



UNIVERSITY OF  
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# InForm 15

## Sustaining Teachers' Professional Growth

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*InForm* is a series of papers whose purpose is to capture significant ideas and events that enhance our understanding of leadership, learning and their inter-relationship. These offer reflections on recent seminars, policy papers and emerging issues nationally and internationally. They attempt to capture the implication for policy and practice in leading the learning of students, teachers and of those who exercise a leadership role in classrooms, schools and communities.

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*The strength of this seminar lies in its bringing together teachers/practitioners, researchers and policymakers.*

(Participant Feedback)

In February 2013, a group of academics, educational practitioners and policy shapers assembled in Cambridge for a two-day seminar. This was the second in a series of seminars arranged to anticipate the international summit meetings initiated by the US Federal Department of Education in 2011. [The third international summit](#) on the teaching profession, hosted by The Netherlands Ministry of Education, was to be held in March 2013 in Amsterdam. The focus of our seminar was 'Sustaining Teachers' Professional Growth', which the planning group had identified as being of crucial importance in the struggle to achieve high quality educational provision globally. Members of the planning group were drawn from the Leadership for Learning (LFL) group and their partner organisations, Open Society Foundation (OSF), Education International (EI), and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The timing of the seminars is not accidental, organised as they are immediately prior to the Annual Summits on the Teaching Profession. The seminars are intended to strengthen the discourse on the future of teaching and teachers on which the Summits focus at a government and teacher organisation level. For this reason, the seminar-planning group for the 2013 event also included representatives from the Dutch Ministry of Education, hosts of the 2013 Summit.

Following the first seminar in February 2012, the planning group discussed what had emerged as the most important question for the future of the teaching profession worldwide. We agreed that efforts on the part of governments to build schools and recruit new entrants to the profession may all be wasted if a large proportion of those teachers either leave teaching or become cynical and ineffective within the first few years of their careers. Successful education systems need teachers who not only retain their sense of moral purpose, but are also able to grow and become increasingly expert with experience.

### **Framing the seminar**

The seminar was framed by opening remarks from a series of people representing the host partners. Fundamental questions posed included the extent to which a group from 20 or so countries could discover any universal truths about teaching and about conditions that sustain teachers' professional growth. It was suggested that our seminar could contribute to the formation of a coherent policy environment focused on equity. The future of democratic civil society, it was argued, would depend on the value we place on young



*The value of the seminar is very high. It gave us the chance to develop a shared reflection on teacher professionalism from various points of view, involving actors acting in different areas of education systems.*

(Participant Feedback)

people as active participants in shaping their school experience. In this respect, the contrast between the conditions in OECD countries and others, such as those in sub-Saharan Africa, is significant. The theme of equity was further amplified with reference to the centrality of moral purpose and reciprocal accountability. The increasing focus on teacher policies was seen as in tension with the heightened intensity of the accountability and control regime. This led to the question: 'to what extent will growth in teacher professionalism shape the nature of accountability?'. We were urged to remember that measures of accountability suitable for assessing the performance of education systems should not be applied to the evaluation of teachers' performance on the grounds that professional growth demands methods of assessment that are both formative and diagnostic. The role of teachers' unions in defending teachers' democratic rights and supporting their professional growth was also highlighted.

### **The substance of the seminar**

The main part of the seminar consisted of a series of presentations, discussions in plenary session, and small group discussion. In all there were around twenty speakers and facilitators from around the world including the USA, Australia, Ghana, and Serbia among others. Important organisations involved included the US Department of Education, the Education International Research Institute and the OECD's Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI). The presentations and a number of papers tabled at the conference can be examined on the [Lfl website](#) but for the purposes of this issue of *InForm*, it seemed most helpful to try and capture the essence of the discussion that took place in response to the main speakers.

The statement '*environments that sustain teachers' professional growth are characterised by...*' was the framing device for our discussions. This was reproduced on sheets placed on the discussion tables and, in each group, a member of the planning team took responsibility for recording points, which helped to complete the sentence. These notes, together with records of the presentations, enabled us to produce a list of what were seen as the characteristics of environments that sustain teachers' professional growth.

These characteristics were organised under ten thematic headings.

