

Unleashing social capital with 21st century teachers:

Current trends in teacher professionalism

Presentation by Tomás Ó Ruairc, Director of the Teaching Council, to the annual conference of ETBI

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I would like to thank Pat O'Mahony and Michael for the invitation to speak to you at your first annual conference as the ETBI. The fact that I am speaking to you in that context is itself a clear example of the breadth and depth of change that is coursing through the education system at the moment. The overall theme of your conference revolves around the ETBs as a new structure and the opportunities there are for you in the new era.

Breadth and depth of change – coursing through the system. Social capital. Some of you may be sitting there and thinking – this is all fine and well, but what about the real world of our schools, and the language that is spoken there? After all that has happened over the last 5 months, never mind the last 5 years, the last thing we need to hear about is some new concept or initiative being “unleashed” on an overwhelmed system and a demoralised profession.

Such a view would be perfectly understandable. But in talking about social capital, and unleashing it, I am not talking about “the new thing.” I am talking about a process that will enable the profession to fully engage with and shape the changes that are currently coursing through the system. I am talking about a new “how”, a new way of doing things, rather than a new “what”, or another new initiative.

In this context, it is worth looking at the word *Unleashing* – it conjures up images of a dam holding back a tidal wave of innovation, of energy. It therefore implies that what we are endeavouring to do is to demolish the dam, let the torrents flow. In a sense, that is precisely what we are about. But to do so before we have constructed the watercourse for the first flow would be reckless. This clearly raises the need for an overall framework in which this energy will flow. Concrete examples of this framework are our Policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education, our Criteria and Guidelines for Programmes of Initial Teacher Education, our policy document on Droichead. Other examples include Junior Cycle reform and SSE in schools. Each of these items in its own way maps a part of the watercourse for the river of social capital – each one describes how the learning of teachers and pupils can be enhanced and supported throughout their career. This “architecture” can act as a reassuring framework for all of us – it can help us remind ourselves of why we are doing what we are doing, and how we can do it best.

So in discussing social capital, and current trends in teacher professionalism, with you today, I would like to cover the following questions:

What is social capital? Why is it a good thing? Is it really necessary?

What are the current trends in teacher professionalism? What do they have to do with social capital?

What opportunities do these current trends offer you as ETBs?

How can we make the most use of social capital to support and enhance the current trends in teacher professionalism?

What is social capital?

The title for this presentation was inspired by Hargreaves' and Fullan's book "Professional Capital – Transforming Teaching in Every School." (2012) For the purposes of this presentation, they say that professional capital is based on human, social and decisional capital. Their first reference to social capital defines it as follows:

"...patterns of interaction among teachers and between teachers and administrators that are focused on student learning..." (3)

Or to put it another way, the notion that social capital is a good thing is based on the belief that the group is always more powerful, more "impactful" than the individual. Which when you think about it, is common sense. We all know when we come to conferences like this how much more we learn when we meet with and talk with others – other teachers, other education officers, other CEOs, other Board members. Social capital is not a concrete object that you can store away like the Talents in the parable. Social capital is epitomised by the conversations that took place over a coffee break this morning and that will take place over lunch.

What are the current trends in teacher professionalism?

Before I say anything more about social capital, and how it is becoming manifest in our system, I think that it is important to establish that teaching has always been a profession – it's just that it has taken a long time for many of us, including teachers, to realise fully why that is, and to describe the full complexity of that professionalism.

The current trends in teacher professionalism are about connections and relationships. They are about increased autonomy for teachers (rather than a teacher) leading to greater collegiality. (Note the slight, yet deliberate, change in the title of my presentation from that which is in your conference programme.) This increased autonomy for the group rather than the individual is one of the many opportunities for you as ETBs – it is a key reassurance. It means that increased autonomy is not about a free for all where everyone does what they want. It is about autonomy for a profession to work together and with other stakeholders in ways that they know best to deliver immeasurably good outcomes for our children and young people. In this way, current trends in teacher professionalism are rooted very much in social capital. They are about how more energy and potential-are being released to enhance teaching and learning.

