
Second Level Support Service

Discussion Document

**Providing for the Continuing Professional Development Needs
of Second Level Teachers**

May 2002

1. BACKGROUND TO THE PRESENT DISCUSSION DOCUMENT

The Second Level Support Service (SLSS) became operational in January 2001 and reached its current complement of 40 Regional Development Officers (RDOs) and Co-ordinators in August 2001. A draft discussion document (appendix 1) on the role and identity of the Service was prepared for consideration in February 2001. A second draft document, entitled Position Paper (appendix 2), was presented to the Steering Committee of the Service in December 2001. That document was considered by the Regional Development Officers and Co-ordinators of the Service in January 2002, and by the Steering Committee on the following February 14th. Discussion on both of these occasions took the form of group workshops and the feedback from each of these sessions has been assembled. This document seeks to explore the vision of professional development for teachers that emerges from the process outlined above. It is not the intention of this document to attempt an articulation of such a vision as a complete and coherent thing in itself. Neither is its intention to grapple with the systemic ramifications of such a vision. The intention is, rather, to highlight some of the issues for discussion and endeavour that inevitably emerge from consideration of the complex task of providing appropriate and effective support for teaching and learning.

2. WHY CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT?

Fullan (1991) states: “As long as there is the need for improvement, namely, forever, there will be need for professional development.” The Report on the National Education Convention, 1994 concluded that “the case for in-service teacher education no longer needs to be made” (Coolahan 1994, p. 87). Fullan and Hargreaves (1994) assert that “no-one could be against teachers developing” but offer the caveat that “there is a difference between developing and being developed.” The White Paper, *Charting Our Education Future* (1995) supported the need for a comprehensive programme of professional development for teachers in calling for “a variety of forms of inservice teacher education... (to support)... the personal and the professional needs of the teacher, as well as those of the school system.” An object of the Education Act, 1998 is “to promote best practice in teaching methods with regard to the

diverse needs of students and the development of the skills and competencies of teachers.”

Lawton (1996) offers the following reflection on the link between the professional

development of the teacher and the development of the curriculum:

“Lawrence Stenhouse once said ‘*No curriculum development without teacher development*’, I would like to extend that idea to the principle that there can be no real improvement in the quality of the education system unless we have fully professional teachers who are given shared ownership of the system.”

Arguably the most pressing case for supporting the professional development of teachers is made by Fullan and Hargreaves (1994) when they assert that “Teachers don’t merely deliver the curriculum. They develop, define it and reinterpret it too.”

Given the elusive character of teaching, there is a necessity for supportive opportunities for reflection so that this developing, defining and reinterpreting can occur in a structured and systematic way. The professional development of teachers is about teachers enquiring into their own practice; it is about recognising the fact that it is teachers who, in their daily encounters with their students, re-create the curriculum. As stated in Lieberman and Miller (1991):

“No matter how school cultures are transformed, the individual teacher continues to make and remake the classroom, based on his or her own imagination, spirit, inspiration, and learning.”

Coolahan (1991) pointedly, and perhaps poignantly, sums up the fact that this ‘spirit’ is ever in need of regeneration when he observes that:

“... the profile of the teaching force in Ireland is that of an ageing profession with a limited supply of ‘new blood’ entrants. It is vital that older teachers, in mid-career, or later, are enabled to re-energise and ‘re-charge the batteries’...”

Perspectives offered by Maxine Greene (1991) referred to later in this document, indicate that new entrants to the teaching profession are also in need of considerable levels of support.

Stoll and Fink (1996) offer an interesting overview of the changing face of professional development provision:

“The one-off in-service sessions designed to impart the ‘right way’ of doing something are being replaced by more sustained, coherent, inquiry-based programmes. Attempts are being made to bring teachers’ and schools’

development needs together so that individuals feel personally and professionally fulfilled while whole-school improvement occurs.”

Generally speaking, then, an emerging consensus favours a commitment to a process that is organic and long-term. Raymond Bolam (1993) grounds his definition of this process in the career narrative of the teacher when he describes it as “an on-going process which builds upon initial teacher education and training, begins with induction into teaching, includes in-service training, staff development and management development and concludes with preparation for retirement.”

3. QUESTIONS OF DEFINITION AND TERMINOLOGY

What is professional development for teachers? How and when does it happen? What are its outcomes and are they objectively measurable? Fundamental questions such as these and others must be addressed by all parties to this discussion because, given the complexity of the task, it is otherwise likely that differing meanings will attach to key terms.