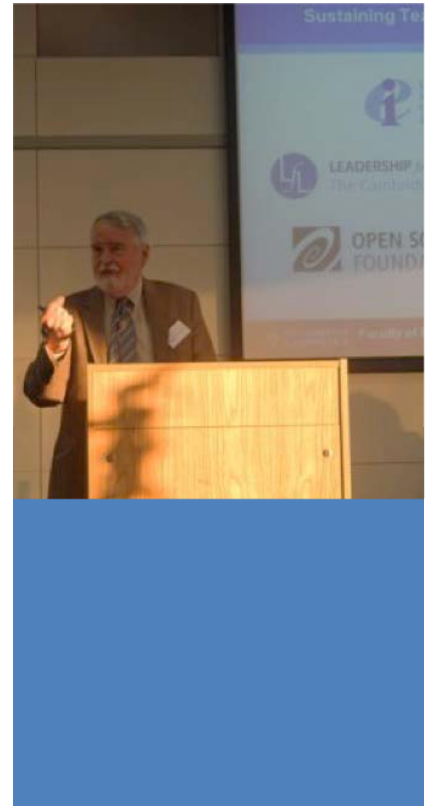
1. Professional autonomy
2. Dialogue and reflection
3. Shared leadership
4. Values of inclusivity and community
5. Flexible and diverse approaches to support for professional learning
6. Norms of self-evaluation and enquiry
7. Leadership for capacity-building
8. Collaboration
9. Structures and tools that support career development
10. Knowledge-building

What follows is a discussion of each of the ten themes illuminated by our own post-seminar reflections.

## 1. Professional autonomy

It was readily agreed that it is important that policies and systems need to allow teachers a greater degree of control over the nature and regulation of their professional practice. Without such control, teachers are unlikely to be able to develop positive self-efficacy beliefs and without those, the quality of their work will be diminished. Interestingly, what seemed to go hand-in-hand with this principle was the proposal that school principals or headteachers need to have more room for manoeuvre. Many of the seminar participants talked about systems in which school principals do not have sufficient freedom to act strategically to build cultures in which teacher's professionalism might thrive. The high levels of political interference experienced in many parts of the world make school principalship unstable and subject to particular pressures.

Professional autonomy demands that schools are able to respond to the cultural contexts and economic realities in which they operate rather than being enslaved by tight regimes of accountability based on narrow measures of effectiveness. In our seminar it was argued that the process of professional development should not be distorted by such accountability measures and that a variety of tools and techniques should be used to evaluate teachers' performance. Classroom observation, for example, should not simply be a tool for performance management, but should rather be a learning activity involving all teachers. It follows from this that teachers should have a high degree of control





as to the direction of their professional development. This does not simply mean that teachers should be able to choose from a menu of approved training courses, but rather be about teachers leading their own learning and that of their colleagues.

It was also argued that entrance to the profession should be carefully controlled according to agreed professional standards, although there were differing views about the extent to which such standards should become a tool for managing performance, or for stratifying and incentivising the workforce.

## 2. Dialogue and reflection

The proposition that teachers lead their own learning and that of their colleagues is a challenging one in a prescriptive policy climate in which professional development and leadership are assumed to lie at the apex of the hierarchy. For teachers to lead their own learning requires strategies that strengthen teachers' and headteachers' critical perspectives, ensuring opportunities for on-going dialogue. For teachers to engage in reflection and discussion about professional standards and expectations requires a firm commitment to making it a priority in the day-to-day of school life. Reflection on 'the way we do things round here' has to be underpinned by a shared willingness to question taken-for-granted assumptions about practice, and about the constraints and pressures that often deter teachers from following their best professional instincts.

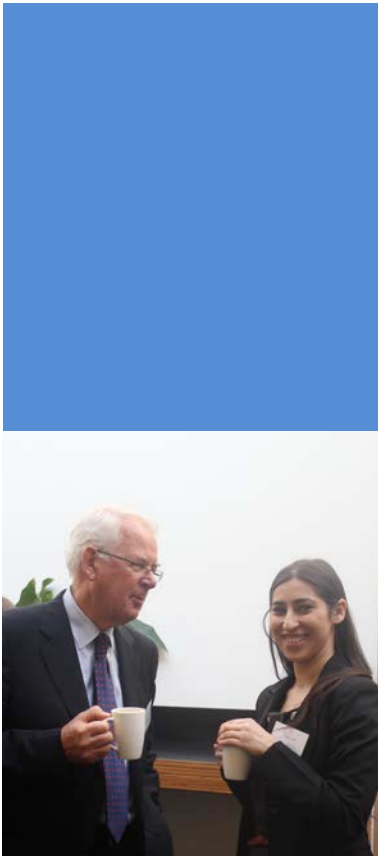
At the heart of the dialogue is a focus on learning, on the relationship between the *what* and the *how* of children's learning and the *what and how* of teachers' learning. This, in turn, implies an extension and broadening of the dialogue to embrace parents and community members, as well as researchers and other professionals in a range of local and national policy forums. The meaning of 'dialogue', as opposed to discussion or debate, contains two reciprocal elements – listening and talking – listening with intent to understand and talking with intent to enter the other person's frame of reference. It is what good teachers do every day in their classrooms. The challenge is to extend that same principle and frame of reference to other contexts and other partnerships.



