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Developing an
evaluation framework
for teachers' professional
learning in Ireland:
Phase 1 Desk-based research
Executive summary

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Developing an evaluation framework for teachers' professional learning in Ireland: Phase 1 Desk-based research (Rawdon, Sampson, Gilleece, & Cosgrove, 2020) represents the first output from a 3-year project which aims to develop a framework for the evaluation of teachers' professional learning (TPL¹). The report has six main elements. It contains:

1. Definitions of key concepts agreed for the current study;
2. A review of existing frameworks for the evaluation of TPL (including three applied examples from the Irish context);
3. An overview of impact assessment and process evaluation methods for TPL;
4. A presentation of findings from national and international research on the wellbeing of children and young people in Ireland;
5. An overview of key national policies relating to the wellbeing of children and young people; and,
6. A summary of the TPL provided in the area of student wellbeing by the support services and agencies of the Department of Education (DE, formerly the Department of Education and Skills or DES)² and the Teaching Council, ETBI, and HSE.

The current summary provides a brief overview of the full report.

ES.1 KEY DEFINITIONS

The concepts of TPL and wellbeing are central to the current research. The focus of the research are the various types of continuing professional learning and development activities (for teachers and school leaders) which are funded, facilitated, accredited, or otherwise supported by the Department, its support services, or its agencies (including but not limited to CSL, NIPT, PDST, JCT, NEPS, NCSE, and the Education Centres). Activities of the Teaching Council, ETBI, and relevant HSE activities are within scope. Professional learning activities offered by private providers and/or funded by teachers themselves are not within scope.

Informal TPL, professional learning communities, and reflective practice are of central importance to the ongoing professional learning and development of teachers; however, the focus of this project is on formal opportunities for learning and development. The main rationale for this relates to the challenge of evaluating and assessing the impact of highly informal activities. One consequence of focusing on more formal activities and opportunities in this project is that the scope and intended outputs are distinct (although hopefully complementary) from the *Cosán Framework for Teachers' Learning* (The Teaching Council, 2016).

For the purpose of this project, wellbeing is defined in line with the *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018-2023* (DES, 2018, p. 10) definition, according to which wellbeing is present when:

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- 1 The term 'teachers' professional learning' (TPL) is used throughout the current report. This term is intended to acknowledge the full range of learning activities undertaken by teachers and is considered to better reflect the various dimensions of teachers' learning than a narrower term such as 'continuing professional development' (CPD). While the term TPL is preferred throughout the report, CPD or other analogous terms are used in direct quotations or if the original term is required to conserve the intended meaning.
 - 2 The Department of Education and Skills (DES) was formally renamed the Department of Education (DE) in late 2020. As this report was completed prior to the renaming, Department of Education and Skills (DES) is used throughout.

“a person realises their potential, is resilient in dealing with the normal stresses of their life, takes care of their physical wellbeing and has a sense of purpose, connection and belonging to a wider community. It is a fluid way of being and needs nurturing throughout life”.

ES.2 EXISTING TPL FRAMEWORKS (INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL)

The purpose of the current research is to develop a framework for TPL capable of describing and evaluating TPL provided by the Department and its support agencies and services. A systematic review of existing TPL evaluation frameworks was carried out in order to inform the development of an evaluation framework for TPL in Ireland which could also potentially incorporate relevant elements of the *Cosán* framework (The Teaching Council, 2016).

Guskey’s (2000, 2002) five-level evaluation framework was used as a starting point when considering evaluation frameworks in the current research (*participants’ reactions; participants’ learning; organisational support and change; participants’ use of new knowledge and skills; and, student learning outcomes*). Work by other major contributors to the field, including Borko (2004), Desimone (2009), Bubb and Earley (2010), and King (2014), is examined in the review. Borko’s work recognises the importance of socio-cultural features, while an important contribution to the field by Desimone is the proposed use of a critical features approach for the evaluation of TPL. Bubb and Earley advocate the inclusion of attitudes as an explicit component of an evaluative model. King’s (2014) work was developed in the Irish context and therefore is of particular interest to the current research. She advocates the addition of systemic factors to the evaluation model and includes the concept of diffusion, i.e., *“unplanned rippling of practices”* (King, 2014, p. 106).