From a lonely profession to a profession that can be comfortably alone

A key point to capture here is that, regardless of how some teachers may feel about the overwhelming scale and pace of change, they are not on their own. Some of you may hear that and scoff – *But sure we all know that. Aren't there unions and branches and subject associations etc.?* That is all true. But when a teacher goes back to their classroom, having attended a branch meeting, or subject association, or in-service, how do they follow through and implement what they have

learned? How do they follow through as a **teacher** on what they have learned from other **teachers**? For such a “people” profession, ask any teacher, teaching can be very lonely.

But new trends in teacher professionalism are trying to change that. It is important not to confuse loneliness with the need to be alone from time to time. We in the Council emphasise the importance of nurturing and developing reflective practice at each stage of the continuum, or of a teacher’s career. To do this properly, a teacher needs to be alone from time to time, to think to themselves, and talk to themselves! But there are equally times when they need support and guidance as they seek to act on that reflection. And there are often times when such reflection will be preceded by professional conversations with colleagues. Hence the emphasis on whole school work in SSE, hence the emphasis on fellow professionals welcoming newly qualified colleagues into teaching in Droichead, hence the emphasis on the relationship between the co-operating teacher(s) and student teachers in school placement, hence the emphasis on teachers leading learning, assessment of learning and assessment for learning in Junior Cycle Reform.

Professional conversations

It is therefore up to teachers to funnel the energies that will enable their profession to be all that it could be. And just as the river changes course, erodes and shapes the landscape over time, so too will the professional energy of teaching shape the landscape of learning in which it flows, and be shaped by it – similar to the process of erosion and sedimentation.

In that sense, the current trends in teacher professionalism are all about maximising the energy of flow when teachers work together, like the flow of a river, and giving shape to new ideas and ways of doing things that others can add to over time, like a delta at the mouth of the river. The current trends are about always keeping an eye on how we could do things better, on “next practice”, rather than stopping and being happy with what we do now, “best practice.” The energy of a river, its constant onward pursuit of its destination, which is also its source, is redolent of the tension between best practice and next practice that Hargreaves and Fullan so eloquently describe in their book. They caution against a slavish, ongoing clinging to the best practice as it may be perceived at a given point in time. Today’s best practice was yesterday’s madness; it was the idea of which others said “*That won’t work!*” Such a reaction would be perfectly understandable, because people tend to like what they have, rather than what they may have. The pursuit of next practice, however, in a measured, professional way, is a key element of what it means to be a professional. Some may describe it as never being happy with what you have; others will see it as the essence of continuing improvement – *we can always do it better*. And when you have finished that pursuit of a particular “next practice”, and start all over again, you deposit the fruits of your learning on that journey in the delta at the mouth of the river.

Pace of current trends in teacher professionalism

If there is a sense of reform / change fatigue beginning to set in, I think that there is no harm in acknowledging that everything will take time. The changes that we have started cannot be rushed if we are to do them properly. We must be prepared to give the time and energy to each project that it needs, and to do so in a sustainable way at a sustainable pace. Hence the phased introduction of Droichead, school placement, and in other areas, Junior Cycle Reform and SSE.

Where are the current trends heading? Vs. **How** are we navigating these trends?

If we here today are to be honest with ourselves in the here and now, we would have to say that we don't know exactly what things will look like when we reach our destination. Where unleashing social capital becomes relevant therefore, is in the realisation that we will not make the most of all the opportunities that lie ahead of us unless we engage with the profession, and indeed with all stakeholders, and agree to work together on these matters.

In that light, it is important to note that here in Ireland, the profession is being offered a new role not just in teaching and learning, but also in shaping and influencing the context in which teaching and learning will occur in the generations to come. In other words, teachers are being offered a new "how", a new way of working, more than a new "what". Teachers are being offered an unprecedented degree of autonomy in mediating education policy in the context of their schools and classrooms. After complaining about too many changes being imposed from the top down, the State is now offering the profession an opportunity to get into the driving seat of its own change processes. This will not be a *carte blanche* to do as they see fit. Unleashing social capital means that they will have to continue to work with colleagues, with principals, with parents and pupils, and all stakeholders, to effect change that has the interests of the learner at heart.