### 3. Shared leadership

Leadership is typically associated with individuals in formal positions within the hierarchy, in which 'sharing' is seen as in the gift of those powerful individuals. When 'leadership' is viewed through a different lens, it recognises that the capacity to lead is not only inherent in the human condition, but also highly influenced by the social contexts in which it occurs. Nor is it the province of adults only, but exercised by children long before they enter formal schooling, at which juncture their spontaneity and personal authority is too often curbed by the demands of institutional life.

The term 'agency' emerged as a thread running through the seminar, used to refer to the willingness to take the initiative to support or direct others, or to work in concert with others, to share the task. Like children, teachers may gradually lose a sense of agency when they are overwhelmed by institutional demands, by impatient targets or categorical mandates. Conversely, when there is openness, a willingness to learn and creative space within schools, there is latitude for teacher leadership to grow and flourish, exceeding expectation, leading staff, students and parents alike to new insights, new ways of seeing, and new understandings of the hidden power of shared leadership. So 'standards' come to be reframed and acquire new meaning.



### 4. Values of inclusivity and community

Whose voice is heard most often and most persistently in the 'acoustic' of the school? In many institutions, the expression of 'voice' is directly related to one's position of power within the organisation. Voice may carry with it respect for authority, on the one hand, or on the other, respect for the individual or for the nature of what that voice expresses. When the latter occurs, it is owed to a culture in which everyone is valued irrespective of status. This is not to imply that every viewpoint is of equal value, but it does imply a willingness to listen, to discriminate and to disagree in a climate where disagreement is seen as healthy and integral to professional and organisational learning.

The issue is particularly acute for new entrants to the profession, treading warily, often unsure of the right or mandate to express their views. Yet, it is the newcomer to school that comes unfettered with familiarity and can see the conventions and rituals of school routine with fresh eyes. Good schools recognise the insights and agency that new members of staff bring with them. Good schools and self-confident staff listen to them, as well as supporting them (emotionally and intellectually) in becoming

valued members of the community and vital team players.

The commitment to equity proposed at the start of the seminar was linked, in the subsequent discussions, to the idea of a global professional community and raised the question of 'the global race' to succeed in the face of international competition, versus the need for collaboration which addresses the acute lack of educational provision for so many children across the world.

## **5. Flexible and diverse approaches to support for professional learning**

Professional learning assumes a diversity of forms underpinned by differing assumptions as to the nature of teachers' learning. New teachers bring with them a powerful legacy as students, their models very often a product of the teachers they liked or respected in their own school days. They bring with them preferences and prejudices about subjects, about the relative values of subjects and about what constitute 'difficult' areas of study. Much of professional learning has been described as 'unlearning', coming to one's practice with fresh insight, with less of an emphasis on what is to be taught than on what Alfred North Whitehead called 'the rhythms of learning', the diversity of ways in which it occurs and the diversity of students' expectations and motivations.

Professional learning is generally accorded specific days within the school calendar as well as through development opportunities in courses provided externally. These may carry little momentum back into the school or classroom without a climate, which encourages the sharing of practice across the school, in which professional learning is the cultural norm and in which there is tangible, on-going and well-resourced support for teachers' professional development. In the best of schools, it is also seen as a cultural norm that teachers will contribute to the professional learning of their colleagues and, in some circumstances, to teachers in other schools as well as within their respective unions and professional organisations.

It is incumbent on senior leaders to both create a climate conducive to professional discourse and mutual support and also to model what it means to be a learner, to be willing to admit to mistakes and acknowledge the agency of others less experienced and with less institutional authority than themselves.



