

Instructional Leadership Programme Conference 2023

Keynote Address

Nurturing Professional Learning: Culture and Practice

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1. Introduction

Good morning to you all. I would like to begin by saying how delighted I am to have the opportunity to deliver this keynote address.

I will explore our shared vision of sustainable professional learning, and I will focus on classroom practices and classroom cultures that can be truly transformative for teachers, for schools and especially for children and young people.

I know that together we will capture some insights on the future of education from the perspective of leadership, our collective influence, and our collaboration - insights which can be developed further to support the goal of equity and excellence in learning for all.

2. Creating a culture that nurtures professional learning

Let us begin by looking at how professional learning can be promoted, enabled and nurtured across the education system. Every organisation, every school, every classroom exists within its own eco-system that is shaped and guided by its own unique culture. That culture is kept alive primarily through the actions of school leadership, but also by the individual actions and reactions of all those working, engaging or interacting in the school community and the wider education system. According to Fullan and Hargreaves, professional learning is “at the heart of an effective and continuously growing teaching profession” and ‘the best visions and versions of it are rooted firmly in a system culture of collaborative professionalism that cultivates individual and collective efficacy.’¹

2.1 Department vision for excellence in learning for all

At the macro level, the Department of Education plays a key role in helping to shape the culture of our education system in Ireland. The Department’s vision for

¹ Fullan, M. & Hargreaves, A. (2016). Bringing the profession back in: Call to action. (p. 2) Oxford, OH: Learning Forward.

education, as laid out in the **Statement of Strategy 2021-2023**, charts our aspiration for an education system where every child and young person feels valued and is actively supported and nurtured to reach their full potential. Learning is valued as a deeply personal gift and as a public good, in light of its core role in the development, cohesion and wellbeing of an inclusive society.

The Department goals also envisage providing strategic leadership and support for the delivery of the right systems and infrastructure for the education sector.

So how does this vision support a culture of professional learning? At the Department level, just like each one of you here today, we are committed to continuously learning about what is best for our students and how we can enhance the learning outcomes of all children and young people. As a Department, we strive to collaboratively build on our strengths with other departments and with each of the education partners.

The prominent, system-wide focus on high-quality education and school improvement in Ireland today is reflected in practical developments such as the introduction of a new Primary School Curriculum Framework, Junior Cycle Reform and the commencement of the redevelopment of the Senior Cycle experience of students. The Department, through the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), has reflected on our shared standards across education and has made key changes to curriculum provision for learners from birth to 18 years of age in order to enhance their learning experiences, opportunities, learning outcomes and their wellbeing.

2.2 The Inspectorate's involvement in fostering professional learning cultures

So how then, in light of those strategic goals, does the Inspectorate foster professional learning cultures? Every time we enter a classroom, we have the unique privilege of experiencing the culture of that classroom and school. We are continuously learning about the quality of the education system as we move from classroom to classroom and from school to school. As inspectors, we affirm where professional learning cultures are becoming embedded and we provide advice to support schools to move more successfully into this space.

For example, as inspectors, we really value the opportunities we have to engage with schools about school self-evaluation. Our advisory visits enable us to talk with school leaders about how school self-evaluation can be used in their context to bring about school improvement that is real and resonates with all partners in the school community. These visits frequently lend themselves to discussion about professional learning and its place in supporting changes and improvement at classroom and school level. Equally, our interactions, individually and collectively, with teachers and school leaders offer us the opportunity to support and promote professional learning in the schools we visit.

Through our engagement with schools, a number of key findings have emerged:

- A culture of teacher collaboration has the potential to have a significant impact on providing a cohesive learning experience for students.
- The authentic participation of all of the stakeholders can result in tangible improvements in students' learning.
- Creating a culture of participative leadership, where everyone works towards a shared vision, provides an ongoing, self-sustaining culture of professional learning, which can further lead to enhanced learning student experiences.

Our engagements with schools also show us that a culture of teacher professional learning is best nurtured through strategic, comprehensive and cohesive planning at whole-school level. Our discussions with schools allow us to sit with school leaders and teachers to learn about what helps them to create this type of culture, while also enabling us to share best practice that we have seen in other schools and settings. As such, our role in schools can support the transfer or cross-pollination of ideas from one school to another while also supporting our own professional development and learning culture.