A number of recent review publications on evaluation frameworks were identified in the systematic review. These include Compen et al. (2019), Merchie et al. (2018), and Soebari and Aldridge (2015). The extended evaluative framework presented by Merchie et al. comprises: *features of the intervention; teacher quality; teacher behaviour; student results; contextual factors; and, teachers’ personal characteristics*. Using broadly similar framework elements, Compen et al. argue for a cyclical model (rather than a linear model) and place student learning at the centre of their model. Soebari and Aldridge (2015) for their part propose the inclusion of student attitudes as one of five phases of their evaluation framework.

Findings from the systematic review underscore the importance of focusing an evaluation on the core features of effective TPL, rather than the mode of delivery or type of activity. This is in line with the Teaching Council’s (2016) *Cosán* framework, which recognises the various learning processes that impact on teachers’ learning and practice, but does not suggest any hierarchical order of such activities. An alternative to the core features approach is to consider a spectrum of TPL models ranging from *transmissive to transformative* (Kennedy, 2014). According to Kennedy’s classification, training is skills-based, generally delivered by an expert, and its purpose is typically transmission. At the other end of the spectrum, collaborative professional inquiry models are likely to be transformative.

In the Irish context, the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST, 2017) has developed their own model of TPL design and evaluation, based on the models of Guskey (1986) and Desimone (2009), as well as work by Parker, Patton, and O’Sullivan (2016) and Brennan (2017). Also, the Centre for School Leadership (CSL) has developed a model for school leaders in Ireland (CSL, 2019). Both of these are described and linkages are made between the models identified in the systematic review and these applied models used in Ireland. Similar to the criticisms advanced by Compen et al. (2019), the applied work of the PDST underscores how a linear model for evaluating TPL may be problematic. Thus, the inclusion of CPD design as part of the PDST’s TPL evaluation framework. The CSL model emphasises that professional learning should be guided by professional standards and references

Looking at our School (DES, 2016a, 2016b). Although *Cosán* (The Teaching Council, 2016) is a descriptive framework (rather than evaluative), it is presented in the current review as it is of central importance when considering the professional learning of teachers in Ireland.

Barriers and enablers to TPL are noted in the current review. Most of the evidence in this area to date is drawn from international literature and is not specific to the Irish context, although it may be expected that many of the same issues apply. Key barriers to TPL (comprising both contextual and logistic factors) include: the school context (e.g., location, enrolment size, and socioeconomic status); school culture; school leadership; time and resources; identifying the specific needs of staff; and, the availability of suitable opportunities that do not conflict with other responsibilities (e.g., family life and work schedule). Ensuring inclusivity was also noted as a challenge to TPL provision in the area of student wellbeing.

ES.3 METHODS OF IMPACT ASSESSMENT AND PROCESS EVALUATION

Teachers in Ireland engage in a wide range of TPL activities and their learning is facilitated in a variety of ways. This poses a key challenge for the evaluation of TPL activities and the development of an evaluation framework which is sufficiently generalisable to suit various TPL activities. Determining the anticipated outcomes of a TPL activity and accounting for unintended impacts also creates a challenge for TPL evaluation. Selecting research methods that allow determination of causality can also be challenging given that randomised controlled trials (RCTs) are costly to establish and difficult to carry out in the school setting.

It is noted in the literature that often TPL evaluation is only carried out at Level 1 (*participants' reactions*) of Guskey's five levels of evaluation. This is also evident in the review of TPL carried out as part of the current research (see Section ES.6). While Guskey argues that evaluating TPL at Level 1 is important, this falls short of assessing whether a TPL activity has had an impact on a teacher's teaching practice or whether the TPL has translated to a measurable change in student learning outcomes. It is important to evaluate TPL outcomes across a number of different levels as change at one level may not necessarily lead to change at another level. It is likely that there is variation across schools in the extent to which a collective approach is used to reflect on TPL experiences and impact.

The current review notes that it is rare to find linkages between TPL evaluation literature and more general literature on evaluation and impact assessment. An effective descriptive and evaluative framework for TPL should allow the evaluator to ascertain means of identifying and measuring expected outcomes as a result of a TPL activity and should attempt to allow the evaluator to describe the mechanisms by which changes in teaching practice and student learning outcomes may occur. This can be achieved with the inclusion of a logic model describing the expected causal mechanisms underpinning the TPL. TPL participation is unlikely to result in change across *all* potential outcomes and this depends on the nature and scope of the TPL activity. A logic model can help to identify *how* and *where* change is expected.