## 6. Norms of self-evaluation and inquiry

When teachers encourage questioning and collaborative inquiry by their students, it carries greater impact if teachers themselves are seen as persistent inquirers, interested in how we come to understand the wider world beyond the school, but also with a focus on how we come to understand and shape the internal worlds of school and classroom. In the seminar, we discussed the practice of a teacher in the Netherlands who uses the first day of the school year not to teach, but to encourage his students to explore the classroom as a site for learning, to open cupboards and drawers, to rearrange the furniture, to create a climate for learning. To begin to question, from day one, the place and nature of learning and teaching sets the stage for self-evaluation.

It may be a small step to then encourage students to take a critical and exploratory attitude to their own learning, and perhaps a further and riskier step to evaluate the quality of teaching. However challenging this further step may seem, there has been a growing willingness on the part of teachers to encourage feedback from their students, as they have come to realise its potential, not only to improve their own teaching and classroom management, but to enhance their students' sense of self-efficacy.

Opening one's own classroom to inquiry has the effect of de-privatising practice, signalling that it is acceptable and desirable to see your colleagues teaching, encouraging an ethos of collaboration, and creating a 'no-blame culture'. This is at the root of peer-evaluation and school self-evaluation, preparing the fertile ground on which school improvement flourishes.



## 7. Leadership for capacity building

What is the capacity of the school as an engine of change? As a place of dynamic learning? As a place for personal and professional growth? And what do we understand by the term 'capacity' – a limited volume within a tight container or expansive and expanding opportunity? Capacity may be seen as fulfilling the mandate or as exceeding expectations, one a limiting notion, the other a challenging concept. One is concerned with management, the other with leadership.

Capacity building relies on prescient leadership, not in the embodiment of the singular heroic leader but as 'distributed', distinguished by the nature of practice, rather than by personal 'style' or 'traits'. It is well expressed in the Chinese aphorism 'All



of us is better than one of us'. Leadership may be hard to perceive, or locate, when it is a shared activity embedded in everyday action and discourse. In other language, this is what we understand by professional learning communities, an expression of leadership, which sees capacity building as a long-term developmental process with teachers in the foreground of innovation and on-going self-evaluation.

The capacity of a school is tested by how it reacts to changes in policy, in staffing, and how it copes with crises and the unexpected. Where there is capacity, there is flexibility and resilience because confidence and self-belief are endemic and the strength of the culture relies not on the individuals who come and go, but on the values and commitment to learning which pass from one generation to the next.

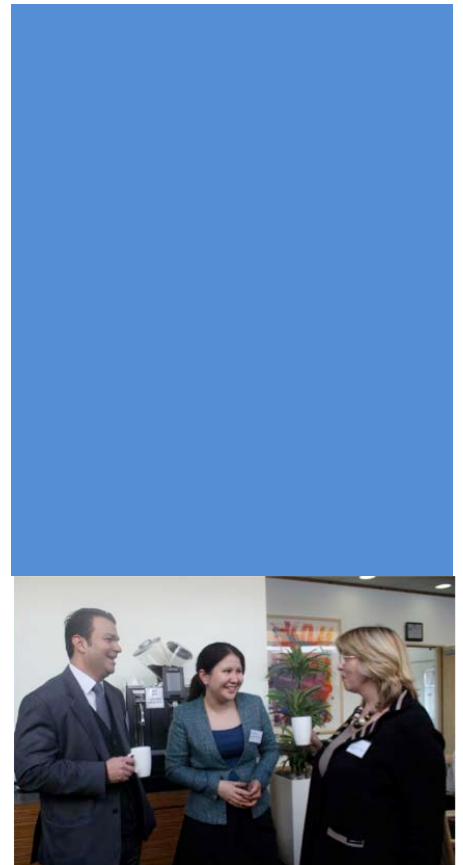
## **8. Collaboration**

The value of collaboration in sustaining teachers' professional growth was clearly identified as key. The starting point for this was the idea of collective professionalism, implying that members of the teaching profession have a shared responsibility for the quality of educational provision for all children in their school. This begs the question of where responsibility lies for the education of those who may be excluded from the school system, but, if the focus is on the conditions that nurture teachers' growth, it becomes easy to see how collaboration flows from this collective commitment.

