Developing schools as professional learning communities:
The TL21 experience

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Abstract: Over the last 2 decades, Irish schooling and society have gone through a period of significant structural and policy-driven change. To meet the emerging needs of the knowledge/learning society, schools and teachers are challenged to develop their capacities as "active learning communities". This places greater demands on teachers and schools to reflect on their classroom practices, to utilise a wider repertoire of pedagogic styles more suited to the needs of the 21st century learners and so that meaningfully collaborate with their fellow professionals. Teaching and Learning for the 21st Century (TL21) was a 4-year (2003-2007) multi-pronged research and development project involving the Education Department at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth (NUIM) and 15 post-primary schools. The project sought to address a number of key aims in terms of developing schools as professional learning communities, including addressing the isolation and insulation which teachers can, and do experience in their day-to-day professional lives and prioritize quality in teaching and learning as a key challenge for school development planning. This paper attempts to succinctly frame the key developments and findings which emerged over the duration of this process.

Key words: teaching and learning; professional isolation and insulation; professional learning communities; in-service training; continuous professional development; pedagogic culture; critical friend

1. Introduction: Changing times both nationally and internationally

Over the last 2 decades, Irish society has gone through a period of great and accelerating change. According to the OECD (Organisation for European Economic Cooperation) and other agencies, the inherited model of schooling which is shaped by industrial society (where teachers work in the privacy of their classrooms, in isolation from each other, with students as passive learners) is no longer seen as adequate to individuals living in a knowledge society. To meet the emerging needs of this knowledge/learning society, schools and teachers are being challenged to turn schools into "active learning communities" for teachers and students in which develop their skills, knowledge and attitudes needed to become lifelong learners in such a society. This requires a different and expanding role for teachers: (1) adaptation to new technologies; (2) use of a wide repertoire of teaching styles to suit the various learning styles; (3) collaboration with fellow professionals; and (4) reflection on their classroom practices. Teachers need support in developing the necessary skills for this new role, which requires ongoing

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professional development for teachers. With these changes, there comes a new pressure on schools.

2. The Teaching and Learning for the 21st Century Project (TL21)

"Teaching and Learning for the 21st Century" (TL21) was a 4-year (2003-2007) multi-pronged research and development project between the Education Department at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth (NUIM) and 15 post-primary schools in 3 different regions: 5 urban (Dublin), 5 suburban (Maynooth) and 5 rural (Midlands). Key features of the project emphasised a commitment to: (1) exploring new development possibilities with schools; (2) building teachers' professional capacities over time; (3) promoting an action research approach to shed new light on what is promising and realistic for practice and policy; and (4) regularly consulting and sharing these key findings with national educational bodies. The research team were conscious that the project should not be seen by participating schools as an external programme that fostered a sense of dependency or set of ready-made procedures to be taken up to fix problems quickly.

The project sought to address a number of key aims in terms of developing schools as professional learning communities, including:

(1) Tackling the isolation and insulation which teachers can, and do experience in their day to day professional lives which, according to the OECD (2005), has been one of the more stable factors in Irish schools;

(2) Prioritizing quality in teaching and learning as a key challenge for school development planning to critically position teaching and learning more to the centre of the school planning process, i.e., to see it more as the school's core business;

(3) Addressing the often conformist tenor of much teaching and learning. While inherited practices have characteristically delivered the goods in terms of all examination success too often, such practices have not prized imagination or originality in teaching and learning. The consequence for that is teachers becoming automatons to predictable pedagogic routines. Again, the OECD tells that in a recent survey over two-thirds of all 15-year-olds in Irish, schools are frequently bored in class (compared with the European average of just below half). Equally, there are worrying questions as to what extent the teachers' practices have assisted students in learning. Changing teachers' attitudes to their own sense of professional learning was critical here.

Further aims included addressing the often under-utilized potential of ICT (information and communication technology) in teaching and learning and encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning. However, due to restrictions in terms of this paper, the authors will choose to leave those issues somewhat aside for the present, sufficing to acknowledge them here.

