to get help
5. Assisting teacher takes offending pupil out
6. Offending pupil housed in facilitating teacher’s class
7. Teacher writes up incident in Complaints Book
8. Year Head deals with the issue
9. Arrangements made to return offending student to class

‘COOLING OFF: SETTLING DOWN’ - DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING A “TIME-OUT” PROCEDURE FOR PUPILS

Notes:
1 Numbers refer to the questions in Questionnaire
2 ‘Qs’ means sending a pupil out as per the system in Figure 10.

References

Daniels, A., & H. Williams, ‘Reducing the Need for Exclusions and Statements for Behaviour: Framework for Intervention’ in Educational Psychology in Practice 14(2) 234 Financial Times, London


Hrabak, M. & Settles, D., 'Effective In-School Suspension Programs' [online] <www.kysafeschools.org/pdfs&docs/clearpdf/issuesbriefs/iss.pdf> [Accessed 18th April, 2007]


The Role of the Year Head: a case study examining tensions between Aspiration and Practice

Dee Callanan.

Teachers now work in a world of great complexity, diversity and uncertainty. With the pace of development and educational change rarely being faster, many teachers have to adapt their practices to cope with this multiplicity of change. Schools are expected to provide structure in a society, where traditional structures are rapidly crumbling. Teachers, themselves, are being asked to not only teach their subject but also be mentors, advisors and a support for pupils.

In The Case study presented here, the writer examines the duties of Year Heads; the role is, in aspiration, a proactive one. However, the day-to-day practice of the role appears to make it more of a reactive one – thereby making the task a Mission Impossible. This Paper utilises qualitative research in the form of reflective comments from Year Heads, together with quantitative research in the form of a Questionnaire. It also proposes a number of possible interventions, or recommendations that would help to deal with the shortcomings of the role elucidated by the research.

Introduction and rationale

Much is expected of the teacher today - to know one’s subject material thoroughly, to communicate it to pupils of varying ages and abilities in a lively and engaging manner and to utilize modern technologies. Teachers must maintain a sense of order in the classroom whilst at the same time being approachable – tasks which can often be challenging. They are also expected to work consistently as part of a team, to
communicate regularly with school management and parents, whilst keeping up to date with legislative changes in the educational environment. Above all, teachers must always be sensitive to the demands placed on young people by adolescence and modern society, and try to enable all students to maximize their talents in order to reach their full potential. It is worth speculating on the extent to which teachers (can) maximize their own talents and reach their full potential.

Irish education has gone through an era of major change. Up until the 1970’s, second-level teachers played a confined role - that of teaching in their classroom, with principals playing largely managerial/administrative roles. Change occurred in the 1980’s and 90’s with teachers becoming more involved in school administration. Educational legislation welcomed and acknowledged the importance of these new collaborative and participative practices. Teaching – often described as a ‘vocation’ – has always involved a pastoral element, what Walsh (2002) calls ‘a responsibility to one’s students on the one hand and responsibility for one’s subject on the other’ (p. 110); but a formal, structured framework was not in place until recently. Feheney (1999) believes ‘society now requires teachers to be more than subject specialists’ (p. 19). Our world is rapidly changing: redefinitions of ‘the family’ unit; the influences of consumerism: the increasing availability of alcohol and the misuse of drugs...the list goes on. As it is becoming increasingly difficult for schools to ignore the outside world, or to keep it ‘at bay’, by providing Pastoral Care, this is a developing curriculum response in attempts that attempts o mediate these changes in society at large.

Pastoral Care:

It would be a mistake to claim that pastoral care was not a feature of schools until the latter part of the twentieth century. It would be true to say, however, that it certainly did not have the prominence and weighting that it has today. The Education Act (1998) with its provisions highlighting the importance of accountability and transparency, ushered in a new dynamic in this whole area. Monaghan (1996) sees Pastoral Care as ‘a systematic approach to education, which seeks to value and develop the young person at every level’ (p. 5). Indeed, Monaghan himself has been at the forefront of initiatives in this area, and, together with Sr. Una Collins, Br. Matthew Feheney and others, founded lapce – the Irish Association of Pastoral Care in Education in 1996. This was an important step in providing support and much needed literature to teachers throughout the country who are involved in pastoral care. Most schools now have specific structures in place for the development and implementation of a Pastoral Care system. One of the key elements in this provision is the role of the Year Head.
The Year Head:

The Year Head is a key identifiable person on staff, is representative of the school's concern for the welfare of each student of a year group, and plays a core role in the life of the school. Monaghan (1998) elucidates ‘...the Year Head has a concern for every aspect of the year group, its spirit, organization, behaviour code, individual student progress, staff needs, parental involvement: the Year Head recognizes that careful attention to these factors will contribute significantly to the learning environment of the school’ (p. 14). To perform the above duties – for a group of anywhere between 30 and 100 pupils – is a task with many challenges, especially when one takes into account the fact that most Year Heads are full-time classroom teachers, with all the demands that this entails.

Whilst the role is essentially a pastoral one, and is ideally proactive, it is interesting to see that because of issues such as time pressure, it has become more of a reactive one. This paper sets out to examine the role. In conducting this examination, it attempts to answer questions relating to the extent to which the presence of the role might be seen as an ‘easy option’ in schools. It considers possibilities that the requirements, responsibilities and duties of such a role may compromise the normal classroom teaching of those appointed. Further questions arise as to the extent to which the role may be over-extended with a consequence that the Year Head may be in a position where many potentially irrelevant issues have to be contended with: a reality which in turn may lead to disaffection. In colloquial terms, can the role as currently defined be considered a ‘mission impossible’?

Case Study Approach

The Case Study has been chosen as the preferred research method for this Paper. Yin (1994) has written extensively on the case study as a worthwhile and productive form of social research, defining it as ‘an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon with its real-life context’ (p. 13). It can involve both qualitative and quantitative data – as this study does. A questionnaire was designed to establish some of the key concerns of Year Heads. It was distributed to a very small number of schools (three in total) as follows:

- 2 questionnaires to Year Heads in a mixed school.
- 2 to Year Heads in an all-girls school and
- 2 to Year Heads in an all-boys school.
All questionnaires were returned and completed. Given the very small scale of this study, it is important to realise that it can but give a snapshot of the issues faced by Year Heads.

Perspectives from the questionnaires

The questionnaire responses confirm the problem posed by lack of time. 7 out of the 8 Year Heads questioned stated that there was no official time allocation for the performance of their duties. Monahan (1998) clearly suggests that an allocation of between ‘three to five periods’ (p. 57) for attending to Year Head duties would be a valuable provision. Time allocation is an area of concern in the role of Year Head and is one that needs to be addressed at the level of the Department of Education and Science. Martin (2006), in the seminal document, *School Matters*, states that because the role of the Year Head is so vitally important, it is critical that they have ‘sufficient time to…deal in a satisfactory and comprehensive manner with issues that arise’ (p. 81). Further, the document expresses serious concerns about the potential for problems to ‘fester if left unattended’ because of lack of time. This theme is echoed at a later stage in 2007 in an address given to the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals, when Patricia MacDonagh states that ‘…schools could not function in this country without a proper Year Head system. Could we suggest …that there would be a pro-rata reduction in hours, with a maximum of 15/16 teaching hours…’(p. 3). Lack of time is a common cause of frustration for Year Heads. It is of interest also that in the questionnaires analyzed for this study, when asked the three most frustrating things about being a Year Head, 100% of the respondents cited lack of time. Similarly, in a survey of seventy-two Year Heads conducted by Monahan in 1998, when asked the question: *What is the most difficult aspect of the role?* the most common response was *insufficient time*. He advises prioritizing issues but alerts us to the possibility that ‘there is only so much that can be done’ (p. 79).

