



An Chomhairle Mhúinteoireachta
The Teaching Council

The teaching professional of the future – making explicit what has been implicit

Presentation by Tomás Ó Ruairc, Director of the Teaching Council, to ACCS Convention on 9 March 2013.

The teaching professional of the future. Do I gaze into the crystal ball and tell you what you want to hear? Do I follow De Valera's example, look into my heart, and talk to you in flowery terms about an idyllic Irish teacher who will resurrect a glorious vision of our Celtic past? This is seductive territory for many of us. However dated and out of touch the past may seem to be, in an era when nothing can be taken for granted, when the recent past can be portrayed as a story of us straying from our traditional core values and paying the price, it can be all too tempting for the discourse to become dominated by calls for a "return to the basics", whatever and wherever they may be.

So I can't dazzle you with brilliance, nor can I beguile you with Irish romanticism. What I can do is present what I believe to be a wonderful paradox that is happening as we speak in the teaching profession that I believe offers much hope for the future. Beyond that, the picture is not clear. The best I can do is to pose some questions that might inform our conversations about the teaching professional of the future, and puzzle some of the answers out loud.

I have said on previous occasions that teaching is a commitment to the immeasurable so that others can face the unknowable. In this light, the fact that the teaching **professional** of the future is unknowable is a reassuring paradox, i.e., that is precisely how it should be. For to prescribe otherwise in a top down way would be to tie the hands of future generations in ways that would do unknowable harm.

It can be said that the future of our lifetimes is unknowable, and the future beyond that practically unimaginable. In that case, I believe and I hope that the teaching professional of the future will always be peeking over the horizon of the next generation so as to bring it into imaginable view for their own generation.

The professional of the future will be the professional of today, and the professional of the past, but also be completely new. Confused? Well that's a good start to a presentation like this on a Saturday morning! But the reason I say that is that I believe, and I know, that teachers from the past are working with teachers of the present to become teachers for the future, together.

What do I mean by that?

I had the honour of presenting at a symposium with Anne Looney and Harold Hislop some weeks ago in UCC on the topic of teacher education and curriculum reform. One strand that seemed to link our respective contributions in one way or another was that of shifting roles and blurring boundaries. Jim Deegan from Mary Immaculate College has some interesting things to say on this in a contribution to the volume *"Re-imagining Initial Teacher Education – Perspectives on Transformation."*

Some practical examples include mentor teachers and co-operating teachers. These are roles that were implicit for years in the profession. The fact that these terms have been coined, and that the work has been formalised and given more structure through the NIPT (National Induction Programme for Teachers) in the case of induction, is a case of new roles emerging or being crystallised. Where the blurring boundaries element comes into play is when you look more closely at what happens when these professionals engage with their newly qualified colleagues. For no more than good teaching in a classroom, what transacts is not a chalk and talk lecture about good teaching from the experienced "stalwart" to the new "nymph"; what is happening is that a real professional dialogue takes place between two professionals.

I know of one case recently where a teacher of 31 years' experience mentoring an NQT had a number of conversations about Bloom's Taxonomy which they both found to be mutually enriching. This is a concrete example of how teachers from the past work with teachers of the present to become teachers for the future. So the good news is that the teaching professional of the future is not some hologram in an episode of Star Trek. You are here in this hall this morning, you are in your staffrooms on Monday morning. The work you do with your colleagues, no matter what their length of experience, is creating the teaching professional of the future now.

Which of course raises another interesting question. In the future, I hope that I, or my successor, will not default to talking about the "teaching professional", but rather the "teaching professionals". That in each generation professionalism will be realised, enacted and nurtured for the next generation of teachers to come through shared professional responsibility and collective professional confidence, all in communities of learning.

This happens already – at this conference for example over the last two days! But our hope as a Council for the profession is that through our work with all stakeholders over the next 5-10 years, this will be a given, the common assumption for all teachers.

