

## ASTI Response to Cosán – Draft Framework on Teachers’ Learning

2016

### 1. Introduction

Quality education requires quality teachers. Several important national and international reviews have identified Ireland as having a high quality teaching profession. Sustaining and developing that quality is the challenge for all stakeholders in education, including the Teaching Council as the professional standards body for teaching. While the latter has a specific remit as the professional regulatory body in developing policy for teachers’ learning, it must also be borne in mind that other policy decisions have direct– and enduring – influences on teacher quality.

The attractiveness of teaching as a career is a significant determinant on teacher quality. Salary level, employment security, promotional opportunities, quality of school leadership, working conditions including class size and staffing levels in schools are all central to maintaining teacher quality. For some time in Ireland, these factors have been in decline resulting in a demoralised profession. The profession is coping with a culture of “*Initiative overload*” in resource-poor schools and is infused with a pervasive sense of being under-valued by society (notwithstanding the evidence as regards the high level of societal trust in teachers). This is the context in which Cosán is being developed and while the ASTI commends the Teaching Council for the manner in which it has engaged teachers from the start in shaping the draft Framework, at the same time it would strongly caution against an over-ambitious project which does not fully take into account the realities of teachers’ working lives and the current low morale in the profession.

### 2. Cosán’s Core Values

The ASTI believes that it is very important that all of these values are at the core of the Framework. Not only are these values intrinsically important, they have practical consequences for teachers. In this regard it is instructive to reflect on the discussion that took place around the development of the Council’s Code of Professional Conduct and the concern that the Code reflect trust in the profession and sustain the professional autonomy of teachers. The research is clear on the centrality of the latter to teachers’ sense of motivation and self-efficacy. The Framework should above all sustain teachers’ commitment to lifelong learning; respecting their professional autonomy will be key in this regard.

It is inarguable that relevance and quality are very important for teachers’ professional learning. However, a common understanding must exist as to what they mean in practice. The research literature increasingly identifies improvements in students’ learning outcomes as a key indicator of both. At the same, it would be wrong to exclude the indicator of teacher well-being. The latter is not defined in the draft Framework but its importance to teachers’ individual and collective sense of self-efficacy, motivation and resilience is increasingly a policy concern at national and international level.

The 2011 Council policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education states that CPD is both a right and a responsibility for all teachers. Accessibility to professional learning is therefore critically important. However, is it not un-problematic. If we accept the research evidence around the centrality of teacher collaboration to effective and sustained teacher learning, then conditions shaping teachers’ working lives which promote or hinder collaboration become of central importance.

The reality is that teachers have experienced an *ongoing intensification* of their working lives which reduces opportunities for professional collaboration either in their own school or with local schools. The changes to the Supervision and Substitution Scheme and the introduction of the 33 additional out-of-school hours under the Croke Park Public Service Agreement are an example of this intensification process and remain deeply resented by teachers.

Educational policy developments such as the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy and School Self-Evaluation, which are explicitly based on concepts of schools as learning communities wherein teachers collaborate to gather, share and use evidence of students' learning are in the main perceived as "*add-ons*" to heavy teaching workloads. The latter perception is primarily due to the fact that teachers were not allocated time to collaborate. From the experiences of the last decade, it is hard to envisage how change can take place in teachers' practice without significant changes to policy factors such as the allocation of teachers' to school; school supervision and substitution arrangements; teachers' class contact schedules; school leadership structures. While the above policy factors are external to the Council, it has a unique opportunity in the proposed Action Research Phase to enable teachers to identify the systemic factors hindering or supporting collaborative cultures in schools.

The other dimensions of accessibility identified in the Framework – cost, time, geographical considerations, and modes – are also critical and are prominent in the research. The first three have a strong impact on motivation to engage in specific forms of CPD such as post-graduate studies and participation in workshops/seminars. The removal of the qualifications allowance has created a strong sense of grievance among teachers and is a disincentive to further learning. The ASTI supports the Council's call on stakeholders to engage on issues affecting accessibility to time for professional learning and underlines that the other accessibility issues require a similar approach.

Lack of acknowledgment of teachers' learning is demoralising at both individual and collective level. Limited forms of accreditation of learning for individual teachers is just one dimension of the problem. A more problematic issue is the lack of opportunity for utilising such learning in teachers' daily practice. A number of factors contribute to this situation: inadequate leadership structures in schools; lack of opportunities to enable teachers to serve as mentors, to engage in team teaching/peer collaboration, to serve as Subject Department co-ordinators and otherwise engage in collaborative practices. As noted above, while these issues are not within the remit of the Teaching Council, the Action Research Phase should be concerned to identify how they impact on teachers' motivation and opportunities for professional learning.