Similar difficulties are experienced by Year Heads in the U.K. The NCSL (National College for School Leadership) details one Year Head’s frustration at having ‘… to deal with all of those things that it is impossible to do if you are teaching as well as being Year Head’ (2006, p. 3). In this context, potential issues for discussion include: is the role of the Year Head a reactive one and is it an impossible task? There is some evidence throughout to suggest that the role is, for the most part, a reactive one, as the following Table indicates:
It is noteworthy that all of the Year Heads had to deal with issues pertaining to another class, either ‘Often’ or ‘Sometimes’. The literature seems to confirm this as a continuing problem. Martin (2006) acknowledges that ‘matters were being referred to the Year Heads that should ordinarily be dealt with by the class teacher’ (p. 130). Monaghan, (1998), in his survey of 72 Year Heads, states one third mentioned that ‘the Year Head should only be called in for serious issues and that other concerns should be handled by the subject teacher’ (p. 85). He also states that in many cases the Year Heads can be primarily seen in their disciplinary roles and this tends to limit the possibilities for other forms of educational action.

Discussions at continuing professional development (CPD) sessions for Year Heads can reveal a degree of intensity surrounding possible intra-role conflict, or, in some cases, conflicting expectations. At one such session late in 2007, there was an openly expressed frustration at constantly being in the role of disciplinarian or fire fighter as opposed to it being more pastoral in nature. One participant stated –

*I am not currently a Year Head but as a class teacher, I have learned that I can help the Year Head. I must accept responsibility too for my class and the discipline within my class. I can’t just run to the Year Head every time I have a problem, expecting him/her to sort it out.* (Tips for Year Heads, October 2007: SLSS presentation.)

---

**Figure 1: Discipline Issues dealt with by Year Heads**
The Questionnaire seems to indicate the extent of this common failing. It may be impossible to assert with any degree of accuracy that classes are interrupted for only discipline issues, but it is interesting to note how frequently classes of Year Heads are interrupted. Table 2 indicates the extent of these interruptions.

![Figure 2: Disruption to classes](image)

It is clear from the replies that Year Heads are regularly disrupted in their class time. This Table emphasizes that no Year Head did not experience some disruption to classes and may cause one to speculate on the absolute necessity for some of these interruptions. CPD approaches which advise Year Heads to safeguard time regarding their availability to colleagues are worthwhile. Such approaches encourage Year Heads to ‘create a window of time when you are available; put a valve on your time.’ Monahan, too, suggests it is important to have an agreed set of procedures, which emphasize that the subject teacher is the normal point of reference. Otherwise, he warns that the tendency is for the Year Head to take on too much. As the results of the questionnaire indicate, it appears that this is already the case.

Evidence from other research, such as that conducted by Sarah Barker, one of the 6 pastoral Heads followed for the NCLS study, *Rethinking Middle Leadership Roles in Secondary Schools*, conducted in the U.K. in the Spring of 2006, notes there is ‘still a tendency for staff to see pastoral heads as the first port of call and they
bypass the school systems on a regular basis’ (p. 1). This data would suggest that issues of time regarding the expectations of Year Head availability is not just an issue confined to Irish schools. While this issue may be more widespread than local, Watkins (1997) argues that in well-disciplined schools, teachers handle all or most of the routine discipline problems themselves. Monahan (1998) advises ‘the Year Head is protected, and is better able to serve the year group, if there are clear limits to the involvement in the discipline system’ (p. 64). It appears from the current study, that indeed a clearly defined role for the Year Head is essential. Most schools have a ‘ladder of referral’ system in place and sometimes, it can be ignored by teachers in the face of obvious frustrations.

In considering the need for Year Heads to deal with the variety of situations encountered, the question arises about the provision of necessary training to enable this to be the case. Despite the fact that this role is an essential one, important to the running of schools, can it be said that training commensurate with this importance is provided? The following table (figure 4) illustrates the degree to which the cohort of Year Heads was trained to undertake their responsibilities.

Some level of training offered to Year Heads was once-off training and not to any extent on a continuing basis. Monahan emphasizes the necessity of training for the role of Year Head. Martin (2006) notes that more than ever, Irish schools and their teachers need to be responsive to the changing needs of students, saying there is an expectation to keep abreast of the latest changes and developments.
When asked to identify the most frustrating things about being a Year Head, respondents listed:

- Lack of Time
- Distraction from Teaching
- Paperwork & No office space
- Expected to solve all problems
- Lack of consistency among Staff
- Lack of Appreciation
- Workload
- No Back up from Principal

There are time management skills, effective ways of dealing with paperwork, and ways to delegate. The potential exists for all these frustrations to be dealt with ongoing training.

It is also worth noting what Year Heads list as the most rewarding aspects of the role. Whilst one respondent writes ‘none’ that does appear to be a minority opinion. (A more detailed enquiry than that presented here would be required to elaborate this unique response). Other respondents answered as follows:

- Ability to help
- Knowledge of Students
- Making a Difference
- Seeing Progress
- Respect from students
- Cheerful Approach
- Liaising with a variety of People

One respondent enthusiastically writes ‘I absolutely love my group of students, they are brilliant.’ Hargreaves and Fullan (1998) argue that ‘keeping the flames of passion alive in teaching is a challenge for all teachers’ (p. 60). It seems the Year Head above has managed to do just that. Humphreys (1996) states ‘that the context of close relationships with students: belief in students’ capabilities … should be maintained at all times’ (p. 141). While this is a central commitment of most Year Heads, and they continually strive to do just that, there is a sense of being genuinely frustrated at the amount of time and energy that is demanded of them in what appears to be an increasingly reactive role.

It is also interesting to see how often the Year Head brings positive news to the group:
Martin (2006) acknowledges the importance of Year Heads, stating that students tend to bond with their Year Head and see them as a ‘significant other in their school lives’ (p. 130). This is reaffirmed by the ESRI’s (Economic Social Research Institute) Survey of 2007, where Darmody et al found that 90% of students felt teachers helped them do their best in school, with less than 15% saying that teachers ‘didn’t care about me’ (p. 7).

The role of the Year Head is, without doubt, a challenging and demanding one: so much expected can be labeled ‘above and beyond the call of duty’. The data shows clearly that there is a pastoral element to the work of Year Heads. From responses it seems to be a most worthwhile area: an area that they enjoy the most. But the role is fast becoming a reactive one, where teachers are using the Year Head as the first port of call for disruptive students. Because of limited time and energy, the reactive nature of the role, the frequent calls to act as disciplinarian, the pastoral side tends to suffer. Pressure from colleagues to deal with tangential issues and lack of time are frustrations which tend towards making the role an impossible one for Year Heads.