It is interesting to look at the opening paragraph of Hargreaves and Fullan's volume *Professional Capital* in the preface. The first references to a teacher or teaching are to the profession – "*The result, for us, is a fundamental repositioning of the future of the teaching profession.*" – and to the plural "*In this book, we equip teachers ...*". Note the distinct absence of the singular, 'the teacher'. This is the case throughout the book – 9 times out of 10, they talk about teaching and teachers, about a community of learning and practice.

Before I come to the main questions that I would like to put to you for reflection, there are a few overarching points which can serve to clarify the context for this presentation:

1. In terms of the context in which the teaching professionals of the future will be working and learning, our hope and aim as a Teaching Council is that they will be in the driving seat of their own change processes, in tandem with other stakeholders, all within a framework of policy consistency led by the Council. Through the Policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education, the Criteria and Guidelines for programmes of Initial Teacher Education, and especially through the Code of Professional Conduct, we are seeking to provide teachers with the scaffolding around which they can build their own home of learning teaching, and of teaching learning. This home will change over time, the landscape in which it is built will change over time, but the scaffolding, the core values, should remain the same.
2. Ongoing uncertainty and change – Uncertainty has been described by Hargreaves and Fullan as the parent of professionalism. If that is true, and I think that it is, emotional self-awareness can be described as its godparent. And just as emotional self-awareness is a skill with universal benefits for the person, not just in their professional life, so the questions that we discuss in relation to teaching do not take place in a political or social vacuum – for each generation, such questions in relation to teaching reflect broader trends and concerns. So, in 1920's and 1930's, for better or worse, there was a clear vision for the kind of society for which teachers were expected to prepare pupils. There was a clear understanding as to how long they would stay in schools to receive that preparation. The dynamic of education was very much driven by the Church and State. In the 1970's, the expectations around the period of schooling had moved on somewhat, but the implications for third level participation had yet to be fully worked out. The sense of professionalism around teaching was beginning to emerge, but the Church and the State were still very much in the driving seat. We had just joined the EEC, now the EU. We thought that public services and the State could be run on a much narrower tax base. Now, just over a generation later, we are grappling with many of the same questions, albeit the context is somewhat different – what is our relationship with

the EU? What would we like it to be? What do we want the State and public services to do, and not do? How much are we prepared to pay for that? And in what ways are we prepared to pay for that? What does professionalism mean in teaching? What is the best way of demonstrating the answer to that question? How can we maintain and enhance the quality of teaching in our schools? And now, in 2013, do we really want our children and grandchildren to be grappling with many of these questions when they come into adulthood? We want our children to learn, and be taught to learn, so that they will come up with entirely new questions of their own. Teachers are the key to the realisation of this vision.

3. Now, it can be said that we scratch our heads as a society, still somewhat shell-shocked by the last 5 years, and wonder at the deepest level what will the future be like for our children and grandchildren. There does not seem to be any overarching narrative for all that is going on. Hence the attractiveness of narratives from the past which have long passed their sell-by dates. So the puzzling out loud about the teaching professionals of the future, with no clear answers, is not all that strange. But there is a great opportunity here. Historically, the dynamic has been that our leaders set out a vision for society, a curriculum was designed to project and perpetuate that, and teacher training, as it was then referred to, followed suit. Now, in the middle of a maelstrom of change, confusion and uncertainty, the teaching profession has an opportunity to blaze a trail for our country and society. It appears to me that the only way we can ensure that we recover from this crisis, and avoid the mistakes of the past, is to be always open to learning, to always question the assumptions and received wisdom of that past. We as a Council are seeking to realise the vision that at the heart of an excellent teacher will be the heart of an excellent learner. If the chalk and talk expert of the past is now expected to exemplify learning, then the profession has the opportunity to lead our society in ways that even its own members can scarcely imagine. Teachers have been

leaders in their communities for generations. But they were leaders in the sense of that classic phrase – a pillar of the community, a fully formed structure – they qualified in college, and then they were a teacher for life. Through our work in areas such as the continuum of teacher education, and the Code of Professional Conduct, that “pillar” will be reshaped, rebuilt again and again by the teacher, according to the needs of their learners and their community.

