EUNEC Statements 'Leading teachers' learning'

EUNEC (www.eunec.eu) is the network of education councils in the European Union. EUNEC brings together the expertise of advisory bodies, giving advice to the governments of the different European countries in the field of education and training.

Introduction

Teachers are the most crucial factor in maintaining and raising the quality of the education and training system. They are at the heart of the pedagogical process. Therefore the theme of the teaching profession is present in every EUNEC debate: how to attract, educate, maintain, coach and stimulate talented professionals during their careers as teachers?

The conference on 'Leading teachers' learning'[1] focused on sharing policy experiences and practices related to continuous professional development of teachers. The conference reflected on what the concept of the teacher as a reflective practitioner means for leading the learning of teachers. What are the main features and levers to allow teachers to develop as professionals, at system level, at school level and within the personal development of each individual teacher? A second point of view is the teacher within the school as a professional learning organization.

This working theme valorises the findings of the EUNEC conference in Vilnius (2008)[2], focusing on changes, challenges and perspectives for the teaching profession.

Definition and contexts

'Professional development is the lifelong process of learning and development resulting from teachers' meaningful interactions with their professional contexts'[3].

Learning needs of teachers are always situated in and motivated from the actual context, and the learning results need to be transferred to that context.

- ¬ System level. The vision and purposes for education at system level strongly influence the professional work of the teachers. The format of curriculum specifications, the knowledge, skills and concepts articulated have a deep impact on teachers' practices and development needs. Take a whole system approach and start from an overarching vision to locate teacher learning in the wider context. Try to bridge the gap with initial teacher education.
- ¬ School level. Sustained professional learning demands individual and school development to go hand in hand. The strategic direction of the school and the whole school objectives

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[1] Leading teachers' learning, Dublin, 21-22 September 2015
[2] The teaching profession: changes, challenges and perspectives, Vilnius, 2008
[3] Professor Geert Kelchtermans, presenting at the Dublin conference

influence teachers' learning. This direction is based on the outcomes of school evaluation, the conclusions of students' assessment, parental priorities.

¬ Teachers' level. Individual needs arising from reflection on practice; from areas of curriculum or pedagogy identified by the teacher as potential areas of specialism and expertise; from teachers' personal and professional interest; from external educational development; from engagement with research findings.

The framework for professional development will need to have an inherent flexibility to take account of all of these variables, while simultaneously enabling the needs of the pupils, the teachers, the school and the system to be met. We cannot fall in the temptations of applying the same model in all contexts. The specificity of each context has to be analysed and flexible decisions have to be made.

From Continuous Professional Development as a compulsory number of hours of formal in-service training organized by external providers to continuous collaborative learning in the school

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Professional development is broader than formal in-service training

In the heads, professional development used to be limited to formal in-service training, organized by 'traditional' providers: local or municipal authorities, national authorities, higher education institutes and teacher education providers, education consultants. However, the international TALIS survey[4] as well as the particular school[5] show that teacher learning that is embedded in the school context, and in which teachers collaborate with their same-school colleagues, which focuses on problems of practice and utilises real student work and curriculum examples, has positive impact on teachers' classroom practices.

When teachers have to report on the professional development they took part in, they often only mention formal professionalization activities. However, good professional development should encompass at least four dimensions of teachers' learning:

¬ Individual/collaborative
¬ Formal/informal
¬ Personal/professional
¬ School-based/external

It should be noted that the four dimensions are not mutually exclusive, and can combine and overlap to create an array of different learning opportunities. For example, formal learning can be either collaborative or individual, and learning opportunities often incorporate collaborative and individual elements, such as a workshop involving an individual reflection piece. Equally, collaborative learning can be formal and informal, while school-based and external learning can each be simultaneously personal and professional.

The teacher as a reflective practitioner

The idea of the teacher taking charge and shaping his or her own profession is relatively new. Teachers are more and more considered as lead agents of their own professional learning, and not as executors of others' decisions.

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[4] OECD (2015), "Embedding Professional Development in Schools for Teacher Success", *Teaching in Focus*, No. 10, OECD Publishing, Paris.
[5] Visit to Colaste Bride Clondalkin at the occasion of the Dublin conference

The idea of the teacher as a reflective practitioner[6] remains strong, although the concept 'reflection' is becoming victim of its own success. Broad and deep reflection as a natural attitude is an essential condition for professional development to be professionalizing. The four dimensions of reflection are ideally included: What and how (technical dimension)? Why (moral dimension)? What do I feel (emotional dimension)? In whose interest (political dimension)[7].