A key opportunity for ETBs here, it seems to me, is to enhance the mediation of this process at the local level in each and every school in your care, to support teachers, principals, parents and pupils as they engage with these new ways of working. Any change can be unsettling, even upsetting. And one thing is certainly clear behind much of the anxiety and concerns about all of these changes. Nobody, especially teachers, wants to see standards fall as a result of them. We all want to maintain and enhance standards. I believe that all of these changes will lead to enhanced teaching and learning. The real difference we can all make is to unleash social capital with 21st century teachers in a way that will enable them to identify opportunities themselves that we never thought of.

So we are talking about connections and relationships. We are saying to teachers – you are not on your own; change will take time; you can be in the driving seat of that change; we don't know how things will look in five years' time; but we do know that in order to make sure that they look as good as they possibly could be, we will have to enhance the ways that we work together. And that means, in a nutshell, unleashing social capital.

But some of you may be sitting there and thinking – *is this not just another buzz word? Is it really that good a concept? Why should I engage with this at all?*

Unleashing social capital is a good thing – it enhances standards and corrects failure and mistakes in a sustainable way.

Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) say that unleashing social capital is the only sustainable way of dealing with failures and mistakes so that teaching and learning are enhanced. As I heard someone say recently, making a mistake is not where people go wrong in life. Where they do go wrong is in how they deal with the consequences of that mistake. This is a critical point for standards in any profession. A key quote in this context:

"In collaborative cultures, failure and uncertainty are not protected and defended, but instead are shared and discussed with a view to gaining help and support." (113)

Unleashing social capital is not an optional extra – this is as high stakes as it gets

In fact, Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) go on to say that not only is social capital a good thing, it is essential if we are to deliver a high quality learning experience for our children and young people:

Teaching is a profession with shared purposes, collective responsibility, and mutual learning. Teaching is no longer a job where you can hog the children all to yourself. If that's what you still believe, then it's time to leave for another profession, because unless you share the responsibility and emotional rewards with your colleagues, you're no longer really a professional at all.(144)

That may come across as threatening or aggressive to some people. They seem to be saying – *Shape up or ship out!* But if you step back for a moment, you can see that there is no threat in this at all. Teaching, at its heart, is about people helping people. It is about people helping people through authentic connections and significant relationships with each other. Therefore, shared purposes and mutual learning are anything but alien concepts to teaching.

Code of Professional Conduct

If we are to look at unleashing social capital as a process analogous to that of a flowing river, it is interesting to note that there is a bedrock under that river of professional flow – we call it the Code of Professional Conduct. In other words, the current trends in teacher professionalism are underpinned by the Code of Professional Conduct. While the trends in professionalism manifest themselves in different ways at different points on the continuum of teacher education, all teachers, regardless of their length and depth of experience, are expected to uphold, and realise the full vision, of the Code of Professional Conduct.

This balance between upholding, and full realisation of, a Code of Conduct, completes the loop of the Council's work as it seeks to both promote and regulate the profession of teaching. There are those who say that these two ways of working are mutually incompatible – *you cannot talk a profession up and wave the big stick of regulation at the same time. Are the unions not supposed to defend the profession?* In fact, I am of the view that advocacy and regulation are mutually interdependent. You cannot fully achieve one without the other. To be just a regulator runs the risk of nurturing little more than resentment. To be just a promoter runs the risk of allowing unacceptable practices to continue. As a professional standards body, the Teaching Council does both.

Zubin Austin from the Ontario College of Pharmacists demonstrated at a recent conference in Edinburgh (CLEAR) how essential the two ways of working are in a symbiotic sense when he pointed out that the opposite of competency – a central concept in regulation – is not incompetency, but disengagement. His thesis seemed to be that if you focussed just on regulation, you may well catch and stop totally unacceptable practices. But you will not make the learning experience of every child, young person and adult learner all that it possibly could be. To do this, you must work **with** and **for** the **full** cohort of the profession – teachers. In other words, we must unleash social capital. This is clearly another opportunity for the ETBs.

In fact, the concept of social capital is stitched right throughout the Code. There are 67 references to the word “teacher” or “teachers” in the Council’s Code of Professional Conduct. 1 reference in 5 is to the singular only – teacher. 80% of the time, the Code talks about “teachers.” There is a full section in the Code entitled Professional Collegiality and Collaboration – section 6, where teachers should engage with and co-operate with all other stakeholders who have an interest in quality learning for our children and young people. The Code therefore supports the view that teachers are not on their own; in fact, at its heart is the principle that teachers are most effective, for themselves and for their students, when they work together.

