

## *Common Ground in a Crowded Space*

### **A thematic exploration of national policies for schools and teachers in the context of *Cosán: The National Framework for Teachers' Learning***

#### **Executive Summary**

##### **Background**

The publication in 2016 of *Cosán*, the national framework for teachers' learning paved the way for a period of further development, led by teachers. Through the development process, we have learned a great deal. During many of these interactions teachers readily identified commonalities in key messages from *Cosán* and other policies, particularly around the role of leadership, teachers' agency, and reflection. Based on these ongoing conversations, and so as to better inform engagement with all stakeholders, the Teaching Council undertook an exploration of a range of national policies.

The objective here is to unpack the common key messages (in *Cosán* and the varying policies). With this in mind, we wish to explore how we can collectively support teachers, based on an enhanced awareness of their own professional agency, to realise the full potential of these developments – all with a focus on the quality of teaching and learning for our learners.

##### **Exploration**

A range of initiatives were selected for exploration, including School Self-Evaluation and Looking at Our Schools, Junior Cycle Framework, the revised SEN allocation model, and *Droichead* (amongst others). The exploration of the documents followed a typical thematic process (Braun and Clarke 2006), and elucidated a range of themes and subthemes. This paper focuses on three overarching themes:

##### *1. Teachers' Agency*

Common to the selected documents is an emphasis on teachers' agency, and collaborative self-determined communities of practice. The literature offers a range of benefits in this respect, but more importantly, a number of conditions for successful collective endeavour. These include (amongst others) space and time, the empowerment of teachers through decision-making, supportive leadership, and processes that respectfully address teachers' continued valuing of 'privacy of practice'. During the *Cosán* Development Process, teachers frequently referenced their sense of agency in light of ongoing reforms, but in echoing much of the literature, cited the need for certain conditions and cultures. Teachers commented on

how they faced a range of barriers, specifically a lack of time, as well as school cultures, and indeed the wider system. In their view these were not amenable to collaborative learning and reflection, and did not prioritise teachers' autonomy with regard to professional learning.

We should therefore explore how we can support teachers in accessing meaningful collaborative experiences, and in tandem, how we can empower teachers to take ownership of their learning, as trusted and respected professionals.

## *2. Leading Learning Cultures*

Throughout much of the documentation, leaders are directly referenced as 'leaders of learning', with direct responsibility for cultivating learning cultures. The literature again offers a number of conditions on which such cultures depend e.g. **balancing all stakeholders' interests, focusing on people rather than systems, making time for learning, encouraging open communication, and having approachable leaders**. Many participants in the *Cosán* Development Process referenced the conceptualisation of school leaders in the selected policies and the wider literature, where they realised the principal's role in directly shaping the nature of professional learning and reflection in schools. However, they also highlighted varying awareness amongst leaders with regard to *Cosán*, and likewise, differing conceptualisations of professional learning that aligned with the underpinning principles, dimensions etc. to varying degrees. Teachers also referenced a lack of awareness around *Cosán* amongst wider management bodies and authorities.

We should therefore explore how we can support leaders in cultivating sustainable learning cultures in their schools and centres

## *3. Reflection*

Reflection is a central element in a number of the selected policies where it is envisaged as a key element in the behaviour of effective teachers and leaders. While admittedly offering a number of conceptualisations of reflection, the literature echoes this sentiment, but also calls for teachers to engage in reflection that is deep, broad and necessarily critical. It also offers a range of tools to support reflection, including professional conversations. However, the latter require a number of enablers to remain meaningful e.g. **clear purposes, the establishing of trust and rapport, and the maintenance of relationships**. In keeping with the literature, throughout the *Cosán* Development Process, teachers offered varying conceptualisations of

reflection. Likewise, while some teachers made connections between calls for deeper, and in some cases, collective reflection in the varying initiatives, they most readily referred to an individual cognitive process, and rarely engaged in specific reflection on their professional learning.

We should therefore explore how we can support teachers in engaging in suitably deep reflection on their learning that helps them, in a sustainable way.

### **Conflicting Conceptualisations**

While the themes above demonstrate congruous elements between *Cosán* and the varying documents, there are some observable points of contrast around constructions of professional learning and reflection. There is evidently a common commitment to learning as a lifelong endeavour amongst stakeholders, but the conceptualisation of professional learning and the differing terminology used is significant. *Cosán* utilises the terms ‘teachers’ learning’, and ‘professional learning’, and is overt in outlining a range of learning processes and dimensions, with which teachers typically engage, of which courses or programmes are only one. This represents a shift away from any exclusive recognition of teachers’ learning as participation in pre-designed formal programmes that rely on transmission model delivery. This move away from any potentially reductionist construction toward a holistic view of teachers’ learning is also evident in the framework’s depiction of reflection as something which envelops their professional learning. The exploration here has revealed significant congruency regarding the importance placed on reflection in initiatives, but such emphasis varies between policies.