Impact is a relatively new concept in discussions on professional development. There is a danger that it could be mis-construed if narrowly framed. Teachers are focused on the holistic development of young people and are wary of concepts which do not take this orientation into account. In this regard, there is room for Irish research on what constitutes impact of teachers' professional learning.

### **3. Dimensions of Teachers' Learning**

The ASTI endorses the typology of teachers learning as set out in Figure 2 of the draft Framework. It accurately reflects what teachers intuitively understand as teacher learning and is sufficiently flexible to respond to teachers' needs at different stages of their professional careers. The ASTI notes the observations under Personal and Professional Learning which underlines the importance teachers attach to well-being as an increasingly important part of their working lives.

#### **4. Teachers' Learning Processes**

The comprehensive categorisation of teachers' learning processes in Figures 3 and 4 follows logically from the previous section. Given the highly formative role of the teacher unions in enabling teachers to develop and exercise their professional voice, the ASTI believes that Figure 4 should include an explicit sample referring to teachers' participation in professional associations, including their Trade Unions.

#### **5. Priority Learning Areas**

As noted by the Council, while professional autonomy is at the core of the Framework, the research at national and international level is consistent in indicating priority learning areas for teachers. The six categories broadly cover these areas. It would be helpful to explicate Leading Learning in the context of ongoing curriculum change. Similarly, Wellbeing needs to be developed in the context of a growing awareness of the importance of what drives and sustains teachers' motivation and sources of self-efficacy.

#### **6. Standards to Guide Learning and Reflection**

The ASTI shares the "*growth-based rather than threshold based*" concept outlined in this section. This concept best supports the value of professional autonomy. The Framework should strive for consistency between Council standards as set out in Droichead and in the Code.

#### **7. Recording and Reflecting on Learning and its Impact**

As noted in this section, the corollary of professional autonomy is the reflective practitioner. There is a wealth of research on how teachers can develop practices and instruments to enable them to be more *self-consciously* self-reflective. (Teachers could not do their jobs if they did not engage in continuous self-reflection!) While the practice of portfolio-based learning is increasingly the norm in higher education, including initial teacher education and induction, it is not the norm of the majority of serving teachers. The Council must be sensitive to this reality and adopt a flexible approach to this model of recording and reflecting on learning. Teachers are very sensitive to proposals which suggest more administrative work, more time spent on paper work. There is also a diversity of opinion among teachers as to the merits of ICT as part of their practice. Similarly, teachers occupy a spectrum in terms of degrees of competency and confidence in using ICT. The Action Research Phase should pay particular attention to researching teachers' responses to models of recording and reflecting on learning.

#### **8. Teaching Council Quality Assurance**

The opening paragraph of this Section should also contain a statement to the effect that the Council has a quality assurance role in relation to teachers so that the values of set out in the Framework are operationalised. Teachers reading the final Framework need to be able to *see* themselves as the key actors in the Framework. The Framework must strike a balance in tone and in content in terms of the regulatory role of the Council and the focus on enabling teachers to develop strong and lasting professional identities as lifelong learners.

#### **9. Action Research Phase**

The ASTI strongly supports the concept of an Action Research Phase participation in which is voluntary. As previously stated, this Phase must research the systemic issues which hinder or facilitate teachers' engagement in professional learning at both individual and collective level. Failure to do so would undermine the validity of the research exercise itself and would leave teachers feeling that their voice was being marginalised.

## **10. Linking Professional Learning to Renewal of Registration**

The concept of linking professional learning to renewal of registration is actually the question most exercising teachers' response to the Framework. Their concerns are succinctly reflected in the summary of issues contained in Appendix 1 in term of the negative consequences of "*mandatory CPD*". Notwithstanding the commitment to professional autonomy, flexibility, dimension of learning, etc., in the draft Framework, the Council must take cognizance of the legitimate fears associated with "*mandatory CPD*". These fears are not solely derived from the political realities of work intensification, austerity budgets, employment insecurity and pervasive low morale in the profession. Rather, they reflect a deep seated concern that an overly prescriptive approach to professional learning will become yet another bureaucratic compliance requirement that adds to an already heavy workload. The Council must work very carefully in the Action Research Phase to explore the most professional meaningful mode of relating professional learning to renewal of registration. Getting this right will be of the utmost importance to the Council in terms of sustaining teachers' confidence in the work of the Council and its role as the self-regulatory body for the profession.

## **11. Conclusion**

In summary, the ASTI commends the Council for the democratic and participative manner in which it has commenced the development of the Framework. The consultation process with teachers and stakeholders is the next important phase: if the final iteration of the Framework fails to reflect teachers' views, it may not secure the legitimacy it requires across the profession. Recent experiences of teachers' feeling marginalised in the process of curriculum change at junior cycle are particularly pertinent in this regard.