Continuing professional development and primary school teachers

NCCA submission to the DES

January 2007
Continuing Professional Development and Primary School Teachers

Introduction

The Primary Curriculum Implementation Group established by the Department of Education and Science (DES) in 1997, provides a structure for the formulation of policy concerning teacher professional development and the Primary School Curriculum (1999). It represents the partners in education at national level. Discussion at recent meetings of the Implementation Group has addressed teachers’ professional development needs beyond June 2007, following completion of the national programme of teacher in-service by the Primary Curriculum Support Programme (PCSP). Arising from this discussion, members of the Implementation Group were invited to respond in writing to four questions concerning future inservice for primary teachers:

- What subjects, aspects or topics of the Primary Curriculum should be the focus of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for teachers post 2007?
- What forms or models of CPD should be considered, so as to provide the most effective primary teacher continuing education post 2007?
- What do you consider to be the roles of the various partners in education in the whole process of CPD post 2007?
- Are there any other related areas or issues which you and your organisation would like to raise which may be pertinent to the implementation of the Primary Curriculum and CPD post 2007?

This paper presents the NCCA’s response to these questions. Given the statutory remit of Council to review the in-service training needs of teachers, including needs arising from the introduction of new curricula, subjects or syllabuses in schools, and to advise the Minister in relation to those needs (Education Act, 1998, 41,2 [e]), it is evident that an NCCA response will focus more on the first and second questions. This paper begins by mapping out what we mean by Continuing Professional Development (CPD) in the context of this NCCA Submission.
Towards a definition of CPD

While there are many definitions of CPD, this paper uses the term CPD to refer to the continuum of activities which are designed to improve the quality of teaching for teachers and learning for children. Day (1999) provides a description of such activities:

> Professional development consists of all natural learning experiences and those conscious and planned activities which are intended to be of direct or indirect benefit to the individual, group or school and which contribute through these to the quality of education in the classroom. It is the process by which, alone and with others, teachers review, renew and extend their commitment as change agents to the moral purposes of teaching; and by which they acquire and develop critically the knowledge, skills and emotional intelligence essential to good professional thinking, planning and practice with children, young people and colleagues through each phase of their teaching lives. (Day, 1999)

Thus Day (1999) speaks to the complexity of teaching and the challenge of effectively meeting teachers’ professional development needs. Cochran-Smith (2003) has noted that definitions of teaching as a profession must assume that teaching is a complex and uncertain enterprise where knowledge is constructed in the interface between teachers, students, materials, textbooks and prior experiences. In addition, the OECD (2005) has noted the recent broadening and deepening of teachers’ roles and responsibilities in response to societal changes and expectations. For example, Totterdell (2006) has referred to the new requirements and challenges of teaching the next generation of digitally literate, highly networked, peer affiliated, associative-communication friendly but broadcast-communicative averse youngsters (p. 14).

Warren Little (1993) has noted that the traditional training model of professional development which focused on transferring a pre-determined set of skills from trainers to teachers is no longer adequate given the complexity of improving student learning in particular classroom contexts. She recommends a variety of approaches to teacher professional development that take account of the difficult work required of teachers to meet increasing expectations concerning what constitutes improvements in teaching and learning. Following from these observations, successful professional development can be described as professional development which uses appropriate strategies to help teachers effect positive change in this complex interface between children, curriculum, pedagogy, contexts for learning, and teachers themselves including their beliefs, attitudes and dispositions.
As this kind of inquiry represents ongoing evolution of the profession of teaching in theory and practice, it follows that in order to be successful, teacher professional development should focus on teachers’ beliefs and practices and should continue throughout a teacher’s career. CPD thus replaces fragmented or drive-by professional development with corresponding investment and commitment to development over the lifetime of each teacher, and recognition of the teacher’s voice as key in any new professional development model.

While different rationales exist for teacher CPD, arguments for effective professional development generally focus on young people as the ultimate beneficiaries. Cochran-Smith noted the significance of CPD opportunities whose purpose it is to engage in inquiry intended to alter the life chances of children (2001, p.3). Similarly, Wenglinsky (2000) concluded that policymakers were correct in emphasising the importance of improving teacher quality as a mechanism for improving student learning. The new CPD model proposed in this paper takes as its starting point the dual purpose of improving teachers’ and learners’ experiences in primary schools.

