

Opening remarks to Shared Learning Day for all pilot schools.

Tomás Ó Ruairc, Director, Teaching Council

7 May 2014

Welcome to this first cluster meeting of all pilot schools that are involved in Droichead.

We had our first cluster meeting for primary schools in February, at which I gave some opening remarks as well. I won't go through them all now, but there are a couple of key points that I would like to reiterate.

Firstly, I would like to say thank you - thank you for participating in the pilot, and well done to all involved on what you have achieved so far. I look forward to hearing more about that work throughout the day.

Today is about connections, relationships and learning. Many are coming to the end of the first year of Droichead. And we have principals here who have expressed an interest in taking part in Droichead, who may not be entirely sure, and who want to know more. So make the most of the next few hours. Talk to each other, ask each other the most basic of questions, and then make your mind up. If the last meeting is anything to go by, you will be pleasantly surprised by what you hear. That's not to say that there have not been problems – there have, and there will be problems that we haven't even thought of yet. But the only way that we can solve problems as professionals is to talk to each other about them. Our first response should not be – well, this is clearly not going to work because of X or Y. And in fairness to the pilot

schools and the NIPT, that is not what is happening here. Open, honest, professional conversations have been ongoing throughout the process, we have all been listening, and we have solved problems where we can. Where we have not, we have promised to reflect on them further.

Support, you, your colleagues, process and connections are precisely what Droichead is all about. Droichead is about supporting and nurturing a way of working, a way of reflecting, a way of talking and thinking, that will stand to you for the rest of your career, and thereby to the pupils that you will teach. To be the best you can be, day in, day out, for the next 40 years, will take a huge amount of emotional energy and resilience that you will not maintain on your own. You may well last 40 years with a solitary approach, but neither you nor the children in your care will learn as much as you could if you worked effectively with others. This is about enhancing your skills and competence, certainly – but it is also about supporting you as a person, and nurturing your emotional energy.

Our work is about making sure that you enjoy your career as a teacher, that you support effective learning amongst the pupils in your care, and that you unlock every potential source of support in achieving that goal. That is what maintaining and enhancing standards is all about. We are therefore there to reassure and support, and also to challenge.

It is true to say that there is a conclusion to the process of Droichead – but the process far outweighs the conclusion in terms of your lifelong career as a teacher. Which has made the greatest impact on the person and professional you are today? – the points you got in the Leaving Cert, your final grade in TP; or the relationships you have had at home, at school, in college, your friends, your fellow student teachers, and your communications with them. It may not

be clear now, but if you reflect on this for even a moment, you will know the true answer to this question.

And so it is with the process in Droichead – the professional relationships you form with colleagues and pupils, how you form them, how you reflect on that formation – are far more important than the verification of that process by another person. And if the process was just about catching those who are “failing” or experiencing difficulties, and drumming them out at the first opportunity, we would not be doing Droichead. Other countries do have approaches that focus on this aspect, and the clear result is the deprofessionalisation of teaching, the complete destruction of the morale of teachers, and impoverished learning for all.

Droichead is not about giving someone else the answer that you think they want. Droichead is about the profession searching for its own answers. Indeed, it is about the profession determining what the important questions are, and asking those questions of themselves and each other. And in reflecting on those questions, Droichead is about you being honest with yourself; about you learning from your reflection and capturing that learning; and about others supporting and acknowledging and at times, challenging, that process of reflection, so that you are empowered to be the best teachers you can be, throughout your lives. It is about modelling a process that all teachers should engage in throughout their lives, no matter when they qualified.

If we are talking about the beginning of your career as teachers, and of Droichead as well, I would like to quote you a passage from John O’Donohue on beginnings. Here he talks about new beginnings as events or phenomena that start off small and grow incrementally until they surprise us with how present they are: [P64]

The beauty of nature insists on taking its time. Everything is prepared. Nothing is rushed. The rhythm of emergence is a gradual, slow beat; always inching its way forward, change remains faithful to itself until the new unfolds in the full confidence of true arrival. Because nothing is abrupt, the beginning of Spring nearly always catches us unawares. It is there before we see it; and then we can look nowhere without seeing it. Change arrives in nature when time has ripened. There are no jagged transitions or crude discontinuities. This accounts for the sureness with which one season succeeds another. It is as though they were moving forward in a rhythm set from within a continuum.

