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# Mentoring to reproduce or change discourse in schools

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to share findings from a Master’s study exploring teacher professional learning needs with the purpose of elucidating the needs of teachers, and mentor teachers, within the school cultural context in the Republic of Ireland. This study coincides with a relentless neo-liberal drive to outsource most of what was traditionally seen as state investment across all public services, including education.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The research methodology is a small scale qualitative research study exploring the perceptions of experienced teachers in two secondary schools. It examines the conditions which may account for different levels of engagement in this regard.

**Findings** – The key findings show very different levels of engagement in school based teacher professional learning in the two secondary schools.

**Research limitations/implications** – These findings have serious implications for the type of whole school mentoring that needs to be offered within schools at a time when policymakers are mandating teacher professional learning and requiring the development of critical reasoning capacities for all pupils in a global knowledge world.

**Originality/value** – This study is concerned with the readiness of the experienced teacher to mentor beginning teachers, and student teachers, in ways that value co-inquiry, care, agency and critical thinking within the ecology of a whole school environment. Mentoring has become a popular construct in everyday usage. The originality of this research lies in the use of productive mentoring as a framework developed by the authors and under continual interrogation.

**Keywords** Ireland, Teachers, Mentors, Continuing professional development, Teacher professional learning, Care, Culture, Mentor teacher, Teacher needs, Reflection, Critical thinking, Inquiry

**Paper type** Research paper

What you do should be worthy of you: it should be worthy of your attention and dignity and conform to your respect for yourself. If you can love what you do, then you will do it beautifully. You might not love your work at the beginning; yet the deeper side of your soul can help you bring the light of love to what you do. Then, regardless of what you do, you will do it in a creative and transforming way (O’Donohue, 1988, p. 198).

The above quotation from an Irish poet and philosopher, John O’Donohue, reminds us of the need for care and dignity in developing the relationship of learning between teachers that we readily refer to as mentoring. Done with care and consideration it has the potential to be a source of teacher professional learning, renewal and mutual enrichment for all within the ecology of the whole school environment (Mooney Simmie and Moles, 2011, 2012). Done hastily and with inattention it will only serve to reinforce the more traditional dominant discourse of authoritarianism at the school site (Sundli, 2007). We argue for the need at this time of turbulent change in education and across the global world for a renewed interest in developing a transformative conception of education and a transformative conception of the continuing education of teachers and mentor teachers (Biesta and Miedema, 2002).



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## 1. Teacher professional learning in the Republic of Ireland

Teacher professional learning in the Republic of Ireland has had a long history of mainly informal, individual and voluntary attendance at a number of short courses, mostly concerned with the prescribed curriculum. Up until the 1980s there were few opportunities for in-service education. During the 1990s there was more of an opportunity for teachers to access support if their subject area was undergoing a reform. However support had a definite timeframe and was not opened as a democratic discourse between teachers and policy makers. The Teaching Council Act (2001) placed responsibility for teacher professional learning with the school principal and moved the obligation away from the education system. This movement is part of the global wind of neo-liberal change blowing across Europe, and the rest of the world, that seeks to set the school free to take care of all its own requirements and increasingly absolves ministries of education from responsibility for important aspects of education, including the continuing education of teachers (Ball, 2012).

The establishment of the Teaching Council, a self-regulating body for the teacher as a professional was a landmark development in Ireland. After much debate and consultation, The Teaching Council Codes of Professional Conduct for Teachers (2007) were developed encompassing three key objectives: to promote teaching and learning; to encourage and support teachers in their professional role; and to promote the teaching profession. The Council advocated for the teacher as a profession and presented the codes within a discourse of holistic development.

However the subject-specific nature of post-primary schools has meant that many teachers have had little or no professional development in recent years (SLSS, 2005, p. 2). There are few data available on participation in professional development activities despite increasing numbers of teachers regarding participation in professional development as desirable. Coolahan (2003) argues for the establishment of a national data bank to guide national policy on what needs to be done to facilitate teacher professional learning going forward.