Curriculum and assessment priorities

Table 1 outlines current areas of work for the NCCA’s Early Childhood and Primary Team which have implications for teachers’ professional needs with reference to the NCCA Strategic Plan 2006-2008. It does not include background papers which support particular areas of work; nor does it include areas of work for which the impact on teachers’ professional needs is as yet unknown. For example, findings from the NCCA’s second phase of Primary Curriculum Review in Gaeilge, science and Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE), may point to professional development needs for teachers in the coming months which extend beyond those identified in Table 1. Similarly, the advice to the Minister on Modern Languages in Primary Schools – a further element of Council’s current work programme may also have implications for the professional development needs of teachers.
Table 1. Overview of Curriculum and Assessment Projects: Early Childhood and Primary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of Work</th>
<th>Components</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum</td>
<td>▪ Draft Report Card Templates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Guidelines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Learning</td>
<td>▪ Framework for Early Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English as an Additional Language</td>
<td>▪ Guidelines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICT</td>
<td>▪ ICT Framework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language and Literacy in Irish-Medium Schools</td>
<td>▪ Guidelines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>▪ DVD for Parents <em>The What, Why and How of Children’s Learning</em></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Information sheets and Tip sheets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Educational Needs (SEN)</td>
<td>▪ Guidelines: Students with general learning disabilities (mild, moderate, severe and profound)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Guidelines: Exceptionally-able students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student transfer (early childhood, primary, post-primary)</td>
<td>▪ To be decided.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is arguable that the impact of curriculum and assessment policy arising from the NCCA’s work (outlined in Table 1), is not predictable and can only usefully be understood in particular classroom contexts. Curriculum and assessment innovations alone do not translate into improved outcomes for teachers and learners. In the same way, initial subject-in-service cannot possibly anticipate and address the full spectrum of implementation issues arising from the diverse contexts in which teaching and learning takes place. A curriculum comes alive only in the very particular social context of schools and classrooms; it must therefore be studied in these contexts in order to determine individual teachers’ professional needs and the needs of groups of teachers across a particular school landscape. It follows that the process of implementing a curriculum innovation or policy change must first be understood as local inquiry:

*The curriculum… will be brought to bear, not in some archetypical classroom, but in a particular locus in time and space with smells, shadows, seats, and conditions outside its walls, which may have much to do with what is achieved inside. Above all, the supposed beneficiary is not the generic child, not even a class or kind of child out of the psychological or*

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1 Design Teams of the Primary Curriculum Support Programme (PCSP) have worked closely with the NCCA to promote awareness of these areas of work in the current schedule for subject in-service.
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sociological literature pertaining to the child. The beneficiary will consist of very local kinds of children, and within the local kinds, individual children. The same diversity holds with respect to teachers and what they do. (Schwab, 1978, p. 310)

Elmore (2006) has noted that the kind of difficult, contingent and uncertain learning that constitutes effective CPD for teachers is best situated in close proximity to the work itself – the teacher’s own classroom. A new model of CPD presents opportunities for focusing on the teacher’s classroom practices and beliefs as central to ongoing improvement. It also allows us to open up the locus of decision-making so that teachers and students in very particular contexts engage in meaningful conversation with one another, with colleagues and with the wider school community about what works in teaching and learning and how improvements could be made. Thus the teacher’s voice and the student’s voice become key to the CPD agenda. For example, recent research by the ESRI (for the NCCA) of students’ experiences of lower secondary education highlights the critical role students and teachers can play in identifying successful pedagogical practices and ways to improve learning (Smyth et al, 2006).

Focusing on teachers’ and students’ classroom and school experiences as central to CPD, recognises that teachers’ professional development needs will extend beyond support for national policy initiatives following from NCCA advice on curriculum and assessment, represented in Table 1. Granville (2005) has noted that while curriculum concerns constitute a significant portion of the professional lives of teachers, curriculum issues do not constitute the entire range of teacher professional concerns (p. 69). Nationally mandated professional development, while key to supporting policy implementation becomes only one part of a national CPD model. Any new model must recognise that professional development to support policy implementation exists in parallel with many other providers of professional development including colleges of education, universities, trade unions and private institutions. While this paper focuses on the CPD priorities arising from the NCCA’s work, it is important to recognise the need for any new CPD model - in emphasising the teacher as central to the model, to provide greater coherence and connectedness between CPD opportunities for teachers in the larger context. The next section proposes a new model for CPD, with the teacher at the core of this new model.
CPD models

For the past two decades, teacher inquiry, reflection and continuing professional growth have been linked to effective practice (Harris 1998). Influenced by Schon’s (1987) notion of beginning teachers becoming reflective practitioners, educators and policy-makers alike have come to place significant emphasis on the value of teacher-inquiry and the importance of providing time and supports for teachers to engage in review and reflection of their own practices. In this regard, the NCCA’s ongoing Primary Curriculum Review has resulted in the development of templates designed to prompt teachers in thinking about their own teaching and their children’s learning within and across curriculum subjects. The time provided by the DES to support teachers’ structured review and reflection, has proved enormously successful in this context.