This latter statement might strike you as a case of stating the obvious! After all, if education is about anything, it is about people helping people. It is about people helping people to learn. Indeed, anybody here could say that teaching / education has always been about these things. But where the teacher of the 21st century comes into their own is in the next iteration of these core truths. Teaching in the Ireland of today is about people helping people to learn *how to learn*. This is the exciting part. For in helping each other to learn how to learn – teacher to pupil, teachers to each other, pupils to teachers – we can unlock learning in such a way that it enables us all to adapt and rise to the unknowable challenges of the future.

That is why the Code of Professional Conduct is for all of you here today – Board members, CEOs, principals, ETB members – probably the single most reassuring document that you can have in your offices. For if I were to ask you what guarantee do you have that quality teaching and learning is occurring in the school(s) that you are responsible for, what answer would you give? Exam results? Parental feedback? Pupil feedback? Conversations with teachers? Inspector reports? Each of these does offer a particular, and important, type of feedback about what is happening in classrooms. But what they all have in common is that they all occur *after* the moment of teaching. It could be hours, it could be years, but each of them reaches your eyes and ears *after* the event.

The only guarantee you have on Monday morning that quality teaching and learning will occur is the professional and ethical commitment of the teachers in your schools. And where will you find the best description of that professional and ethical identity? Here in this Code. At the core of this code is the concept of teachers, as opposed to the teacher; the concept of a collegial profession. When you have conversations with teachers about teaching and learning, I would submit that the conversation would be all the richer if you were to ground it in this Code. For contrary to popular belief, this is not a punitive yardstick for the purposes of Fitness to Teach. Yes, it is a benchmark for that process. But it is also far more than that. Amongst many other things, it is a clear and succinct description of how social capital can be unleashed so as to further enhance teaching and learning in our schools.

So what is happening here and now to unleash the social capital of the profession?

To recap, there is a clear sense that teaching is evolving into a profession where lifelong learning will be the norm, where teachers working together rather than on their own will be the default approach to their work. In this context, we have an instinctive sense that while teaching has always been a profession, there is still an untapped well of potential in the profession, which can only be fully harnessed by teachers working in co-operation with teachers and other stakeholders.

A good example is our new policy on induction and probation – **Droichead**. As you may be aware, we are piloting a new approach which will see teachers take greater ownership of the process of inducting their newly qualified colleagues. There will be a Professional Support Team in each school responsible for the process, rather than an individual inspector. Each PST will have a trained mentor, although they will not have a formal evaluative role. They will be the shepherd to the gate but not the gatekeeper. The process of Droichead will be grounded in professional conversations on a particular phase in the journey of a teacher. Experienced professionals will together welcome their newly qualified colleagues into the most important profession in society. They will observe teaching by the NQT, the NQT will observe the teaching of some of their colleagues, they will reflect on their teaching and these observations, and they will discuss this reflection with the members of the PST. When the NQT has demonstrated that they fulfil the criteria put in place by the Council, the PST will recommend to the Council that the condition of Droichead be removed from their entry on the register.

But there is an even greater depth of social capital in Droichead. Our policy document envisages that PSTs from different schools will meet together to discuss issues of common interest, and to guide each other on this first step of a new journey of professionalism. And they will be supported by the NIPT and the Inspectorate as they explore their issues together. For small schools which may not be able to sustain a PST on their own, we think that they should be able to cluster together and have one PST that will meet their needs. I hope that these examples show that the NQT will be at the core of a process that is replete with the unleashing of social capital by teachers, for teachers.

Teachers will therefore work with each other to ensure that newly qualified colleagues have the best possible start to their career as teachers. They will also ensure that their colleagues have met the standards for the profession at this phase of the continuum. How exactly they will work together has yet to be fully worked out. This we intend to facilitate the profession in doing through a pilot project in schools at both primary and post-primary level. This is the antithesis of the top down approach that we have bemoaned for years and represents one of the golden opportunities for the profession to take the “driving seat” that I mentioned earlier.