More recently the Teaching Council has started to develop national policy documents in the area of teacher education: there is a *Policy on Teacher Education as a Continuum* (Teaching Council, 2011), a *Career Entry Professional Programme* (Teaching Council, 2012a) policy for mentoring all newly qualified teachers and policy *Guidelines for School Placement* (Teaching Council, 2012b). This suite of three policy documents collectively present the conception of the teacher, across their full professional lifespan, as an inquiry oriented, reflective and collaborative professional with the experienced teacher assuming support and mentoring for the student teacher and the newly qualified teacher. For example, the *Career Entry Professional Programme* (Teaching Council, 2012a) will mandate newly qualified teachers to attend evening workshops in local education centres and require them to be mentored at the school. Mentor teachers receive some training from the National Induction Programme in this regard. While these three policy documents seek to elucidate obligations, roles and responsibilities for teachers in this regard they do not offer a broader conception of how mentoring at the school site might develop all teachers and the whole school, not just mentor teachers, to engage within a discourse of transformative education. Policy documents produced in Ireland rarely if ever are accompanied by strategic implementation plans. Budget allocations, if they are at all conceived to be required, are generally drafted within a narrow training and managerial rationale.

## **2. A Master's degree in educational mentoring**

This paper presents research from a Master's level degree in educational mentoring, exploratory in nature examining teacher professional learning in two post-primary schools in Ireland (Loneragan, 2010). Students study mentoring from a number of different lenses and are guided by a framing for productive mentoring that presents mentoring with a conception and ecology of care, agency and critical thinking (Mooney Simmie and Moles, 2011). The key research question centred on what conditions, if any, were present in the schools that may explain the high or low levels of engagement in school-based teacher professional learning. The following questions directed the inquiry:

- In what types and levels of professional learning activities are teachers engaged in two sample second level schools?
- What factors influence teachers' decisions to become involved in school-based professional learning?
- What is teachers' perception of the effectiveness of participation in school-based professional learning activities?

## **3. My personal philosophical positioning**

This Master's study research is informed by experience gathered from a teaching career which includes working as a substitute teacher in various school systems in various countries including Ireland, Australia, South Korea and the United Arab Emirates. Pondering on this experience I raise the question of how different all these different experiences might have been with the benefit of a supportive mentor. Fletcher (2000) in *Mentoring in Schools* contends that mentoring concerns itself with easing transitions and ensuring growth and self-actualisation. I hope that this research study, and further study that may emanate from this study, will help raise awareness of teachers' engaging in mentoring relationships of learning within the school community as a noble way forward for teacher professional learning.

## **4. A review of the preferred literature**

A comprehensive literature review formed part of this research study. The initial interest in mentoring came from taking part in this formal programme of study at the University of Limerick. This accreditation pathway was the first programme of its kind in Ireland. Fletcher (2000) has been influential in defining and framing mentoring for students on the course. Hargreaves and Fullan (1992, 2000) and Stoll and Fink (1989), Stoll *et al.* (2003) work on school culture provided insight into the changing educational landscape. Sugrue (2002) provides a valuable description of "Irish teachers' experiences of professional learning implications for policy and practice". Current professional learning activities were measured with reference to Cochran-Smith and Lytle's (1999) three conceptions of knowledge and teacher professional learning.

The preferred literature in the study indicated ways in which this research may be contextualised within existing theory and positioned within contemporary understanding both in Ireland and elsewhere. I approached the study of teacher professional learning from a consideration of teacher knowledge-learning theories, the stages identified to date within the teaching career and the personal professional needs of teachers. These studies of the literature were finally contextualised within a study of the literature on school culture and the role it plays in advancing or halting teacher professional learning.

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#### 4.1 Knowledge-learning theories

It appears that more effective teaching leads to enhanced student learning. However, the question is “what do teachers know or what do they need to know? How do professionals learn?”. Clandinin and Connelly (1995) introduced the metaphor of “professional knowledge landscapes” to highlight the breadth and complexity of teachers’ professional knowledge with its mix of personal, ethical, intellectual and social dimensions (Webster-Wright, 2009, p. 715). The term professional development is viewed as part of a discourse that focuses on the professional as deficient. The professional is viewed as in need of development and direction rather than as a professional engaged in self-directed learning (Webster-Wright, 2009, p. 712). Across the educational literature there has been somewhat of a shift in conceptualisation from professional development to professional learning (Webster-Wright, 2009; Dall’Alba, 2004; Putnam and Borko, 2000). However, the concept of professional learning in education has proved difficult to define conceptually. Many commentators offer a description of the characteristics, but not an explicit definition of professional learning (Webster-Wright, 2009; Hoban, 2002). This paper uses “professional development” and “professional learning” interchangeably.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) discuss three main ideologies of knowledge – learning theory. The “knowledge-for-practice” ideology could be said to fulfil the training aspect of teacher development. The basis for this ideology is identifiable gaps in teachers’ knowledge and skills. The assumption is that these gaps need to be filled. In Ireland, this ideology has formed the basis of professional development delivery. Professional development based on this ideology has traditionally manifested itself in mass gatherings of teachers listening to an expert lecturing on a topic. Sugrue *et al.* (2001) criticised professional development grounded in this ideology, as being insufficient and inadequate in terms of professional learning.