4. If you were to step back to 1933, or even 1974, and asked schools, the State or the Church at the time what the teaching professionals of the future might look like, what would they have said? Would the question have even made sense to them? Perhaps it might have done in 1974, but note that it took 40 years for a Teaching Council to be established, and we are still working on embedding an understanding of the Council’s work amongst the profession at large. So I think that the very fact that we are having a conversation about the concept of “the teaching professional of the future” is something of a paradox – both a remarkable sign of how far we have come, but also of how far we have still to go.

When inviting me to speak at the conference, Ciarán [Flynn] asked me to take the moment when someone first says – I want to be a teacher – and to trace from that point to the end of their career where the Teaching Council has an input or role in the progression from one phase of that journey or continuum to the next. The formal title – The teaching professional of the future – came quickly thereafter. So I thought that the best way to approach this would be to frame a number of questions that we might ask about the teaching professionals of the future, and use them as stepping stones around which to talk about the Council’s role as it would be relevant to the answer to each of those questions.

So, the questions would be:

1. Who will be the teaching professionals of the future? This touches on entry criteria.

2. Who will be teaching the teaching professionals? There may be a large degree of overlap here.
3. How will the teaching professionals know that they are ready for entry into the profession? This touches on induction and probation.
4. What will the teaching professionals do if they are experiencing difficulties?
5. What will the teaching professionals of the future teach their students?
6. When will the teaching professionals of the future emerge?

And in light of the answers to these questions, what understanding of professionalism do we hope the teaching professionals of the future will have? What process of engagement do we hope they will have – with their pupils, parents, with the community, with fellow professionals, in teaching and other professions, and with the State? I think that we have enough evidence in the here and now to make a good educated guess as to the answers to these questions.

1. Who will be the teaching professionals? You may be aware that we have just closed the first phase of consultation on entry criteria, and we will be shortly bringing the feedback we received to Council for its consideration before drafting advice for the Minister. Firstly, we hope that they will continue to be individuals of the highest calibre. International commentators, including Pasi Sahlberg, say that we have one of the highest standards of entry into initial teacher education (ITE) in the world – the top 15% of Leaving Certificate candidates, and that we should not lose that. Issues have emerged in terms of Maths and Irish in particular in the last few years, and our draft proposals do call for a raising of the requirement in both these cases, as in English. The standards that we set as the professional body should be as high as possible but nonetheless achievable. But this deals with the “what”, the content of entry criteria. What about the “how”, the processes by which we select individuals to enter programmes of ITE. We will be looking at these in the next phase of consultation in the autumn. One of the key issues we will have to deal with here is the

question that we ask of this dynamic. Are we going to assess selection procedures in terms of their reliability in predicting that someone will make a great teacher? That would seem impossible and also appear to be incongruous with the very concept of initial teacher education. If a process did do such a thing, then arguably you might not need ITE at all. What should the question be then? At the moment, I think it should be along these lines – to what extent does the person applying to enter a programme of ITE display the potential for learning – to what extent do they show the attitudes and dispositions that indicate they will learn from and engage with all that a programme of ITE has to offer, so that they can become a truly reflective practitioner? The journey of teaching is intensely personal and professional. Am I suggesting that a basic standard in core curricular subjects should not form part of the criteria? No, I am not. We have consistently stated as a Council that subject or curricular knowledge is one key element of the complex skill set required to be a teacher. But I am saying, as the Council has always said, that it is about a lot more than that, and that the ultimate solution to the question of entry criteria, if it is to be sustainable, will have to take cognisance of this.

