

***Thar tairseach isteach: Working together to support teaching and learning***

*Presentation by Tomás Ó Ruairc, Teaching Council Director, to the annual conference of the National Parents' Council – Post-Primary*

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This is a picture of a major archaeological dig from the Orkney Islands which has yielded many secrets about the community that lived there 5,000 years ago. But for all that it has revealed, there is much that we still do not know about the people who lived there. Nick Card, one of the lead archaeologists on the dig, said “Archaeologists are not really after treasure, we’re after the whole story.”

This paragraph sums up a lot of what I would like to talk to you today – about the unique essence of a community, and how it applies to teaching and learning; and about the whole story of teaching and learning, and the role each of us has in helping our children and young people to write that story. Some people think that education should be about the finding the treasure, the elusive top grade, the unique insight that will give them an edge in an exam. Teaching and learning, however, are far more about the whole story, the whole person.

The nexus between teaching, learning and parenting, between teachers, learners and parents, is most complex and intriguing. If we tried to fathom it all, we couldn't. What we can best do is anchor it in our lived experience first, and then try and understand the landscape in which we are. One example from my own lived experience was where my eldest daughter was struggling with long division, and I sat down with her to try and help her work it out for

herself. And as I was working through the process of estimation with her, the penny dropped with me. Here was a beautifully simple example of what we say to teachers, learners and parents alike - you have got to be prepared to get it wrong in order to get it right. So today, I would like to talk about teaching and learning, for teachers and learners, and all the relationships that are involved in supporting these dynamics.

What am I here to say? That the parents of Ireland can trust teachers? No. Not because it is not true - you can, and you do, trust the teaching profession. I say no because that is not the most effective way to maintain and enhance that trust. Nor is it the most effective way to deal with those cases where that trust is breached. So what am I here to say? I am here to say that if we are all serious about making the learning experiences of our children and young people all that they possibly could be, we will all have to re-imagine how we currently engage with each other in talking about teaching and learning.

When I say "we", I mean everybody - parents, teachers, students, bodies such as the Teaching Council and the National Parents' Council. So I am not so much here to say or declare particular things - although there will be a bit of that. I am here more to explore with you how we might enhance our ways of working together to support teaching and learning for us all - including teachers and parents. And I hope that this presentation, and the Q and A that follows, will merely be the beginning of a new way of talking about our children's learning, and our teachers' learning, that will help drive a new energy through teaching and learning in this country. So here I am saying that I want to explore how all the relationships that support teaching and learning can be best maintained through talking, through direct, honest communication.

I imagine that many of you will want me to get straight to Fitness to Teach - how will that work, what it will mean, what the possible outcomes will be etc. Bearing in mind that this is the first time for a Director of the Teaching Council to address this gathering, I would ask you to bear with me as I set out all the Council does in maintaining and enhancing the quality of teaching and learning in our schools. While there is an understandably high level of interest in Fitness to Teach, it has to be seen in the broader context of our work in order to be properly understood. But more than that, if you want us to achieve our primary goal, we cannot afford to focus solely on Fitness to Teach. So here I am talking about the bigger picture, the wider landscape, of which we are all a part.

To summarise, I want to explore with you the concepts of teaching and learning as they apply to our teachers and students. I would like to explore all the relationships that support those dynamics. I want us to think about how those relationships can be both supported and challenged in an appropriate way, particularly through honest communication. And I want to us to try and imagine, picture, the landscape in which all of this is happening, so that we and those we care about might find it easier to navigate our way through it.

At the end of this session, I would hope that you have a better understanding of what the Council is and does, and why; I would like to have a better understanding of what your hopes are for our children and young people; and I would like for us all to have a better sense of how we can help each other in empowering our children and young people to create their own future.

## **Landscape**

Let's start with the landscape. Let's remember that one of our first frames of reference for what we see and hear is what we have seen and heard up to this point - our lived experience. I am a parent too, as well as a teacher. My own sense is that for a parent, there is one process that matters - the learning experience of our children. There is one river if you like, one flow, along which our children progress from pre-school to post-primary and beyond. Many tributaries feed into that river, but at the end of the day, what we really care about is the nature of our children's journey along that river. We may be aware to varying degrees of those other tributaries, of the valleys from which they come. But in the reality of lived experience, they are not always our fundamental or most visible concern.