School placement

The Council has approved new guidelines for school placement for student teachers. Many of you may be more familiar with the term “teaching practice”. The new term, “school placement” encompasses the sense that the student teacher is expected to engage in the whole life of the school as they progress through their initial teacher education. This progression culminates in a single block of 10 weeks in the second half of the programme.

The guidelines are due to be published in the near future, and a summary will issue to all schools at that point. But in the meantime, I think that it would be useful to give you this extract from the Guidelines where we say:

Relationships built on core values of respect, trust and inclusion

Relationships based on mutual respect, trust and inclusion are paramount to the success of the placement. In that context, it is important that student teachers are included and supported by all partners during their school placement. In turn, student teachers must

recognise and respect the role of school personnel and have due regard for the policies, protocols and characteristic spirit that underpin the day-to-day life of the school.

“supported by all partners” – this speaks to the importance of social capital. The last line highlights the opportunities for yourselves as ETBs in this process – where young people in their first supported experience of teaching pupils and learners can do so in the context of the culture and ethos of the schools under your remit.

FÉILTE

FÉILTE stands for the Festival of Education in Learning and Teaching Excellence. This is an event we are planning to mark World Teachers’ Day this year on the 5th of October in the Royal Hospital, Kilmainham. In short, this will be a celebration of all that is good about teaching. It will be a showcasing of innovation, best practice and next practice in teaching. Each of us can think of a number of teachers who are doing something really innovative and exciting in schools – be it in the use of tablet technology, in the area of Special Educational Needs, inclusion, or engaging with research.

We all have experience of attending conferences and seminars where we came away really enthused. But where have the connections been to help kindle those fires of enthusiasm when teachers return to their schools? There are connections in many different professional networks. But you get the sense as you talk to more and more teachers, principals and others in the system that there is so much more that we could do, if we only had the support and time to do it. Creating space and time and architecture for this to happen is another key opportunity for the ETBs, and indeed for us all. As you embark on this exciting new phase in the growth of education in Ireland, and form new clusters, there is a great opportunity to support and further enhance the networks of teachers that are already in place.

FÉILTE will be one project of the Teaching Council’s that will contribute to this endeavour. It will be first and foremost a celebration of great teaching. Teachers from all over Ireland will come to Dublin to show their fellow teachers, the public and the media what it is they are doing. In this way we hope to make good headway in breaking the dam of social capital.

Research Alive!

But teachers themselves are not shy in chipping away at this dam themselves. We jointly hosted, in cooperation with the NCCA and CES, a conference on the theme of Research Alive! on 11 May in Coláiste Bríde, Clondalkin. The attendees included over 50 registered teachers, HEI staff, and researchers from different organisations. The middle of the day saw them break into small groups, each with a mix from the various groupings, to discuss a number of issues about the impact of research on teaching and vice-versa. There was a clear sense in the feedback from all the groups of the profession asserting itself in an appropriate way to question the research discourse – why is *that* research being done? How is it related to teaching and learning in schools? When the research is done, where does it go? How accessible is it? Teachers said that they wanted more access to research, but also, and more importantly, they said they wanted critical engagement with that research. We in the Council are addressing the access issue by giving all registered teachers free

access to EBSCO (a package of education journals) as of 1 September. We are also working on a number of ideas to support teachers' critical engagement with that research.

CPD

All this energy around research and impact is an appropriate precursor to what is arguably the holy grail of the current trends in teacher professionalism – CPD – continuing professional development. CPD is essentially lifelong learning, the idea that no matter how experienced any of us may be in our respective posts, there is always more to learn.

The Council's powers in the area of CPD have yet to be commenced. It is our intention that they will be by the end of this Council's term of office in March 2016. When they are commenced, every registered teacher will have to demonstrate that they have engaged in further learning in order to maintain their registration. In this context, it is worth noting that our policy on the continuum (2011) clearly envisages CPD as the key that will open the floodgates to unleash social capital:

CPD should involve teachers in sharing their expertise and experience more systematically while building cumulative knowledge across the profession by strengthening connections across research, policy and practice. (21)

Fine, you may say, that's the policy, that's the theory. Give me a practical example. I came across an article recently (Harrold, 2013) about a network of GPs called CME – Continuing Medical Education. It is described by someone involved in it as a "standing army" of 3,000 GPs who go to small group meetings in libraries, hotels, offices, even their own homes. And what do they do? They keep up – they keep up to date. He goes on to say:

The CME network is one of the most holistic, sustainable and community-based organisations you could imagine. The meetings are lively and animated, and information is passed around like a Frisbee.