Stated pressures and frustrations aside, there is little doubt about the enthusiasm of Year Heads for their work. Such enthusiasm however could benefit from an ongoing reflection and analysis, and the creation of professional conversations about the role. Such a professional community of practice could further develop capacity to deal more effectively with the more demanding moments. Being Year Head is hard emotional labour: often pleasurable, but frequently exhausting.
The Role of the Year Head: A Case Study Examining Tensions between Aspiration and Practice

Recommendations

The Case Study has revealed many issues deserving of focus and attention. These are presented below, not necessarily in order of priority. These recommendations allow for the reflection so necessary in today's busy world. They are not in any way seen as the only solutions to an obviously complex issue. Instead, theses are matters arising from the data.

1. **A clearer Definition of the Role of Year Head:**
   Each school, in collaboration with the school community, needs to clearly define the role of the Year Head. Defining the responsibilities and tasks of the Year Head will significantly increase its chances of success. Everybody will benefit from knowing where the boundaries are drawn. Reviewing is also a crucial aspect in maintaining the effectiveness of the role, where each school examines what aspects of the role proved worthwhile and what areas need further improvement. This could be done by questionnaires for staff, parents and pupils.

2. **Time:**
   In order to create time for designated Year Head work, the partners in education might examine possibilities of creating a formal reduction in teaching hours for Year Heads. A more creative balance between the Year Heads’ various responsibilities might go some way towards enhancing pastoral care systems in secondary schools.

3. **Ladder of Referral:**
   Each school has its own Code of Discipline in place, together with an effective referral system. It does appear that in some cases subject teachers can bypass this ladder of referral and go straight to the Year Head with issues not exclusively relevant to the pastoral side of the role. Information regarding the boundaries of professional spheres of action could be made available perhaps by placing a poster in the staff room or having a regular reminder at staff meetings.

4. **Behaviour Management Training for Staff:**
   Regular training in Behaviour Management skills might form a core of school's CPD planning. In the complex and changing work of schools a Staff Day could focus on the work of experts such as, say Bill Rogers, who is known for his practical advice on confrontation and classroom management.
5. **Delegation:**
Fair and effective delegation is essential and is an area that needs to be encouraged. The art of delegation might reduce the sense that Year Heads might have that it is more efficient and quicker if ‘I do it myself’. Teams of class teachers and Year Heads can be effective combinations. Year Heads would benefit from realizing that asking for help is not saying they are unable to do the job!

6. **Separation of Disciplinary and Pastoral Care roles:**
It would seem worthwhile to introduce a uniform system of Deans of Discipline into schools, on a trial basis where appropriate, to see if it would reduce the demands for some of the Year Heads’ firefighter duties. This system has been implemented successfully in some schools in the U.K. in order to harvest the professional experience of more senior staff. This separation of ‘discipline’ from Year Heads’ remit might assist the development of a more focused attention to pastoral duties.

7. **Training and Remuneration:**
Year Heads would benefit from regular continuing professional development as an integral part of the role with a priority on time management skills and communication skills for example. Training can provide opportunities to make contact with other Year Heads and to realize the universality of the role. New ideas and experiences can be shared; these are often invaluable. It also allows time for reflection, an important tool in a teacher’s professional growth. Teaching is often a very lonely profession and the same is true of the role of Year Head and any interaction with similar professionals can only lead to improvement. Education partners including, the Teaching Council, might look at ‘ways and means’ by which recognition of training courses, certification and allowances could form new elements in professional remuneration.

8. **Cluster Meetings:**
This type of support structure is becoming increasingly available and seems to have been very successful for Principals, Deputy Principals and Home School Liaison Officers. It could also work well for Year Heads.
Regional support groups with schedules of regular meetings including guest speakers could enthuse: it would provide an outlet to share ideas and ways of coping with the demands of the role.

9. **Website:**
We do live in a hi-tech world and the Internet has become a useful tool in the classroom. Likewise, it could be
utilized to help Year Heads in what is often referred to as blended learning. An organization for Year Heads, complete with a website of useful information, could be most productive. Year Heads could be invited to share worthwhile resources and tips; the possibilities are endless. It would also mean Year Heads could communicate with similar professionals in other parts of the world and learn from their experiences. This shared knowledge is potentially a powerful ingredient in twenty first century workplaces.

10. More Research:
In view of the rapid changes in schools, an ongoing commitment to research into the work of the Year Head in Ireland would be a worthwhile examination of the pastoral role. It is an area that deserves attention as the Year Heads are seen as significant others by the pupils. More literature and greater dissemination can provide more focus and discussion: the benefits of this dissemination could be of great benefit to researchers and practitioners alike.

Conclusion
This Paper looked at the role of Year Heads in our schools. It concludes while there is a pastoral element to the role, it may not be able to be exercised to the fullest extent. The proactive role in pastoral care was an area that Year Heads seemed to gain most satisfaction from. They enjoyed the positive interaction with students and expressed frustration at being cast in the role of disciplinarian to an undue extent.

However, because of limited time and energy, together with the demands of full-time teaching, many Year Heads found that their role had become largely a reactive one. This seems to erode time and limit actions to the role of fire fighter, as seen in dealing with relatively minor issues of misbehaviour. The school’s established ladder of referral should be taken as more of a guide in making professional judgments than taking students immediately to the Year Head.

Therefore, it seems fair to conclude that the role of Year Head is indeed somewhat of a Mission Impossible! Whilst there appears to be great enthusiasm for the pastoral side, the tendency for Year Heads’ classes to be disrupted in order to deal with discipline issues needs to addressed in a professional manner. A number of helpful changes have been suggested in order to achieve this outcome.
THE ROLE OF THE YEAR HEAD: A CASE STUDY EXAMINING TENSIONS BETWEEN ASPIRATION AND PRACTICE

References


Feheney, P., (Editor 1999), Beyond the Race For Points, Veritas, Dublin.


Irish Association of Pastoral Care in Education (IAPCE), (1997), Discipline & Stress: Beyond Control? Marino Institute, Dublin.


MacDonagh, P., Address to the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals, Kilkenny, 2007, available online at www.napd.ie


Monaghan, L., (1999), Moving Forward with Students, IAPCE, Marino Institute, Dublin.

Monaghan, L., (1998), The Year Head: A Key Link in the Community, IAPCE, Marino Institute, Dublin.

Monaghan, L., (1996), Making School a Better Place, IAPCE, Marino Institute, Dublin.


Number 1 : Summer 2009
Part 2

Continuing Professional Development: reflections from a variety of curriculum perspectives.

Reflections on the continuing professional development of history teachers

John Dredge – SLSS National Coordinator for History.

All meaningful learning is rooted in experience, both personal experience and inter-personal experience. This does not mean that all experiences are educative. As Dewey (1938, 1997) notes, “Everything depends upon the quality of the experience which is had.” (p.27). These statements hold true for students in the classroom and, also, for the teachers who facilitate student learning as they engage in the various activities that we identify as ‘continuing professional development’ (CPD). If the overarching objective of curriculum development is to create improved learning experiences for students, the constant focus of continuing professional development must be the provision of quality learning experiences for teachers. It behoves the providers of CPD to continually review the nature of the service they provide and to listen carefully to the voices of those whose learning needs they purport to address. Equally important is the need to reflect on their own experience both as teachers and facilitators of professional development. The Socratic emphasis on the importance of the ‘considered life’ is especially applicable to all who assume leadership roles, in education as in other areas of human activity.
My own early classroom learning in history was not a positive experience, filled as it was with the rote learning of dates and events, predominantly political, to which significance had been attached for purposes of civic formation. My classroom interest in history was spurred by influences from outside of the classroom (such as historical novels and historical epics on the cinema screen), and by a teacher in senior cycle who realised that teacher-student dialogue was central to effective learning. This teacher’s infectious enthusiasm for his subject helped propel me along a path through college and subsequent return to the classroom as a history teacher. The introduction of a new junior cycle History syllabus in the year that I began teaching created a need to adjust to new demands; the collaboration that this prompted was my first ‘in-career’ experience of one (very important) form of professional development.