The teacher's reflective practice allowing collegial reflection within the school as a learning organization

Professional reflection can enable professional reflection in team and help build schools as learning organizations. In this sense, schools and teachers are the main providers of professional development, developing publicly shared and critically grounded professional reflection, based on practice. Schools and teachers share practices among the teaching team as a community of practice. Teaching is improved using appraisal and feedback.

Allowing teachers to work together collegially supports improvement in learning and teaching. Spaces where teachers can learn and enhance their professional status need to be created, in order to build their capacity to address these curricular and day-to-day challenges, and in order to allow them to lead more effective teaching and learning. Positive interpersonal relationships can help teachers be more successful in challenging circumstances. They are also related to higher levels of teachers' job satisfaction and self-efficacy[8]. The more frequently that teachers report participating in collaborative practices with their colleagues, the higher their level of self-efficacy and job satisfaction[9].

At best, it leads to new pedagogical thinking and activities, a change in the working culture, joint learning (team teaching), competence sharing, wellbeing at work, individual development and the development of the entire working community.

For all these reasons, collaborative reflection should be at the heart of teachers' learning. And the potential of the school as the primary locus of teacher learning and development needs to be exploited.

There is need for recognition of the daily practice of exchange and cooperation in schools.

> "*Teachers need an outlet to showcase what they have achieved. Schools are good at celebrating the successes of their students, but are still reticent about applauding the successes of teachers … Let us see a celebration of what we have achieved. Let it feel prestigious and let it hold value. Let us find ways to link up research projects across the country and expand the dialogue … Creative professional development deserves to be acknowledged and applauded.*"[10]

This does not mean, of course, that exchange should be limited to same-school colleagues. Technology offers quasi unlimited opportunities for the development of blended learning models of professional development and for the creation of learning communities larger than school. Virtual learning environments can offer the advantages of transparency, immediate feedback and distributed leadership in cooperative endeavours.

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[6] The reflective practitioner, Donald Schön, 1983
[7] ALACT model of reflective practice, Korthagen et al., 2001.
[8] TALIS 2013 results, presented by Katarzyna Kubacka at the Dublin conference
[9] Ibidem
[10] Owen, 2014, from the presentation by Fergal McCarthy at the Dublin conference

Impacting on teacher beliefs and behaviours through professional development requires higher-order leadership of learning.

Professional development as described is of a higher order level, it is a journey undertaken by school leaders and teachers, supported sometimes by external providers. It thus requires higher order leadership. It is a challenge to cherish the moments of spontaneous exchange between teachers.

School leaders have to give literally space and time (out of the contact hours) for collaborative and reflective practice; this has to be embedded in the schedule and the culture of the school. The time dedicated outside of the contact hours on professional development should be acknowledged. Habits of professional reflection and evidence-based practice among teachers have to be embedded and instilled from the start. Structured initiatives and school organizational routines such as school self-evaluation or arrangements for classroom-based assessment can facilitate collegial reflection.

> *"If I want to grow as a teacher I need my school leader in a way a student needs his teacher"[11]*

Quality control and effectiveness measurement

How will the quality of professional development be ensured? How can funders be assured of value for money and a positive return on investment of resources? A national framework can bring coherence and ensure alignment with strategic priorities. Teachers' views, students' views and schools' views have to be incorporated in assessing.

It is crucial, when assessing, to take into account that learning is, fundamentally, a journey, and one in which the act of travelling on that journey is more important than the destination. In other words, professional development is about steady and ongoing progress, rather than elusive perfection[12].

TALIS shows that, regardless of the content, over ¾ of the teachers report that the professional development in which they have participated had a positive impact on their teaching. However, effectiveness is not easy to evaluate. Criteria to judge are far from evident, and effects take time. It is important, when measuring effectiveness, to document, interpret, judge and conclude, rather than to adopt and build on simplistic effect measurement.

Responsibility is more than accountability

The starting assumption needs to be that teachers are professionals, and that they have to be trusted as professionals. Professional development courses should not tell the teachers how they should work. Professional development seen as a remedy for professional insufficiency is rather de-professionalizing. In this sense, imposing a minimum hours of professional development to teachers is questioning the professional commitment of the teacher.

Motivation and passion

We might have well-constructed policies on professional development, we might have a budget and time to spend, these are all external means. What is needed, is teachers who are truly motivated to work on their professional development. That is why we should not accept the business language to take over the unique language of education. Meaningful education is about relationships, about connectedness, trust and confidence.

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[11] Femke Cools, presenting at the Dublin conference
[12] Cosàn,Irish for journey