We also promote professional learning through a responsive and robust programme of external evaluation and inspection – including, for example, through the whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) in schools.

2.3 Nurturing a professional learning culture across the school

Sustainable professional learning cultures will not just happen by accident in schools. According to the Oxford dictionary, the word 'sustainable' itself means to be able to continue or to continue for a long time. Just as the underlying concept behind sustainable energy and sustainable environmental practices is to maintain a state of equilibrium and constant renewal, effective professional learning cultures need to be maintained in order to be able to continue independently of any individual in the school community.

The role of school leadership in nurturing this culture is critical. Harvard Professor Ebony Bridwell-Mitchell claims that “everything a leader does — [their] statements and philosophy, reactions to key events, energy, and interaction style — influences culture in a powerful way.”²

In creating a culture of professional learning, school and teacher leaders need to be conscious that their every action will play a role in the success or otherwise of that goal. Their vision, their decisions and their actions are crucial to supporting professional learning.

As Raymond Kroc, the man credited with turning the McDonald's fast-food chain into the global business success it is today, once said, “The quality of a leader is reflected in the standards they set for themselves.”³ Be what you want to see!

A professional learning culture cannot be sustained without the individual commitment of each of the teachers in the school. Your strong, purposeful commitment to professional learning, demonstrated by your attendance here today and yesterday, and your engagement with the Instructional Leadership Programme

² Bridwell-Mitchell, E, as cited in Shafer, L. (2018). *Building a Strong School Culture*. Available at: [What principals can do to create a strong school culture \(harvard.edu\)](https://www.harvard.edu/what-principals-can-do-to-create-a-strong-school-culture)

³ Kroc, R, as cited in Guay, C. (2022). *From aspirations to action: helping countries reach their climate goals*. Available at: <https://www.iso.org/news/From-aspirations-to-action.html>

(ILP) demonstrates the professional standards you set for yourself and those you work with.

There also needs to be a high level of collaboration among staff in order for a professional learning culture to be maintained and to thrive! Don't be shy in sharing your learning with your colleagues ...that is leading collaborative professional learning!

In addition, leading collaborative professional learning requires appropriate structures at school level to support and nurture ongoing relevant professional learning. I am delighted to be here today to hear about some of the structures you have developed within your own school context.

We know that collaborative professional learning promotes high quality education.⁴ It is at the heart of effective schools, promotes the sharing of knowledge and helps to build trust and social capital in schools.⁵ It also supports prudent risk-taking and the trying of new ways of doing things which allows teachers to feel that they are supported in developing innovative practices. The process of engaging collective intelligence to deliver results is grounded in a belief that all of us together can be smarter, more creative and more competent than any one of us alone, especially when it comes to addressing the kinds of novel, complex, and multi-faceted challenges that schools face today.⁶

2.4 Nurturing a culture of professional learning between schools

As I mentioned previously, inspectors (and from time-to-time school leaders in their networks) have the privilege of travelling from classroom to classroom and from school to school, observing and learning about what constitutes good practice in the Irish education system.

⁴ Hattie, J. (2011). *Visible Learning for Teachers*. Routledge

⁵ Hargreaves, A., & Fullan, M. (2012). *Professional Capital: Transforming Teaching in Every School*. Teachers College Press.

⁶ Hargreaves, A. & O'Connor, M. (2018). *Leading Collaborative Professionalism* in Centre for Strategic Education Seminar Series Paper #274. Available at: http://www.andyhargreaves.com/uploads/5/2/9/2/5292616/seminar_series_274-april2018.pdf

However, I often wonder and reflect on how powerful it can or could be for teachers to engage in this level of observation and peer-learning. As a system, we are at the early stages along the journey of sharing our practice beyond our own classrooms and schools, but there are many green shoots emerging, for example, Féilte, Learning Schools Projects, and conferences such as this which facilitate the sharing of experiences, knowledge and skills.