### **Summary**

These overarching elements are undoubtedly profound, and while it is heartening to note their corresponding presence in varying policies, this is not enough. They arguably represent some of the fundamental ‘conditions’, on which the success of any policy, and indeed, the wider reform agenda depend. Recognising that some teachers continue to feel overwhelmed by the depth and pace of such reform it is vital that we all take account of these congruent underpinning elements, and collectively address the perceived challenges and opportunities that they offer. In doing so, we can more effectively and cohesively support teachers in navigating the current terrain. With regard to *Cosán* specifically, while the Development Process continues to operate in an exploratory space, there remains a genuine opportunity for

the profession and stakeholders to shape a framework that is truly meaningful, impactful and which can be of help to us all in our focus on quality teaching and learning for all learners. The success of this collective endeavour hinges on all stakeholders carving out a genuine and sustainable space for professional learning. *Cosán*, the first national framework for teachers' learning, is the kind of space in which all of our respective work programmes can truly thrive.

In moving forward, we propose the following questions for exploration and discussion during the briefing session on December 11.

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. Teachers' agency is key to meaningful engagement with *Cosán* and the range of other initiatives. How can we collectively ensure that the profession continues to feel adequately supported and therefore confident, to fully realise the collective empowerment and ownership espoused in national policies?
2. How can we ensure that leaders are informed of, and see value in *Cosán* and its underlying principles? And, in keeping with the literature and the elements espoused in national policies, how can leaders be supported in cultivating successful learning cultures in their schools and centres?
3. How can we support teachers in engaging in suitably deep reflection around their own learning in a sustainable way?

## *Common Ground in a Crowded Space*

### **A thematic exploration of national policies for schools and teachers in the context of *Cosán: The National Framework for Teachers' Learning***

#### **Background**

The publication in 2016 of *Cosán*, the national framework for teachers' learning marked an important milestone for the teaching profession, in that it articulated, for the first time, the values, principles and standards that guide their ongoing learning, and the variety of ways in which they learn. It has paved the way for a period of further development, led by teachers, which will inform national implementation of the framework. This 'Development Phase' is a process of exploration with the profession – a learning process in its own right. And it is proving to be a learning journey for us in the Council. Through the development process, we have engaged with teachers from all sectors (primary, post-primary and further education), at all stages in the teaching career, and from a variety of schools and circumstances. We have employed a number of mechanisms in engaging with the profession, including an online survey, school-based workshops, workshops at regional level in education centres, and shared learning events at national level. The breadth, and indeed depth, of engagement with the profession to date represents a rich and sometimes challenging conversation, both amongst members of the profession itself, and between the profession and the Teaching Council. Through that engagement, we have learned a great deal, and this is informing our ongoing thinking, and indeed, the drafting of this paper.

During many of these interactions teachers readily highlighted a perception that they were currently overloaded by 'initiatives'<sup>1</sup>. Admittedly, despite this evident 'overload' (Fullan 2001), some teachers identified commonalities in key messages from *Cosán* and these other 'initiatives', particularly around e.g. the role of leadership, teachers' agency, and reflection. For those who had begun to make such connections, they typically referenced School Self-Evaluation and the accompanying framework – Looking at Our Schools, Junior Cycle Framework, the revised SEN allocation model, and Droichead, amongst others. Based on these ongoing conversations, and so as to better inform engagement with all stakeholders, the Teaching Council undertook an exploration of a range of national policies. The objective here was to begin to explore how we can collectively support teachers and schools in negotiating what many of them perceive as a turbulent and daunting landscape, and to unpack the

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<sup>1</sup> Admittedly, depicting the varying national policies as 'initiatives' merely reflects how they were addressed in wider discussions with teachers, and does not indicate the depth or breadth of the programme.

common key messages (in *Cosán* and the varying policies), that are evidently contributing to the current terrain of reform. In essence, it appears that the best and common intentions of policy are getting lost in translation – they are seen as competing for people’s time and attention. Inevitably, choices are made between one option and another, consciously or unconsciously. As policy makers and stakeholders, what can we do to find common ground in this crowded space? How can we communicate that more effectively to schools and teachers? And how can we scaffold the journey for them so that quality teaching and learning thrive for all learners?

### **Context**

Varying policies have been published and then implemented throughout the Irish education system in the last decade. These include (amidst others) the significant changes in assessment at post-primary, the introduction of school self-evaluation, the introduction of the literacy and numeracy strategy, curricular changes at primary level, the reconceptualization of programmes of initial teacher education, the introduction of *Droichead*, the launch of *Cosán*, developments in provision for special and inclusive education, and ongoing reforms in early childhood education and care.