Today, the introduction of a new syllabus or programme remains a major driver of continuing professional development. However, significant developments have taken place in the last fifteen to twenty years. When the Junior Certificate History syllabus was introduced in 1989, teachers were briefed in large gatherings by colleagues who outlined suggested approaches. Once the first cohort of teachers had completed the programme and the first exam had been sat, the Minister (for Education) could declare that the syllabus had been ‘implemented’ and the programme of in-service ceased. Today, there is, in the words of Stoll and Fink (1996), “an increased orientation towards viewing professional development as a continuum.” (p.155). The recognition of such a continuum is part of the rationale for the existence of the Second Level Support Service (SLSS) and the appointment of a National Coordinator for History.

From the school year, 2003-2004, to the school year, 2007-2008, the continuing professional development of history teachers was the responsibility of the History In-Service Team (HIST), headed by Dr. Pat Callan. The team was established to support history teachers as a revised Leaving Certificate History syllabus was introduced into schools from August, 2004. As one who had been education officer to the committee that drew up the syllabus – and, prior to that, secretary to a History Teachers’ Association of Ireland (HTAI) sub-committee that drew up proposals for syllabus change – it was a privilege for me to work as a member of the team. Over the five years of its existence, I think it is fair to say that the team won the confidence of the general body of Leaving Certificate History teachers and had acknowledged successes. These include the website www.hist.ie, which has consistently recorded high levels of usage. In the report, Looking at History (2006) – published by the Department of Education and Science inspectorate – the work of HIST is identified as an “important catalyst of development in the teaching and learning of History, reaching, as it has, more than 1,500 teachers of the subject between 2004 and 2006.” (p.3)
Among the teaching and learning approaches promoted by HIST were:

- The use of sorting exercises to focus student attention on such aspects of source-based work as the different types of historical sources, the viewpoints evident in different sources, the usefulness and limitations of various sources
- The use of ‘enquiry questions’ to present historical study to students as a mode of enquiry with an evidential base and a range of interpretative possibilities
- The use of online library catalogues, reputable history websites, word processing and other IT resources to enhance students’ research skills
- The use of documentary film clips as source materials, to develop student understanding and provide opportunities for the development of critical thinking skills

What these approaches have in common is an emphasis on history as activity (as opposed to the more passive model associated with conventional use of the textbook) and/or an emphasis on group work.

The promotion of such approaches had implications for the ways in which in-service sessions were organised. Teachers were frequently invited to ‘try out’ sorting (and other critical skills) exercises themselves, so they could appraise their likely effectiveness in the classroom. Group work was used for shared reflection on classroom experience (e.g. in relation to the research study) and for collaborative responses to challenges that might be posed to students in the classroom. ICT work, such as the use of online library catalogues and the employment of advanced searching techniques, was incorporated into in-service sessions. Overall, these approaches were well-received, and there is some evidence – for example, from inspection reports – that the types of group work and critical thinking exercises exemplified at HIST sessions are having an impact in the classroom.

Alongside the adoption of more active and skills-focused approaches, however, older transmission models of history-teaching undoubtedly persist which are at odds with the syllabus principle that history is “an exploration of what historians believe to have happened based on enquiry into the available evidence”. What can the History Support Service do to help embed the aforementioned principle in classroom teaching?

One of the principal means through which the syllabus focus on exploration, enquiry and evidence can be realised is the documents-based study. Here, students explore the issues involved in each of three case studies, as well as the surrounding context from which their significance emerges. Through the use of enquiry questions and the analysis of relevant sources of evidence, students can be engaged in the excitement of
historical investigation and helped to develop more nuanced understanding of the many facets of historical study, from human motivation and processes of change to the development of technology and the origins and resolution of conflict. Since the topic prescribed for documents-based study changes periodically (currently, the period of prescription is for two successive examinations), history teachers – individually, and through their representative association, the History Teacher’s Association, Ireland (HTAI) – have expressed the wish that support will be available when a new topic is prescribed. It is the intention of the History Support Service to continue to support teachers in developing enquiry-focused, evidence-based approaches to the teaching and learning of the prescribed topic. There is also a need, however, to look beyond the immediate confines of History and to place history teaching in the wider context of senior cycle development.

Over the coming years, teachers in senior cycle will be invited to incorporate into their teaching an emphasis on five ‘key skill’ areas identified by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). The key skills are:

- Information processing
- Critical and creative thinking
- Communicating
- Working with others
- Being personally effective

When one looks at the listed ‘elements’ for each key skill, it is obvious that history teachers – and particularly those in whose approaches group work and critical thinking strategies are embedded – have much to contribute to student skills’ development. A few examples will help to illustrate the kinds of ways in which History can assist key skills’ development:

i. Information processing – accessing information from a range of sources
ii. Critical and creative thinking – analysing and making good arguments, challenging assumptions
iii. Communicating – analysing and interpreting texts and other forms of communication
iv. Working with others – acknowledging individual differences, negotiating and resolving conflicts
v. Being personally effective – being able to appraise oneself, evaluate one’s performance, receive and respond to feedback. (This is particularly relevant to the research study, including the ‘review’ section of the extended essay.)
If history teachers are to assist students in developing their skills in each of the five areas, they will need the opportunity to explore the ways in which their subject can contribute. This, then, is one possible focus for CPD in the future. The key skills, however, also suggest some useful pointers as to how CPD sessions might be structured. (Indeed, many of the strategies suggested are already key features of much CPD.) Inviting teachers to reflect on their own practice is a fundamental pre-requisite if CPD is to have any lasting impact on classroom practice and teacher values. Working with others is a key to effecting lasting curriculum change and sustained improvement in teacher and pupil learning. Communicating is what teachers do, and CPD needs to provide opportunities to assist them communicate more effectively in their history classrooms. Approaches to developing critical thinking and the analysis and interpretation of a variety of sources are likely to remain central to CPD. Teachers will develop their students’ information processing skills more effectively if they have the opportunity through CPD to improve their own understanding of information and communication technologies (ICT) and the ways in which these technologies can assist learning. (That understanding should include the realisation that ICT is not the panacea for all educational ills, and that the role of the teacher in helping students to critically appraise all sources of evidence is likely to remain pivotal.)