In the literature reviewed, the intended user of the evaluation models presented was not always evident. It is necessary to determine whether the same evaluation framework could appropriately be employed by all stakeholders (the Department, school leaders, teachers, and TPL providers in Ireland) to determine the quality and impact of a TPL. This deserves further consideration as the TPL provider is likely to focus on potential improvements whereas school leaders and teachers may focus preferentially on changes in student outcomes arising as a result of participation.

Guskey (2003, 2014, 2016), King (2016), and Merchie et al. (2018) advocate the importance of backward planning of TPL evaluation in order to determine what outcome is expected and how this outcome will be achieved. In other words, evaluation methods should be embedded from the outset. Unexpected outcomes should also be considered from the outset of TPL design, along with the expected outcomes. In reference to systemic factors (support; initiative design and impact; and, teacher agency), King (2016)

argues that these should be considered when planning TPL as these factors may mediate the impact of TPL activities on student learning outcomes. By *support*, King (2016) means the support that teachers may need to engage with a TPL activity and this may come from school leadership. *Initiative design and impact* refers to whether the design of the TPL is structured, feasible, research-based, and focused. *Teacher agency* refers to teacher characteristics which may determine if changes can be facilitated, such as teachers' openness, willingness, and motivation to change. In designing the framework for the current project, it may be relevant to consider factors such as teacher motivation and support for TPL engagement in the pre-design phase of TPL.

ES.4 THE WELLBEING OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN IRELAND

Theories of development which focus on the school environment stress the crucial role that this environment can play in the growth and development of the child from an early age (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Vygotsky, 1962). In line with *ecological systems theory* (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) it is noted that the wellbeing of children and young people may be impacted by the various systems in which they interact, e.g., the school and family/home environments, the policy context, and educational systems. Vygotsky's (1962) *social learning theory* describes how individuals learn in social contexts and how a child's interactions with those around them can enhance their ability to learn in numerous ways. Taken together, these theories highlight the important role of teachers and school leaders in cultivating a positive school environment which focuses on wellbeing in order to facilitate positive developmental and learning outcomes for children and young people.

Having considered the theoretical literature underpinning concepts of wellbeing, a review was conducted of large-scale national (GUI, MWS³) and international (HBSC, PISA, PIRLS, and TIMSS⁴) surveys and assessments which reported findings on the wellbeing of children and young people in Ireland over the past decade. Studies were included in the review which were conducted in Ireland within the last 10 years and which included nationally representative samples of children and young people (5-18 years).

Survey findings regarding physical wellbeing show that for a minority of children and young people issues with diet, sleep, levels of physical activity, and substance misuse continue to warrant public health attention. Differences in outcomes associated with socioeconomic status were identified from quite young ages. Turning to mental health, issues were more common amongst girls than boys and the comparatively lower life satisfaction reported by teenagers in Ireland relative to other countries in some studies was noted as concerning. A positive finding was that at both primary and post-primary levels, rates of bullying in Ireland are lower than on average internationally.

ES.5 POLICY CONTEXT FOR THE WELLBEING OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN IRELAND

Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, 2014-2020 sets out a vision for Ireland to be one of the best small countries in the world in which to grow up and raise a family (DCYA, 2014). It hopes to create an environment in Ireland where the rights of all children and young people are respected, protected, and fulfilled; where their voices are heard; and, where they are supported in reaching their full potential throughout their lives. The increasing national emphasis on the wellbeing of children and young people is also reflected in international trends (e.g., the OECD's PISA now includes a stand-alone wellbeing questionnaire as part of the assessment). The focus on wellbeing is evident across a broad spectrum of national policies in health, education, and other spheres but educational policy is the primary focus of the current review.

3 GUI – Growing Up in Ireland; MWS – My World Survey.

4 HBSC – Health Behaviour in School-aged Children; PISA – Programme for International Student Assessment; PIRLS – Progress in International Reading Literacy Study; TIMSS – Trends in Mathematics and Science Study.

Four areas for whole-school wellbeing promotion are highlighted across a number of education policy documents and these are: culture & environment; curriculum – teaching & learning; relationships & partnerships; and, policy & planning (e.g., *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018-2023*, DES, 2018). These four areas listed for wellbeing promotion highlight the micro and macro contexts which may impact wellbeing. Additional wellbeing supports are available to those who need them in schools depending on the degree of need.