The second ideology, knowledge-in-practice, grounded in the works of Dewey (1927/1929/1933) generates a more situational view of knowledge. Teachers are integral to the experience of learning rather than merely spectators (Garrison, 2006, p. 20). A critical element in this conceptualisation involves reflection on their practice. Individually or with colleagues, reflective teachers become generators of knowledge. Professional development based on this ideology promotes a learner-centric view of teaching. It sees the potential of teachers as active and reflective change agents rather than the agency of change. Supportive, collaborate, learning communities inside schools have been shown to provide teachers with the kind of organisational setting that makes continuous learning possible (Lieberman, 1995, p. 222). Knight (2002) claims there is a paucity of research on how best to stimulate collaborative learning within schools. The constraints of time may limit participation or interaction that supports learning (Sandholtz and Scribner, 2006). Irish teachers have not historically tended to engage in collaborative planning in schools. This has contributed to isolationism in schools (McNamara *et al.*, 2002, p. 201) well depicted as working within an “egg crate” structure by Dan Lortie (1975, cited in McNamara *et al.*, 2002). This may be about to change as teachers’ have more recently been mandated to meet for a specified number of hours per year as part of “productivity” measures within the public service.

The concept of mentoring being promoted here is from the constructivist paradigm, knowledge-of-practice. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) view this perspective as both the combination of practical knowledge generated from classroom practice, and the formal knowledge and theory produced by others. Each stakeholder including teachers, students, administrators, parents and academics has a viewpoint. These

weave collaboratively together to construct new insights and understandings. Learning from this perspective is challenging. There is constant restructuring of individual thinking as teachers adapt to changing experiences.

Learning within an extended partnership approach offers a more holistic view of knowledge-learning theory. The classroom and school community are sites for inquiry. The perspective advocates for activist teachers and mentor teachers working in partnership with parents, students and a myriad of external agencies, including teacher educators, in the broader community. The beliefs and value systems of the teacher are interrogated. The teachers' role in the wider education community is examined. The knowledge generated from this perspective is informed by many resources including research. The knowledge also reflects local relevance as the wider school community is involved in the learning process.

#### *4.2 Teacher career cycles*

Teacher professional learning has been described within the career cycles of teachers. Sugrue *et al.* (2001) contends that the nature of professional development provision is often inadequate and poorly conceived, due a lack of differentiation that is sensitive to teacher's career stages. Teachers at different points in the life cycle may have varied orientations to change and improvement as well as different professional needs (Hargreaves and Fullan, 1992). If teacher actions can be identified with a particular stage in their career path then the designing and planning of professional development activities which respects that phase is not ambitious but practical (Huberman, 1993).

Developmental models mainly use chronological age as a key variable. The stages of teacher maturation cannot be equated with physical maturation. By using age as a key variable, the wide variations in factors and conditions that may influence the nature of a teacher's development are not realized. It is important to understand the perspective from which teachers see their careers. Some teachers will have a strong vocational commitment whilst others may view their career through sequenced posts. Whatever model of career stage is used "some recognition of teacher needs at different times in their teaching lives is necessary when planning in career development" (Hyland and Hanafin, 1997, p. 14). Teachers' perceptions of themselves and of the profession are likely to relate to the type of experience which they have undergone and the support systems available in the cultural contexts in which they live and work.