2. Who will be teaching the teaching professionals? The answer to this question, as I have indicated already, is beginning to emerge, not least through the fact that these two questions may already be overlapping, especially in schools. We hosted a conference on the teacher educator on behalf of the Irish EU Presidency a few weeks ago, where a number of people referred to the teacher educator as the hidden profession. This is the idea that when you hear the words “teacher educator”, you may automatically think of lecturers in a college of education or a University education department. But arguably, mentor teachers and co-operating teachers (those who take student teachers on school placement) in schools are also “teachers of teachers”, teacher educators. In fact, the NIPT are now moving to a phase

of their work where mentors are talking to all the staff of a school and exploring with them how they can all support the NQT in their school.

But the answer to this question goes much further than that. I was struck to hear recently that a transition year group in a school in Wicklow, on completing a module in Development Education, sought a meeting with student teachers, so that they could impress upon them the importance of including this area in their study as “becoming teachers”. And that’s not all! Last October, at a SCoTENS conference on creativity in education, I was enthralled in a workshop given by the Education Department in Maynooth on a module of their PDE, where student teachers teach each other, not just within a year group (i.e., microteaching, although there is more to it than that), but also across year groups in the course. What is happening is that third year students are “mentoring” their second year colleagues on this module, and have been proactively making space and time to do so! Which is another example of shifting roles and blurring boundaries leading to a richer educational experience.

Wonderful, you may say, but where is the Teaching Council in all of this? Through our **review and accreditation of all initial teacher education programmes** in the State. Over a period of about 2 years, we will be reviewing approximately 45 programmes of teacher education from 22 providers to make sure that they meet the standards set by the Council for the profession of teaching – Criteria and Guidelines. This is a formal process with a legal standing in the context of the Teaching Council Act. Each course must have academic accreditation from their awarding authority. But if they do not have professional accreditation from us, on behalf of the profession and in the interests of the public, then people who study on them will not be able to register as teachers. It is as simple as that. But to echo some of my opening comments, our expectation is that the most innovative of teacher education practices will emerge and thrive within this framework, which will give a reassuring scaffolding and language for teachers and teacher educators in all that they do.

3. How will the teaching professionals of the future know that they are ready for entry into the profession? Well firstly, assuming that they have crossed the threshold of the reflective practitioner, they should have a fair idea themselves. But as the professional standards body, we need to have some mechanism in place to verify this, in a way that is consistent with the values of professionally-led regulation, collective professional confidence and shared professional responsibility. And we have a legal responsibility to do so, in the areas of induction and probation. We have just begun a process of consultation with all stakeholders on what we are calling *Droichead* – the Irish for bridge. But I think that it is important to note that there is a careful blend or mix between supports for the NQT during this time on the one hand – mentor, induction workshops – and verification or oversight on the other. So the teaching professionals will know that they are ready because fellow professionals will say to the professional standards body – we are happy to recommend that these teachers progress to the next stage of the continuum of teacher education.

4. What will the teaching professionals do if they are experiencing difficulties? What will the teaching professionals do if they encounter a new type of problem, which they have not been “trained” to deal with, as others might see it?

a. **Share professional responsibility and collective professional confidence –**

hopefully, others will have spotted it and pointed it out to them long before it becomes an issue, and they will be able to take corrective action, either through:

i. Their role as a reflective practitioner

1. We in the Council are aiming to provide support for this in the area of research. The goal here would be that ongoing research would be provided to teachers in the most accessible manner possible, **and**

that it would be frequently accessed **and assessed** by the teaching professionals, exercising their professional judgement.

And / or

- ii. **Through CPD** which will be a requirement for the renewal of registration.
- b. In the rare cases where problems have not been identified, or where action has not been taken, the process of **Fitness to Teach** (Part 5 of the Teaching Council Act, 2001) could apply. The Code of Professional Conduct, the second edition of which was issued last year, is a critical element of this process. The Code is about a lot more than that, which I will come to shortly, but it does have a particular importance in this context. Part 5, when it is commenced, will have to take cognisance of other legislative provisions such as Section 24 of the Education Act. It will also operate in a context where the quality assurance provisions in teaching, for teachers, pupils, parents and the public, will be much enhanced – new entry criteria, extended, reconceptualised programmes of initial teacher education, extended school placement and an enhanced process of induction and probation into the profession.