I understand that to be part of this pilot has been a courageous act on the part of everyone here; and for those who are thinking of taking part, that you might be apprehensive about doing so. I am reminded of this quote from William Arthur Ward who said:

We can throw stones, complain about them, stumble on them, climb over them, or build with them.

The great news is that you have been building with stones for the best part of a year now. What kind of wall have you built?

The way I would like to briefly give some sense of that wall is through summarising what I learned from the last Shared Learning Day on 7 February:

1. Everyone is engaging openly and honestly with this process of change. It might seem trite to say this, but this cannot always be taken for granted. Even with the robust conversations that we have had throughout the process, it is fair to acknowledge that all parties, Council, NIPT and most importantly you, are coming from a place where we want this to work

based on the best standards. So actually we're coming from, and going to, the same place together, and yet we are all on a journey! There's an element of quantum physics in here somewhere!

2. We are all on a journey in this process – we are making the road by walking. Implicit in this, and in the concept of a pilot, is that we are trying new things out, in real time, at a measured, steady pace, so as to make sure that we learn in a professional way and capture that learning in a consistent, methodical way. Implicit in this too is uncertainty, and making informed judgements in the midst of uncertainty. There is nothing new in this for the profession – teachers do this a thousand times a day, every day. That is one of the hallmarks of professionalism.
3. We are all learning, together. An NQT told the story of how a principal asked her to observe his teaching and give him 3 points of feedback. She was initially very nervous and taken aback. But she did it and found it to be an enlightening experience. She felt that this proved that it was not a judgemental process. So the principal and the NQT learned, in real time, from each other, together.
4. There is still a latent tendency to see Drochead as a type of inspection, a product, an end point. One NQT said – there has to be a point at which this is all done and we are fully qualified! I can totally understand this viewpoint. I remember vividly finishing my last exam in the H Dip for teaching in UCD sports hall, on philosophy of education, and swearing that I would never do another exam as long as I live! I broke that promise about 10 years later – and thank God that I did! If you observe your colleagues in schools over a prolonged period of time, one way or another, formally or informally, no matter how long they are teaching, they are all learning. A new syllabus, a new curriculum, a new pre-

packaged resource, a new programme for LC, new past exam papers, new students every year, new parents, new expectations – teaching is about learning in a maelstrom of uncertainty. What the work of the Council is about is to acknowledge this work that happens already in a more explicit way; we seek to acknowledge and recognise this learning by professionals; we seek to do so in a way that brings greater consistency of standards to the process of learning; and we seek to do so in a way that enables the profession to empower itself, forged in a spirit of true collegiality.

5. There is great hope for the future of the profession in this room. The NQTs impressed and humbled me at the last meeting – I wish I was half as mature and as insightful when I started out teaching. I heard NQTs giving out about “showcase lessons”; I heard them say that you need someone to show you where you’re going wrong; I heard them say that the fear of being observed was largely gone; even better, I heard that same NQT say that they would now be willing to let future NQTs observe them.
6. Language is crucial. The words we choose to use, and how we use them, can make all the difference. “The words you speak become the house you live in.” So we heard principals taking comfort when an inspector said that what they look for is progression, not perfection. We heard an NQT say that through Droichead, “you actually feel like a professional.” We even heard the PST’s referred to as John the Baptist! Which I suppose makes our NQT’s our Messiah!
7. Consistency is important in this process, but so is context. Content is said to be king in teaching, but context is queen. Are we talking about consistency of marking / grading – or are we talking about consistency of

support? If we are talking about the latter at all – and we are! – then we know as teachers that properly given, support must be sensitive to context. Otherwise, it will not work.