#### *4.3 School culture*

School culture may influence teachers' professional motivation (Scribner, 1999; Johnson, 1990; Rosenholtz, 1989). If the school culture is not conducive to learning, teachers may not be motivated to engage in professional learning activities. If they do engage, they may not be motivated to put what they have learned into practice. If teacher growth is to be facilitated it is important to identify factors that might support or hinder this process in order to promote a positive school culture where learning is embraced and teacher professional development can flourish.

School culture is a concept of which most people have a feeling but only begin to know when one of the unspoken rules is broken (Stoll and Fink, 1989). Schools have their own unique sets of relationships and cultures established through the values, beliefs and behaviours of the teachers that work within them. Studies show the difficulty found in seeking to introduce change to a system that traditionally has been more authoritarian than authoritative (Moles, 2003; Mooney Simmie, 2009).

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Hargreaves (1994) identifies four forms of school culture: individualism, balkanisation, contrived collegiality and collaboration. Schools characterised by individualism feature an “egg-crate structure, a scarcity and low quality of space for teachers to work together, and overcrowding” (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 62). This structure resembles that of the traditional position anecdotally described in Ireland. Schools display many types of cultures all focused on greater or lesser levels of co-operation and collaboration (Hargreaves, 1994; Fullan, 1982). Day (1999) argues that contrived collegiality may be the starting point for developing a culture of true collegiality and collaboration.

#### *4.4 Personal and professional development needs*

Writers at the end of the last century (Lawton *et al.*, 1986; Cameron, 1988; Hopkins, 1990, cited in Harris, 2000) viewed the identification of teachers’ needs as the first step in planning appropriate professional development. Harris (2000) argues that the involvement of teachers is essential in the initial phase of assessing and identifying needs. The identification of these needs should include individual teacher needs, along with school and the education system’s needs (Fullan and Hargreaves, 1992). This view is supported in the *White Paper on Education* (Government of Ireland, 1995) which proposes that both “the personal and the professional needs of the teacher as well as those of the school system” should be taken into consideration when planning professional development provision.

Within the Irish system the identification of teacher professional or personal development needs has been of minor interest. Educational reform has resulted in curricula and assessment change that closely aligns with the needs of the marketplace and government agendas (Sugrue, 2002). Egan (2004, p. 23) avers that a system where greater emphasis is placed on professional development activities in the context of future needs identified by schools and teachers, is not only desirable, but essential for the future development of professional development provision in Ireland.

Schein (1990, cited in Harris, 2000) questioned the limitation of perceiving teacher professional learning needs as just technical work-based knowledge and skills. The implication is that besides focusing on changing teachers’ cognition, attention should be paid to the emotional, motivational and behavioural aspects associated with learning and professional development (Hoekstra *et al.*, 2007, p. 203). In this way teachers’ voices may be more clearly heard and subsequent needs more fully realized.

Contemporary management of education is described by Ball (2012, p. 110) as occurring alongside a discourse of “the untrustworthy teacher” who requires “more accountability and control” legitimising “the withdrawal of aspects of their professional autonomies”. This lurch in thinking from the late twentieth century to the early twenty-first is evidenced by the positioning of teachers, and mentor teachers, within education systems in Ireland and is a source of great concern for future teacher professional learning (Lynch *et al.*, 2012; Mooney Simmie and Moles, 2012). Irish teachers are being required to become more accountable and less autonomous as data presented in this study will demonstrate.

#### *4.5 A conceptual framework*

From the study of the literature it became clear that teacher professional learning depends on factors that were both internal to the teacher themselves and external to the teacher, for example, involving the culture of the school and the education system. For example, internal needs might require the teacher to engage in a reflective process

to elucidate their own personal and professional needs and engage in a number of self-directed activities in this regard. External needs for teachers' work within a learning continuum at the school might require the system and the school to make "protected time" for teachers to interact alongside other teachers, and others, in democratic ways and using partnership approaches. The threading together of these various ideas led to the development of a conceptual framework for teacher professional learning which assisted the data analysis process (Figure 1).