Coolahan et al (2016) point to these and a range of other reforms as ‘amounting, in accumulation, to a major new direction for the inherited school system. However, research also emphasises that the successful achievement of major educational reform is a complex process, involving many requirements. Crucial among these are resources, goodwill and time. When a lot of change is occurring, or proposed to occur, simultaneously it can put strains on the system’ (p.xi). The mention of resourcing and time is of particular significance here, as parallel to these varying reforms, teachers and schools experienced a range of measures implemented as part of a wider agenda to address a national recession. Coolahan et al (2016) again offer a summary of such measures, including ‘reductions in salaries and allowances, the removal of middle management posts, reductions in support staff, dis-improvements in pupil-teacher ratios, embargos on appointments in various staff categories of the system and reduced capitation fees’ (p.xii).

The impact of such measures continues to resonate in reports of low morale amongst the profession (ASTI 2016), and schools operating on limited financial resources (INTO 2016). The last two years have also witnessed an evident ‘crisis’ in teacher supply. Such reports highlight (among other factors) a significant shortage of teachers in certain subjects, a lack of substitute

teachers at all levels, and the considerable impact of pay inequality (Teaching Council 2017). While it is not the objective of this paper to explore these contextual elements in greater detail, it is wholly appropriate that any exploration of the varying policy documents remains cognisant of the evident tensions within the system, and how these potentially impact schools, teachers and learners.

### **Exploration**

This paper explores commonalities in a range of policies, most of which featured in teacher commentaries during the *Cosán* Development Process 2017-18. Others, which were not specifically referenced during this process, have also been included for exploration, as they were deemed particularly significant in potentially impacting future planning around *Cosán* e.g. the Action Plan for Education (2018). The relevant documents included:

- *Cosán: Framework for Teachers' Learning* (Teaching Council 2016)
- *Droichead: The Integrated Professional Induction Framework* (Teaching Council 2017)
- School Self-Evaluation 2016-20 (Primary and Post-Primary) (DES) and Looking at Our Schools 2016-20 (Primary and Post-Primary) (DES)
- Schools Excellence Fund (Guidelines) (DES 2018)
- Delivery for Students with Special Educational Needs – A better and more equitable way (NCSE 2014), and Guidelines for Post-Primary/ Primary Schools Supporting Pupils with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools (DES 2017)
- Framework for Junior Cycle (DES 2015)
- Further Education and Training Professional Development Strategy 2017-19 (SOLAS)
- Action Plan for Education (DES 2018)
- A Professional Learning Continuum for School Leadership in the Irish Context – Consultation Paper (Centre for School Leadership 2017)

Of course, there are undoubtedly documents which could have been added to this selection (e.g. Aistear, Guidelines on Well-being in Primary Schools etc.), but it is worth noting that the Council intends to commission research on *Cosán*, and a detailed analysis of all relevant policies will form part of this project. Furthermore, it was considered that the breadth of the

selection here might allow stakeholders to begin a discussion around an overarching national policy framework and how the varying policies sit within this.

The exploration of the documents followed a typical thematic process (Braun and Clarke 2006), and elucidated a range of themes and subthemes. This paper focuses on three overarching themes:

1. Teachers' Agency
2. Leading Learning Cultures
3. Reflection

Each theme is discussed here with specific reference to its conceptualisation both in the varying policies and in teachers' commentaries during the Development Process. In order to better inform the overall discussion, there is also a brief outline of salient issues in the wider literature.

### **1. Teachers' Agency**

The *Cosán* framework is underpinned by seven underlying principles i.e. autonomy/responsibility, flexibility, accessibility, relevance, quality, acknowledgement, and impact. Essentially, *Cosán* recognises teachers as autonomous and responsible professionals who can prioritise professional learning that benefits them and their pupils. The framework cites Wiliam (2014) here, where teachers should decide what aspect of their practice they wish to develop via engagement in professional learning and what evidence they need to collect in order to support their ongoing reflection on learning, and to demonstrate that learning has occurred. Teachers therefore have autonomy with regard to how they engage in learning and indeed reflection on their learning, and whether they do so individually or collaboratively. However, while *Cosán* acknowledges the value of individual learning and reflection, it specifically references how 'professional development is most effective... when it fosters teacher professional collaboration' and how many teachers during the consultation indicated how they valued collaborative learning opportunities above other forms. Therefore is therefore a need for' teachers to balance shared professional learning goals with a personalised learning pathway' (p.12).