Conclusion – It ain't rocket science, it's far more important than that!

If you regard this last example as the umpteenth case of me stating the obvious, then perhaps that is no bad thing. For a lot of what I am talking about is not rocket science, in so far as the ways of implementing it are not that difficult to describe – connect, develop and enhance relationships; create space, time and support for this work to happen; create ways of cascading the fruits of that work right throughout the system in a way that is easily accessible and adaptable by all teachers.

Then again, it is rocket science – in fact, it is far more important than rocket science. As Hargreaves and Fullan say (2012),

The conflicts surrounding the future of the teaching profession are a battle for the future soul of the world. (153)

But it is not just because what we are about is so fundamentally important. It is also because it can be incredibly difficult, at a human level, to unleash social capital. As a country, I don't think that we do honest conversations very well. We are not good at giving or receiving positive or negative

feedback. More often than not, we tend to cringe with embarrassment when someone tries to praise something that we've done. Equally, we can be afraid to challenge or criticise in any way for fear that a teacher, for example, would take it as an automatic slight on their professionalism.

But if we step back, and reflect on those moments in our lives when we made a particular breakthrough, when we learned something new about ourselves as people and professionals, I would wager that each of those moments stemmed from an open and honest engagement with others. This goes to the heart of current trends in teacher professionalism – open, honest, professional conversations where each of the parties approaches the process in a spirit of reciprocal vulnerability. The research would indicate that this is essential if really effective learning is to take place. All of the examples where I have highlighted opportunities for you as ETBs come down to how you can most effectively support teachers in that process of mutual learning.

Ok, ok, you may be saying, but give me the short answer – what can we do, as principals or CEOs or members of a management authority, to help, encourage and support teachers to unleash social capital? Two words – communities, and belief. We have got to enable and empower teachers to build their own communities that engage with the wider world. Fine, you may say, but don't they have their associations, networks, conferences already? Nothing new there. The magic ingredient seems to be belief – belief in what you are doing, and why you are doing it; a belief that what you are doing as teachers can, and does, actually change the world. The word "belief" keeps cropping up in the literature on teachers and their own sense of impact or efficacy. Believing or not believing seems to make all the difference as to how confidently teachers engage with reform and change. In other words, belief seems to be a cornerstone of professional identity.

In the Ireland of today, such statements may seem hopelessly naive. But unleashing social capital in this way will enable us to ride the crest of the wave of future change. Andreas Schleicher, from the OECD, recently stated (2013) that:

The past was about delivered wisdom; the future is about user-generated wisdom. (30)

User-generated wisdom. Inherent in that concept is the idea of people working together to generate that wisdom. If that is the way of the future, how can we gain a niche advantage here as a country? What is the best way of doing this? One answer may lie in a book by Charles Duhigg. He has written a fascinating book exploring why people do what they do, and how they can change their habits. The book is called "The Power of Habit", (2012) and I would like to give you two extracts which for me encapsulate why the concepts of community and belief are so important, why they are the key to empowering user-generated wisdom, and how therefore we can unleash the full potential of social capital for all of those involved in teaching and learning:

When people join groups where change seems possible, the potential for that change to occur becomes more real..... there are no seminal moments or life-altering disasters. There are simply communities - sometimes of just one other person - who make change believable. (88)

There's something really powerful about groups and shared experiences. People might be skeptical about their ability to change if they're by themselves, but a group will convince them to suspend disbelief. A community creates belief. (85)

As I have reflected on these pieces, it seems to me that the future of teaching is one of professional communities of learning, rooted in each other; it is a future where those communities aspire to a belief in a world that can, and must, be better than our own. We cannot form an exact picture now as to how that world will look and feel, but we draw strength and confidence from each other to believe that we can make it better, and we trust each other to take that journey, both exciting and sometimes frightening, into the unknown, together.

Thank you for listening.

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- Code of Professional Conduct (2012)
- Policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education (2011)
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