It is through dedicated opportunities for self-reflection and action, that teachers themselves learn how to question, analyse and change (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995) in a process which is deeply contextualised and entirely relevant to their own teaching experience. Thus, research-based professionalism has been used to refer to the process of enhancing teacher professionalism through constructing professional knowledge-bases from self-studies of teachers’ professional practices (Whitehead, 1998). Living educational theories have been described as the explanations which teachers offer for their own professional learning as they ask and answer the question, how do I improve what I am doing?

Despite this general consensus about the importance of teacher reflection and action, decisions about professional development are currently made not by teachers but by at least three other agencies (the NCCA, the Teacher Education Section (TES) of the DES\(^2\) and the Support Service) who may consult with teacher representatives, but nonetheless do so in the service of a policy target, a curriculum change. It could be argued that the in-service needs of teachers are decided in the light of the need to bring about particular change in the system, rather than on the basis of supporting professional development. The provision of in-career support for teachers on curriculum and assessment only when there is a policy change in that area creates a

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\(^2\) The TES incorporates the work of the former In-Career Development Unit and the areas of the DES which had responsibility for pre-service teacher training at third-level.
culture of change as event rather than process, and places change as something demanded by the system rather than a constituent component of professionalism.

In a recent paper for the OECD, John Coolahan suggested that if teachers are to drive the lifelong learning agenda in schools, then they should be lifelong learners themselves. Lifelong learning, he suggests, should be regarded as the master principle for the future renewal of the teaching profession (OECD, 2002). As a master principle, lifelong learning could be built into the teaching career in a number of creative ways:

- Teachers having professional learning plans which are enacted in a variety of contexts and supported by a variety of providers
- Teachers having professional learning accounts which can be debited for further or post-graduate study but credited for in-career support associated with curriculum/assessment change.
- Teachers having sabbatical time granted after a certain number of credits have been achieved.

In the U.S. context, Elmore (2006) has noted that

*The existing occupational and career structure in schools and school systems is completely inadequate as a basis for improvement. Teaching is a largely undifferentiated occupation, while improvement demands that it become more differentiated – allowing teachers who have developed strong expertise in particular domains to lead the improvement of instruction in those domains by working as mentors, coaches and professional developers* (Elmore, p. 126).

These observations are no less significant in the Irish context. Such a shift in the focus of professional development to provide greater opportunities for teacher leadership, and to recognise the value of teacher leadership and expertise, would ultimately support greater curriculum and assessment innovation at local level and the planning for and delivery of local responses to local educational issues. Examples of how these discrete elements come together and become operationalised within a CPD policy at system level, are well documented in a number of jurisdictions.

Moving from the global to the local presents opportunities to value teacher inquiry as a worthwhile exercise in itself, both individually and collectively. It follows that a new
model of CPD would recognise and respond to the potential for teachers to generate a view of their own learning needs as teachers and as teaching colleagues. Thus, individual schools or networks of local schools (as learning organisations) would provide centres or hubs for staff reflection, research and action at local level. Given the potential for these hubs to both tap into teachers’ CPD needs through teacher reflection and needs analysis, and to build capacity for the thinking school (following from the work of Leadership Development Schools (LDS) initiative), they too provide a critical site in setting the agenda for the professional development of their staff.

Valuing local inquiry in the ways outlined above, leads to a model of CPD which recognises three sites for identifying the CPD needs of primary school teachers. In this tri-fold model the locus of decision making concerning teachers' professional development needs focuses on the individual teacher, local networks of teachers, and the national agenda. Taken together, teachers’ personal CPD plans, school CPD programmes and national CPD priorities would provide the inputs for designing and structuring CPD for primary teachers. Table 2 provides an overview of this new model:

Table 2. Overview of new CPD model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Responsive to</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal CPD Plan</td>
<td>Teacher inquiry:</td>
<td>Teacher’s professional identity and specific professional needs (including breadth and depth of experience, curriculum priorities, leadership potential, age/ stage of career, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- personal/professional review and reflection</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- generation of empirical knowledge concerning classroom practice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPD Network</td>
<td>Collective reflection and action planning.</td>
<td>Specific local context (including demographics of student population, specific curriculum challenges, particular parents’ needs, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National CPD Programme</td>
<td>Policy implementation</td>
<td>National priorities and needs associated with the implementation of policy (including curriculum development, teaching and learning, assessment, etc.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3 This site for CPD decision-making would include networks facilitated by Education Centres including learning support and resource teacher networks, networks for small schools, etc.
This new model presented in Table 2, would place in-career development as a subset of professional development – as a subset of ‘career development’ and generate a wide range of in-career development opportunities, reflective of system needs, but also aimed at offering teachers ownership, through choice of the path of their professional development.