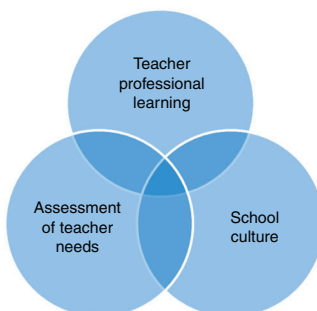
## 5. Research methodology

### 5.1 Research design

The rationale for the research was to find out what conditions, if any, were present that may explain the high or low levels of engagement in school-based professional learning in the two schools under examination. The research compared professional development in two post-primary schools. The sample schools under study were purposively chosen (Silverman, 2006). One school was perceived to have higher levels of involvement in school-based professional learning than the other. This study was exploratory in nature, limited as it was to examining the experiences and perceptions of a small group of teachers. A questionnaire, interviews and a reflective journal were the research instruments used in the study. Some 30 teachers completed the questionnaire. The use of mixed-methods to gather data enhanced the validity of the research findings. The use of semi-structured interviews provided an element of triangulation verifying the authenticity of the data collected. By triangulating the data gathered it was hoped to attempt to develop a more comprehensive account. The analysis of the findings depended on a number of key features: my informed awareness of the area from the literature review; the findings of the field research at the schools; my reflective journal along with the insights which finally emerged from a critical interpretation from all of these sources.

### 5.2 Data collection

- (1) A questionnaire was given to research participants to establish baseline data into professional development activities these teachers were engaged in. A range of categories of professional development activities were incorporated into the design of the questionnaire. These categories were based on Scribner's (1999) range of professional learning activities: collaboration, reflection, reading, experimenting, in-service and elective courses. The categories were scored on a six-point Likert scale in order to indicate the degree to which each teacher was involved in the professional development activity.



**Figure 1.**  
Conceptual framework for  
assessing teacher  
professional learning

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- (2) Following on from the questionnaire semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight participants. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim.
  - (3) I kept a reflective journal recording insights and informative data from research articles, relevant literature and incidental conversations.

### 5.3 Data analysis

Phase 1: the first phase consisted of a survey conducted with teachers in two post-primary schools in the south west of Ireland. The results from the questionnaire informed the interview questions in Phase 2 of the study. Each school was given an identification letter (A and B) and each questionnaire was coded with a number to identify its source.

Phase 2: the second phase consisted of interviews with eight post-primary teachers who had completed the questionnaire and volunteered to be interviewed. The questionnaire was effective in developing baseline data regarding the professional development activities in which teachers are engaged. A series of follow-up interviews conducted with four teachers in each of the two schools expanded the scope of the questions to include all the aspects being investigated. The research interview was used to probe deeper behind the participants' experiences of professional development activities.

Thematic content analyses of the data from the interviews in Schools A and B established that the remaining research questions could be explained by a four cell matrix of both positive and/or negative, internal/external factors. These categories grouped emerging themes from teacher interviews from sample Schools A and B.

## 6. Findings

The findings were examined and reported using the conceptual framework that was developed from a distillation of the preferred literature for the study (Figure 1). These were dealt with under three main headings: teacher professional learning, personal and professional needs, and school culture.

### 6.1 Teacher professional learning

The findings show teachers in School A more actively involved in mentoring formally or informally than in School B. A climate in schools which promotes reflection and where purposeful collaboration is encouraged appears crucial to successful mentoring.

The research findings point to a system where teacher professional learning is grounded within a "knowledge-for-practice" perspective. This was highlighted by one teacher who felt the professional development she participated in was "focused on content for the exams". Professional development delivery, grounded in this perspective, is effective for updating teachers' knowledge on examination content. If teachers' exposure to professional development is based, for the most part, around this perspective it will lead to very limited professional learning and development.

There is further evidence of a limited view of professional learning in School B. Teachers' discussion around professional development mostly centred on in-service provision. There appeared a limited awareness of the range and breath of professional learning activities that teachers may or potentially may be involved in. OCED TALIS (2009) outlines the wide range of activities that develop an individual's skills, knowledge, expertise and other characteristics as a teacher. These include mentoring, peer observation, courses and workshops, education conferences and seminars,

qualification programmes, observation visits to schools, participation in networks of teachers, and individual or collaborative research. The teachers in School A showed a greater awareness of the breath of possible teacher professional learning activities.

However, if teachers are to be encouraged to become generators as well as disseminators of knowledge there needs to be combined emphasis on all Scribner's (1999) categories of professional learning. There also needs to be discussion around teaching and learning. Mentoring using a whole school approach could facilitate this type of robust, relational and relevant discussion.