“Professional Development refers to *learning opportunities* that *engage teachers’ creative and reflective capacities* to *strengthen their practice*.” (Bredeson and Johansson, 2000)

Global descriptions of professional development, such as the above, serve as reminders of the parameters of the task and highlight some key terms that are in need of further consideration.

3.1 Learning opportunities

In the process of professional development the teacher is cast in the role of learner. It is of considerable importance, therefore, that his or her learning experiences are congruent with current understanding of the nature of teaching and learning. Traditionally, the dominant conceptions of how learning happens have been incremental and behaviourist. This assumes that knowledge is there to be transmitted and learnt, that understanding will develop later and that practice will alter accordingly. Latterly cognitive psychologists have proposed a constructivist view of learning that sees it as interactive rather than linear. A constructivist model of teaching and learning sees the learner as engaged in a process where he/she takes in

information, interprets it, connects it to what is already known and, if necessary, reorganises understanding to accommodate it. Ideally, a constructivist approach to teaching and learning will value and promote a process of on-going collegial inquiry. (Hargreaves et al., 1996, Black & Wiliam, 1998)

3.2 Some implications

Few would argue in favour of a model of professional development that would cast the teacher in the role of passive recipient of training. Yet, there are occasions when in-service sessions are heavily dependent on the clear transmission of information, leaving the teacher in no doubt as to course content and favoured methodological approaches. Such an approach is necessary in part during national initiatives associated with curriculum change. Indeed, given the pace of curricular change in Ireland in the recent past it is not surprising that the focus of energy and resource allocation has gone into supporting new programmes and the changes associated with a variety of new syllabuses.

A more-or-less constructivist approach to professional development would seek to involve the teacher in reflective dialogue, would support a process that is largely self-directed, and would place considerable emphasis on how curricular issues are assimilated and mediated by the teacher. In such a broad scheme of things professional development is viewed as a process that is continuous and multi-faceted. Much of the discussion that arose in the context of earlier SLSS discussion papers supports such a vision of professional development, one that is characterised by some or all of the following principles:

- That it should recognise that the development needs of teachers are not simple, incremental and linear
- That it should respect the fact that the development needs of teachers will vary because of the different stages they are at in their careers and because of the different circumstances in which they find themselves
- That teachers learn best from other teachers and from reflection on their own classroom experience. This is not to deny the pitfalls of a support structure in which teachers learn *exclusively* through contacts with other teachers, be they on secondment

or active classroom practitioners. Thinking ‘outside the loop’, as it were, is necessary so that the correctness of shared professional assumptions is not always taken for granted.

- That it should as far as possible support local initiative and teacher autonomy in this area
- That, in its relationship with teachers as learners, it should exemplify a good model of teaching and learning. That is to say that professional development should not cast the teacher merely in the role of recipient. The promotion of learner-centred activities should be a matter of priority.
- That it should recognise that the pace of educational change is slow, that growth in this area does not proceed by simple increments
- That interventions that are not negotiated and that do not involve shared learning targets and outcomes are unlikely to succeed to any meaningful degree

In the light of the above, discussion here might usefully centre on the following question:

What kinds of learning experiences for teachers should be given priority in a programme of professional development?

3.3 Engage teachers’ creative and reflective capacities

It will be useful to look particularly at the structure that might ensure that the creative and reflective capacities of teachers would best be engaged – how and when such development might be encouraged to happen. The SLSS discussion documents prepared to date look towards a two-dimensional approach to the provision of professional development as offering the best hope for success. That is to say that the structure should have a national identity and a regional presence, the former offering coherent and strategic planning at national level and the latter offering ownership at local level of processes designed to meet local needs. Those documents envisage both dimensions of the process being managed by a

single agency in partnership with other providers, particularly the Education Centre network. This, in itself, raises some issues that go to the heart of how teachers visualise themselves and how they understand the complex set of relationships that are the lifeblood of their professional identity.

The professional identity of the teacher is frequently defined in and through the following kinds of relationships:

- With the students and their parents or guardians
- With the teacher's own specialist knowledge and expertise
- With the school as a teaching/learning organisation
- With the school as an administrative structure
- With the wider community in which the school operates
- With the fabric of the education system in the broadest sense