Initially within each school, the TL21 team worked with a minimum of 2 teachers[1] from each of 4 key subject areas: science, English, Irish and mathematics, and also worked closely with the school principal and deputy principal. Participants attended a series of workshops/seminars which were held on a regional basis in addition to 2 overnight seminars held on campus in the university. In between workshops, the project team provided on-going in-school support for all participants. In September 2005, the ICT strand of the project commenced, enabling teachers from additional subject areas to actively participate in the project. As the project progressed, efforts were made to widen developmental initiatives to assist schools to become professional and

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[1] Having a minimum of 2 teachers in each of these 4 subject areas allowed the project team to work with schools to set up critical friend structures within each school. The 4 subject areas were chosen because these involve the greater numbers of teachers from within each school.

independent learning communities. This was in keeping with the recent OECD study: Teachers Matter: Attracting, Developing and Retaining Effective Teachers (OECD, 2005) with its emphasis on schools of the future as "learning communities". In such communities, it states:

> Seek to maximise opportunities for staff to interact and learn from one another …. And try to develop ways for learning to be cumulative and more readily accessible to all members of the organisation …. A key strategy is to encourage teachers to become more enquiring, reflective   practitioners, and to do so in collaboration with colleagues.

Whole school development seminars were organised in individual schools for this express purpose. In this work, the authors were mindful of Bolam, et al. (2005) who detailed characteristics which all professional learning communities share in common, namely: (1) reflective professional enquiry mutual trust, respect and support; (2) shared values and vision; (3) collective responsibility for pupils' learning; and (4) collaboration focused on learning and openness, networks and partners. Contributing to this mix was a rigorous emphasis on the setting of high expectations around this work, the need for strong leadership and the implementing of deep and sustained changes in practices and structures in schools.

At the outset, the predominate pedagogic culture within participating schools was one which was characterised by elements of presentism (a concentration on short-term planning where energies are more likely to yield results), conservatism (personnel avoiding discussion or commitment to fundamental changes which may affect the context of what they do) and individualism (avoiding discussion or commitment to fundamental changes which may affect the context of what they do) (Lortie, 1975). Prior to involvement with the project, teachers largely acknowledged their in-school conversations around pedagogical issues which were informal, infrequent, mostly unstructured and rarely enough informed by ideas of active professional collaboration on teaching and learning issues. The same was true for their conversations with senior management on teaching and learning issues which teachers said that were infrequent if not rare. In fact, many principals and deputy principals readily admit that teaching and learning issues were all too frequently relegated to a position of secondary significance citing the burdens of administration. While many principals and deputy principals initially saw the project as a worthy initiative, they also saw it as an "add-on" to be facilitated by another member of staff.

3. TL21: A differing approach to CPD (continuous professional development)

Traditional model of INSET (in-service training) refers to a model of training which, as understood in the Irish context, tends to refer to the one-off or short modular courses centrally provided for by the Department of Education and Science through various national support agencies. These are primarily introduced following a change in curriculum and/or to address topics relevant to individual subject syllabi. By definition, provision of this nature tends to be subject specific and is inclined to prioritise the needs of the system (e.g., enhancing teachers' capacities to deliver the syllabus). Generally, teachers are given little time or incentive to integrate these programmes into their classroom practices. Research shows that these traditional in-service sessions "generally prove to be ineffective in changing teachers' practice and have little, if any, effect back in the classroom" (Riding, 2001).

The TL21 model, in contrast, involved the participants in a variety of activities that reflected the purposes and changing needs of the participants. This model provided teachers with opportunities to contribute and create knowledge. Ownership was clearly in their hands particularly around the shape which workshops would take. Teachers themselves were partners in drafting the agenda and materials for workshops. In this way, the change process was personally and professionally relevant to their needs. Collins (2007) stated:

Perhaps the most important aspect of this culture (INSET), in terms of the continuing professional development of teachers, is that teachers typically do not "own" the syllabus they are teaching. Instead, they work to a national syllabus, where the concern with knowledge delivery, as opposed to knowledge creation, is uppermost.

Current literature on professional development is advocating a move-away from the isolated in-service workshop (Kennedy, 1998) towards a professional development model that is ongoing and gives teachers opportunities to: collaborate with their peers sharing practices and knowledge; reflect on their pedagogic practices; and focus on student learning and influence decision-making.

Table 1 succinctly illustrates the significant differences between the traditional INSET model offered in Irish post-primary schools and the TL21 professional development model.