We here today are in a slightly different space. If we're not in a helicopter surveying the valley, we have certainly scaled one side of the valley in an attempt to get a sense of the wider landscape. The Council, the Department, management bodies, teachers' unions, parents' councils, and many others - we are all tributaries that feed into that river of learning. We are all a part of that landscape. And just as tectonic plates shift over time, just as glaciers and rain erode and change landscapes, so the nature and direction of these tributaries, these influences, also shift.

The landscape is crowded – we all know that. So we have choices. We can bemoan the crowded state of the landscape and wish that it were not so. We can try and accelerate the process of landscape shift in an attempt to increase our own influence and impact.

Or we can let nature take its course, and in the meantime build sound bridges of connection between our various valleys so as to enhance our collective impact for the better on the river of learning that our children experience.

This latter option may sound hopelessly naive. But the first option - bemoaning - achieves nothing. The second one - trying to intervene in the process of landscape shift - is destructive and rarely if ever achieves what we are seeking, definitely in the longer term. We have been through a very traumatic period as a country. As we begin to emerge from that, we have to reflect on what we really want, on what we want to do, and what our aspirations are for our children and young people. I'll leave you to ponder that for a moment.

### **Council's position in, and contribution to, the landscape.**

So having sketched out the landscape, I would now like to describe the Council's views of the teaching and learning journey in it, what our guiding values are, what pillars support that work, and how we think they apply to the teaching profession.

#### *Values*

The core values of the Council's work are collective professional confidence, shared professional responsibility, and professional leadership. As you may be aware, we are the only professional standards body in Ireland with a professional majority on it. I realise that to some of you, this may not sound like a tenable position - how come all other professions have a lay majority but not teachers? What makes them so special?

In terms of the teaching profession, I work from a saying of one of your children's favourite superheroes - "with great power comes great responsibility." I have said on a number of occasions publicly to teachers that there is an onus on them to clearly demonstrate to you and the wider public that they can continue to be trusted to lead the enhancement of the standards of their own profession. I also point out that this position of leadership is not a carte blanche to do as they see fit.

This position of leadership that the profession has been entrusted with is bound up with the concept of partnership. They must lead in partnership with others, including parents. And this position can of course be taken away as easily as it has been granted. Hence the onus on the profession to show that this trust is well placed.

What this means in practical terms is that much of our work starts with the profession. They commence the conversation, but it must move on and include all the other voices, all the other tributaries, before concluding and reaching its destination. I will come back to this in a few moments in the context of CPD or professional learning.

To parents and the wider public, I have also been quite clear publicly - give the Council, give the profession, a chance to show that it can continue to be trusted with this position of leadership. Give us the functions, give us the space, time and resources to exercise them properly and fairly, and then form a view as to how well we are doing or not. At this point in time, our functions in both Fitness to Teach and CPD have yet to be commenced. The Council is

extremely keen to see both of them commenced before its term of office ends in March 2016.

We ask you to work with us in helping to achieve this, so that we can complete the framework of quality assurance that our teachers, children and young people are entitled to.

### *Pillars*

There are three pillars that support the Council's work - research, reflective practice and relationships. For the purposes of this presentation, they are very much bound up with the concept of teachers' learning.

I think that an embedded culture of research in the teaching profession is one of the most strategically significant challenges facing teaching and learning in Ireland this century. Such a culture would involve easier access to research – which the Council now provides – but also space and time to reflect on that research, to learn from it, and adapt practice accordingly. Research, simply put, is essential for all learning, including that of teachers.

Reflective practice is a key pillar for teachers' learning at every stage of their careers, from the day they start learning to become a teacher to the moment they retire, and perhaps beyond. Reflective practice also requires space and time to think about practice and to interrogate it. Reflective practice, therefore, is also essential for teachers' learning.

And finally relationships. As Tracy Takuhoma-Espinosa has said, putting it somewhat bluntly if nonetheless effectively (2014, 51) –

*Good relationships help learning; bad relationships impede learning – it's as simple as that.*

Good relationships are the bedrock for open honest professional conversations between parents and teachers about their children's learning. Good relationships can help everyone talk about the learning in such a way as to identify what is going well, and what is not, and what everyone can do to support the learners to improve.

To be clear, the primary focus of all of our collective efforts is the quality of learning experience for our children and young people. It has been stated that the quality of teaching is one of the most important influences on that experience, if not the most important.