Similarly, while recognising the potential for varying roles in *Droichead* Professional Support Team members, the framework asserts that it is always a collaborative process. However,



Droichead's underpinning principles overtly connect collaboration with teachers' agency, as the process is underpinned by shared professional responsibility, collective professional confidence, and professionally-led regulation. These same principles and an emphasis on the three Rs i.e. research, relationships and reflective practice, underpin the Council's work more broadly.

Teaching and learning in the SSE framework is viewed through four domains, one of which – *Teacher Collective/ Collaborative Practice*, encompasses teachers' cooperative practices, including the collaborative gathering and reviewing of evidence, and their sharing of expertise to build capacity. Therein, schools are empowered as self-determined communities of practice (Wenger 1998) 'to identify and affirm good practice, and to identify and take action on areas that merit improvement. School self-evaluation is primarily about schools taking ownership of their own development and improvement' (p.6). *Looking at Our Schools* (2016) which underpins SSE, reiterates the importance of schools assuming 'responsibility for the quality of the education they provide' (p.7), and where leaders 'develop and implement systems to promote professional responsibility and accountability' (p.25). However, the context of schools is crucial here. Through *Cosán*, teachers are asked to actively reflect on their professional learning with due regard for their unique context, while through SSE schools engage in 'reflective enquiry leading to action planning...informed by evidence gathered within each school's unique context', which 'enables them to create and implement improvement plans, to measure their progress, and to identify their achievements' (p.6).

The *Action Plan for Education* (2018) directly references an increase in collective autonomy for schools, with Objective 3.3 referring to 'improving quality, promoting excellence and innovation, and increasing autonomy for schools'. The actions and sub-actions therein include developing 'new forms of School self-evaluation (SSE), advisory visits and collaborative working to support leadership development', and piloting 'the Schools Excellence Fund' project to 'advance collaborative working between post-primary schools, Inspectorate and JCT support service that will encourage self-evaluation' (p.43). The broadening of collaborative endeavour here i.e. beyond schools, echoes the recommendations from the revised SEN model. While affording schools greater autonomy and flexibility in how they allocate resources, the model emphasises the value of a whole school co-operative approach. But it goes further in highlighting the importance of networking and collaboration in providing support at all levels, including school-to-school collaboration (mainstream and special schools)

and partnerships with other agencies to provide support to individual learners in the local school and community.

In keeping with the latter i.e. where collaboration extends beyond the single school community, the Schools Excellence Fund (Digital and Creative) specifically supports collaborative projects, where a number of schools from different sectors can cluster and work collectively to address a common issue or challenge. However, these clusters offer further opportunities for collaboration beyond schools e.g. with the wider arts community, the third level sector, or industry. Finally, the Centre for School Leadership's Consultation Paper is overt in asserting that 'a far greater range of high quality opportunities is being provided for those aspiring to middle or senior leadership in the jurisdictions where collaboration between providers exists' (p.7), and therefore they highlight the need to consider a collective/collaborative approach to induction for leaders. This of course echoes the collaborative and highly supportive approach to induction in the *Droichead* process.

The prevalence of references to teachers' agency, specifically collective agency, in the varying policies is perhaps unsurprising given its parallel prevalence in the wider research literature. The opportunities and challenges offered by increased opportunities for meaningful collaboration for teachers, schools, and beyond are widely reported (e.g. Hargreaves 2000, Johnson 2003, Malone and Smith 2010, Ronfeldt et al 2015). Vangrieken et al's (2015) extensive review offers some useful insights here, where the reported benefits include improved student outcomes, the capacity to initiate and improve professional learning, increased teacher efficacy and motivation, and a shift in school culture toward more equity and a 'flattened power structure' (p.28). The negative consequences, though admittedly considerably less in number, include increased competitiveness, interpersonal conflict, collaboration as a means of enforcing conformity, a narrow focus on practical affairs, and reduced autonomy and flexibility. The authors offer an array of preconditions for successful collaboration, including structural characteristics e.g. time, process characteristics e.g. flexibility and a sense of community, and organisational characteristics e.g. a whole-school philosophy and leadership support.

Such 'conditions' are of course common in the literature (Brownell et al. 2006, MacDonald 2013,). These include common planning time, the empowerment of teachers in decision-making, 'supportive leadership, mutual respect steeped in strong professional knowledge, and

a climate that invited risk taking and innovation’ (Louis, Marks and Kruse 1996, cited in Darling-Hammond and Richardson 2009, p. 4). These sentiments clearly resonate with Beane and Apple’s (1999) assertions around collective teachers’ agency in the context of democratic schools, the conditions for which include ‘the open flow of ideas, regardless of their popularity, that enables people to be as fully informed as possible; faith in the individual and collective capacity of people to create possibilities for resolving problems; and the use of critical reflection and analysis to evaluate ideas, problems, and policies’ (p.7). Referring specifically to the Irish context, O’Sullivan (2011) acknowledges how teachers may be reluctant to embrace purposeful collaboration as they continue to value ‘privacy of practice’. However, as her research demonstrates, through a negotiated process that respects their professionalism through building their capacity to exercise agency, they can place collaborative practice above such privacy (p.123).

