REPORT
LEADING OUT SEMINAR SERIES
SEMINAR 4
2ND DECEMBER 2020

primary
developments
forás sa bhunscolaíocht

NCCA

Report on the Leading Out Seminar Series

The NCCA has reached an important milestone in its Primary Developments/Foráis sa Bhunscolaíocht with the completion of a *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* for consultation in 2020. Consultation and collaboration are at the heart of the series of Leading Out seminars for key stakeholders, the first of which was held on December 1st, 2019. Although not unique to Ireland, the consultative and collaborative nature of curriculum development is a hallmark of education work here. Generally, it is characterised by the recognition of a shared journey where decisions taken in a spirit of collaboration, while not irrevocable, enjoy a high degree of stakeholder confidence. Consensus-building is not without its challenges and it benefits from occasions when time is taken to reflect upon the journey to date and to tease out the ramifications of decisions taken and changes proposed, in a forum where participants are free to share doubts and concerns without feeling the need to adopt final positions. Similarly, such a forum offers opportunities to look back upon developments, at the how-we-got-to-here story, and to speculate on how the future will look once change has been implemented, with a view to building consensus around how all stakeholders might adapt to the change – a vision for how-we-will-be-then. To that end, the NCCA is holding this series of Leading Out seminars for representatives of stakeholders engaged in and supporting the proposed redeveloped Primary Curriculum. The deliberations of the seminars are recorded in two ways:

- A **Report** document that provides a brief overview of the presentations and a summary record of the discussion at each seminar, including some indications of the likely shape of the agenda for the next seminar in the series
- A **Pathways for Change** document that offers an overview of the themes, issues, reflections, and action points for consideration by all stakeholders as the series develops. A particular feature of this document is its focus on linkage across the seminars – its attention to overarching questions. Consequently, the Pathways document begins after Seminar 2.

The intention of the series is that participants will determine the agenda and, through deliberation and discussion, shape an emerging document, which becomes not just a record of what has been said during the meetings but a picture of agreed pathways and action points in support of change. The Pathways Document, then, will provide a record of the main areas of thinking, signalling points of convergence and questions yet to be addressed. So, both the Report and Pathways documents will include **Thinking Forward** boxes where the intention is to give direction for further deliberation – to explore further, check for consensus, problematise, and so on.

Seminar 4: 02.12.2020

As with its predecessor, Seminar 4 was hosted online due to the ongoing pandemic and this had a significant impact on the discussion. The keynote presentation from Professor Jim Spillane (following on from a [podcast](#) which had been circulated prior to the seminar) focused on the topic of **Systemwide Leadership**.

Participants then engaged in a facilitated discussion.

Discussion 1:

- **Schools are not islands.** *How does Jim's statement illustrate the kind of systemwide leadership that will be needed to support the process of changing the curriculum?*
- *What can we, as partner organisations, do to support constructive and meaningful interactions across our system?*

The questions were taken together and **engagement** was the key theme: engagement of the different levels or parts of the system with each other, and engagement as a community-based, locally-led process. An initial caveat was entered regarding the framing of the term *leadership*, which requires clarification because it has the potential to unintentionally exclude teachers who may see school principals as the only leaders. System-wide, distributed leadership changes how we think about schools, agencies and artefacts. Expertise that can be shared is informal leadership in itself, and this has been amply exemplified over the past number of months in our responses to COVID-19. Yet, many teachers develop expertise—through doing a Masters, for example—but cannot share this easily with others.

Secondly, participants felt that it is to be expected that there will be challenges in getting commitment for action from the various stakeholders and in sustaining that action. In this context we will need to guard against the assumption that all partner organisations are equal in their sphere of influence and in the challenges they face. As some organisations have 'soft engagement' with schools and can do little more than encourage, it will be important to clarify and review the roles and influences of organisations, and to share that clarification with all the partners.

Some felt that of necessity **schools in Ireland are indeed islands**, or that each one, with its own board of management and unique context, can seem to be so. In fact, the draft curriculum framework places particular emphasis on the agency of the individual school and teacher. And while this feeling of isolation has been more pronounced during the lockdown, participants agreed that there were initiatives and opportunities in the system that could support connections.

Operating at the micro-level, schools can experience this feeling of being isolated from centralised, macro-level policy. Participants felt that our education system is lacking a meaningful bridge between those levels. Currently there are agencies working in that bridging space, but there could be greater consistency across these agencies to support engagement between the macro and micro levels of the system. It would be wise to capitalise on the use of technology and on what we have learned during the Covid-19 pandemic to facilitate wider engagement and better collaboration.

Much of the work of the PDST establishes links between levels and there should be more opportunities for Education Support Centres Ireland (ESCI) to do the same. Sometimes the lack of a coordinated approach means that there can be an unhelpful overlap between different organisations, leaving schools and teachers uncertain about specific supports. For example, in responding to the pandemic, agencies who are not officially recognised as CPD providers have generously stepped into that space

in order to 'do something'. After the pandemic, however, it would be important that the CPD space is not flooded with providers.