What is becoming increasingly clear to us in the Council, however, is that the quality of students' learning depends every bit as much on teachers' learning as it does on their teaching. This may sound odd, but is actually stating the obvious. If you walked into a doctor's surgery, and saw that their most recent parchment was dated 20 years' ago, how comfortable would you feel? Any profession worth its salt knows that it must always learn so that it can always practise.

The good news is that the vast majority of teachers know this already - they know that they must always learn so that they can always teach. Over 70% of teachers across primary and post-primary engage in one form of CPD or another. Or as John C. Dana puts it, quoted by Tracy Tokuhama-Espinosa (2014, 31), "Who dares to teach must never cease to learn."



So what do we need to do? We need to develop a system or framework that will enable teachers, parents and pupils to understand teachers' learning better - how much should they be doing? What should they be learning? How should they be identifying and choosing those areas of learning? How will teachers and the public know that the learning is of good quality? And how can we all best support their learning?

This latter question is quite significant. Teachers have a sense that their learning is not supported at a cultural level to the extent that it should. You may disagree with that. But teachers who have spoken to us contrast the set up in schools with that of hospitals. In hospitals, student doctors accompany consultants in real time engagement with real patients with real illnesses. In schools, many student teachers are told not to admit that they are student teachers; they are not given exam classes; there seems to be an unspoken assumption that unless a teacher is beside the whiteboard or blackboard all the time, they are not doing their job. There seems to be a sense that while CPD and learning is good for teachers, when the chips are down, time away spent learning is a luxury that can be ill-afforded. We hear talk about the disruption that teachers' learning causes to schools. And while these processes should be carefully managed, we should be equally careful not to lose sight of how essential teachers' learning is to our students' learning.

### **Council's work in supporting teachers' learning**

So one of the obvious questions might be - fine, if teachers' learning is so important, and we all have a part to play, what part is the professional standards' body playing?

Fair question. The work of the Council covers a lot of what happens after the moment someone says - "I want to be a teacher." There must be some of your children who have had that moment, or who will have it before they sit their Leaving Cert. It is worth noting at this point that teaching remains a highly valued and trusted profession in Ireland, and we need to keep it that way.

The Teaching Council is the professional standards body for teaching. That means that we promote and regulate the profession. We are a statutory body, established under the Teaching Council Act 2001. We are charged with maintaining and enhancing the quality of teaching and learning in our schools.

How does the Council impact after that moment, when someone says "I want to be a teacher"?

Firstly, we advise the Minister on the entry criteria onto all programmes of Initial Teacher Education - the B.Ed. or H. Dip, what is now called the PME. So the standards that your children who want to be teachers will have to meet will reflect the advice that we give the Minister.

Secondly, we review and accredit all programmes of Initial Teacher Education. This is quite a high stakes process. We give what is called professional accreditation. Academic accreditation is where the colleges or Universities decide if a programme is a degree, Masters, diploma etc. Professional

accreditation is where the professional standards body decides if the programme adequately prepares people for the professional requirements of teaching. Under the Teaching Council Act, if the Council does not grant accreditation, the graduates of that programme cannot become registered teachers, so it is a very significant function.

The Council maintains the register of teachers, on which there are almost 90,000. Since 28 January this year, all teachers working in recognised schools must be registered with the Teaching Council, otherwise they will not be paid. The register is one of the most important and visible reassurances that you have as to the quality of people that are entering the profession. The standards that people must meet in order to be registered are clearly set out in Council regulations, which have the status of a statutory instrument, or secondary legislation. A huge amount of work has gone into creating that register, and a huge amount of work continues to go into maintaining it.

The Council is also responsible for establishing the procedures and criteria for the induction and probation of newly qualified teachers (NQTs). All NQTs must satisfy these criteria in order to become fully registered members of the profession. In essence, induction and probation is about ensuring that the NQTs are continuing to make adequate progress in adapting what they have learned in ITE to the daily realities of classroom life. We are piloting a new model for this, called Droichead - I can say more about that in the Q and A if you wish.

The Council is also responsible for teachers' CPD, also referred to as their professional development or professional learning. Under section 39 of the

Teaching Council Act, which has yet to be commenced, we will have the function of accrediting programmes of CPD. The Council has also stated in its Policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education that we intend to link teachers' ongoing professional learning to their renewal of registration, which is the case for all other professions. We are currently engaged in a consultation process with teachers on the development of a national framework for CPD. We will of course be engaging with all stakeholders, including parents, as we develop that framework.