Collaborative professional practice heightens the impact that individual teachers, even the most accomplished, have on student learning. By inquiring as part of a team about how to improve their teaching and engaging in peer observation, individual teachers benefit from sharing their insights and experiences with colleagues. The collective appetite for effective professional practice is the difference between good and great teaching. It is also the difference between a good and a great school system.⁷

At a system level, the relatively recent introduction of Subject Learning and Assessment Review (SLAR) meetings in post-primary schools has the potential to support extremely deep peer learning for teachers within their subject areas. We know that there are issues with time and we are aware that these meetings need to keep a focus on standards as well as on the sharing of practice and learning from one another. And, of course, a move towards teachers from different classrooms and from different schools coming together and discussing learning outcomes and agreeing what high quality learning looks like can only have a positive impact on professional learning in the long term.

A professional learning culture that involves teachers openly and honestly discussing student achievement and standards has the potential to lead to more fundamental questions about the 'how' of student attainment. It is in this space that teacher professional learning can really be enhanced and can have a real impact on practice in the classroom. Opening our doors to allow others to observe our practice and

⁷ Burns, T. and L. Cerna (2016), "Enhancing effective education governance", in Burns, T. and F. Köster (eds.), *Governing Education in a Complex World*, OECD. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264255364-13-en>

learn from each other takes courage and can be a daunting, but highly rewarding and professional experience for many. I welcome your courage in this respect as your look towards learning more about the skills of instructional coaching and mentoring.

At primary level, teachers have reported that engagement in the Teaching Council's Droichead process for newly qualified teachers has promoted and supported a culture of '*sharing of expertise*'.

Beyond some of these formal structures, professional learning took on a whole new guise during the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers met online to discuss how they were addressing students' needs and continuing to support them during such a stressful time. When they were faced with a very complex change in aspects of curriculum and assessment, we saw communities of practice emerge where teachers supported one another and gave freely of their time to share ideas, collaboratively develop expertise, and ensure that the learning needs of their students were met in a responsive and effective a way.

We also know from our engagements with Education Centres that those less formal structures that enable teachers to meet and share expertise have continued to grow and are now a much more embedded as an aspect of professional learning than ever before. This purposeful collaboration is a powerful way to deepen professional capacity, increase the total value of the professional capital in the system, and harness the power of the collective.

3. Professional learning: what does this look like at a practical level?

I am now going to turn my attention to what the practicalities of nurturing professional learning look like. Thankfully, we know that many of these practices are already in place in schools, even though they may not be as widespread as we would all like to see. At a practical level, we can look at professional learning from the individual teacher's perspective, from a school perspective, and from a system perspective.

The Department has recently published the third edition of *Looking at our School*, a quality framework for primary, post-primary and special schools. The statements of

effective and highly effective practice indicate to school leaders and teachers, as well as inspectors and others, the value of professional learning. The quality framework can also support school leaders and teachers along their own professional learning journey as they seek to align their practice with what is considered to be highly effective practice.

One of the ten key principles which underpin *Looking at our School 2022* is that schools are learning organisations. The quality framework views schools as dynamic learning hubs, where teachers are enabled to work and learn individually and collectively to build their professional capacity in order to support continuous improvement in learning and teaching.

To accomplish the maximum impact on student learning, John Hattie has found that it depends on teams of teachers working together, with excellent leaders, collectively agreeing on worthwhile outcomes, setting high expectations, knowing the students' starting points and desired success in learning, seeking evidence continually about their impact on all students, modifying their teaching in light of this evaluation, and joining in the success of truly making a difference to student outcomes.⁸

Of course, what we are trying to achieve through effective collaborative practice is not just about student outcomes but also student wellbeing and equity.

Individual schools, and the wider education system, have a considerable interest in developing and sustaining teachers. This interest needs to be translated into practical actions. The principal, the deputy principal(s) and teacher leaders in the school are responsible for fostering a culture in which reflection, learning and creativity flourish. They can achieve this by leading the school community to continuously strive for excellence and by setting high expectations for every student. Essential to this is the promotion of a culture of continuous improvement by supporting colleagues to become reflective practitioners which, we hope, begins in the early stages of a professional learning and teaching career journey.