The pandemic has also highlighted the importance of **community-based models of interaction** and the potential of the Teaching Council's BEACONS initiative was noted in this regard. Schools are currently meeting in online networks to solve problems and share solutions. Groundwork involving principals and teachers can be harnessed and capacity can be built through the promotion of cross-sectoral engagement as part of the academic calendar. These communities of practice should be driven and supported locally, perhaps through ESCI. In the long run, an effective model of CPD should include schools coming together. This fits well with the belief that autonomous CPD needs to be built into the teaching career. While schools will need to show a willingness and ability to work, implement and plan collaboratively, clearly defined structures are needed to facilitate them in this regard. In considering how to bring coherence to this enterprise, participants noted the potential of The Centre for School Leadership (CSL) to promote dialogue and collegiality between levels. There was some concern that while recently the focus on leadership in teaching and learning had taken an understandable back seat, it would be important to renew this after the pandemic. Noting the challenging role of the school principal, participants recommended that high quality professional learning for school leaders, informed by research on school leadership, must also be provided.

Similarly, a question of balance arises regarding the need to afford sufficient autonomy at school level and the need for consistency of curriculum implementation at school level. We need more interconnections between schools on the one hand and, on the other hand, more autonomy should be given to schools especially around curriculum.

Two practical challenges were identified in the light of the above discussion points:

- Currently, there is a perception of disconnect between macro and micro levels and establishing bridges is challenging, especially in the space where policy meets practice, where, at the very least, the change messages need to be aligned and consistent. Consistent and clear messaging from, within and between stakeholder organisations is crucial to supporting change by building trust and reassurance at the micro level.
- Perhaps some teachers and principals do not feel that they have ownership of policy, or even want that. Thus, the meso and macro can be seen as the sole judges of effective policy enactment, and therefore feared and mistrusted.

Inter-agency engagement was viewed as critical to promoting shared understanding and consistency of messaging across the system.

- The Leading Out series, it was felt, is an important contributor to inter-agency understanding. Participants stressed the importance of continuing to model this way of building connections across the system.
- Supportive and advisory inspector visits to schools have been effective in building trusting, collaborative relationships between the levels during the past school year. Given the recognition that curriculum artefacts need to reflect the realities on the ground, a two-way system needs to be maintained whereby messaging from the ground can be fed to other levels within the system.

Having watched and listened to inputs on *Systemwide Leadership - Perspectives from Practice*, participants than engaged in **Discussion 2.**

Jim asks us to anchor educational leadership in teaching and learning. Considering this, how might we engage 'informal leadership' as part of the change process, perhaps through communities of practice, both formal and informal?

This second session revisited some of the ideas from **Discussion 1**. Communities of practice can be transformative, but they need to be thoughtfully established, facilitated, and properly resourced to have full impact. Some participants felt that the COVID-19 pandemic made people more ready than before to sustain communities of practice at local level. Examples were given of heightened teacher confidence and of small primary schools becoming less isolated, which might be harnessed for increased collaboration and collegiality within and between school communities. In recent years local principal support networks have developed through an effective grass-roots movement.

Participants recognised, too, that communities of practice are 'not always the answer,' and that in the long run they cannot be made sustainable from the outside. This is especially true, some felt, if they are seen as voluntary CPD in teachers' own time, where it is left up to the teachers to engage. Most people become involved in education with a clear moral purpose about change and capacity to influence students' lives. Communities of practice can encourage us to reaffirm and reconnect with this original motivation.

Sustaining a bridge between initial teacher education and the school can help to keep the focus on teaching and learning for all. Newly-qualified teachers, many of whom have specialisms leaving ITE that are not optimised subsequently, should be empowered so that they can make the most of what they bring to the school. The T-REX initiative, an online space where teachers and student teachers can work together to solve real-life classroom problems, was cited as being particularly useful in bridging the gap between ITE and the school.

Discussion acknowledged the importance of embracing a multi-faceted understanding of leadership, including the notion of leading from the middle, where everyday leadership roles are open to all. Some felt that there is not enough emphasis currently on distribution of leadership. Principal and deputy principal roles are relatively clear, but after that roles are less clear. Informal leadership needs clear pathways and connection to wider developments, to avoid it becoming undermined by lack of support or by the limitations of its sphere of influence.

Practical challenges facing a wider conception of educational leadership were felt to include:

- the limited scope of posts of responsibility
- the limits of time and opportunity for teachers to engage in informal leadership
- the lack of a clear rationale and purpose where informal leadership is being enabled, with the risk of it not being sustainable.

Regarding a sustained focus on teaching and learning, it was felt that organic curriculum development and enactment happen from the classroom up and that the challenge lies for the most part in finding sustainable ways to share the good practice that exists. Many participants recommended keeping teacher professional development as close as possible to the site of learning to ensure that the professional learning would be most impactful.   Local level CPD, an example of which might be seen in special schools and community schools coming together, could be very effective. Another way in which we can bring the focus back to teaching and learning is through research which is close to the site of practice, the school. A real project rather than an abstract concept can be more transformative. There are many examples of good communities of practice in the system currently. For example, the *Droichead* process really facilitates informal leadership in schools. Establishing a formal research lead in a school could be beneficial in developing teacher confidence and a capacity to build upon innovative practice.

Thinking forward

- **What impact might the COVID-19 pandemic have on our shared priorities and action plans for the redeveloped primary curriculum?**
- **How has engagement with the seminar series impacted upon our thinking regarding:**
  - **the messages about curriculum change and how they are disseminated**
  - **the professional development space for teachers and others**
  - **how our system has coped with change in the past and how it might do so differently**
  - **how to motivate and sustain engagement across a diverse set of stakeholders.**