The Council will also be responsible for the Fitness to Teach process , often referred to as Part 5 of the Teaching Council Act. At this point in time, it has yet to be commenced, but we are hopeful that it will be commenced early in the New Year. You may recall that the previous Minister for Education announced in January the Department's intention to amend Part 5 to bring it into line with the provisions of other professions before commencing. The work of drafting the bill is ongoing. Many of the changes were sought by the Council itself previously. We are working closely with the Department to ensure that this process is completed as soon as possible.

I can say more about the mechanics of the Fitness to Teach process in the Q and A. But for now, I would urge you to remember that Fitness to Teach is but one part of the Council's work programme which is seeking to help maintain and enhance the standards of teaching and learning in our schools. We hear talk from time to time of the need to punish or fire bad teachers, or the need to reward the top 10% of teachers. Such views, while understandable, are misguided. As Hargreaves and Fullan have pointed out, any scheme that would focus on the bottom 10% or the top 10% ignores the 80% in the middle, who

are also teaching our children. Zubin Austin, from the Ontario College of Pharmacists, which regulates the profession, has pointed out that the opposite of competency is not incompetency, but disinterest. (Like the opposite of love is not hate, but boredom.)

What you can take from this is that every aspect of the Council's work – entry criteria, ITE, induction and probation, Fitness to Teach, CPD, research – is of vital importance in maintaining and enhancing standards.

### **Relationships - connecting with parents**

So that's what the Council does; that's our view of teaching and learning for both our teachers and learners. How does it connect with what you do as parents? How should it connect? And if there is a gap in the answers to those two questions, how might we begin to close that gap?

I referred earlier to relationships as one of the pillars that supports the Council's work. We all know that good relationships are essential to effective teaching and learning. There is much research to back this up in the area of student well-being. Teachers know this, and you know this. If students are hungry or unhappy going to school, they will not learn, or they will not learn much.

Trust of course is the bedrock of good relationships. At a conscious or subconscious level, we trust teachers every day - we entrust them with the care of the most precious gifts in our lives. So far, so good.

But what then? If we are to be honest with ourselves as parents - and I'm including myself here - how much do we engage with the teaching and learning process beyond that moment at the school gate?

You may respond that we have the parent-teacher meetings. True - but that will typically be one night a year, where we run from one teacher to another, then talk to our children at home, and then life moves on. You may also mention the Parents' Council of the school. As I understand it, Parents' Councils do incredible work helping with the running of the school, conducting fundraising, helping out with school tours. But how often do we talk with teachers about the teaching and learning that our children experience every day? We have to ask ourselves the question - is this enough? Could we do more? There are no easy answers to these questions, when we all lead very busy lives, and have so many pressures to contend with. But remember that according to our Constitution, we are the primary educators of our children. We entrust schools and the teaching profession to exercise this right on our behalf. But if we are to empower the next generation to create their own futures, if we are to give them the confidence and skills to be willing to address the unknowable challenges of that future, can we do more to work with teachers, support them, and challenge them, to bring teaching and learning alive for us all?

And in fairness to you, there is of course a responsibility on teachers to facilitate those conversations on teaching and learning. As parents, you have to want them; as teachers, they should be opening the doors more often to them.

The good news is that we are coming across increasing evidence of teachers opening the doors of their classrooms to their colleagues and engaging in mutual observation so as to enhance their practice. In fact, as I speak to you now, back in Maynooth, there is a wonderful exhibition of students' work at the Engineering and Technology Teachers' Association in Maynooth. This morning, the teachers have invited the parents of those students to their conference to thank them, acknowledge them, for their contribution to their children's achievement. This is wonderful, and we need to see more of it.

We do need to maintain momentum. I asked teachers before - which of these two actions would create more trust amongst parents and the public –

(a) I go on the six-one news, look directly into the camera and state "The people of Ireland can continue to trust teachers" or

(b) schools throw open their doors and host parents and families in celebrating their children's work as a community of learners. This latter point is crucial - we all discuss our children's work in an individual sense with teachers at parent-teacher meetings. But how often do we celebrate their work as a member of their peer community? Our children do not learn in isolation - they learn as members of a larger group. Why do we not celebrate their learning in a way that truly reflects this more often?

As a Council, we are encouraging the steps that members of the profession are already taking to establish a culture of collaboration and collegiality as the norm. There is much research to support the idea that such a culture is far more beneficial to the learning outcomes of our students. But for a culture

such as this to take root and thrive, they need your support. They need to have honest professional conversations with you.

