

Teaching and Learning:

Insights from Irish Schools



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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.

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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 add 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.

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