A possible explanation for the low levels of co-reflection, in both schools, may be connected with low levels of collaboration. This may also be as a result of a lack of time to get involved in reflection with colleagues. The issue of time as a negative factor influencing engagement was raised in School A "if there was more time we could do a lot more". The findings from the questionnaire suggest different levels of collaboration in Schools A and B. The highest frequency, in School A, in the category of collaboration was the "use of colleague's materials in lessons". In School B it was "talking with colleagues about teaching problems". However, this study highlights how some teachers still find conditions "isolating" and feel somewhat "left by yourself".

The research found that the majority of teachers stated that in-service had only "a little" impact on their practice. If teachers do not have an opportunity to put newly acquired knowledge into practice then much of the learning from professional development may be lost. In this study "curriculum/syllabi changes" and "subject matter" were cited as the predominate type of in-service course. This becomes more system driven rather than teacher driven. Some teachers surveyed took part in no "in-service" education in the past three years. This finding supports the OCED TALIS (2009) report that found teachers in Ireland attended fewer days of professional development than their counterparts in other countries (OECD, 2009, table 3.1).

The research found two-thirds of the teachers in School A supported the establishment of an entitlement to professional development alongside a contractual obligation. In School B only one-fifth supported such a proposition. A possible explanation for this may be that teachers in School B feel threatened or intimidated by such an obligation.

### *6.2 Teacher personal and professional needs*

Teachers in this study felt that system needs, rather than their professional learning needs, guided the professional development provision in Ireland. Teachers stated that the present examination system was a major stumbling block to participation in professional development. Time taken away from the classroom engaging in professional development activities may be viewed as affecting exam results negatively. In School B, a teacher who had not been on any in-service in four years expressed a viewpoint that there's "talk about a lot of things that you would never use in the classroom [...] set in unrealistic situations". This would suggest that some teacher needs are not being met through in-service provision.

This study highlights that if professional development provision does not differentiate in terms of teacher knowledge, career stage or prior experience then it may not meet teachers' needs. In School A, one teacher expressed the view that appropriate professional development was not available, stating "it's just not there [...] well at least what I need now at this stage". In School B one teacher said that professional development may lack relevance for teachers. If teacher needs are not accounted for appropriate professional learning activities may not be available.

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We may need to identify a system of structured differentiation in teacher professional learning according to the participating population.

This study reveals that much of the professional learning provision consists of updating subject knowledge, and the courses that accompany curricular reforms. One teacher, in School B, stated “I haven’t had any in-service in PE or Geography”. Professional development relating to a teacher’s subject area is necessary and beneficial. However, there are many other areas of professional development in which teachers’ may have voiced needs. Evidently, teachers in this study are clear about what professional development activities would best meet their needs. This study shows despite the negative motivational effect of perceived inappropriate professional development, teachers still derive benefit from participation “to go on in-service [...] even if it’s not very useful [...] at least you get to meet other teachers [...]”.

In School A one teacher stated that “trying to strike a work life balance” was an obstacle to engaging in professional development. The findings of this study support Schein (1990, cited in Harris, 2000) view that life space issues should be integrated into teachers’ needs. The OCED TALIS (2009) report showed that 54 per cent of teachers indicated that they wanted greater participation in professional development. Of these, 43 per cent cited “conflict with work schedule” and 29 per cent “family responsibilities” as the reasons for non-participation.

### *6.3 School culture*

The research findings show that school culture can have both a positive and negative impact upon effective professional learning provision. Teachers in School A stated that the school climate was supportive of their professional learning. Interviewees from both schools cited “better working relationships with colleagues” as an outcome of effective professional development. The forging of “better working relationships with colleagues” were also cited as an influence and motivation in involvement in professional learning activities.

This is evidence of the existence of sub-cultures in School B. One teacher stated “not all teachers want to work together it’s like pockets of teachers and they work [...]”. In “Balkanised sub-cultures” (Hargreaves, 1994) teachers have strong loyalties to a particular group such as a department. The existence of strong professional and personal relationships appears a powerful driver behind maintaining sub-cultures. In School B one teacher said “all the younger teachers get on very well [...] have a good working relationship”. This raises questions a question. Is age a determinant in participation rates in professional development activities? Is age a discriminatory factor in relation to collaborative activities in schools? Also, interestingly the possible effect of gender on engagement in professional development activities was raised. One teacher, in School B, who had worked in a number of schools stated “where the atmosphere and culture [...] when there is a good mix [...] the collaboration happens more [...]”. Does the gender mix within a school effect engagement and motivation to engage in professional development activities?