Thus, opportunities for professional growth and for school change during one’s primary teaching career would exist both inside and outside the school. These opportunities would reflect the three sites for decision-making concerning teachers’ CPD needs and would include a range of structures including, teacher-researcher groups, peer review groups, teacher networks and organisational partnerships, and programs that involve teachers in national, school-based, and local curriculum planning and development. This model would recognise the many providers who support teachers in this work, which currently include the PCSP, the Education Centres, the Colleges of Education, other third level providers, and the Irish National Teachers’ Organisation.

The relative weighting among the three elements of the proposed model - individual teacher, local network and national priorities, would be critical in getting the balance right and ensuring the new model could effectively meet the needs of individual teachers, local schools, and system priorities.

**Partners’ roles**

The key to any new model lies in the creative synergy between the professional development agenda of teachers and the change agenda of the system. As discussed, this would underpin a shift towards increasingly seeing the *focus* of professional and in-career development as the teacher -not the subject or curriculum area, not the programme, not the initiative. Following from Elmore (page 7 of this paper) the new model would afford new opportunities for teacher leadership and expertise including specialist roles. Thus CPD would become something that teachers do as part of the development of the profession, not something that is done to them by the system when the system needs them to change. This marks a new role for teachers in the proposed model.
The present model of national in-service places teachers very much on the receiving end of policy changes at national level. Thus, messages about curriculum policy travel from the NCCA to the TES to the support services and finally, on to teachers. The present model is linear, with the change message being generated at one end of the line and implemented in another. Experience has shown that close partnership between the NCCA and the support services for primary school teachers is crucial in clarifying policy messages and encouraging maximum ownership of curriculum ideas among teachers. This synergy is evident in the NCCA’s membership of PCSP Design Teams, for example, and the collaboration with School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI), Primary and PCSP in developing curriculum review and curriculum planning templates. While it is true to say that this involvement with PCSP, SDPI and Leadership Development at primary, is established and expected, it is relatively circumscribed and can vary between different subjects/areas of the curriculum. The distance between the curriculum message and the classroom and students also makes it difficult for the information on implementation to be fed back to the NCCA to inform future curriculum reviews. In the present model, effective liaison between NCCA and agencies working in support of educational change become critical to providing coherent messages about policy change for schools and early childhood settings.  

While the nature of the NCCA as a representative body and its commitment to consultation ensures that teachers are involved in the development process, the vast majority of teachers, as noted, are frequently on the receiving end of the message. One particular feature of the NCCA’s Strategic Plan (2006-2008) is worth noting in this regard. Across numerous projects, Council’s work currently involves ongoing engagement with schools (principals, teachers, parents and children) as a means of informing the curriculum development process. By partnering with schools in this way, the NCCA is able to test and improve developments on a limited scale in order to ensure that they work and they represent an efficient use of resources. This direct engagement with schools builds capacity for curriculum change and evolution in schools (e.g., School Based Developmental Initiative (SBDI) on the ICT Framework, SBDI on the draft Report Card Templates, etc.), while providing critical input in the

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4 The Teacher Education Section (TES) (ICDU) of the DES oversees in-service provision for Early Start settings. Some in-service has also been provided for practitioners in Traveller pre-schools. Under the DEIS programme, the DES will support CPD in a greater range of Early Childhood settings.
curriculum development process. In the same way, within a new model of CPD, schools would have a very significant capacity-building role for teaching as a profession.

Professional networks based in schools and connected with local Education Centres would provide a key support mechanism for teachers by helping to identify their professional needs (as individuals and in the context of the whole school’s needs) and the professional development solution which best meets these needs. The Education Centres have recently worked closely with the NCCA to support capacity building in schools for intercultural education, following publication of the NCCA guidelines on *Intercultural Education in Primary Schools* (NCCA, 2005).

By bringing teachers closer to the centre of policy development and change, the proposed model of CPD would shrink the distance between the curriculum development and curriculum implementation processes. The new model would also go some way toward narrowing the *implementation gap* - the silent pause between development and practice, where a policy becomes implemented *in theory* (as a requirement) before it is translated into practice some time later.

It would require even more significant levels of collaboration between partners with some blending of roles among policy-makers, curriculum developers, curriculum implementation providers (pre-service and in-service), support networks and school staffs. Within the proposed model, collaboration among partners would ensure that CPD is responsive to policy changes, local school circumstances including children’s needs, and individual teachers’ needs all within the context of research evidence of experiences teaching and learning – at local and national levels.