In a recent article in the Harvard Education Letter, Wilser (2008) refers to “signs of student disengagement from traditional forms of learning that value memorization and mastery of content over student-designed demonstrations of skills” (p.1). She offers a list (P.2) of what are called “21st century skills”, that are increasingly the focus of classroom activities in many US high schools. These are: critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, written and oral communication, creativity, self-direction, leadership, adaptability, responsibility, global awareness. Most of these feature, either implicitly or explicitly, in the NCCA framework. One that has a particular relevance to the CPD of teachers is problem-solving. Stoll and Fink (1996) note that teachers are adult learners and report the conclusions of researchers that adult learners “are problem-centred and want to apply what they learn to solve specific problems.” (p.154) Should CPD sessions focus on the resolution of specific curricular problems? The answer, of course, is that many already do, dealing with such issues as the challenges of mixed-ability teaching and the preparation of second assessment components, such as the research study report. Offering teachers support in addressing identified curricular challenges is likely to remain an important area of focus in the future. The History Support Service will be interested to hear from teachers about what they perceive as appropriate areas of focus for future CPD sessions.

Another important consideration is that some of the most significant challenges facing many teachers are context-specific i.e. they arise from the unique circumstances of the school, its dominant cultures, its level of...
resources, the make-up of its student cohort. In this sense, the CPD needs of history teachers cannot be totally divorced from the development needs of the schools in which they operate. That is why, in an international context, as Stoll and Fink (1996) report, “Attempts are being made to bring teachers’ and schools’ development needs together so that individuals feel personally and professionally fulfilled while whole school improvement occurs”. (p.155). This kind of approach allows teachers to raise with subject specialists the particular challenges they face in implementing recommended teaching and learning approaches. For agents of CPD, it provides the opportunity to explore the meaning and application that particular curricular elements have in the specific context of individual schools. A key element, as Jim Callan (2006) reminds us, is “to listen with understanding to what school personnel are saying and how they interpret proposed developments from the perspectives of their own day-to-day working reality.” (p.221). My own (admittedly, limited) experience of school-based in-service would suggest that many teachers are more likely to talk frankly about curricular problems when encountered in their own everyday working environment. Talking through these problems with teachers is often the first step to their resolution.

This paper has not offered a comprehensive listing of priorities for future support. Such a list would include such considerations as developing the website, addressing the needs of teachers teaching through Irish, dealing with issues of differentiation and providing guidance on the research study. However, my intention here is to invite reflection as well as to suggest aspirations. The views contained herein are best seen as a contribution to dialogue on the on-going and future CPD needs of history teachers. If such CPD is to be effective, it must, as I suggest in my opening paragraph, offer teachers quality learning experiences that enhance their capacity to generate enthusiasm and develop understanding in the classroom, and bolster their sense of personal and professional identity. Barth’s (1990) words underline the importance of quality CPD for teachers: “When teachers stop growing, so do their students” (p.50). If we are to ensure the on-going development of teachers, we must not pretend we have all the answers and we must remain committed to dialogue with those whom we serve. We could do worse than adopt as motto the wise words of the American educationalist, Elliot Eisner (1998): “I do not believe in ‘last words’ in human affairs, only better conversations “. (p.7)
References
There are several rationales for science education for all (Osborne, 2003). The ‘utilitarian’ considers knowledge of science to be practically useful for everyone. The ‘economic’ suggests that society requires a supply of well educated scientists to continue to develop and implement technological advances. The ‘cultural’ holds that science and technology is one of the great cultural achievements of our civilisation and everyone should be familiar with its major themes. The ‘democratic’ holds that citizens should be equipped to judge the value and limitations of scientific arguments in issues from stem cell research to global warming.

Science education for all is then justified by these rationales. The ‘cultural’ and ‘democratic’ suggest that less importance should be given to a detailed knowledge of science material and more to an understanding of science processes and the major themes of science. Indeed, science is one of the three literacy domains used as indicators of educational attainment in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). It is a core subject in many schools and 90% of students take Science in the Junior Certificate.

The image of science has changed in recent times. Science is seen as responsible for such disasters as Chernobyl and global warming. Science is now gender balanced and research is performed across the globe. Studies in the history and philosophy of science suggest science sits in a culture and incorporates certain values. True objectivity is not possible. There is no single “scientific method”. This then reinforces the cultural and democratic rationales for science education and suggests that science processes and the major themes of science should be the core elements in science education for all.
Evidence from education and science education research suggests that constructivism (Driver, 1978), cooperative learning (Johnson, 1994), assessment for learning (Black, 2004), investigative science (Bybee, 2006), problem based learning (Finkle, 1995), cognitive acceleration (Adey, 1994) and student centred learning in general are key elements in the learning of science. This implies a change from an authoritarian, didactic and non discursive delivery of science by teachers to developing autonomous learning and the development of critical reasoning as young scientists by students. It opens opportunities for differentiation and students with special educational needs. It reinforces the need for an emphasis on science process skills and the major themes of science rather than specific content detail.

Science has been revolutionised by advances in ICT. The same could be true of science education (DES, 2008). Sensors can simply capture many types of measurement over many timescales. Video analysis of motion or events captured by simple digital cameras in classrooms is possible. Freely available interactive simulations and models provide engaging representations of scientific theories and models which are otherwise difficult to envisage. Science education also benefits from the general access to advanced information, communication and collaboration systems applicable in all subject areas (Osborne, 2003).

Key advantages are the simple experimental setup, rapid gathering of data and effective production of graphical and other visual representations at the core of science practical work. More time is then available for planning, discussion, interpretation and analysis as required by newer methodologies. ICT can equip students for a deeper engagement in science processes and a better grasp of concepts in the major themes in science.

As part of the Bologna Agreement, all third level courses are to be described in terms of learning outcomes to facilitate labour mobility in an open market while in second level reforms across the world, there is a move towards less content and a delineation of key skills learned in appropriate contexts (NCCA, 2005). The broader picture of accelerating change means that to prepare students for the future they should learn how to adapt to changing collaborative environments and the skills required for lifelong learning. Science process skills sit firmly in this framework.

Rationales, education research, ICT advances and changes in education systems argue for an emphasis on science process skills.
Science Education in Ireland

In Ireland, primary science was introduced in 1999 with the new primary curriculum (DES, 1999). It is recognised as a high quality programme in science with an emphasis on science process skills and investigation. Science at primary level is a spiral curriculum culminating in a programme for 5th and 6th class which is expressed in terms of specified science process skills and several topic strand units. Working scientifically includes questioning, observing, predicting, investigating, experimenting, estimating, measuring, analysing, sorting, classifying, pattern recognition, interpreting, recording, communicating and evaluating.

The revised Junior Science syllabus (DES, 2003) was designed as a continuation from the primary science syllabus and intended to preface a change to the leaving certificate sciences now emerging from the NCCA with consultation expected in 2009. Junior Science was the first syllabus to be written in terms of learning outcomes which specify the knowledge, skills and attitudes which students should attain by the end of the course.

Compared to the detailed specification of content in a traditional syllabus, this gives much greater freedom to teachers and students as to how the outcomes are attained. The syllabus is for integrated science rather than separate courses in biology, chemistry and physics. Practical investigative science incorporating science process skills is explicitly promoted. The preamble also mentions cooperative learning and the use of sensors.

The syllabus includes biology, chemistry and physics plus some climatology and other minor disciplines. The revised syllabus specifies learning outcomes. As an example, the section on animals, plants and microorganisms no longer specifies exactly which organisms need be known and to what degree but rather encourages process skills, such as, “use a simple key to identify plants and animals including vertebrates and invertebrates”.

The assessment includes coursework. Coursework A awards 10% for a written record of ongoing practical work spread over three years. It should be available in schools for possible external review over the course of the assessment process. Coursework B awards 25% for a pro forma investigation report submitted together with the written exam paper for correction by the same examiner. Students can select either 2 from 3 set investigations from the SEC each year or a single investigation of the student’s own choice.