8. Some of you may say, *Do we really need a sign-off? Are there not these new-fangled B.Ed. and PME programmes that are going to lead to a new quality of graduate?* As a Council, we say that you do need this, and I'll explain why in a moment. I'm often reminded by my sister that we always have choices in life – nobody forces us to do anything. The answer is that the future of the profession here in Ireland is now in your hands. You can make the most of this opportunity to lead your own professional change – or you can leave it entirely in the hands of external agents. If you do, if you leave it to others to write and tell the story of teaching to the wider community, then they will do so in a way that takes less and less heed of what you feel to be right and best for your pupils. As a Council, we are established on the basis of a teacher majority, of what we call professionally-led regulation. What this means is not a *carte blanche* for teachers to do as they see fit. It means that the story of teaching starts with teachers. It clearly does not finish with them – but it does start – they lead the process, in partnership with others. This is easier said than done. Others have been leading and writing the story for over a hundred years – at least!
9. We in the Council have listened, supported – and challenged! – throughout the process of Droichead, and we will continue to do so. One obvious example of listening is the decision we made in relation to quality assurance after the last shared learning day. One example of support is the research bursary we give each school, not to mention our attendance at various meetings on Droichead throughout the year – this

is important to us. One example of challenge is our response to the point that HEIs should do probation. We do not accept that, because it is entirely inconsistent with the professional values of leadership on which the Council is established. So the process of listening has to be seen as a process of dialogue, of professional conversations – no one of us has all the answers!

- a. On the matter of the bursaries, I cannot make any guarantees, but we are prepared to look at the research bursaries both for schools who are heading into year 2 of the pilot, and those who are thinking of beginning. The pilot will now last 3 instead of 2 years, so we need to have a look at this.

10. Portfolio

- a. I understand that there are some concerns around the portfolio for Droichead. So I would like to offer some reassurances and clarification about where we are now, and outline some of the next steps which we intend to take.
- b. With regard to NQTs who have completed, or are about to complete Droichead, whatever process you have used for recording your reflections throughout the year constitutes your portfolio. I would encourage you to collate them in some protected format, ideally on line in a secure cloud account, for your own sake. Will the Council be looking for your folder or CDROM of reflections before we remove the condition? No, we will not. This is a first iteration of a process, we are all learning.
- c. We have done some thinking as a Council as to some practical points that we feel could be of use to NQTs and PSTs in maintaining portfolios in the future, and they have received a

positive welcome from NQTs on our Steering Committee. This thinking is still evolving. We are discussing it within the Council, we are doing so with the NIPT and other stakeholders, and we would like to discuss it with you. To that end, we would like to convene a small working group of this year's NQTs who would help us bring greater shape to the portfolio. We would also consult with PSTs in next year's pilot.

- d. Why a portfolio at all? Because teacher learning, if it is to be lifelong, needs space and time to support it at a personal level. It needs some kind of structure. The continuum of teacher education is supposed to involve a seamless transition from one phase to another. But transition itself acknowledges that the continuum works across different spaces. That is why teachers need something that they own, that travels with them, across those spaces. Why can't we just copy what the HEIs do? Because the Council works on the basis that the profession should lead the conversation, and we make no apologies for that. So yes, we should talk to HEIs, the PDST and others about the portfolio, and we have already had some discussions with both. But as Director of the Teaching Council, I need a clear sense from you, from the profession, of what will work and will not before we develop those discussions any further.
- e. There is a lot of concern about who the portfolio is for – one view holds that it can either be for the NQT, or for the PST, but it cannot be both. I can understand that view, but I think that we need to try and look beyond it. This is a picture of my youngest daughter, Róisín. She can hardly put two words together, but she