During the *Cosán* Development Process, teachers frequently referenced their sense of agency in light of ongoing reforms. They made some connections between the varying initiatives and the common messages therein around autonomy and collaborative approaches, but in echoing much of the literature above, cited the need for certain conditions and cultures. Teachers commented on how they faced a range of barriers, specifically a lack of time, as well as school cultures, and indeed the wider system, which in their view were not amenable to collaborative learning and reflection, and did not prioritise teachers’ autonomy with regard to professional learning. The *Cosán* framework is overt in stating that teachers need dedicated space and time, but it is clear from the ongoing feedback that even with such resources, some teachers may need further practical support and scaffolding around collaborative processes i.e. professional conversations, co-operative teaching, collaborative inquiry etc.

We should therefore explore how we can support teachers in accessing meaningful collaborative experiences, and in tandem, how we might empower teachers to take ownership of their learning, as trusted and respected professionals.

## **2. Leading a Learning Culture**

*Cosán* emphasises the importance of effective school leadership and management, in fostering a culture of professional learning, and actively supporting teachers’ engagement in learning at school level. The fostering of a learning culture is also a key element of the Droichead process,

where the principal, as a leader of learning in the school, cultivates an environment where Droichead, as a quality induction experience, can flourish.

Throughout much of the documentation, leaders are directly referenced as 'leaders of learning', with direct responsibility for cultivating learning cultures. For example, the SSE guidance directly signals leaders as promoting cultures of 'improvement, collaboration, innovation and creativity in learning, teaching and assessment', and fostering 'teacher professional development that enriches teachers' and students' learning' (p.17). Building on this, LAOS references how it 'defines school leadership by its impact on learning. It sees leadership that is focused on creating and sustaining environments that are conducive to good learning as paramount and acknowledges that effective leadership is essential for schools to be places where successful learning happens' (p.7).

The Further Education Strategy also refers to the role of leaders in supporting professional learning, but this also moves beyond school leaders to those in the wider system i.e. 'a key role for ETB managers is therefore to support, facilitate and structure the professional development process for individual FET practitioners. Professional development should form part of an ongoing dialogue between FET practitioners and their managers, and it should be enabled and championed by senior leaders within ETBs' (p.18). And this supportive capacity is echoed in the Junior Cycle guidance, which in acknowledging the reformative nature of Junior Cycle, therefore requires 'effective school leadership to create a supportive professional context for teachers' (p.35).

In supporting leaders in creating and supporting learning cultures, the Action Plan (2018) specifically references Innovative Leaders, and therein cites the work of the Centre for School Leadership in offering 'an expanded range of supports, including a quality assurance framework for leadership CPD provision', and the finalisation of 'a continuum of professional learning for leadership' (p.38). Finally, the Centre for School Leadership calls on the system to develop leadership attributes in all staff as well as 'systematically identifying and supporting its future senior leaders. Embedding the leading of learning as central at every stage of the leadership continuum will have a significant impact not only on learning outcomes for the school community, but also on the perception of the school leader's role at every level. In particular, the central role of the principal as both a lead learner and a key agent for leading learning will be strengthened' (p.6).

There is of course a wealth of evidence on how leaders can impact the cultivation of professional learning cultures (Spanneut 2010). Stoll et al's (2006) review characterises such cultures as 'balancing all stakeholders' interests; focusing on people rather than systems; making people believe they can change their environment; making time for learning; taking a holistic approach to problems; encouraging open communication; believing in teamwork; and having approachable leaders' (p.236). To these elements they add an emphasis on 'ensuring learning at all levels', where 'if school leaders are to facilitate the growth of a [learning] community it will be essential that they focus on promoting professional learning as fundamental to the change process' (p.236). In echoing the references to inquiry orientation and effective evidence gathering in the varying policies above, Stoll et al. also highlight the value of 'inquiry-orientated leadership', where principals promote 'research and evaluation across the school, adopt a more systematic approach to collecting, analysing and using data and evidence in the course of ongoing work', and seek out and use 'relevant and practical research, generated and produced by external researchers' (p.237).