This provides a further reward for practical work and emphasises the importance of investigative science process skills. All practical work is intended to be done in groups but individual student reports are required.
is intended that students plan and write up their investigations themselves but that teachers provide the framework to develop the necessary skills.

The remaining 65% of the assessment is for a written exam which is intended to assess process skills as well as content knowledge. The assessment has, in effect, adopted a low discrimination policy for coursework while the exam discriminates on evidence of process skills.

Coursework has ensured that almost all students now have a practical experience of science compared with an estimate of one third under the previous syllabus. While the 30 mandatory activities of coursework A is the minimum required, it is expected that, wherever possible, practical exploration will be encouraged and that investigative or problem based learning will infuse the syllabus. It should be set in an investigative context.

The resultant additional burden on teachers encourages a fresh look at the nature of the practical work involved and an impetus to simplify practical activities in the light of technical advances. Examples include simple, inexpensive, dedicated plastic kits for gas preparations to replace the complex apparatus formerly required and plastic A4 sheets for chemical testing rather than glassware which is so difficult to maintain in schools.

A changed approach

How can the rationales, science education research, ICT, learning outcomes and key skills be embodied in science teaching and learning? Taking the learning outcome “plot a cooling curve and explain the shape of the curve in terms of latent heat” as an example, one possible modern approach follows.

Students could be engaged with a focus on a practical application or examples: perhaps a rapid exploration of the effect of perfume on the skin or how sweating can cool the body. The learning intention could then be clearly shared in accessible language. Student cooperative groups could plan briefly how they could explore this by investigation. After discussion of the different approaches proposed, a simple set up with a temperature sensor could be agreed or various possibilities attempted. Student groups could predict what will happen to the temperature of the liquid as it cools. Predictions would be justified in terms of prior scientific understanding. Once agreed, the prediction could be drawn by the students using free graphing software before the investigation is begun.
Example prediction and results are shown in the graph. The focus is immediately on interpretation rather than the mechanics of the experiment and the graphing process. The liquid cools substantially over the course of only 3 minutes. The graph develops in real time. The observations are at odds with the student prediction. There is a clear cognitive dissonance since the (red) measured cooling curve flattens out for some time before cooling resumes. How can we explain that cooling stops and then starts again?

There could be discussion on how suggested explanations might be tested. The melting point of the substance could be located on the internet, the experiment could be run adding a webcam to display, record and synchronise with the temperature measurement. Another experiment could be set up to see what happens as the solid is heated. Further rapid exploration is possible with experimental models of sweating and exploration of evaporative cooling by other liquids.

In further elaboration, students could manipulate free software or real models of the arrangement of particles in solids and liquids. Important links across the curriculum could be discussed. Students could then evaluate their learning. Teacher questioning and feedback are critical. Peer and self evaluation is encouraged.
**Challenges**

Many challenges remain. It may not yet be generally appreciated how coursework can be approached in a variety of ways and that coursework ‘own choice’ is an option which rewards student science investigation skills. It best represents the intentions of the syllabus. There remains some focus on content knowledge.

Although ICT has been promoted consistently in science education (DES, 2008), ICT pedagogical skills require further development. Specialist and non-specialist teachers require additional support and the processes of science require some clarification for teachers (Williams, 2008). The hard work done at primary level needs greater recognition and support.

At all levels, teaching for understanding with an emphasis on science process skills requires a high level of expertise and an appreciation of how science works. Changes in methodology require teacher flexibility and ongoing reflection.

**Supports**

SLSS Junior Science provides supports for teachers in science process, specific subject areas for non-specialists, newer methodologies and using ICT and the internet with students. Face to face, blended and online modules are available. The school visit programme supports teachers working together in collaborative groups in school to address the pedagogical and practical issues which they face. Junior Science assists with issues of transfer from primary to second level and on to transition year or the leaving certificate. Support is available for differentiation and language issues in science.

Discover Sensors is a Discover Science and Engineering (DSE) project which promotes investigative science and appropriate use of ICT. Junior Science collaborates with the NCCA, the NCTE, the Education Centres and DSE in the project. Junior Science also supports the Intel and DSE sponsored SciFest project to promote student investigations which may then be used for the coursework B assessment.

Useful resources are available on www.juniorscience.ie, www.sors.ie and on Junior Science CD / DVDs.

Requests for additional support are welcome and should be directed to sciences@lec.ie.
References


Black, P. and Harrison, C. (2004), Science inside the black box, UK, nferNelson.


Reflections on supporting teachers of Religious Education

Lorraine Gillespie – SLSS National Coordinator for Religious Education.

‘Religious faith will be of the same significance to the twenty-first century as political ideology was to the twentieth century. In an era of globalization, there is nothing more important than getting people of different faiths and cultures to understand each other better and live in peace and mutual respect, and to give faith itself its proper place in the future’

Tony Blair (The Times, 29 May 2008)

…such is the task of the R.E. teacher in a pluralist society – a task involving enormous sensitivities to students from many faith backgrounds and to students from no faith tradition.

Unlike subjects that have undergone revisions to their syllabuses, Religious Education is unique in that it was launched as a new subject for State Examination for the first time in 2000, with the first cohort of Junior Certificate students taking the exam in 2003. Similarly in 2005 the first cohort of students sat the Leaving Certificate examination in R.E. There has been over a ten-fold increase in that time of students studying Leaving Certificate R.E. while approximately half of all Junior Cycle students study R.E. as an examination subject.

These statistics are tremendously encouraging. Behind the statistics lies the hard work of numerous R.E. teachers who face the daily rigorous challenges of learning and teaching the academic knowledge of this subject while also remaining sensitive to the particular school ethos. Furthermore, the R.E. syllabus is designed to meet the sensibilities of students of all faiths and of none: a monumental task to accomplish with any class group.
Until September 2008 in-service training was provided to teachers through the Religious Education Support Service. Now however R.E. is one of many subjects under the umbrella of the SLSS. Even at this stage most teachers are still acquainting themselves with the vast content of the Leaving Certificate syllabus, most of which is very new to the majority of teachers. There is widespread support for the syllabus and for the opportunities for multi-faith learning that can occur therein. Nevertheless, it takes time to embed a subject in the curriculum, and R.E. is no exception.

One of the most popular courses for teachers offered by the R.E. Support Service in 2006 involved applying Assessment for Learning approaches in Leaving Certificate Religious Education. This marked a turning point in CPD provision, and it received a very positive response from the vast majority of teachers in attendance. It offered them an opportunity to redirect their concern about the terminal examination to stating the learning intention at the start of class; how teachers identify and share with students criteria by which to assess homework assignments and how to use comment only marking and how to offer positive and constructive feedback to students. Most teachers felt reassured that their assessment judgments were similar to those of their colleagues and could see the merits in applying this tool in the classroom.

Having listened carefully to suggestions offered by teachers for future in-service, the autumn courses for 2008 were meticulously designed and planned to offer teachers a comprehensive range of ICT supports when approaching the research and reflection component - Coursework Titles - for Leaving Certificate R.E. This round of in service became fully subscribed very early on, indicating a real interest in and need for this support. The course also offered suggestions for suitable methodologies for approaching Coursework in addition to using AFL techniques for monitoring students’ progress. The feedback received from teachers was overwhelmingly positive and their level of personal engagement and participation during the in services was most encouraging and inspiring.