The seminar participants supported the view that collaborative approaches to the development of practice and problem-solving in schools are not only more effective, but are also more likely to build teachers' professionalism, to extend their professional learning and promote a sense of moral purpose. Consequently, it implies that schools need to adopt the organisational structures and grow the professional cultures that foster and support collaboration. A collegial climate is essential, it was argued, because it enables the celebration of collaborative endeavour, which inspires others.

## **9. Structures and tools that support career development**

There were strong arguments for structures which frame teachers' career development. For some, these would be manifest in the form of professional standards, albeit ones that are generated by and accepted by teachers. Such standards could include specifications regarding skills, quality of practice and knowledge. Along with the call for professional standards, were proposals for structures that offer multiple paths to career progression. These include certification, which reflects different levels of experience, expertise and responsibility. Salary structures would be commensurate with providing incentives built-in to the system along with systems of performance evaluation.



It was agreed that such systems would need to be seen to be valid by both teachers and principals. There were, however, differences of view as to whether such acceptance could be achieved through union representation.

Unsurprisingly, the argument for this kind of systems approach tended to be advanced by representatives from the developed countries such as Australia, the USA and the Netherlands where it is assumed that substantial funding has to be found to invest in enhanced professionalism. However, participants whose attention was focused on the developing world tended to be more interested in strategies which enhance professional commitment based on teacher-led, self-help approaches. It is clearly difficult to advocate a common approach where economic and political circumstances vary so markedly, but there are a few simple principles underpinning different strategies. For example, it was agreed that it is important teachers know what they can expect from each other. Professional growth is nurtured by mutuality and reciprocal accountability however this might be enacted.



## 10. Knowledge-building

The idea of specifying the professional knowledge that teachers should possess came up under the previous heading. It was suggested that knowledge is inextricably bound up with values, beliefs and skills. The importance of access to sources of formalised and research-based professional knowledge was highlighted, pointing to the potential role that universities can play, not just as gatekeepers at the stage of initial teacher training, but as partners in various enterprises designed to support teacher and school development. The discussion here took us beyond the idea of university-based courses towards processes in which teachers are expected and encouraged to engage in scholarship and professionally located theory building, perhaps in the form of principles for practice.

It was also argued that, perhaps, even more important is to give consideration of the processes through which teachers build knowledge. Specifications of professional knowledge as part of the standards approach was in tension with the argument that such knowledge is necessarily provisional and grounded in evidence and experience of practice. This harmonises well with the proposal that teachers grow best when they are able to build knowledge through networking within and beyond their own schools, using social media as well as face-to-face encounters. This echoed the discussion about collaboration described above and was extended to include the idea of partnerships in which universities play a significant role, bringing the values of scholarship and critical inquiry to the professional context.

## Where does the debate go from here?

The discussion in this seminar, enriched as it was by so many experienced and pivotally placed voices, pointed to a number of ways forward. The discussion returned continuously to fundamental values and principles that, from our perspective in the LfL group, seemed to affirm our understandings captured in the [LfL framework of ideas](#). The principles of dialogue, shared leadership and shared accountability in particular were very much to the fore in the discussion, which also encompassed the other two LfL principles of a focus on learning and creating the conditions for learning. The point about such principles is that, while they may lead to a variety of practices, they provide the means to engage in a critical review of such practices. In the longer term this is the only way to proceed if we are truly committed to democratic approaches to policy and reform.

A highly principled discussion, such as the one we enjoyed over the two days in Cambridge, could not escape the challenge put on the table in the opening remarks by John Bangs, Dirk van Damme and others, hinging on the imperative of equity in educational provision. As we look to the future we cannot afford, as educators, to be drawn into the empty pursuit of winning the global race by racketing up the pressure on teachers and schools without considering what will ensure genuine professional growth. The pursuit of equity in a global sense has to focus on the challenge, highlighted by our partners in OSF - the dire lack of educational opportunity in the developing world, especially for girls. Meeting the challenge of the UN Millennium Goal of ensuring full participation in elementary education is not simply a matter of provision, school buildings and teacher recruitment. As the revised goals that emerged in Dacca emphasise, the human right is not just to schooling, but essentially to quality in education. The goal of quality will not be realised unless we can enable policy makers to turn their attention to the principles and strategies that enhance professional growth - in the end a matter of moral purpose.

The [LfL site](#) offers links to podcasts from each session, papers provided for delegates and background documents

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