⁸ Hattie, J. (2011). *Visible Learning for Teachers*. Routledge

3.1 Using Quality Frameworks as a stimulus for pedagogical change

We in the Inspectorate recognise that effective pedagogy is central to positive learning experiences and outcomes for the children and young people in our education system. To support you in your work we have we have also published, in addition to *Looking at our School (LAOS)*, a number of other documents including the *Looking at Series*. In our most recent versions of *LAOS* we have strengthened references to particular aspects of learning and teaching such as digital competence, approaches to remote learning and teaching, the role of assessment and feedback in supporting progression in learning, and the development of students' independent learning skills.

We have reemphasised the importance of high-quality teaching. We see excellence in teaching as the most powerful influence on student achievement while acknowledging the pedagogical skills required to enable truly meaningful learner experiences and outcomes. Of paramount importance is the agency of teachers in making informed and reflective professional decisions about learning and teaching – and doing this in line with the curriculum and in response to the aptitudes and needs of all learners in a variety of contexts.

The *LAOS* framework holds that improving the quality of students' learning should be the main driver of teacher learning. We see the school as a key context in which teachers' professional learning occurs and where students can become active agents in their own learning.

Many schools are using the quality frameworks (*LAOS*) to facilitate teachers to critically analyse and evaluate their own practice by looking at the domains and standards. This type of critical analysis has assisted teachers to become stronger pedagogical leaders - it enables them to be thoughtful and intentional and to take the initiative to identify suitable professional learning opportunities.

Pedagogical change is a challenge but we know it can be transformational and invigorating for teachers. As I previously referenced, we are striving for excellence by creating a culture that fosters highly skilled teachers who trust their own professional judgements and can lead their pedagogical learning journey.

3.3 Individual teachers' professional learning journey

So what does the individual teacher's professional learning journey look like? The foreword of *Cosán, the National Framework for Teachers' Learning*, states that, "Teaching is about teaching, but it is also about learning. Teachers know that teaching does not happen until others learn. As professionals, teachers also understand that sustained professional practice rests on their own professional learning. It is the hallmark of the teaching profession that its members continue to learn so that they can continue to teach."⁹

In practice, this means teachers embracing an ongoing learning journey to ensure that their professional practice is of a consistently high quality. A teacher's professional identity grows and is shaped by many factors including engagement with professional learning opportunities as part of curriculum reform, embracing new strategies for teaching and learning, sharing expertise and experience through participation in subject-area networks, and the individual pursuit of further qualifications in areas of pedagogical interest to them.

All of this ought to take place within a strong co-professional culture. Your own attendance at this conference today and yesterday and the journey many of you are on, or have been on as part of the Instructional Leadership Programme, is a case in point. And central to this is the sense of collegiality, support and collaboration.

Regardless of what aspect of professional learning we pursue, we are interconnected with others from our profession and we co-construct new and refined meanings of what best practice in teaching and learning looks like on a continuous basis. It is this combined commitment of individual teachers to reflecting, reviewing, researching and re-envisaging and sharing our learning that has our education system held in regard as one of the best education systems in the world.

⁹ The Teaching Council. (2016). *Cosán: National Framework for Teachers' Learning*. Available at: <https://www.teachingcouncil.ie/en/publications/teacher-education/cosan-framework-for-teachers-learning.pdf>

3.4 Whole-school support for life-long professional learning

In highly effective schools we see a whole-school approach and a culture of collaborative review of learning and teaching practices and outcomes. When this is part of an effective professional accountability process and managed in an affirming and developmental way, it yields the most successful results. While individual teacher commitment to professional learning is commended, it is *really strengthened* where it is facilitated by and supported through whole-school practices.

So, when our inspectors visit schools they look at how whole-school practices support collaborative sharing of expertise. It is very encouraging for us to learn how schools are prioritising learning and teaching and we note how these appear frequently as standing items on staff meeting agendas, thus keeping the spotlight on pedagogical leadership.

Schools are very creative in harnessing technology to support collaborative professional learning. We know teachers are using digital platforms to build a suite of useful resources; some teachers are recording lessons to illustrate and share with colleagues how teaching methodologies can be used effectively. *Teachmeets* have become a part of the culture in many schools and this willingness to demonstrate and share experiences with other teachers is an indication of teachers' high levels of motivation and ongoing professionalism.