The subtlety of the context established through this set of relationships ensures that the needs of teachers cannot be met by simple, one-dimensional initiatives. The support needs of teachers are not, in themselves, simple or linear. They are more complex and shifting than that. For example, it is possible to characterise the professional needs of teachers as being ***inextricably linked to the needs of the individual teacher, the needs of the school, and the needs of the wider system.*** It is unlikely that the individual teacher will succeed in making significant improvement in the classroom in the absence of a supportive school environment. Furthermore, in relation to the needs of the individual teacher, it must be borne in mind that the teacher as a professional experiences different support needs at different stages in his/her career. So, the landscape in which initiatives aimed at longer-term professional support for teachers must be conducted is a complex one indeed. Conceived of as a 'problem', the provision of meaningful professional development for teaching does not admit of easy solutions. A partnership approach, arrived at through genuine consultation between all the parties engaged in such endeavour, is essential so that the dimensions of the task can be apprehended clearly and imaginative strategies can be put in place to meet the identified needs. The Second Level Support Service does not approach this area as though it were a 'green field site'. The SLSS is a new organisation and it is conscious of the existence of

many other initiatives and organisations, and it recognises the complementary nature of the work carried out by so many others in this area of education.

It is sometimes tempting to suggest that the in-service provision which is necessary during times of curriculum change can, to some degree, bypass this complex world by assuming that shared objectives between provider and receiver exist in the matter of new knowledge to be imparted, new skills to be mastered and new curricular arrangements to be assimilated. The 'content' has been determined externally and a relatively simple transmission route is available to all. And yet anybody involved in in-service provision knows that this is an inadequate articulation of the process. Knowledge is not mastered so simply and the process through which the teacher as learner takes ownership of such knowledge depends very heavily on the relationship that is established between the in-service provider and the teachers, individually and collectively.

In attempting to *engage teachers' creative and reflective capacities* then, the following question might be posed:

How can all the partners to this endeavour complement one another to ensure that teachers and schools will be fully engaged in the developmental process?

3.4 To strengthen their practice

The ultimate goal of professional development for teachers and schools is improved practice so that teaching and learning experiences can become more fruitful and effective. Here again, questions of definition are crucial. What *is* the 'practice' of teaching? Lieberman and Miller (1991) offer some helpful insights into the nature of teaching through investigation of how a teacher learns the job, becomes a teacher, and forges a professional identity. They remind us that teaching embodies a central contradiction based on the fact that the teacher must deal with a group of students (and teach them something) and also deal with each learner as an individual. This leads to the teacher's having to develop a uniquely individual teaching style "forged in the dailiness of work and developed by trial and error". The clear implication of this for the provider of professional support for teachers is that the

support must be grounded in classroom realities and must respect the complexities of the teaching task. Respecting the individuality of the teachers' experiences, it must afford teachers an opportunity to give account of their experiences and insights. It should encourage each teacher to research, record and reflect upon his/her teaching.

“Unlike other professionals, who look to colleagues and supervisors for... feedback, teachers turn to children.” Here Lieberman and Miller argue that the teacher's professional satisfaction comes from “the feeling of being rewarded by one's students.” This points to a support service that is based on the premise that *meeting the needs of the learners is central to the work of the teacher*. Ironically perhaps, order and control are strongly felt needs of the learners, and control norms in the individual classrooms and in the school as a whole, are necessary in teaching. “Control precedes instruction; this is a major shibboleth of teaching.”(ibid.) Yet, there are occasions when the imperative to maintain order can *appear* to be at variance with the ideals of the profession. The grammar of schooling itself, especially at post-primary level, can be seen at times to embody a view of teaching and learning occurring exclusively within a context of transmission and control. Denis Lawton (1998) asserts that the “school even as we know it now was largely a nineteenth-century invention deriving from nineteenth-century social theories and practices...” Schools, he argues, were developed originally along the lines of other institutions designed to solve social problems. Certain cultural norms emerged from the impulse to control: silence, strict control over time, restrictions of space and movement. Maxine Greene (1991) articulates a commonly felt experience of teaching when she reminds us that the initial commitment we make to teaching as

a profession can be undermined somewhat in our early encounters with the everyday life of the school.

“What happens, of course, when we have our initial experiences with teaching in public schools, is that we become sharply aware of limits, of structures and arrangements that cannot easily be surpassed. No matter how practical, how grounded our educational courses were, they suddenly appear to be totally irrelevant in the concrete situation where we find ourselves.”