One observation which I have often made with regard to R.E. teachers (and I spent the best part of twenty years as an R.E. teacher) is that there is often a tendency among us to be isolated in our domain. Teachers attend in service in high numbers and return to their classrooms somewhat refreshed and refocused. However, numerous quiet stories exist of teachers working in isolation, struggling with the academic content they are expected to grasp and ‘pass on’ to their student. Many R.E. teachers take enormous pride in their work and in the worth of their subject for students’ learning, both for the immediate culture now and for living in an increasingly secular, multi-cultural and multi-faith society. They enjoy the challenge of engaging with religious diversity, opening up possibilities for communication, critical and creative thinking, problem-solving, multi-faith
and multi-cultural dialogue and academic research with their students. However, they tend to do so relatively alone. Given the ‘newness’ of R.E. as an examination subject, many teachers have made enormous strides and given greatly of their inner resources to ensure that students receive a thorough grounding in this subject. I couldn’t help but wonder what things might be like if this state of isolation were to give way to a more collaborative approach. I wonder what things might be like if teachers of this challenging yet inspirational subject were to connect with one another in a meaningful way, and perhaps enter into a new level of dialogue with one another rather than just the person or service offering in service. I saw possibilities for sharing of expertise, ideas, suggestions, teaching resources, assessments, methodologies...the list is almost endless. But it would require teachers to risk stepping outside their comfort zones. It would mean seeing other teachers not as potential competitors but as potential colleagues in collaboration. It would mean engagement with one another rather than relying on in service to offer a ‘top-down’ supply of resources and ideas. I decided in recent times to introduce a couple of very simple strategies to further this collaborative effort.

At the start of each in-service day I circulated a sheet with the names and school addresses of each teacher present. I invited each teacher (voluntarily) to fill in their email addresses and details of the numbers of students in their school preparing for the exam for 2009 and 2010. I later emailed the list of contacts to all those who had included their details. This meant that teachers within roughly the same catchment area could network. I suggested that they might consider sharing resources, planning together and generally supporting one another in the task of teaching Leaving Certificate R.E. Already some teachers have contacted me to say that they are now in touch with one or two others and have agreed to share ideas and resources. I believe that there is a wealth of expertise, experience and collective wisdom in R.E. ‘out there’ which is relatively untapped. This networking list may go some way towards empowering teachers to take the risk to work collaboratively rather than in isolation, to share rather than to hoard and to move further into the field of becoming increasingly reflective practitioners in collaboration with colleagues, in their professional lives. I hope that such teachers will take inspiration from the victory speech of President Obama: ‘And where we are met with cynicism and doubts and those who tell us that we can’t, we will respond with that timeless creed that sums up the spirit of a people: Yes, we can…Yes, we can’.

The Religion Teachers’ Association of Ireland (RTAI) of course also provides excellent networking opportunities for R.E. teachers. Theirs however is a broader brief than that of SLSS R.E. Support. Membership of the RTAI is drawn from teachers who are teaching R.E. as an examination subject as well as those who are teaching R.E. in a non-exam context. This means that there are a wider range of needs to be addressed by the RTAI. It is fair to say that they do an exceptionally good job at meeting these needs and invest a considerable amount of
time and work on a voluntary basis to do so. I appreciate and place great value on the work and contribution made by the RTAI and I know that I echo the views of its members in this regard. I expect that SLSS: R.E Support and the RTAI will also be involved in further dialogue and collaborative work in the future, in an effort to continue our shared vision of offering meaningful professional support to teachers of R.E.

Another strategy I employed in an effort to promote collaboration was the introduction of a new journal publication: ‘Teaching Religious Education’. The inspiration for this came from the need and request by Leaving Certificate R.E. teachers for more teaching resources. I decided to create a journal that would contain primarily new teaching materials that were appropriate and relevant to the syllabus, user friendly and created by people with a high degree of expertise in the relevant topics. In pursuit of this objective, I approached a number of lecturers and others in third level Religious Education and Theology, and asked them to submit articles on specific syllabus topics that would be helpful to teachers and students alike. I received a most enthusiastic response from them and the new materials they supplied were to the highest possible standard. Similarly, I asked some teachers to submit articles on projects that they have been involved in while teaching Junior or Leaving Certificate R.E. Once again, teachers were most generous in offering their excellent contributions. Finally, I asked a couple of teachers to record students’ reactions and feelings about Junior and Leaving Certificate R.E. Their responses were predominantly positive and added greatly to the publication. I was also conscious of trying to include material that reflected gender balance, different school types, and geographical difference and of course the wide-ranging voices from students, teachers and academic personnel. Additionally, it was important to include material on various religious topics from the syllabus but also to be mindful of students who are from either non-religious or humanist backgrounds. To this effect I included material written specifically to educate on this topic. Issues one and two of the publication were circulated to all second level schools in Ireland and Issue three is in print as I write. Teachers have offered a tremendously positive and encouraging response to this (free!) publication, and some third level colleges have also requested several copies for their students.

Apart from the obvious need for additional teaching resources being met, the success of ‘Teaching Religious Education’ rests largely with the wide ranging network of people who bring their experience and expertise to bear in the articles they submit for publication. The journal attempts to move away from a ‘spoon-feeding’ approach to handing out resources. Instead, it necessitates the harmonizing of many different voices with various levels of knowledge and experience, all of equal value. The emphasis to date has been on hearing the ‘academic’ voices through the journal. As time moves on, I hope to include an increasing representation of contributions from both teachers and students. For instance, a teacher who is somewhat experienced will have
many examples of practice that worked well for them in the classroom. Why not share these with colleagues in order to support those with less experience? Why not allow others to benefit from your positive experience? Students’ experiences also need to be included.

Think, for example, of all the wonderful work they invest in preparing for Journal Work and Coursework. Why not have some students tell their stories, telling others not just about what they learned, but about how they learned it and how they feel about what they learned, and where this might all lead them to in the future? There is so much scope in this journal for the voices of academics, teachers, students and others to sing in perfect harmony! Everybody benefits from this kind of exchange and engagement. My thinking is based on a belief that if I share my ideas and experiences with others, I receive as much and more in return, rather than ‘losing’ something in the giving. Through collaborative efforts, networking and sharing of experience and expertise, we all benefit as a group of professionals. Nobody loses out. But we must seek to rise above the comfort zone of our isolated classrooms in order to make this collaboration a reality. We must overcome our fear that ‘if I share an idea then our competitors will gain an advantage’. Only in professional collaboration and dialogue will networking with other teachers serve the needs of many.

So: where to from here? R.E. is still in the early stages of CPD provision. In my role as National Support Officer I am always conscious of the many and varied requests and needs of R.E. teachers and the limitations on what I can offer as one individual. I believe, however, that professional collaboration among R.E. teachers will be at the core of all that is of value to their CPD both now and in the future. Hopefully R.E. Support will continue to make progress. I hope that in time we will have a discussion forum added to the RESS website. I look forward to the establishment of a team of local facilitators who will share their expertise through the Education Centre Network. It would be hugely beneficial were teachers to provide more suggestions and materials for sharing with colleagues. I hope that R.E. teachers will connect more with one another, and support the efforts of the RTAI. I hope finally that the CPD of R.E. teachers in future will place more emphasis on the necessity for collaborative networking so that the richness of what is already there may be tapped into and shared with one another.
Towards twenty-first century learning - Scoilnet Maps: Sharing Geography Resources on the Net (http://maps.scoilnet.ie/)

Gerard Synon – SLSS National Coordinator for Geography.

