OECD Initial Teacher Preparation study

Promising practices

Professional learning based on systematic enquiry in the Fern Federation in Wales

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Teacher education pathway category(ies): Equipping; Supporting
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This case study describes a “Promising practice” drawn from an OECD international workshop on Initial Teacher Preparation in Wales from 15 to 17 March 2018.

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Promising practice 1.
Professional learning based on systematic enquiry in the Fern Federation in Wales

Context

As part of a large-scale educational reform undertaken since 2011, Wales has introduced a number of policies including reforming the curriculum, strengthening research-based teacher education, revising professional standards (Learning Wales, 2018[1]), etc. (OECD, 2017[2]). Based on recent review recommendations, some initial teacher preparation (ITP) reform initiatives aim at specifically recognising schools’ contribution to initial teacher education (Furlong, 2015[3]). Creating networks of schools and partnerships between schools and ITE providers, as well as educational institutions, agencies and other key stakeholders has been a key lever in realising these recommendations (Welsh Government, 2014[4]). Examples for such partnerships and networks are:

- The Pioneer School Network – charged with developing the new curriculum (Welsh Government, 2015[5])
- Partnership schools of ITE provider universities – charged with ensuring teaching practicum for newly qualified teachers and collaborating with the ITE provider to integrate emerging pedagogical developments in school-based induction and support schemes (Welsh Government, 2017[6]).
- Teacher Training Hubs – Based on one of the options proposed in the Furlong report, some areas established a group of “training schools” to offer teacher education acting as local hubs, linked to a network of other schools in their region (Furlong, 2015[3]).

A 2013 review also highlighted the necessity to expect schools “to have strong professional development systems and practices which cause teachers to be active and effective in developing their skills” (Tabberer, 2013[7]). The Fern Federation’s approach to professional learning has been identified by the OECD review team as a practice that realises this expectation at a high level, while at the same time playing a key role in the preparation of newly qualified teachers.

Engagement in partnerships and networks

The Fern Federation consists of two small primary schools in Wales, with large proportion of students experiencing vulnerability. The schools were federated by the regional council as a school improvement strategy as both schools showed unsatisfactory results. Following a comprehensive strategic development plan, the results have improved hugely. The strategic development is strongly focused on professional learning, which is described next, based on the interviews conducted with the headteacher and a number of teachers of the schools.

Fern Federation is the leader or member of various networks. It is a Pioneer School Network, and participates in the development and testing of the new curriculum. In addition, to facilitate a wider local development, the Federation established a network of
leaders of teaching and learning to undertake inquiry-based pedagogical development across a number of schools. The network was initially led by the Federation and progressively enabled other school leaders to lead development in their own schools. In parallel, a group of twenty schools are involved in action research with the purpose of jointly developing pedagogy relating to the recommendations of a recent review of curriculum and assessment (Donaldson, 2015).

Partnerships have also been established across school levels. Currently the Federation is working with the local high school on a joint project focusing on the development of collaborative learning in grades 7 and 8. It is also a partnership school of the Cardiff Metropolitan University and in this function is charged with ensuring teaching practicum for newly qualified teachers.

A systematic approach to professional learning

The appointed executive headteacher having undertaken an evaluation of teaching in both schools, launched a comprehensive strategic development plan with a strong focus on professional learning aiming at improving teachers’ competencies in both general and subject pedagogy.

Structures set up as part of the development plan include:

- shared leadership with a large share of the teaching staff assuming some kind of leadership role (e.g. leader of data: tracking and monitoring individual student data, following up with teachers, leader of literacy improvement)
- “teaching and learning workshops” every two weeks focusing on a chosen area of practice to improve
- co-coaching sessions (leaders of teaching and learning coach both newly qualified and more experienced teachers to provide pedagogical support)
- mentoring (for teachers failing to make progress mentor sessions are in place to ensure practice progress)

The executive headteacher designed the professional learning programme with a focus on systematic inquiry in a strongly research-based way. Teachers work on areas of pedagogy that they identify as worth improving (for example, questioning, assessment for learning, children’s engagement, collective learning). They search literature and share theoretical findings in the workshops, then collectively plan how to apply relevant theories in practice. Having experimented with new or modified practices in their classrooms, teachers then reflect on the process through joint coaching sessions. In parallel, the staff is engaged in action research on pedagogical developments that underpin their own development needs. Dedicated time is ensured for teachers to conduct (individual or collaborative) research projects, and reflect on their impact on their own learning.

Video-based reflection

The strategic development plan also includes investing in some resources and setting up a system of video-based reflection tool. Resources include:

- a classroom with a one way mirror that allows observers to watch the class without disturbing or influencing children’s behaviour (see Figure 1)
- video cameras
• a video library system with individual accounts for each teacher where they can upload their recordings, add reflection notes to them and share them with other users.

Figure 1. Classroom in Craig Yr Hesg Primary School with one way mirror

The videos are used systematically as part of the professional learning programme. All teachers are required to record their lesson at least once every term and share it with the senior leadership team for the purposes of monitoring and evaluating progress. In reality, however, most teachers use the tool on a regular basis for self-improvement both individually and in teams, focusing on specific areas of development. For example, recording can be narrowed down to particular time periods of the lesson to focus on improving teachers’ questioning. Several cameras can be used to record specific students or student groups, the teacher or the whole class to enable observing and analysing parallel events, or the individual learning of a student in difficulty and so on. The use of the video tool is also aligned to the thematic professional learning programme, for example, when the staff works on assessment for learning, teachers analyse recordings from this perspective.

Teachers’ learning process and products (e.g. research outcomes and findings related to a theme, videos and collective reflections) are systematically stored and are accessible any time for all teachers. Newly qualified teachers in induction in these schools are not only initiated in the professional learning culture of the school, but are expected to contribute to it actively. Moreover, even teachers in their early career can quickly assume various responsibilities and leadership roles based on their interests and expertise.
Why is it a strength?

The OECD Review Team in its visit to Wales from 13-17 March 2017 considered that the following aspects constitute a strength in ITP:

- **Co-construction of new knowledge and systematic improvement of practice based on evidence.** The professional learning programme builds on available theories and knowledge and involves a systematic questioning of practice, which leads to the co-construction of knowledge through experimentation and negotiation. The constant monitoring and evaluation of new knowledge and practices in turn lead to a systematic improvement of practice.

- **Distributed leadership for collective knowledge building.** Responsibilities and leadership roles within the school are not delegated in a top-down manner, but develop in relation to perceived needs, teachers’ interests, expertise and motivation. This includes recognising and valuing early career teachers’ contributions. Leadership in networks in the wider local context provides possibilities for sharing and scaling good practices and building a collective knowledge base.

- **Enhanced support and development of early career teachers.** Multiple forms of support such as coaching and mentoring are deeply embedded in the professional learning culture of the school. These provide a secure environment for beginning and early career teachers to develop. The fact that professional learning and support includes the whole educational staff, strengthens trust and gives less experienced teachers confidence to adopt a continuous development approach.

How could it be improved?

The OECD Review team noted that the practice could by further improved by:

- **Strengthening the partnership with the universities providing ITE.** Although the Federation is a partnership school of the Cardiff Metropolitan University, there is little collaboration with the University in collective knowledge building. The partnership could be strengthened both by allowing more leadership and contribution from the Federation to university-based ITE courses and programme, and by more strategically linking school-based professional learning to pedagogical developments and research taking place at the university. Strengthened partnerships would equally constitute an opportunity for scaling the improved practices developed in the schools.

For more information


