

## **In conversation with....**

### **How and why did you become interested in practitioner learning?**

Thinking about this made me reflect back to my childhood and always wanting to be a teacher. I followed this dream and began my pre-service teaching career in Montessori education. Central to Montessori philosophy is observation of the child, their interests and how they learn. So from the beginning I was focused not only on my teaching but more importantly the impact of my teaching on the child's learning. My default was if the child is not learning the way I teach, then I need to learn how to teach them in a way that they *can* learn. I learned very early on how complex teaching is and how important it is to continue to develop the specialist knowledge inherent in being a teacher; content knowledge, pedagogic knowledge, curricular knowledge, pedagogic content knowledge, knowledge of learners, and knowledge of educational contexts to mention a few. As a teacher, change was a constant which meant I continually had to rethink and reflect on my current practices and research new thinking and practices in order to support my learners.

My curiosity about how individual children learn increasingly drew me to working with children with diverse needs and those often marginalised in society. I wanted to make a difference, I had a moral purpose, focused on including all learners and enabling all learners to not only access education but to meaningfully engage in school, the community and wider society. So began my love affair with practitioner learning, as it empowered me to make a difference.

I taught in a variety of school settings for over 25 years including mainstream and special school contexts in Ireland and in the United States. During this time I never engaged in a professional learning experience for the qualification it afforded me, it was always about my learning and making a difference for the learners I worked with. So my journey to working in Higher Education was not planned or intended, it just happened. Following my doctoral studies there was no going back, I was hooked by research and more convinced than ever about the importance of professional learning for teachers, reflected in the title of my doctoral thesis; *Developing and sustaining teachers professional learning: A case study of collaborative professional development*. I was then drawn to teacher education as I believed I could have a bigger impact working with existing teachers and pre-service teachers, empowering them through professional learning experiences throughout their teaching careers.

Professional learning is still really important to me as a teacher educator, and is reflected in my commitment to IPDA and IPDA Ireland while also being part of the editorial teams for PDiE and Practice. These experiences continue to empower me to make a difference.

### *What for you are the current 'burning issues' in practitioner learning?*

The term 'practitioner learning' is a little challenging for me as it feels somewhat reductionist, focused on the technical aspects of practice. I know it is not intended in that way but for me 'professional learning' encompasses the complexity of teaching and learning that I mentioned earlier. It also highlights the importance of learning as part of being a professional

educator. While it might seem like semantics to some I think it is important that we, as teachers, say we are professionals, believe we are professionals and so engage with our work as professionals. Central to this is professional learning as distinct from practitioner learning and practice.

Here are my thoughts on the key burning issues for me:

- How to **prioritize** professional learning during times of disruption such as Covid-19. We know professional learning keeps us close to the moral purpose of teaching and we know many teachers have shown real leadership in how they engaged with their learners when schools were forced to close. How can we now learn from each other and support each other as we plan for continued disruption in uncertain times ahead? What is the role of leadership in schools in developing and sustaining teachers' professional learning during these times so as to make a difference to our learners?
- How to **embed** collaborative professional learning into the everyday lives of professional educators in schools in a way that is natural, meaningful and beneficial. Too often professional learning is seen as something that is done 'to' teachers and involves bringing in 'experts' from outside. We need to change this expectation and narrative to view professional learning as experiences where expertise within schools is celebrated and shared. Noteworthy also is going outside for professional learning is also part of the bigger tapestry of professional learning experiences.
- How to empower teachers and staff [bottom up] to take **ownership** of their professional learning and be supported by leaders [from above] in terms of trust, space and time. Affording teachers time to collaborate is not enough. Creating a climate of trust and a safe space for collaborative critical courageous conversations is essential for meaningful engagement in professional learning to make a difference.
- How to **explore and understand the gap** between theory and practice, between what is learned in pre-service education and what is practised in the classroom, between what is taught in HE and what is meaningful in practice and prepares teachers to navigate the complexity of teaching and learning while also understanding the wider influences from within and outside of schools. Supporting teachers to become teachers in residence in our universities or teaching fellows for a short to medium term can enhance the learning of the teachers, teacher educators and students in HE and schools. Creating professional learning communities with members from HE, teachers, pre-service teachers, principals, policy makers and other stakeholders might also further understanding of the theory practice gap at various levels of the system.

*What are you currently working on and how does your work talk to what you see as the burning issues?*

- I have been working with a group of novice teachers and colleagues from HE to explore the theory practice gap. Having received some funding from the Teaching Council of Ireland we were able to have teachers become teachers in residence teaching our pre-service teachers. The teachers had all undertaken our specialism on inclusive and special education as part of their pre-service teacher education degree where I worked with them on two modules; collaborative practice and

leadership for inclusion. On completion of their BEd I invited them to join a community of practice focused on leadership for inclusion to support them in staying close to their moral purpose [inclusion] and to support us in understanding what student teachers need to prepare them for their first years of teaching. It has highlighted for me the importance of supporting teachers in their early years of transitioning from being a student to a teacher, being confident in their ability to exercise leadership for inclusion. We met with the teachers 4-5 times per year and adopted a participatory action learning action research approach to their practice. The teachers took photos to represent their leadership for inclusion in their schools and they have published an article together on teacher leadership for inclusion.