Scoilnet Maps is a new type of resource bank which is available to all second level teachers and students nationwide.

This new project was initiated by the National Council for Technology in Education and the Geography Support, and it will move geography mapping and resource banking into the twenty-first century.

This project was developed and managed as part of the NCTE’s Digital Content initiative. The NCTE is an agency of the Department of Education and Science and is funded through the ICT Policy Unit of that department. The Geography Support Service was centrally involved in the design and development of the interface and resource content.
The seeds for this ICT project were set by the Geography Support Service over the last four years through the provision of:

(i) Digital presentation of resources on CD rom for each module of in-service
(ii) Design and development of courses focusing on the integration of ICT in the teaching and learning of Geography under the auspices of NCTE (ICT and Geography 1 and ICT and Geography 2 Courses)
(iii) Support for the Scoilnet Geography Support Service Website
(iv) The design and development of the interactive Geofis CD in conjunction with Department of Earth and Ocean Science, NUIG
(v) The roll out of the digital mapping Trail Master DVD.

The Digital Content of Scoilnet Map

Scoilnet Maps is a web-based mapping and Geographic Information System which is accessed through the schools’ broadband network. It will provide free access for Second Level schools and Geography teachers to the following as they are rolled out:

- 1:50,000 OSI Topographical Maps of Ireland
- 1:5,000 OSI Urban and Rural Place Maps of Ireland
- OSI Vertical Aerial Photographs of Ireland
- Historic Maps: 1834 + of Ireland
- World Atlas Maps
- Teleatlas Maps
- Satellite and Landform Maps
- CORINE Land Use Data: 1990 and 2000
- Census data in map form for 1996 and 2006

Organizations such as Environmental Protection Agency, Marine Institute, Geological Survey of Ireland and the Central Statistics Office have indicated their desire to make their map data available through Scoilnet Maps.
The Educational Potential of Scoilnet Maps

The programme will give teachers and students access to a data bank of maps of varied scales. Scoilnet Maps will allow the teaching of the GIS element of the Revised Geography Syllabus. Beyond that, it will also enable students and teachers to upload their resources (photographs, video clips, animations, worksheets, websites and documents) to the website which can then be shared across a virtual learning network by all registered users. These resources can be tailored to the learning needs of individual students.

Beidh an seirbhís seo ar fáil trí mheán na Gaeilge freisin agus beidh fáil ar acmhainn don chéad scoth do mhúinteoirí atá ag múineadh trí Ghaeilge áit a raibh deacrachtai ollmhóir acu go dtí seo.

Scoilnet Maps Resources Upload

The Support Service team initiated the resource sharing potential of the site by uploading three hundred separate resources onto it for teachers and students which they can access and download now and in the future. This will also demonstrate to them the capacity of the site to act as a resource bank for a geography community on the net – “YouTube for Geographers”

This was done with the Revised Syllabus in mind and addressed, in particular Core Units 1, 2 and 3, The Economic and Human Elective and a number of the Options 7 and 8.

Methodology

Five geographic locations throughout the country were picked. These locations facilitated the collection of a variety of physical, social and economic geographic resources specific to each area yet addressing the overall thematic approach of the project.

An example of a location is Dublin where a special study was completed on the Howth area with the following themes in mind:
Coastal Landforms (Physical Geography/Core Unit 1/Erosion/Deposition)
Primary Industry (Fishing)
Tertiary Industry (Tourism)
Historic Settlement (Ancient etc.)
Urban Settlement
Tectonics (Fault Lines)

These resources were further enhanced by the addition of extra information from other sources such as the internet.

Once each project was completed it was uploaded onto the Scoilnet Maps site. This was done in cooperation with the project team at the NCTE who up skilled the team when necessary or when new maps become available on the site.

**Projects’ Details**

A large number of detailed projects were uploaded onto the Scoilnet Maps site. Each project contained a variety of file formats. Among these were:

- Maps
- PDF File
- Photographs
- Video
- Animations
- Word Documents
- Excel Spreadsheets
- PowerPoint Presentations
Geo Mapping

Each project was ‘geo-mapped’ meaning that it was linked to a defined section of a map or a photograph available on the site. Therefore teachers will be able to access resources which are linked to their local or regional area.

For example, when teachers type in “Howth” into the search engine they will look for the location of all resources on either the 1:50000 OS map or Aerial Photograph.

Search Engine

These projects will be accessible to teachers and students through the site’s search engine in a variety of ways:

- By syllabus heading
  - Core Unit 1, 3 and 3
  - Electives 4 and 5
  - Options 7 and 8

- By thematic heading
  - Physical Geography
  - Tourism
  - Regional Geography
  - Geology
  - Soils
• Economic Geography
• Ancient/Rural/Urban Settlement
• Industry e.g. The Study of an MNC, etc.

By named locations, named landform and by various other headings from the Geography Support Service.

The challenge for geographers and other educators into the future is to keep this site live by interacting with it not only map searching and resource download but by also uploading and sharing resources among ourselves.
The journal invites teachers/schools/school leaders/support agencies/SLSS members to tell their stories of how they went about working towards creating change deemed worthwhile in any area of their work.

The authenticity of these stories will be seen in the evidence gathered. Evidence is gathered in order to show the reader (a) what particular actions were undertaken and why (b) the extent to which the situation can now be deemed more worthwhile after such actions and (c) the professional learning involved.

The writer will approach the writing with (principally) a readership of colleagues in mind so that it is recognisable by, and potentially inspiring to, other colleagues.

Any reading, or research, that writers feel it worthwhile to draw on in order to make the more important aspects of their work clearer can be included and referenced in the usual way (see examples in this edition).

Authors are invited to include a short biographical note with their submissions – where teaching, how long, professional interests etc.etc.

**Suggested outline framework/format for submission**

Writers are invited to shape their contributions keeping in mind the following outline. This is loosely based on cycles of action and reflection underpinning practitioner research.

1. *Describe what was of interest to you in your situation, what invited your investigation* with your particular group/class, such as: working towards improving levels of participation: working towards generating well-ordered discussions: working towards developing and/or sustaining interest in the
work in hand: working towards learning how to best to work in a worthwhile manner in mixed ability groupings: working towards trying to solve some recurring teaching and learning ‘puzzle’: responding to one’s own invitation to one’s self to unravel something worthwhile in a professional life etc. etc:

2 Explain why this area was of particular interest to you:

3 Show in whatever way you can what the situation was before you began to work towards on your chosen area:

4 Talk about, and give examples of, the kind of practical things you did in order to bring about a more desirable state of affairs/to enhance understanding, and show in what ways they helped to move the situation towards your goal. You could include here samples of any particular resources you developed, examples of student work etc:

5 Reflect on the understandings that you have gleaned through the process and what you might do should you wish to continue the process you have begun with that group or any other:

6 Conclude with some comment on your professional learning: include some comment from the pupils/participants on their experience.