Within an Irish context, King (2011) also emphasises the pivotal role played by leaders in cultivating the conditions and culture necessary for developing and sustaining teachers' professional learning. Such 'conditions' in this project included an alignment of teacher and principal values, the fostering of organisational capacity for change, and the empowering of teachers to create collaborative learning cultures. This form of leadership (she asserts) ultimately 'empowers teachers through distributed leadership based on trust' (p.152). Also referring to support for professional learning communities, Mullen and Schunk's (2018) recent review highlights the importance of a non-traditional way of thinking and acting on the part of the leader, as they must 'satisfy educational mandates while leading in ways that are participatory, consensus building, empowering, and commensurate with improving teacher and student performance' (p.190). The reference here to balancing potentially competing agendas is of course common in the literature (Fullan 2005). In his review of empirical evidence from the last four decades, Hallinger (2010) acknowledges that leadership for learning 'is enacted within an organizational and environmental context [and is therefore] both shaped by and responds to the constraints and opportunities extant in this context' (p.127). However, Fullan (2005) calls for a renewed form of leadership in this regard, where leaders as 'systems thinkers' might 'work intensely in their own schools or LEAs or other levels, and at the same time connect with and participate in the bigger picture' (p.1).

Resonating with the literature above, many participants in the *Cosán* Development Process referenced the impact of leadership on their engagement in, and reflection on, meaningful professional learning. Their commentaries echo the conceptualisation of school leaders in the selected policies and the wider literature, where they realised the principal's role in directly shaping the nature of professional learning and reflection in schools. However, they also highlighted varying awareness amongst leaders with regard to *Cosán*, and likewise, differing conceptualisations of professional learning that aligned with the underpinning principles, dimensions etc. to more or less degrees. Teachers also referenced a lack of awareness around *Cosán* amongst wider management bodies and authorities. Resonating with the literature around learning cultures, they also emphasised the importance of school culture and the leader's role therein, in fostering a culture which retained learning as a central tenet. Conversations with leaders in particular revealed a significant increase in workload and administrative duties, thereby impacting the time and space they required to learn and to reflect themselves, and to support teachers in engaging in meaningful professional learning and reflection.

We should therefore explore how we can support leaders in cultivating sustainable learning cultures in their schools and centres.

### **3. Reflection**

Individual and collaborative reflection on learning and its impact is a key element of *Cosán*. The Framework proposes that teachers would identify, from their own practice, examples of their teaching that will help them to determine the impact on practice, and that this process would also support their reflection on the standards and on their learning in light of those standards. The Council envisages that teachers' learning journeys will be guided by standards that will facilitate them, as individuals or collectively, reflecting critically on their teaching and their learning, and the relationship between them. Engagement in such reflective processes will facilitate teachers in considering the complex ways in which their learning can benefit their students (not just in terms of student learning outcomes, but more broadly in terms of their levels of motivation, interest, engagement, and enjoyment, etc.), school culture, and the wider school community.

Reflection is also a central element in the *Droichead* process, where engagement in portfolio-based learning enables the NQT to reflect on their professional learning in a way that helps them grow as professionals and identify and plan for areas in which they may need further support or guidance. NQTs also reflect on the professional conversations that take place on their own professional learning and practice. Finally, NQTs engage in reflective practice that supports their professional learning and practice, both individually and collaboratively.

Reflection is also central to School Self-Evaluation and the supporting quality framework, *Looking at Our Schools*. School self-evaluation involves 'reflective enquiry leading to action planning for improvement that is informed by evidence gathered within each school's unique context' (p.6). The guidance emphasises how professional 'reflection and dialogue between teachers, focusing on specific aspects of teaching and learning, are very important when gathering evidence' (p.10), and essentially, how 'reflecting on what teachers teach and how they teach it, and on what students learn and how they learn, school management and teachers will become aware that certain aspects of the education they provide are effective and that improvement is needed in others' (p.6).

LAOS seeks to assist schools to 'embed self-evaluation, reflective practice and responsiveness to the needs of learners, and views career-long professional development as central to the teacher's work and firmly situates reflection and collaboration at its heart' (p.6). It advises that 'school principals, in particular, should view the framework as an enabler of self-reflection and improvement and not as an inflexible check-list' (p.10). The guidance is explicit in highlighting how reflection is a key element in the behaviour of effective teachers and leaders, and that this 'may involve self-reflection where professionals question their actions and examine the impact of those actions as a way of improving both. It may also involve structured reflection with others in seeking to enhance teaching and learning and leadership in their school' (p.10).

The Junior Cycle Framework (2015) involves not only teachers, but both teachers and students, who in reflecting on how learning is progressing can decide on next steps to ensure successful outcomes. Students are encouraged to 'reflect on how they are progressing in their own learning and provide feedback to their teachers. In developing the capacity for self-management and self-awareness, students will approach their learning more confidently and will be better prepared to meet the challenges of life beyond school' (p.36).