Further considerations

This paper began by recognising and highlighting the complexities of teaching as a profession. It proposed a new model for responding to the CPD needs of individual teachers in particular school contexts and in light of policy developments. It argued for placing teachers at the heart of this new model – and recognising teachers both as
consumers and generators of information concerning effective classroom practice and improved student learning, which are central purposes of CPD. Three further and related considerations are addressed in this section; they concern quality assurance, evaluation and research in the new CPD model.

Elmore (2006) has noted that professional development brings the general and the externally validated in contact with the specific and the contextual. Recognising teachers and classrooms as central to the proposed new model of CPD means that the site for measuring quality in in-career support would shift from the training session to the classroom. However, to date in Ireland there has been a lack of a comprehensive national evaluation programme focusing both on the quality of course offerings and their impacts and effects on classroom practice. This lack of commitment to evaluation is not particular to Ireland:

*A key question is the effectiveness of different professional development programmes – their quality, relevance and impact need to be addressed. However, in many countries it seems that the outcomes are not evaluated in a rigorous manner. What evaluation is carried out is often limited and poorly disseminated so that models of best practice are not readily available to policy makers or to practitioners.* (Hargreaves et al, 2001, p. 123)

While there have been some evaluations of in-career initiatives in terms of their quality and effectiveness as professional development activities -most recently, the Evaluation of the PCSP (Murchan et al, 2005), there has been little work on evaluating to what extent the desired impact on teacher/school practice was achieved, and to what effects. To date, there has been no comprehensive evaluation of the many different approaches to professional development in the Irish context. Questions concerning the relative effectiveness of different interaction strategies (including the structure and scheduling of courses, the location of professional development offerings, the potential of the Internet, and so forth) are as yet, unanswered.

The education system in Ireland is also slow to collect comprehensive data prior to a change being introduced. A critical analysis of policy and practice in teacher professional development conducted by researchers from St. Patrick’s College in Drumcondra and UCD noted that a lack of evaluation and research appears to pervade the Irish context (Sugrue et al, 2001). The researchers speculated whether the failure
to evaluate programmes systematically and conduct research as a basis for policy change, sends subliminal messages to teachers about the importance of evaluation and rigour generally in the system.

In this regard, New Zealand’s *Best Evidence Synthesis (BES)* programme (based in the Ministry of Education since late 2003) is notable. It provides a compelling example of how research evidence is used to inform the professional development agenda at national and local levels. BES uses evidence from a range of research sources about what works in teaching and what produces learning to inform professional development and ultimately, to underpin policy and operational development within the education system. For example, one synthesis began with the question *what constitutes quality professional development as it relates to learning opportunities, experiences and outcomes for children within diverse early childhood provisions?* (Ministry of Education, 2002). The resulting synthesis presents information drawn from many sources concerning effective pedagogy, outcomes for children, and characteristics of professional development nationally and locally.

Documenting localised evidence of principals’, teachers’, parents’ and children’s experiences with the *Primary School Curriculum* (1999), and providing access to findings nationally has become a very recent reality. Studies in the past three years (including evaluations by the DES Inspectorate, national assessments by the ERC, curriculum review by the NCCA, surveys by the INTO and research by many other agencies and institutions) provide critical insights into teachers’ professional needs and the supports teachers require in responding to these evidence-based needs. The depth and breadth of teachers’ professional needs as documented in these studies reflect the NCCA’s current work agenda, and the schedule for in-service by the PCSP. They highlight the diversity of teachers’ CPD needs determined by very particular classroom contexts. Most importantly, collectively the findings provide an important framework for measuring or evaluating the effectiveness of teacher CPD in terms of system and teacher needs. The new model of CPD should connect these fragmented pieces of evidence as a basis for CPD at national level. Syllogistic alignment between the design of CPD opportunities (at the three levels identified in the model) and the evaluation of outcomes or impacts of CPD provision must become a key priority for the new model.
In summary, the purpose of the CPD model outlined in this paper focuses on improving the CPD experience for teachers and ultimately the learning experience for children. It emphasises:

- valuing teacher inquiry by recognising teachers as generators of empirical knowledge about what works in teaching and learning, as well as consumers of nationally driven CPD
- differentiating national CPD initiatives to meet the needs of teachers in specific classroom contexts
- shrinking the policy implementation gap by bringing teachers closer to the policy development process
- generating a framework which connects partners and providers of CPD at system level
- using evidence of best practice to design, develop and evaluate CPD solutions for teachers in different classroom contexts.

The proposed model has at its core the purpose of enhancing a new kind of professionalism among teachers and an improved model of curriculum implementation for all.
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Bibliography