The negative effect of an unsupportive school culture was evident in School B. One teacher in School B stated “it’s kinda pointless [...] you try to do something [...] you’re put off by ‘X’”. Another teacher in School B cited the attitude of school management as a major stumbling block to motivation “it is not going to happen [...] the principal isn’t going to listen”. In School B, teachers viewed that engagement in professional learning activities leads to heightened awareness of the school climate and increased levels of

dissatisfaction. The teacher stated “it just makes you think [...] how will anything ever change here”.

The findings of this study highlight that school cultures resistant to change can negatively impact on engagement in teacher professional learning. One teacher, in School A, expressed a view that the existence of a negative sub-culture within the school was due to certain colleague’s difficulty in embracing change. The teacher stated that, “not everyone wants to see us working together [...] some don’t like change”. However, this teacher had expressed that the climate in School A was generally supportive. Another teacher in School A expressed a similar viewpoint that “not everyone feels that spurred on [...] has been so much change [...] there’s a little bit of fear and intimidation around [...]”. Given the positive school climate in School A this suggests that issues around embracing change within this school may be arising from teacher internal factors. However there were real fears surrounding change and uncertainty for teachers. By not accounting for these in planning personal and professional development the needs of certain teachers are being left unmet.

## **7. Discussion and implications**

This Master’s level research study established that the levels of engagement in teacher professional learning activities were much higher in School A than School B. Are teachers in School A more motivated than those in School B? Are teachers in School B less motivated due to school climate that is not as encouraging to professional development as it might be? Some research is indicated in this area. However the very different levels of engagement in teacher professional learning between the two schools and the influence of the school culture appear to be major stumbling blocks to the development of teacher professional learning. This has serious implications in an education system trying to develop the critical reasoning capacities of all pupils and to develop the teacher as an inquiry-orientated, reflective and collaborative professional. It may be delusional to think that mentoring of newly qualified teachers will progress the school as a learning community without a deeper commitment to interrogate the school culture in Ireland and the ways it inhibits and advances teacher professional learning.

As suggested in the SLSS (2005) report teacher professional learning activities could be scheduled outside the school year and teachers remunerated for participation. Whichever approach is adopted it is clear that a “public space” needs to be provided for collaborating and reflecting with colleagues both within and outside the school. The fruits of our past success, from Celtic times to more recent Celtic Tiger times, were reaped from a deep historical interest in learning, literature and scholarship.

The findings from this small-scale study show that teacher professional learning is ad hoc and fragmented with some teachers’ personal and professional needs currently unmet. At the outset of this study, mentoring was advocated as a suitable means of teacher professional learning. There was evidence in this study of informal mentoring happening in the schools. Productive mentoring set within a larger framing that takes critical thinking, care and agency into account has the potential to support teacher professional learning and pupil learning using a whole school learning community approach. If teachers were willing to co-inquire together, across their full professional lifespan, from student teacher, to newly qualified teacher, experienced teacher and mentor teacher, in mutually enriching and engaging ways there are endless possibilities for using productive mentoring to develop schools as learning communities (Mooney Simmie and Moles, 2011).

However, there were many critical questions raised from this study that need further exploration. For example what is the professional knowledge base of current mentor teachers? How have they come to acquire this knowledge? What is this knowledge made up of? What is the consequence of this knowing? The pursuit of answers to these questions may lead us closer to an understanding of the context for teacher professional learning in Ireland today and the place of whole school approaches to mentoring, and new partnership models, within that. While reflecting on John O'Donohue's call for creativity and transformation with which we started, we will leave the last word to Michael Apple (2012, p. 158) as he reminds us of the need to develop newer forms of partnerships in education going forward that include teachers' voices and invite policy makers and others to embody their social commitment to educational change:

[...] educators can educate these groups, at the same time that they (the educators) are being educated themselves. After all, it is somewhat silly to deny the fact that teachers do know things that tend to work in classrooms. In this way, by working in concert with others, the practice of developing our methods and content will also embody the social commitments we articulate.

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