The FET Strategy (2017) uses the term 'reviewing', and locates this in a broader process i.e. identifying, planning, reviewing, and delivering. The first stage here involves identifying professional development needs, moving to carefully designing and then participating in CPD activities. Finally, reviewing includes the 'informal and formal evaluation of programme effectiveness, with a view to continuous improvement, increased value for investment and transfer of knowledge. It also includes the practice of ongoing reflection by the practitioner, the employer, professional networks and the sector, which informs the formal identification of development requirements' (p.17).

Reflection is an ingrained term in educational discourse, and teachers' engagement in reflection is accepted as essential to their practice (Leitch and Day 2000). It is evident from the literature that what actually constitutes 'reflection' (for teachers and other professions), continues to instigate wide debate (Russo and Ford 2006), with a wealth of material offering contrasting definitions, models, levels and categories (Dewey 1938, Day 1993, Valli 1997, Rodgers 2002, Finlay and Gough 2003). Moving beyond any single static consideration, Finlay (2008) depicts reflection as a continuum. At one end 'stands reflection, defined simply as 'thinking about' something after the event and at the other end stands reflexivity: a more immediate and dynamic process which involves continuing self-awareness. Critical reflection lies somewhere in between' (p.5). Emphasising the need for a critical lens, Zeichner and Liston (1996) call for teachers to grasp the nettle with regard to reflection that is deep, broad and necessarily critical:

*Teachers cannot restrict their attention to the classroom alone, leaving the larger setting and purposes of schooling to be determined by others. They must take active responsibility for the goals to which they are committed, and for the social setting in which these goals may prosper. They are not to be mere agents of others, of the state, of the military, of the media, of the experts and bureaucrats; they need to determine their own agency through a critical and continual evaluation of the purposes, the consequences, and the social context of their calling. (p. 11)*

With regard to tangible tools to support reflection, the literature abounds with examples, particularly from the initial stages of the teacher education continuum i.e. initial teacher education and induction. These include reflective journals (Boud 2001, McGarr and Moody 2010), blogs (Kileavy and Moloney 2009, Yang 2009), video (Harford and MacRuairc 2008), photo-ethnography (Lemon 2007), portfolios (MacRuairc and Harford 2008, Barrett 2010) etc.



Professional conversations and dialogue (whether physical or virtual) feature as a significant tool, not only in their own right, but as a mechanism to bring life to other tools. However, the nature of such conversations is crucial, as evidenced in Timperley's (2015) extensive work, where she claims that 'deep sustained conversations among teachers about matters of teaching and learning remain uncommon. Professionals, including leaders talk in generalities, fail to make tacit knowledge explicit, gloss over differences so as not to offend, rarely seek clarification from one another or revert to telling others what they should do' (p.4). In attempting to support teachers, she offers a range of enablers e.g. clear purposes, the establishing of trust and rapport, and the maintenance of relationships. In essence, such authentic conversations are only possible in schools with cultures that are conducive to e.g. shared meaning-making, collaborative critical reflection, respect for and expectation of challenge, the collection and use of evidence etc.

In keeping with the literature, throughout the *Cosán* Development Process, teachers offered varying conceptualisations of reflection. Likewise, while some teachers made connections between calls for deeper, and in some cases, collective reflection in the varying policies, they most readily referred to an individual cognitive process that evaluated 'what worked' and 'didn't work' in their practice. Some teachers did reference professional conversations as a means to support collaborative reflection, though in general, such conversations are not habitual, and do not appear to facilitate reflection at a deeper and more critical level. In keeping with previous assertions around collaboration, teachers also frequently highlighted the need for time and space to engage in meaningful reflection.

We should therefore explore how we can support teachers in engaging in suitably deep reflection on their learning, in a sustainable way.

### **Conflicting Conceptualisations**

While these themes demonstrate congruous elements between *Cosán* and the varying documents, there are of course points of contrast within and between themes that deserve some exploration. There is evidently a common commitment to learning as a lifelong endeavour amongst stakeholders, but the conceptualisation of professional learning and the differing terminology used is significant. The *Cosán* consultation process revealed how some teachers demonstrated somewhat narrow conceptualisations of what constituted professional learning. They readily referred to Continuing Professional Development (CPD), and therein

almost exclusively associated this term with formal courses or programmes. They are therefore often surprised at the expanded consideration of learning in *Cosán*. The document utilises the terms ‘teachers’ learning’, and ‘professional learning’, and is overt in outlining a range of learning processes and dimensions, with which teachers typically engage, of which courses or programmes are only one. This represents a shift away from any exclusive recognition of teachers’ learning as participation in pre-designed formal programmes that rely on transmission model delivery.