Greene reminds us that a variety of impulses or ‘interests’ (the nurturing or social dimension, engagement with an academic discipline, the desire to foster critical thinking, for example) may urge us towards teaching as a career. However, once we find ourselves in *the concrete situation*, with the imperative that we survive, that we assimilate (and quickly) the structures that epitomise the culture into which we are being inducted, we all too often allow ourselves to be defined by roles laid down in that culture. In effect, we discover that much of our day-to-day work is scarcely congruent with the vision that impelled us towards this career in the first place. At times we cope, Greene asserts, by becoming more efficient and by functioning compliantly. And in doing so we run the risk of abandoning what Dewey refers to as ‘the pursuit of our selves’ in favour of a certainty that is ever a compromise and a diminution. Even the most supportive school environment cannot avoid the fact that the school, which is a learning community, is also a learning institution. In other words, ***the context in which teaching and learning takes place is, in itself, a problematic one and it is important for teachers to engage in critical reflection upon this.*** A process of continuing professional development for teachers must recognise the complexity of this context as an integral part of what it means to be a teacher and must offer teachers at differing stages of their careers opportunities for renewal and regeneration at this level. That is to say that, at some point, in offering support for the deepening and expansion of the teacher’s stock-in-trade, a support service should address broader issues around what makes teaching problematic in itself. For example, a programme of support in areas of classroom or behaviour management should be nuanced in such a way as to open up discussion and reflection of issues that are fundamental to teaching. The importance of this is acknowledged in Fullan and Hargreaves (1994)

“Acknowledging the teacher’s purpose and understanding and valuing the teacher as a person... should be vital elements underpinning any strategy of staff development and school improvement. It is one of the keys to unlocking motivation and helping teachers confront what it means to be a teacher.”

The perspectives offered by Lieberman and Miller, and by Greene above would uphold a view that, on a pragmatic level at least, ***a programme of continuing support aimed***

at new entrants into the profession should be implemented as a matter of some priority.

This is particularly so because of the ‘lonely’ character of teaching and because, it seems, nothing can prepare the fledgling teacher adequately for the ‘shock of the new’!

“Once graduated from preparation programs, teachers find themselves alone in the classroom with a group of students, without a peer or supervisor in sight. The neophyte teacher is left with degree in hand, high expectations internalized, a fistful of untried methodologies, and few adults with whom to share, grow, and learn.” (Lieberman and Miller, 1991)

Although the scenario painted above does not correspond exactly to the Irish context, the similarities are striking enough to suggest that clearly focused support in the early days and years of teaching would have the potential to meet a real need. A well-managed induction programme would encourage the teacher in his/her first year of teaching to record and reflect upon early experiences. Appropriate links between the support service and the teacher training colleges could serve to ground the perspectives of the academy in practice and in turn broaden the base of research into teaching and learning in this country.

Lieberman and Miller (1991) remind us also that the task of establishing clear links between teaching and learning is problematic and that the knowledge base in teaching is weak, “there is simply no consensus... about what is basic to the practice of the profession... When viewed as a craft, teaching makes sense as a messy and highly personal enterprise, for it concerns itself with the making and remaking of an object until it satisfies the standards of its creator.” Knowledge about teaching is always applied knowledge, emerging through situation and encounter. There is no guarantee that in teaching yesterday’s answer will suffice for today. The question of best practice is always a matter for reflection and debate. Thus, it is all the more important that teachers, at all points in their careers, engage with the daily realities of their own practice and with the practice of others so that this debate can continue fruitfully.

In an attempt, then, to *strengthen their practice*, a question such as the following might be posed:

What work needs to be done so as to provide the necessary opportunities for teachers to examine their practice in a structured and systematic way?

4. SOME VIEWS OF THE WORK OF THE SECOND LEVEL SUPPORT SERVICE

“The work of the SLSS is the professional development of the teacher... a process that can be enabling for teachers and can create opportunities for teachers to share experience.”

(SLSS Position Paper Workshop, January 2002)

Section 3 of this document has attempted to draw attention to the complexity of the context in which a process of continuing professional development for post-primary teachers will have to operate. The Second Level Support Service is acutely conscious that, as a new organisation, it enters a vineyard in which there are many other labourers. To do so without adequate consultation and without a clear mandate at national policy level is, to say the least, inadvisable.

There are many initiatives and organisations whose work involves them in the process of ‘enabling’ teachers in schools and in the wider social contexts in which they work. The Education Centre network provides important leadership at local level and has a widening brief in the national scheme of things. Through its representative structures the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) enables teachers to contribute significantly to curriculum development. The School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI) is a national initiative that affords every school the opportunity to explore the potential of strategic planning and organisation. As well as providing pre-service training for teachers, the third level institutions promote the continuing professional development of teachers through a wide variety of post-graduate programmes. Many subject associations exist to promote and sustain the work of teachers. The teacher unions are actively engaged in the professional development of their members. Curriculum development centres (CDC/CDU) actively promote the concept of the teacher as researcher through a broad range of curriculum development projects. These ‘players already in the field’ can help the SLSS in the task of defining its role. To that end, *a consultative forum should exist* so that the complex task of

meeting the professional development needs of teachers can be approached as a truly collaborative one.