Table 1   Comparison of traditional model of INSET with the TL21 model

	Traditional INSET	TL21
Time	One-off or short modular courses	Extended professional engagement (over 4 years)
Priorities	Needs of the system; Top-down through support agencies	Needs of the school and its individual teachers Bottom-up/Bottom across
Participation	Passive consumers	Active participation
Collaboration	Little or no collaboration or expectation	Meaningful collaboration Critical friend/subject depts Principals connected
Feedback	Immediate (following each workshop) Summative in nature	Immediate (following each workshop); Feedback (progress reports) by participants during workshops; Participant feedback to in-school colleagues; Long-term evaluation of: (1) the teachers' classroom practices; (2) students' learning; (3) Developments within and across different subject departments and within the school.
Developing schools as learning communities	Initially not a key priority	Key priority from the outset

TL21 CPD workshops aimed towards promoting approaches whereby schools could increasingly draw on and energise their own capacities to consider, plan and act in order to bring about more desirable teaching and learning experiences in conditions familiar to each school. Defining features of the TL21 workshop model included an emphasis on:

(1) Clearly defined tasks

Tasks and expectations were formally built into the process. These tasks were of 2 kinds: (a) tasks to be carried out during the workshop; and (b) tasks to be carried out by participants between one workshop and the next.

(2) Active participation

Workshops were of an interactive nature, with lecture-style presentations being kept to the minimum. In between workshops, participants actively engaged in action research into the teaching and learning practices in their own schools and classrooms. As mutual trust and openness grew among participants, participants themselves were encouraged to take a more active and responsible hand in the design of the workshops.

(3) Continuity

Workshops were designed as scheduled events within a developmental sequence (over 4 years). As distinct from being "once-off" events carried out at periodic intervals, each workshop had a particular contribution to make the progressive development of specific capacities on the part of the participants.

(4) Feedback

This included: (a) feedback (evaluation) to the workshop convener after each workshop; and (b) feedback (progress reports) by participants to workshop colleagues during the workshop on teaching and learning initiatives being undertaken by participants in their own schools. The project team were aware that very often the long-term impact of such CPD models is too rarely assessed so that there was a key emphasis placed on benefits to: (a) the teachers' own classroom experience; (b) the students' learning; and (c) the cross fertilization within both within and across different subject departments.

(5) Emergent learning communities

Features, such as the four above cultivated mutual-trust and openness among the workshop participants, leading to significant advances in participants' sense of professional identity and a new awareness of such groupings as learning communities in which practitioners had a decisive sense of ownership. Rose and Reynolds (2006) succinctly capture the essence of this point:

> The importance of ownership is reiterated throughout the CPD literature. Teachers' ownership of CPD is a feature of highly effective schools, as are creative CPD opportunities. Teachers selecting their own CPD focus or activities can have a hugely positive effect on motivation, enthusiasm and take-up of any new ideas with compulsion being seen as having negative consequences in the impact of CPD.

At this juncture, it is not enough to denigrate the current INSET model, indeed far from it, for it is a model that has been particularly effective in addressing particular system needs. The experiences of both teachers and schools attest to the high-quality support and in-service provided by the various INSET support agencies. However, the initial research with schools and teachers supports the view of Granville (2005) who found that the traditional model of INSET:

> Is it seen to have had a greater impact in changing teaching practice than in changing the mindset of teachers[2].

TL21 project findings support the view that the work of the various support services can and do make a real and sustainable difference for the better where their contact with schools can be of a continuing nature.

4. Key developments

This paper attempts to succinctly frame the journey which 15 post-primary schools and their participant teachers made over the 4 years of the project in terms of developing their schools as professional learning communities by moving teaching and learning to the centre of the whole school planning process. In this regard, the project has shown considerable developments within a relatively short-time frame. However, for the purpose of this paper, it is not possible nor desirable to detail all of these benefits individually[3]. Relevant developments include the following parts.

4.1 Meaningful collaboration: Building learning communities

In terms of developing schools as active learning communities, one of the key developments within the project was the building of meaningful collaboration both within and between schools. It was conscious of what

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[2] While Granville was specifically referencing only one key national support agency here, his reference is generally well noted. The critical issue here for TL21 was to develop and sustain active learning networks with schools and set in place a number of expectations between the workshops. Granville, G. (2005). *An emergent approach to teacher professional development: Final evaluation report on the experience and impact of the second level support service*. Dublin Unpublished Report, ii.

[3] For a comprehensive treatment of all key developments please see the project's final report. *Learning Anew* (2007).

