

Review of the Droichead Teacher Induction Pilot Programme

Executive Summary

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An Chomhairle
Mhúinteoireachta



The Teaching Council



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Executive Summary

THE DROICHEAD PILOT PROGRAMME

The Droichead pilot programme, which began in 2013, is designed to provide whole-school support for teacher induction in both primary and post-primary schools. The programme is innovative in a number of respects. It is led at school level by a Professional Support Team (PST) consisting of the principal, mentor(s) and other member(s), who have received training provided by the National Induction Programme for Teachers (NIPT) in relation to their roles and responsibilities. Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) in Droichead schools have support from a mentor and other members of the PST in the identification of their professional learning needs and in planning opportunities to address these needs. NQTs have the opportunity to observe and be observed by other teachers, and receive feedback on their teaching. NQTs also compile a learning portfolio which supports their learning and records their reflections on their learning. At the end of the process, the PST may make a recommendation to the Teaching Council that the Droichead condition be removed from a teacher's registration. In this process, emphasis is placed on the progress made by the teacher in terms of his or her professional learning and practice.

The introduction of the Droichead pilot programme in Ireland reflects a wider trend internationally toward the design of more systematic, integrated and intensive programmes to support induction and probation. Since 2012, the induction programme requirement for registration has involved attendance at induction workshops for NQTs. However, at school level, induction practices prior to Droichead varied considerably, with some schools using trained mentors to support NQTs while other schools adopted more informal approaches. In non-Droichead primary schools, the probation process has involved the completion of a period of service and the demonstration of satisfactory professional competence on the basis of inspector visits to observe NQTs' teaching. In non-Droichead post-primary schools, newly qualified teachers were required to have a specified number of hours of post-qualification employment (PQE), as verified by the school principal. Droichead represents a sea-change in relation to previous approaches to supporting newly qualified teachers in its emphasis on whole-school support for the NQT and school ownership of the recommendation process.

RESEARCH ON TEACHER INDUCTION

With an increased policy focus on teacher quality, the provision of high quality teacher induction is now seen as an important, if not essential, part of becoming a teacher. Induction has been framed in a number of ways; as a distinct phase in learning to teach, as a socialisation process and as an integrated programme for learning to teach. The third orientation, and one of particular relevance in reviewing Droichead, focuses on induction as a deliberate programme for sustained and systematic support and assistance for newly qualified teachers. Existing research indicates very considerable variation within and across countries in the design of integrated induction programmes, with differences in; the allocation of mentors, the duration of mandatory induction, system commitment to the intensity of induction for

NQTs, links between induction and subsequent phases in the professional continuum, and the role of higher education institutions in induction. The emerging consensus from existing research is that a set of factors rather than one single factor alone is critical for effective induction. The literature on induction illustrates the many ways in which school culture matters in the successful implementation of induction, an issue addressed in this report using case studies of primary and post-primary schools to explore implementation at the school level.

METHODOLOGY

The current study aims to assess the Droichead pilot programme and thus to inform the model of teacher induction which will be used in Irish primary and post-primary schools in the future. In so doing, it seeks to answer the following key questions:

- How effectively are the teachers who participate in Droichead supported and is the process adequately resourced?
- How useful and appropriate are the criteria and indicators of good practice developed through Droichead?
- How effective, appropriate and fair are the procedures and protocols employed by members of the Professional Support Team (PST) in making a recommendation to the Council in relation to the practice of a newly qualified teacher (NQT)?
- How effective is the Droichead experience as an induction into the teaching profession?
- What can be learned from the research findings on Droichead to facilitate the mainstreaming of an effective induction and probation process for all teachers?

Postal questionnaires were developed for school principals, mentors, other PST members and newly qualified teachers in Droichead schools. In non-Droichead schools, questionnaires were developed for principals, newly qualified teachers and teacher induction co-ordinators¹ (where evident). In Autumn 2014, questionnaires were distributed to the 123 primary and post-primary schools then taking part in the programme and to a matched sample of 199 non-Droichead schools. A further wave of questionnaires was distributed in Autumn 2015; this allowed for a more detailed exploration of the experience of Droichead, as many schools had only joined the programme a couple of months before the initial survey. These data have been supplemented by case studies of six Droichead primary and six Droichead post-primary schools. Within each of the schools, interviews were conducted by members of the research team with school principals, mentors, other PST members and newly qualified teachers. In addition, in order to capture information on teacher collaboration within the school and the

¹ Teacher induction coordinators were identified by the school principal as the person responsible for teacher induction or mentoring in the school. They were not necessarily a trained mentor, an issue which is explored in this report.

potential wider impact of Droichead on the school culture, interviews were conducted with two teachers in each school not directly involved in the Droichead process.

MAIN FINDINGS

Principals in Droichead and non-Droichead schools were asked about the extent to which initial teacher education prepares teachers for a number of different aspects of teaching. Principals were most positive about the extent to which initial teacher education (ITE) prepared NQTs in terms of using a range of teaching methods in an appropriate way, knowledge of curriculum content, planning lessons and use of appropriate assessment methods. However, they were more critical of the extent to which ITE prepared teachers for dealing with diversity in terms of teaching students with special educational needs and from multicultural or disadvantaged backgrounds. Only a small number felt that NQTs had been prepared for working with parents. Responses were similar in Droichead and non-Droichead schools and newly qualified teachers highlighted similar gaps in their prior education.