In turn, such a shift alters any related notions of evaluation or monitoring, as *Cosán* recognises teachers’ engagement in informal learning, which in essence may prove difficult to measure and record using conventional means. There is therefore a direct contrast with any initiatives that may rely on a construction of professional learning as limited to any particular learning process, and which may emphasise the need to quantify and monitor participation. This move away from any potentially reductionist construction toward a holistic view of teachers’ learning is also evident in the framework’s depiction of reflection as something which envelops their professional learning. The analysis here has revealed significant congruency regarding the importance placed on reflection in initiatives, but such emphasis varies between policies. Similar variance is evident concerning overall conceptualisations of reflection as well as an explicit expectation that teachers engage in more deep and critical reflection.

While such differing conceptualisations may be expected from different stakeholders, the lack of a common language e.g. around professional learning, reflection, impact etc., can leave teachers on uncertain ground, and can arguably add to the sense of overload as they receive mixed and even competing messages from stakeholders. They are therefore likely to continue to question ‘what counts’ as ‘valid’ learning, whose responsibility it is to ‘monitor’ their learning, and whether their own judgement in this regard is trusted and respected, least of all by themselves.

**There is therefore a need not only to explore the potential to develop this common language, but to begin to explore how these constructions can be more carefully aligned, specifically in the context of *Cosán*.**

## Summary

This paper has revealed significant congruency in national policies with common key messages emerging. Perhaps more than ever, teachers and wider school communities are expected to engage in purposeful collaboration. This shift away from individualised approaches represents a significant challenge for some, not only because it may challenge preformed beliefs about effective teaching and learning, but because it makes their own attitudes and practices more visible. This visibility brings with it the arguably unavoidable necessity to adopt a more critical mindset, but again, moving away from any purely inward gaze, to remain open to shared critical engagement. There is evidently a dualism at play here, where teachers who open their practice to collaborative endeavour can experience shared agency and empowerment, but likewise, are undoubtedly more exposed, and consequently, more vulnerable.

The sense of collective agency referenced above is of course wholly in keeping with an evident shift toward increased professional responsibility and autonomy. Teachers, as trusted and respected professionals, are now expected to be more self-determined, critical, and evidence-informed, in taking responsibility for their own learning, and in cultivating learning communities that value students', parents' and wider community participation.

This focus on agency moves beyond individual teachers, as the evidence demonstrates how schools are expected to assume collective responsibility for self-review and improvement. Yet again though, this new positioning offers certain challenges, including a potential lack of confidence among some teachers, who may question their ability to act autonomously, or even whether this is within their professional remit. Leaders are obviously especially challenged here, as a shift toward greater autonomy has the capacity to significantly alter their role. Aside from a renewed focus on 'leading learning' in their schools and centres, they are required to actively promote and foster cultures that rely on democratic engagement, shared meaning-making, and inquiry-orientated practice. Finally, this emphasis on inquiry orientation and increased criticality resonates with recurrent references to a more reflective profession. Teachers are encouraged to engage in deep reflection, both individually and collectively, and to use evidence to inform such processes.

These overarching elements are undoubtedly profound, and while it is heartening to note their corresponding presence in varying policies, this is not enough. They arguably represent some of the fundamental 'conditions', on which the success of any policy, and indeed, the wider

reform agenda depend. Recognising that some teachers continue to feel overwhelmed by the depth and pace of such reform it is vital that we all take account of these congruent underpinning elements, and **collectively** address the perceived challenges and opportunities that they offer. In doing so, we can more effectively and cohesively support teachers in navigating the current terrain. With regard to *Cosán* specifically, while the Development Process continues to operate in an exploratory space, there remains a genuine opportunity for the profession and stakeholders to shape a framework that is truly meaningful, impactful and which can be of help to us all in our focus on quality teaching and learning for all learners. The success of this collective endeavour hinges on all stakeholders carving out a genuine and sustainable space for professional learning. *Cosán*, the first national framework for teachers' learning, is the kind of space in which all of our respective work programmes can truly thrive.

In moving forward, we propose the following questions for exploration and discussion during the briefing session on December 11.

#### **Questions for Discussion**

1. Teachers' agency is key to meaningful engagement with *Cosán* and the range of other initiatives. How can we collectively ensure that the profession continues to feel adequately supported and therefore confident, to fully realise the collective empowerment and ownership espoused in national policies?
2. How can we ensure that leaders are informed of, and see value in *Cosán* and its underlying principles? And, in keeping with the literature and the elements espoused in national policies, how can leaders be supported in cultivating successful learning cultures in their schools and centres?
3. How can we support teachers in engaging in suitably deep reflection around their own learning in a sustainable way?

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