Ultimately, however, our work in promoting the profession and enhancing its status will be the keystone of this regulatory structure. As the President of the Medical Council recently noted, all the regulatory provisions in the world cannot detract from the personal professional responsibility of the individual practitioner. And how do we ensure that that this new understanding of professionalism is embedded in the thinking of all teachers? By consistently and persistently engaging with their mind-set and worldview as professionals, and engaging in the culture and

environment in which they operate so that the public has an authentic understanding of the complexities and importance of their profession.

5. What will the teaching professionals be expected to teach their pupils and students? Will the traffic in this dynamic be in one direction only? I referred earlier to a symposium that I took part in in UCC last month on teacher education and curriculum reform. One of my concluding points was that teacher education, and indeed teaching, would shortly become the catalyst for all future curricular reform. Anne Looney has quoted someone else in describing curriculum as the set of stories that one generation chooses to tell the next. Which led me to initially pose the question as – what should the relationship be in the future between those whom we trust to tell the story (teachers) and the story they are asked to tell (curriculum)? But then I realised that that was the wrong question. It should be – how should we best prepare those whom we trust to tell the story, so as to enable our children, young people and adult learners to write their own story? And if you recall the examples I mentioned earlier, this is all redolent of a reconceptualisation of where the teaching of teachers will sit in the continuum of teacher education.

6. When will the teaching professionals of the future emerge? Human nature being what it is, we will never know the answer to this one for sure. We don't know for sure, but we have some evidence to suggest both now (teachers from the past working with teachers of the present to become teachers for the future) and in the future. For the Master of the National Maternity Hospital, her moment when she said “I want to be a doctor” was when she received her first Fisher Price Doctor's kit for Christmas! Such a simple moment, filled with the magic of Christmas. But it is also an example that shows how the standing of a profession in society does influence these moments of choice. What motivated her parents to buy that present for her? What conscious or unconscious values or assumptions

influenced this decision that influenced another? The Teaching Council, just like the Medical Council, has a responsibility to promote the profession, and to ensure that the highest calibre of individual continues to be attracted to it. As this Fisher Price moment shows, such work can make all the difference, when we least expect it!

7. If we met the teaching professionals of the future today, what would we say to them? What might they say to us?
 - a. I don't think that we could say anything to them at all that they wouldn't know already. And we couldn't ask them any questions because if they were to answer at all, they would violate the Granny Rule of time travel, the Law of Unintended Consequences!
 - b. So what might they say to us? Will they say - Thank you for providing a new way of engaging with professionalism that supports me in learning teaching and teaching learning? Or will they say - what were you thinking when you missed this opportunity for the profession to drive its own change? After complaining for 30, if not 40 years, of constant change "imposed" from the centre out or from the top-down, when the State was offering you the chance to adapt your own curriculum tailored to the needs of your own students, and the chance to be your own gatekeepers at a key stage on the continuum of teacher education, why did you not seize the opportunity?

That might seem to be an odd statement for the regulator of the profession to make. Are we hinting at a laissez faire attitude here? I don't think we are, and I don't think that it is a crude choice between letting teachers regulate themselves on the one hand, or micromanagement by the State or Church on the other. Our mission is to promote and regulate the profession. Many people when they hear that will see "promote" as the soft underbelly of "regulate" – yes, it is all fine and well to

talk about enhancing the status of the profession through a communications strategy, but let's face it, when the chips are down, the iron fist in the velvet glove is what counts – isn't it?

That is too simplistic a view of what we do and how we do it. The emerging consensus in the literature, in so far as I can tell at this point, is that whole system reform can only be achieved by enabling and empowering teachers to work with, and for each other, to help themselves and others to unlock learning. This for me points to a need for a new understanding of professionalism amongst teachers. It is not sufficient to exhort *"You must trust me! I am a professional! I know what I am doing!"* It would be more accurate, and more effective to say, *"We are professionals – in a community of learning."*, where roles are shifting and blending. This does highlight the need for language, space and time – a new language to say to fellow professionals, and to the public and parents, what it is they do, and space and time in which to reflect on and articulate that language with fellow professionals.