Schools taking part in the Droichead pilot programme did so on a voluntary basis. This decision reflected their prior history, with schools opting into Droichead being more likely than other schools to have had a formalised approach to teacher induction prior to joining the pilot programme; over half (56 per cent) had such an approach compared with just a third of non-Droichead schools. A significant minority, four-in-ten, of Droichead principals had themselves received mentor training prior to joining Droichead. Furthermore, the majority of Droichead schools had staff who had already taken part in mentoring professional development. The findings indicate that Droichead takes place within the broader context of formal and informal cooperation within the school. Newly qualified teachers frequently rely for support on other teachers who are not involved in the PST and on other NQTs, and the extent to which they do varies across schools. Schools differed in the extent to which they had assumed ownership over Droichead and adapted the programme to meet their specific needs. A prior history of mentoring and collaboration facilitated this ownership and the fostering of school-wide support for teaching and learning, but was not a necessary condition.

The Professional Support Team was typically made up of the principal, the mentor and the other PST member, although some schools had larger teams. The mentor was the main source of support across schools, meeting very frequently with the NQT. Principals varied in whether they assumed an 'overseer' role or were more heavily involved in the day-to-day operation of the programme. Across all schools, however, they played a crucial role in the choice to join Droichead and in facilitating staff buy-in to that decision. The 'other' PST member had a somewhat more ambiguous role, being very involved in the recommendation process in some schools while taking a more administrative role in other cases. PST members were very positive about the professional development they had received as part of Droichead, and mentors in particular were positive about the extent to which they had learned from the NQTs they were supporting.

Members of the Professional Support Team typically observed the NQT teaching on two to four occasions, being more frequent in primary than in post-primary schools. Mentors were the most involved in giving feedback to NQTs and beginning teachers found this feedback helpful and constructive. Other professional conversations between the mentors mainly centred on teaching methods, classroom management and how the NQT was coping. Teaching methods, differentiation and assessment were more frequently discussed in primary than in post-primary schools.

While all NQTs pointed to some induction workshops which were helpful, many highlighted a duplication of material covered in initial teacher education and suggested similar gaps to those experienced in ITE, particularly teaching diverse student populations. The vast majority of NQTs keep a learning portfolio, mainly to reflect on their practice. Several teachers in the case-study schools felt this enabled them to document their learning throughout the Droichead process. However, teachers in a number of schools were critical of the lack of clarity around the purpose and nature of the portfolio.

PST members and NQTs were generally clear about the recommendation process with regard to removing the Droichead condition from the teacher's registration and felt it was fair. However, over half of primary principals felt that the number of days required to complete Droichead was 'too short' and case-study interviews suggested additional pressure in terms of scheduling meetings and observations where NQTs were only in the school for the minimum period. Staff were generally positive about sign-off as a process rather than a one-off, and less authentic, 'performance' for the inspector. However, there was some tension about combining support and assessment, and this was expressed strongly by some schools who had not taken part in Droichead. In practice, the recommendation process itself was not seen as highly contentious, with the mentor typically taking a supportive role while the principal and other PST member were more involved in making the recommendation to the Teaching Council. The team-based approach appeared to mitigate against the risk of personality clashes influencing the process. Furthermore, there was no evidence that PST members were reluctant to make a recommendation in relation to NQTs because they had worked closely with them. However, PST members did raise concerns about how to handle serious underperformance by an NQT and about the potential for uneven standards across schools.

Levels of satisfaction with Droichead were very high among principals, mentors and other PST members, though somewhat less satisfaction was expressed in relation to resources as well as the timing and location of meetings. NQTs were also very positive about the support provided by the Professional Support Team. The benefits of the programme were seen as providing a structured support for NQTs while a very significant minority of principals felt that involvement had contributed to a more collaborative culture and greater openness within the school as a whole. Principals in Droichead schools reported greater levels of improvement among their NQTs than those in a matched sample of non-Droichead schools, and NQTs in Droichead schools reported lower levels of stress than those in non-participating schools. The most commonly reported challenge centred on the issue of time, mainly time for meetings

and observations. Meetings were regularly scheduled outside school hours and only half of principals drew down the full allocation of release time available under the programme. This reflected both the perceived inflexibility of the method of allocating release time and a reluctance among teachers to miss class time. Other challenges centred on the additional workload, especially for the mentor, without commensurate rewards and the difficulty for NQTs in securing enough teaching hours to complete the process in an uncertain labour market climate.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

The Teaching Council indicated in October 2015 that it was envisaged that, with the appropriate resources and support, Droichead would be confirmed as the route of induction for all NQTs within a three-year timeframe. The study findings highlight a number of implications for the availability and sustainability of this model across primary and post-primary schools as well as the future development of teacher induction policy and practice, principally:

- In rolling out the programme, the importance of information and support in securing buy-in from principals and staff and addressing their concerns about workload and assessing new teachers, especially in schools without a strong tradition of mentoring and staff collaboration;
- The need to consider cross-school cooperation in Droichead provision in extending the programme to smaller schools with teaching principals, given additional challenges regarding time for meetings;
- Greater flexibility in the allocation of time to cover meetings and observations along with the potential to build Droichead planning and meetings into the timetable, at least at post-primary level;
- In a context where principals indicate they are likely to expand or rotate membership of the PST, the provision of ongoing professional development opportunities for participating staff;
- Greater clarity regarding the purpose and nature of the learning portfolio;
- Closer links between Droichead and school development planning, given the way that support for new teachers relies on a broader network of formal and informal ties within the school;
- The need to ensure complementarity between initial teacher education, Droichead induction activities and the proposed Cosán framework for teacher professional development in order to provide continuity of learning and facilitate high quality teaching;
- A need to examine the implications of the labour market context for the ability of new graduates to complete the Droichead process in a timely manner and review options such as guaranteed placements.

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