Other highly effective collaborative practices have begun to emerge in schools further along the journey; these include open door policies where teachers are invited to peer observe lessons and visit colleagues to learn in real time about new learning and teaching methodologies. This has given many teachers confidence to try new approaches and then to discuss with a trusted colleague how to improve their practices. This willingness to experiment and reflect are essential in a professional learning community. I welcome Joe's and Coran's input last night on coaching and mentoring, and how they demonstrated how Whitmore's (2017) *GROW Model* can support conversations leading to effective collaborative professional learning. I also look forward to Becky's workshop today and learning how her work can support teachers' learning.

We commend schools when we see learning and teaching discussions occurring at board level to facilitate self-evaluation and strategic planning - and also, when we see, at student council and parent council level, these important partners being consulted and participating in shaping the future of the school. I know the NCCA are working in partnership with the ILP in enhancing learner voice in the classroom, as a means of enhancing the teaching and learning experience for teachers and learners alike.

This is the collaborative learning culture and future we hope to see in schools.

4. What are the implications (opportunities and challenges) of an enhanced professional learning culture across our education system?

We have looked at how professional learning can be nurtured through various cultural factors, and we have also looked at what professional learning in practice may look like. But let us now turn our attention to the reality on the ground in the Irish context. We must acknowledge that there are challenges associated with developing an enhanced culture of professional learning across our education system.

One of the main benefits of continuous professional learning is that learners can experience evidence-informed teaching methodologies that are evolving and changing to best suit their needs. As a parent myself, what I experienced as part of my primary and post-primary education looks vastly different from what my own children have experienced.

As parents, it can be difficult to navigate and understand the changes in emphases and methodologies experienced by our children. Take the classroom-based assessments at Junior Cycle, for example. These assessments have, in many cases, promoted discussion and engagement in learning activities at home that would not have been seen up to this point. But our challenge as educators is to ensure that new methodologies and learning experiences are firstly informed by best practice, and secondly, are communicated in an effective way to parents so that the rationale for various approaches to teaching and learning is clear. Again, this opens the door to a huge opportunity to bring parents further into the conversation about

the learning of their children and to strengthen their role as the primary educator of the child.

5. System-wide supports for lifelong professional learning

So what can we do to support this lifelong professional learning journey?

At a system level, professional learning needs to be sustained by targeted actions and supports.

At a whole-of-system level, the Department's support services, the Centre for School Leadership (CSL), Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT), National Induction Programme for Teachers (NIPT) and the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), will be amalgamated into one overarching professional development and learning service called *Oide* on 1 September this year.

The vision of *Oide* is to support the professional learning of school leaders and teachers in Ireland through the development of high quality, innovative and responsive professional learning - a type of professional learning that enables them to meet the educational needs of all children and young people in a changing world. This is an ambitious and forward thinking vision to create a system-wide culture of reflection, inquiry and purposeful collaboration that aligns with national and international best practice in a way that supports induction, curriculum, pedagogy, leadership and school improvement.

We recognise the need for future professional learning opportunities to be provided to schools to enhance the work already started and to build upon the strong pedagogical foundations established during recent curricular reforms. We all have a common purpose - a commitment to high standards and quality driven by a focus on the learner. We also recognise school leaders and teachers as agentic and committed professionals.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, I congratulate the Instructional Leadership Programme (ILP) on its successes as an effective professional network. The uptake in training and

professional learning is very high. You are very successfully tapping into the appetite among teachers for continuous professional learning.

Thank you, the delegates, for taking the time to further enhance your learning. I know it is not always easy to leave personal commitments behind to attend events like this; I deeply appreciate your commitment to learning. Thank you!

Clearly, it is evident that we are all working to support excellent classroom practices, to grow effective classroom cultures that can be truly transformative for every child and young person we encounter.

Tréaslaím libh as an obair iontach, dearfach, comhoibritheach atá ar bun agaibh agus molaim sibh as an obair seo.

Go raibh maith agaibh.

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