The Inspectorate of the Department of Education & Science is represented on the working groups of the individual programmes and on the steering committee, which oversees the work of the SLSS. The work of the Inspectorate in schools will necessitate the existence of a support service that can be responsive to the professional development needs that will emerge.

In relation to education and training, the remit of the Teaching Council, as set out in the Teaching Council Act 2001, states that the Council “shall promote the continuing education and training and professional development of teachers.” [38.1] and that it shall “promote awareness among the teaching profession and the public of the benefits of continuing education and training and professional development.” [38. 2.(b)]

The Department of Education’s In-Career Development Unit is central to the emergence of the SLSS. This is especially true in that many of the individual programme support teams, which have come together to form the SLSS, owe their existence to ICDU-funded initiatives associated with occasions of curriculum change. Ironically, this has provided the emerging organisation with some problems of identity and direction. Members of these programme teams have been engaged in work of a high quality over a number of years, or are currently engaged in the developmental work of introducing and supporting more recent initiatives. Work has been intensive, focused and highly rewarding. Yet, feedback from the January 2002 workshop session indicates that many regional development officers are experiencing difficulty in re-aligning their professional selves within the context of the new organisation. Not lacking in commitment to the ideals that impelled them into this kind of work, they see themselves at times being defined rather arbitrarily by system requirements and by structures. Most significantly, perhaps, they perceive themselves to be in a work context in which much has changed rather rapidly. Their situation can be viewed as analogous to the experience of the early ‘days’ of teaching articulated by Maxine Greene

(1991) and discussed in the previous section of this document. Their impulse to support teaching and learning remains strong but the vision that should animate the work can seem a little blurred because the new context has taken them into a more complex milieu. In virtually all cases the co-ordinators and development officers of the SLSS have come to the new service with their programme-specific remits still intact. This cannot be viewed merely as an accident of history, but as a development that raises crucial questions for the service and, in particular, for the work of the development officers within the service. Not least, this new context has focused attention on the development needs of the RDOs themselves—*in the task of supporting life-long learners the RDO will need to be a supported life-long learner.*

And indeed, the members of the organisation have begun this task of critical reflection and some suggestions and possibilities have emerged:

- * The development of regional support teams affords opportunities to broaden the remit of the service and strengthen ties with a variety of local initiatives, especially through dialogue with the Education Centre network. It can ensure, also, that local support service personnel will have the capacity to respond flexibly to local needs. The location, for example, of regional development officers within the catchment areas of one or more Education Centres could facilitate the involvement, on a part-time basis, of serving teachers in a variety of programmes of professional development.

- * The emergence of a strong regional network can, in the longer term, provide a framework through which schools, teachers, parents and students can collaborate to explore and help meet the learning needs of all.

- * A basis for the work of the development officers can be found in extending and strengthening the collaborative relationships that already exist between RDOs and individual teachers and schools. In this context teachers should be afforded opportunities to give account of their experiences and insights – to research, record and reflect upon their teaching. Viewed in this light the work of the RDO is essentially

twofold: initiating programmes of professional development, and providing a monitoring framework for programmes initiated by others.

- * Support for individual programmes can and should be broadened so as to encompass wherever possible wider pedagogical concerns.
 - * An emphasis placed upon RDOs working in collaboration with whole school staffs suggests a natural interface with the School Development Planning Initiative.
 - * Evidence from pilot research projects (such as the School and Curriculum Development Initiative, funded by the ICDU and managed by the Education Department of NUI Maynooth) can offer useful models of collaborative enterprise in this area. Especially, such projects offer teachers and schools opportunities to share their practice with others and to make their sense of their own work more explicit.
 - * Many opportunities exist for the development of cross-programme links such as whole-school approaches to mixed-ability teaching, assessment for learning, literacy development, portfolio creation and management, peer mentoring, and so on.
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- * The active encouragement of the teacher as researcher is given considerable priority within the thinking of the SLSS. The strengthening of links with third level colleges and agencies of curriculum development can do much to support this aim. Intrinsic to such expansion will be the issue of how the personal and professional initiatives that teachers engage upon can be recorded and accredited appropriately.
 - * The existence of a consultative committee, through which the bodies and organisations representing the partners in education can contribute to the development of policy, can do much to enhance the legitimacy and validity of the service. (This, in fact, is the purpose of the Advisory Committee for post primary inservice which has recently been established under the chairmanship of a Deputy Chief Inspector.)

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