- To further understand the idea of leadership learning at pre-service level I engaged in a Scotens funded project with colleagues from the University of Glasgow and the University of Ulster. We spoke with pre-service teachers, novice teachers, teacher educators and various stakeholders in education at national level including for example teacher unions, teaching councils, department of education. Our findings here clearly showed that while pre-service and novice teachers are receptive of leadership learning and willing to assume leadership, they face challenges and tensions. They require a system that is open and supportive in allowing teachers to exercise leadership even as novice teachers.
- While exploring leadership with pre-service and novice teachers is central to my work and research so too is social justice leadership preparation and development for principals as evidenced in my most recent article in PDiE with Torrance, D., Forde, C., King, F., & Razzaq, J. (2020). *What is the problem? A critical review of social justice leadership preparation and development*.
- This focus on leadership by teachers and others is also evident in my work with colleagues from the University of Cambridge and the University of Florida where we are focused on leadership for professional learning and are currently planning for the next *Leadership for Professional Learning* Symposium in Dublin in 2022.
- I work with the Teaching Council of Ireland as a critical friend on the working group for the framework for professional learning for teachers (Cosán). Currently professional learning is not mandatory in the Irish context and the Teaching Council has been involved in working with teachers to explore what constitutes professional learning and how teachers can engage with it in a bid to encourage teachers to take ownership of their professional learning. One of the challenges here is striking a balance between using the framework to empower teachers through professional learning experiences and using it to ask teachers to potentially evidence their professional learning for continued registration as a teacher where teachers may feel it is purely an accountability exercise aimed at getting teachers to do more.
- My involvement with IPDA and being an associate editor on the PDiE journal contributes significantly to my own professional learning as it provides me with the safe space, time and trust to have the critical courageous conversations necessary to enhance my own thinking and practice.

*What theoretical perspectives and concepts do you prefer to work with and why? Or what theoretical perspectives or concepts have you found most useful to your work on practitioner learning?*

- I prefer to work in the Interpretivist paradigm as I believe in reality being socially constructed by individuals. It allows me as a researcher to understand the subjective world of human experience of others. Within education context is key and nothing works everywhere so for me it is important to understand individuals own meaning making in their own context.

*What research paradigms/methods/designs do you prefer to work with and why?*

- My preference is for mixed methods or qualitative research to allow for gaining the bigger picture and the in depth insights into a smaller number of cases. I enjoy comparative research particularly with countries of similar size to Ireland to see lessons learned across systems.
- I believe in the importance of learner voice and enjoy using visual approaches to access the voices of all learners.
- I have also found the use of photographs for reflection on practice to be very insightful and user friendly for teachers in our community of practice.

*What piece of work has most challenged/changed/ or influenced your thinking in relation to practitioner learning?*

My involvement in the community of practice with the novice teachers has significantly influenced my thinking. Engagement in this professional learning experience made a difference to the inclusion of all learners in the teachers' classrooms. It kept the teachers close to their moral purpose and they found it sustainable and engaging. Noteworthy is its influence on my thinking in terms of what pre-service teachers need to support them in their practices. This has led to changes in my teaching in HE. However the challenge is how to scale this up for other groups going forward. Covid-19 has shown me how using an online platform might be one option to do this as we don't need to have face to face meetings. Watch this space...

*What are you reading at the moment and how is it impacting on your thinking?*

I've started reading 'Standing Still Is Not an Option: School Children Using Art for Social Change' by Christa Boske. The title itself is powerful, *standing still is not an option*, and highlights the importance of voice and arts methods for accessing voices that are often marginalised. The power of art for creating equal opportunities for understanding social justice and equity and promoting courageous conversations about social justice and equity is clearly evident as is how art could be used to encourage social change. Powerful storytelling!

*What's next for you?*

I have carried out a lot of research in the past few years and now I need time to reflect and write. Writing helps me to make sense of findings and in turn influences my practice. Never underestimate thinking time!

*What advice would you give to new researchers in the field of practitioner learning?*

Align your teaching and learning with your research. Try to understand and theorise what is happening so as to improve it. Keep it simple and practical!

*If you could change one thing about practitioner education it would be....*

The name!

*How would you like to see 'practice' develop in the short to medium term?*

Practice is a very welcome addition to IPDA. I feel that the think pieces, in conversation with and From our own correspondent are key features of the journal and should be encouraged in the medium to long term. They help readers to make sense of issues and unpick issues in a clear simplified way. They stimulate thinking...