When speaking with Ciarán, he presented me with a very simple, very clear and very powerful concept – choice. He asked me to trace the journey that a person would take to teaching from the moment that they made that "choice" to be a teacher. We all remember that moment ourselves, no matter how young or how old we were when we did, when we sat back and thought, "Yes, I would like to be a teacher." It's not that that moment was the definitive, fateful one. I am sure we had doubts afterwards, had to reflect further, observe and experience more, so the stream might have meandered a bit. But nevertheless, there is clearly a moment in our respective "timelines" before which teaching was not on our horizon, and after which it was.

So you may well ask – for what is for many us quite a personal moment in our lives, how can you relate the Teaching Council to it? Surely, you might say, you are not trying to argue that the Council is responsible for that choice? In many respects, of course I am not. But I would submit that we are slowly, but surely, creating a virtuous loop as a Council, which does relate us to that moment.

Because instinctively, our choice was based on our experience of the quality of teaching which we

ourselves experienced. I was happy in school, I learned a lot, and I liked most of my teachers. And one in particular sowed the seed of that moment of choice. It was in first class, where the teacher impressed me with the air of calm, measured learning that she fostered in the classroom. I am sure that there were aspects of her pedagogy that would be frowned on today, but her contribution to my moment of choice, or my choice moment, was simple, probably not realised by her at the time, but nonetheless profound.

However, I am equally aware that the experience of school for some of my classmates, and for pupils in other schools, was less than ideal. They were not always happy, they did not always learn, they did not like some of their teachers. The Teaching Council is about enhancing the quality of teaching and learning for all learners, we are about ensuring a common, basic standard of excellence across the board in all teachers.

When I was in a college of education, you might hear it whispered that that person is an excellent teacher because they innovate, because they are a really good reflective practitioner. The sub-text, unintentionally, was that these traits were the preserve of the “A” grade teacher, that only the lucky groups of students who were fortunate to pass through these teachers’ classes would get the benefit of this top class teaching. That was the assumption in many cases. But there is a notion gathering strength in the educational discourse in the context of true systemic change, and that is the notion of a common standard of excellence, available and applicable to all.

Look at the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, literacy is not just decoding text, and numeracy is not just doing your “sumai” as my daughter in the Gaelscoil calls them. Higher level skills are defined as being at the heart of what it means to be literate and numerate. Similarly with teaching and with the Code of Professional Conduct, it is not an optional extra to reflect on your practice continuously, it is not an optional extra to collaborate with your colleagues. Every teacher, as a member of the most important profession in society, is expected to exemplify these traits. And by thus enhancing the

quality of teaching for all, we do hope that more people will make the space and time to reflect on whether they might be good enough to be a teacher.

So what understanding of professionalism will the teaching professionals of the future have? How will they engage with other stakeholders? I hope that they will have a whole new language, that we can scarcely imagine now, to talk about their professionalism, I hope that they will then engage with a renewed sense of confidence and courage with all other stakeholders in a mutually enriching journey of lifelong learning that will not entertain any shibboleths, and always strive for, without ever reaching, the perfect question.

They will be working in an education context where teaching continues to be a profession that is governed by the principles of professionally-led regulation, collective professional responsibility and shared professional confidence. Beyond that, however, I think that it is impossible to be definitive. In fact, it may even be educationally unsound. For in essence, a definitive answer to the question of “who will be the teaching professionals of the future?”, if it existed, would be an educational black hole, a concept that would nullify all other educational endeavour, both now and in the future. To puzzle it out loud, in an educational cacophony with others, would be, indeed I hope it has been, a most educationally enriching experience that will never end.

Tomás Ó Ruairc

9 March 2013