Fullan and Hargreaves had to say about those forms of "comfortable collaboration" (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996) where the privacy of the teachers' classroom is protected and there is no deep probing of issues of teaching and learning. What they said is a weak form of community. To address this issue, the authors implemented a number of strategies, including:

(1) Critical friend

In addressing the core issue of teacher isolation and professional insulation, many teachers found the "critical friend" structure that they initially put in place to be most useful in encouraging professional and pedagogic conversations. Costa and Kallick (1993) defined the role of the critical friend as:

> ... A trusted person who asks provocative questions, providing data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of a person's work as a friend. A critical friend takes the time to fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward. The friend is an advocate for the success of that work.

At the outset, the project sought the establishment of weekly meetings in schools involving project participants and the same subject teachers (i.e., their "critical friend") as a structured means for teachers to begin systematically engaging in professional discussions around key areas of pedagogic interest. Teachers were encouraged and actively supported in sharing and engaging in well-focused discussion and self-evaluation of individual teaching practices. It worked well in the majority of incidences, however, there were exceptions. In certain cases, differing power relations within the schools and various personality clashes meant that these teachers were proved to be unable to work with each other. In these instances, these teachers established their own critical friends with teachers from other disciplines within their schools. As time progressed, and teachers developed a level of trust, the structure naturally evolved where many began to develop critical friendships with colleagues in other schools.

Where these meetings were established as scheduled events within the school's timetable, they tended to yield promising results. However, it called for special adjustments to be made in the timetable, for the adjustments were clearly too complex to apply on a whole scale level to each school. Some teachers thought that the model was a little too prescriptive and they were unclear as to how to approach the work. As the project progressed, teachers and schools began to develop alternative models which were less formal and more suited to their individual circumstances and professional development needs. While the formal scheduling of these meetings were in the main discontinuation of the project in 2 or 3 years, it had helped develop a capacity in teachers and willingness to engage in such meetings on an informal basis and where opportunities could be found or provided.

As a further, and an unintended development in many respects, teachers developed critical friend relationships with colleagues outside of their schools. Within a period of 18 months after starting the project, teachers from different schools began contacting each other informally, seeking clarification on ideas that may have been illustrated or spoken about at previous workshops and developing joint presentations/resources for presentation to teachers at future workshops.

> The benefits of the TL21 are many. By far the most tangible benefit is the opportunity to exchange ideas and engage in discussion with colleagues from another school. It is this exchanging of ideas that then leaves one with a renewed enthusiasm for one's day to day experience in the classroom.

Another stated:

> I have become even more focused in my subject area. It has been very interesting sharing perspectives with other professionals (I am feeling less isolated).

(2) Development of subject teams

The focus on critical friends provided an impetus and platform to encourage the development of professional learning communities both within and between schools. Many teachers reported that prior to their involvement with TL21, their in-school subject department meetings were in the main administrative in focus and generally informal, infrequent and rarely enough informed by ideas of active professional collaboration on teaching and learning issues. At an early stage, the authors acknowledged the development of subject teams as a key priority on which to build the whole school change. Principals and deputies played a key role here not only in terms of ensuring that the infrastructure was in place, but also further encouraging and supporting this work. In a number of cases, the changes experienced at subject team level diffused more widely, therein furthering the schools' efforts at becoming a professional learning community.

(3) Wider forms of collaboration and moodle and VLEs (virtual learning environments)

In addition to the formal collaborative networks instituted through the projects workshops and seminars, a significant number of teachers established their own informal networks. Teachers who previously did not know each other now contacted each other professionally (telephone, e-mail and informal meetings), seeking clarification on ideas and tasks exchanged at workshops and also sharing ideas and resources. Such was the appetite for these networks that in the final 2 years of the project, teachers were set up on their own VLEs that is moodle. This allowed teachers to contact each other through a secure web network, thus, enabling them to actively upload and download digital resources, share information and most importantly engage in sophisticated conversations around pedagogical practices (successes and difficulties). They came to see such practices as an integral feature to their professional identity as opposed to something that was merely an add-on. This is very heartening, given that for many of the participating teachers, TL21 is the first time since their teacher training days that they have found themselves sitting around a table discussing the teaching and learning that takes place in their classroom. De-privatising practice to this level where teachers have become at ease in discussing pedagogical practice with other participants of the project has taken significant amounts of time, clarification, trust-building and persuasion. Networks, such as these are regarded by teachers as a major benefit of the project.