The school context is particularly important for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with special education needs (SEN). Internationally, the OECD's *Strength Through Diversity* project is exploring how education systems can be more inclusive and equitable by examining the wellbeing needs of specific marginalised groups under six key themes: migration-induced diversity; ethnic groups, national minorities, and Indigenous peoples; gender; gender identity and sexual orientation; special education needs; and, giftedness. The current review did not find a strong focus on the specific wellbeing needs of students in these particular groups in the submissions by TPL provided in the area of student wellbeing by nine providers in Ireland. An exception is TPL for teachers of students with SEN as for these teachers, there is a variety of relevant TPL (e.g., JCT facilitated workshops focusing on Level 1 and Level 2 Learning Programmes; ESCI Primary SEN support groups; as well as NCSE work focusing on inclusion of students with SEN).

ES.6 TPL PROVIDED RELATING TO WELLBEING OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN IRELAND

Recent TPL activities related to wellbeing provided by nine providers in Ireland were reviewed (i.e., the Teaching Council, NIPT, PDST, JCT, NEPS, HSE, NCSE, ETBI, and the Education Centres). Providers were asked to supply information on student wellbeing related TPL provided over a 5-year period, where possible.

For the most part, the TPL activities listed by providers were optional (for teachers and school leaders) and uncertified (other than certification of attendance). Participant evaluation on completion of the course was found to be very common and was typically found to focus on what would usually be viewed as Level 1 (*participants' reactions*) in Guskey's (2000, 2002) five-level model for evaluating TPL, with some at Level 2 (*participants' learning*). Some notable exceptions to this, where more in-depth evaluation took place, are the use of an RCT design by NEPS for the evaluation of the FRIENDS programme (Rutledge et al., 2016) and a detailed evaluation of TPL for Restorative Practice by the PDST (2019).

Organisations offering TPL in Ireland vary significantly in their approaches to TPL design, development, facilitation, implementation, and the level of impact assessment they carry out. It is hoped that the framework developed in the current project will cater for the wide range of TPL activities offered by various organisations. Engaging TPL providers in the evaluation process is critical, given that evaluation should be considered from the design phase of TPL and embedded from the outset.

From this review, it is clear that a large variety of TPL options are available to teachers and it may be useful for future consideration to be given to possible ways in which TPL options in the area of student wellbeing could be streamlined within and across organisations.

ES.7 CONCLUSIONS

The current review represents one strand of work in this project which aims to develop a TPL evaluation framework for use in Ireland. Other sources of information, including a large-scale survey of teachers and principals and focused in-depth research in schools, will also inform the development of the framework. Although all phases of the research project are not yet complete, it is useful nonetheless at this stage to establish a set of guiding principles for the evaluation framework that are borne out by the literature:

1. The framework should be clearly and explicitly underpinned by a clear conceptual and theoretical rationale.
2. The framework should have both descriptive and evaluative strands and each should clearly complement the other.
3. The strands may be further split by phases (e.g., development, delivery, review) and distinguishable by level or user (e.g., TPL developer, school leader, teacher, pupil/student) and these distinctions should be enabled by a clear statement of TPL objectives at the outset.
4. The framework should incorporate best practice TPL design principles, which in turn should be intrinsically linked to the evaluation of TPL.
5. The framework must be sufficiently flexible to meaningfully accommodate TPL in a range of areas (both subject-specific and cross-curricular) as well as a range of levels of the system (i.e., the various stages of primary and post-primary), yet not overly generic, perhaps through the use of concrete examples.
6. The framework should include concrete and practical tools and resources such as templates and checklists.
7. The framework should make explicit linkages between phases of TPL implementation and evaluation methodologies, providing guidance to permit a good match between TPL phase, content, and evaluation.
8. The evaluation component should incorporate a sense of audience and ownership by phase and user and address such questions as: *Who leads on this aspect of the TPL? Who is evaluating it? Who is involved in the evaluation? Why? How are evaluation data to be used?*
9. The evaluation component should include a meaningful consideration of impact assessment which should ideally be guided by logic modelling. Impact assessment within the framework should address the merits of RCTs, while also acknowledging that RCTs are not always feasible, and suggesting appropriate alternatives where this is the case. Further, commentary in the evaluative part of the framework should promote a realistic approach in terms of the time required for learning associated with TPL to become apparent in practice and related outcomes. That is, when considering the timing of impact assessment and evaluation, there should be due consideration given to the time taken for learning from TPL to take effect across the various levels.

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