As Robert and Edward Skidelsky put it (2012):

*For a social species such as ours, the good life is essentially a life in common with others. Its home is not in the brains of individuals but in groups of people doing things together.... Collective participation is essential to all but the most solitary visions of human fulfilment. (92)*

*...such groupings depend for their continuing vitality on the recognition of the surrounding culture; without it, they are liable to implode in mistrust and resentment. (93)*

Tokuhamma-Espinosa (2014, xxxviii) says that *“the development of shared values, including the importance of education, is vital to providing the right conditions for learning. The community also reflects another factor that influences learning: culture.”*

### **Connections across boundaries - professional conversations**

So perhaps at this stage we are acknowledging the need to connect better, to paraphrase George Bernard Shaw. And we have some sense of practical ways in which we might do this.

What are the implications of this, particularly in a system where we all tend to look to the Department of Education and Skills for direction and answers?



Firstly, it has to be acknowledged that they are the Department, and we live in a democracy. The DES is the Department with overall responsibility for policy setting and direction for the education system as a whole. And if we imagine the triangular relationship between the DES and national agencies (NCCA, Teaching Council, SOLAS) at one apex, parents and learners / students at another, and schools and teachers at the third, there is a very strong tendency for schools / teachers and parents / pupils to cast their view upwards to the "national agencies" to resolve problem x or challenge y. This is perfectly understandable.

But again I ask the question - is this way it should be? Is this the most effective way of communicating or working in the interests of our children and young people? For even in a small island nation as our own, it must be acknowledged that all power, all leadership, is circumscribed by a multitude of interacting forces - local, regional, national and global. Coming back to that river of learning that our children and young people must navigate, when the waters are choppy, what is the best response - call back to the streams and valleys and tell them to change what they are doing?

Or bring our focus to bear on the site of action - the boat, the oars, the captain in the boat - and work hard to get to a calmer part of the flow?

Put in less abstract terms, it has to be acknowledged that it is those closest to the site of learning who know best how to mediate national policy in that context. You know your own children. Teachers understand them as learners, and they work hard every day to enhance that understanding. Parents - rightly

- tend to have very fundamental questions to ask of the teaching profession.

*How do I know that you are a fit and qualified person to teach my children?*

One answer to that question is the register of teachers. But as a question, and as an answer, they only go so far. I would suggest that what you really want to know, and need to know, is what teachers are doing every day to learn about your children, so that your children can learn for the future that they will create. A national framework for CPD will bring more shape and structure to the conversations around this particular question.

But no matter what area the question relates to, what I am saying is that these conversations about teachers' learning, and our children's learning, and how they interact, need to happen more often. And they need to happen where they matter the most - in your own lives, your own context, your own lived experience.

I would acknowledge that the Council, the National Parents' Council, and other national agencies, have a responsibility to facilitate and support those conversations. Indeed, I would call on the Parents' Council to work with us in doing that.

But we cannot have those conversations for you. Teachers have their lived experience, as parents you have yours, and of course our children and young people have theirs. None of us has a full grasp on the truth of life. It is in the enhanced connections between those experiences, an enhanced understanding of each other's positions in the landscape of learning, that we will get a little closer to that truth. It is by enhancing our ways of working together to support the boat of teaching and learning that we will be able to

step back and let the next generation take that boat around the next bend in the river's course.

As parents, we know in our hearts that there will come a time when we will not see beyond that bend, when our children must venture into an unknown landscape without us. What we crave therefore is the reassurance that we have done all we can to equip them for that journey; what we crave is the sense that they have the confidence and skills to proceed to that stage. The best way we will do that is by enhancing all our relationships around teaching and learning.

That of course can be easier said than done. The last 6 years have been traumatic for us as a society. In the Ireland of today, it's not what we have we hold, it's what we do we are. And what we do, we must do together.

We all of us have stories in our families of ancestors who struggled and strove precisely to make sure that our parents and us would have a better, more comfortable life than they did. They sacrificed what little they had so that we would have so much more.

What they did, they are to us now, through those stories.

What stories will our children and our grandchildren tell of us in years to come? What will we be to them? I hope that we will be remembered as the generation that said, yes, our children and young people may well be the future, but that the only way we will make that future the best it possibly can be is by working together, through our relationships.

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