4.2 Workshops

A significant achievement of the TL21 workshop model has been the development of a culture of meaningful collaboration, i.e., a culture that encouraged teachers to discuss their classroom practice as well as sharing resources and ideas. The professional learning community the teachers sought to build in TL21 did not merely consist of swapping materials and exchanging activities. It was conscious of what Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) and Lieberman (1990), among others, had to say about those forms of teacher collaboration which do little to generate changes in teachers' practices. Hargreaves (1994) stated:

> Telling stories, scanning for ideas and materials … do not pose serious threats to teacher independence, since all these forms of collaboration and collegiality take place outside the classroom and leave teachers' conceptions of and control over their own practice broadly intact.

What it is at here is different to that and different to those forms of "contrived collegiality" in which tasks and agendas are merely created in order to occupy teachers' collective energies? Rather it is what Judith Warren Little would detail as a sharing of expertise and perspectives on teaching and learning processes that develops a sense of mutual support and shared responsibility for effective instruction. Collaboration and collegiality in this way becomes a part of one's professional identity and therefore works to bring about more beneficial adjustments

in teachers' practices.

Developing a culture of meaningful collaboration involved a number of strategies including the building-up of trust over time and involving participants in the decision-making process—encouraging them to believe in the relevance and importance of what they are engaged in. Major benefits of meaningful collaboration include: (1) teachers themselves seeing insulation and isolation as a disabling feature of their professional lives; (2) project team working closely with the teachers; and (3) it looking at "real" issues and the needs of teachers in the day to day reality of their classroom as well as subject and pedagogical knowledge.

5. Conclusion

The TL21 project has shown that in order to make any lasting and noticeable difference to teachers' performance, their individual professional development must take place over a period of time as a developmental sequence of connected events and should involve teachers in active collective participation, allowing them sustained opportunities to consciously develop, practice, reflect upon and refine their skills. Continuous professional development for the enhancement of teaching and learning must come to be seen as a normal aspect of all teachers work in the 21st century.

The question begs as to the extent of development and whether or not progress was achieved and more substantially—sustained within each of the schools. Again, the research literature is unforgiving here with few commentators offering any kind of substantial hope. Eisner (1992) told people schools are "robust" institutions whose very cultures frequently militate against change. Sarason (1990) stated:

> Like almost all other complex traditional social organizations, the schools will accommodate in ways that require little or no change … the strength of the status quo—its underlying axioms, its patterns of power relationships, its sense of tradition and therefore what seems right, natural and proper—almost automatically rules out options for change.

Despite real and present challenges, a significant number of schools within the project have moved on apace. Many have instituted new organisational infrastructures, therein encouraging and supporting new practices. A number of principals and deputy principals have adopted a more assertive role in terms of driving the teaching and learning agenda forwards, as opposed to merely facilitating it. They accorded the work a high profile—prioritising it in varying ways: both structurally and "emotionally". TL now features as a regular item for attention at staff meetings: Time is scheduled for teachers to engage in work of this nature and principals check in with teachers and keep a supportive (as opposed to monitorial/inspecting) eye to it. Leithwood (1991) told that such work by the principal is critical to ensure sustainability of the practices and it is the principals who strongly influence the likelihood of cultural change. While positioning and aligning many principals and deputies to this stance has been difficult (remembering at the outset many saw their role as merely facilitating work of this nature), many have now come full circle and accepted their critical role in legitimating (and structuring) work of this nature.

Indeed, while the role of the principal is central in sustaining such actions and practices, it is equally vital not to underestimate the pivotal role which the teachers as the leader plays. Again, these teachers need to believe in the legitimacy, relevance and value of what they are engaged in. Within the participating schools, many teachers worked, in tandem with senior management, to build capacity around this venture. To an impartial observer, this may seem a fairly straightforward and politically neutral task—The authors' findings suggest that for many of these teacher leaders, the task of doing so was not without some, and in certain cases, substantial risks to themselves. A certain minority of teachers risked certain suspicion and alienation from their staff colleagues. Such

findings are of concern but should not occlude us from the more substantial picture, which is generally favourable in terms of what was achieved. Where senior leadership was strong, these teachers managed to build critical capacities within their schools.

In many of the participating schools, key practices and structures have altered where levels of professional collaboration are now significantly more sophisticated; where professional learning takes place at school-wide as well as individual level, and professional reflective conversations into pedagogic approaches are not only encouraged but organisationally legitimated and supported.

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