can sing many of the words in the main song from the film, Frozen – if you have children, grandchildren, nephews or nieces, chances are you have heard this song! A key part of the story is where Elsa calls for the gates of the castle to be opened, notwithstanding her fear that her secret sorcery may be discovered. Arguably, the story's conclusion rests on Elsa allowing herself to be vulnerable enough to accept her sister's love so that she can finally live life to the fullest. Vulnerability is a rapidly emerging issue in teacher professionalism – not as a problem, but as a solution; as a means of empowering professionals to have honest, professional conversations. A new understanding of the portfolio rests firstly on the idea that you open the door for yourself to your own reflective capacity. It then rests on the idea that given sufficient time and support, you will open the doors and invite others in to view whatever rooms in the “castle” of reflection you wish them to see – but not the entire castle! This will have no practical impact on you in Droichead. But in your comments at the last meeting about opening the doors of your classrooms to future NQTs, you are already showing that you have some idea of what I'm talking about. It might seem strange for the Director of the Teaching Council to be making a point based on a fairy-tale. But in my defence I would say – 1, I am open to all sources of learning; 2, maybe my wife is right, and I am nothing more than a big child! And 3; fairy-tales are the most ancient and rich teaching resource that we have – they were told before they were written, and they were composed to teach as well as to entertain.

- f. So far we have distilled some key points about the portfolio. These indicate that the portfolio should be:
 - i. Called the Professional Learning Portfolio.
 - ii. Written.
 - iii. Brief, succinct – as little as 8-10 pages for the entire year!
 - iv. Portable, relevant and useful for your entire career as a professional
 - v. Primarily for the NQT
 - vi. A clear demonstration of the learning and reflection of the NQT
 - vii. Support the NQT in having professional conversations with their colleagues
- g. We also get a sense that the mentor could support the NQT in having those professional conversations, as that shepherd to the gate, but not the gatekeeper.
- h. Today is about shared learning, so we would like to hear more of your thoughts about this and all other aspects of Droichead.

In closing I would like to quote from a research article that a post-primary teacher, Beth Cooney, has recommended for reading from EBSCO – this will be listed in our forthcoming e-zine as we approach the end of this school year. It's called "Mindsets that promote resilience", and its focus is on interventions with students based on two different views of the world and of people. Put simply, one view says that we all have the potential to change, and the other says that we do not, that our talents and traits are fixed. I'm summarising here. One of the interesting findings from this research is that interventions and

change have the greatest impact when the group of people involved not only are given the skills and support to implement change, but crucially, they must also understand why. You will make some progress if you provide the resources, but nothing like the progress and improvement you could make if you let people explore and embrace the why. This is not some utopian visionary stuff from Tomás Ó Ruairc – this is hard, scientific, psychological research. This is why the emphasis on resources, perfectly valid and understandable, is only part of the story of Droichead, and of teacher professionalism. The real story of Droichead is to be found in the chapters that you have been writing all year long in your respective schools, in the chapter you wrote together back in February, and in the chapter that you will all write together here today. And in writing today's chapter, you open the book of next year's story.

Make no mistake about this – there are forces at play, at home and especially abroad, that want to snatch the quill and inkpot out of your hands, tear up the vellum, and hand you a glossy, pre-packaged book of resources and instructions. That glossy pack could give you comforting direction, it could tell you what to do and how to do it. What it will not do is free you to explore the why, with each other and with your pupils. And that will be because it does not want to let you do that. What I have witnessed over the past year and half, with NQTs, principals and experienced teachers, through all of the challenge, hostility and support, is a powerful story of a new understanding of professionalism coming alive amongst teachers, driven by teachers themselves, in partnership with others. This is in keeping with the recommendations of the research I have just mentioned, where the authors say:

...collaborative partnerships between researchers, practitioners, and students may be necessary to engineer interventions that will work at scale.

If you substitute “NQTs” for “students” in that quote, that is what we have in Droichead – a collaboration to grow and further awaken professionalism in teaching. Like any process of growth and awakening, there have been times when it has been unsure, unsteady, even under siege! But it has been clear that given enough space, time and light to grow, the core values of Droichead do offer the profession an historic opportunity to grasp the levers of professional change, in partnership with others, in a way that will empower them to bring teaching and learning alive for all of their pupils in a way that they know best. The full implications of this are profound – they have the potential to cut across everything else in education. But they are also very exciting. Those of you who were here on 7 February will recall that sense of energy and reassurance that comes from teasing complex ideas in an uncertain context with others. Today is about sharing that sense of excitement, opportunity and learning with all of your peers, tempering it with a good shake of the salts of reality, and thereby to lead each other, in the deepest, most professional sense of the word, to become teachers for the future, together.

Thank you for listening.