

Lasair: Supporting Principals and Deputy Principals as Instructional Leaders

Introduction

Three organisations – the Instructional Leadership Programme/Education and Training Boards Ireland (ILP/ETBI); Društvo Ravnatelj, Slovenia; and the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD) – in conversation recognised the lack of professional learning opportunities for principals and deputy principals as instructional leaders. Highlighting the need to develop a programme of support as a priority, ILP/ETBI in partnership with Društvo Ravnatelj applied to Léargas for funding, and both partners received funding for January 2023 – June 2024.

The aim of the project was to develop a programme to give post-primary principals and deputy principals an opportunity to develop core skills and competencies in the leadership of teaching and learning, and to give them appropriate resources in this area. In so doing, it aimed to contribute to improving school outcomes by creating an environment in which principals and deputies, and their teachers, engage in conversations and practices to enhance teaching and learning and ultimately the learning outcomes of students.

Background of project

Leithwood et al. (2009) identified the teacher's instructional repertoire as the top predictor of student achievement. The second most powerful factor is the principal's support for teachers in refining and extending their instructional practices. This puts an onerous responsibility on principals and deputy principals. Yet these roles are overloaded in both Ireland and Slovenia, and the job is more time-consuming with increasing administrative and managerial workloads, which deflect time and attention away from the role of instructional leader (OECD, 2018).



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This article explores the pilot programme Lasair, designed to support principals and deputy principals as instructional leaders. Lasair aims to provide school leaders with key skills, competencies, and resources in the leadership of teaching and learning, thereby improving school outcomes by creating an environment in which the senior leadership team and teachers engage in conversations and practice to enhance teaching and learning.

School leaders should be given ongoing professional learning opportunities on instructional leadership, to help them develop and enhance their instructional knowledge and skills. Communities of practice provide opportunities for school principals to improve their instructional leadership (OECD, 2020).

Despite the fact that support and training in the ongoing development of school leaders' knowledge and skills in leading learning are essential to their complex roles, anecdotal evidence in both countries suggests that the support is not available to them. In response, and to address the priorities identified by the OECD, the project partners sought to establish communities of practice in each country, and to develop a programme of professional learning aimed specifically at enhancing the core skills of principals and deputy principals and provide them with relevant resources.

Objectives

The aims of the programme were to:

- » develop an understanding of effective teaching and learning and how national and European policy define it
- » develop a deep understanding of what instructional leadership is, why it is important, and what it looks like
- » understand how to foster a culture of highly effective teaching and learning practices in their school
- » support senior leaders in embedding highly effective teaching and learning practices in their schools by developing their skills to lead teaching and learning
- » develop and share resources to support principals and deputy principals as instructional leaders
- » develop a deep understanding of reflective practice and the skills to engage in it
- » support the participants in developing a deep understanding of educational change and the skills to lead and manage instructional change.

Two stakeholder events were held with members of NAPD, ETBI, unions, National Council for Special Education, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, Teaching Council, Oide, Department of Education, and the Inspectorate in attendance. At each event we shared our experience of the programme, provided interim research reports, and outlined the next steps and future delivery. The programme was officially launched in Ireland at the NAPD conference in October 2024.

The project partners sought to develop a programme of professional learning aimed at enhancing the core skills of principals and deputy principals.

Programme content

The pilot programme, which was residential, operated over a six-month period. Participants attended three two-day sessions, exploring together the importance of school leaders being at the centre of educational change in their school. The programme gave them the opportunity to carry out a collaborative inquiry, engage with instructional research, analyse case studies, and explore school culture.

The programme aligned with national policy in the form of *Looking at Our School 2022* (Department of Education, 2022) and *Cosán* (Teaching Council, 2016). This gave participants an opportunity to explore leadership skills and styles, to explore the impact of professional learning on the whole school, and to plan for a school-based change initiative that was relevant, important, and unique to each school.

Over the three sessions, participants engaged in 10 modules: professional reflection; understanding instructional leadership; using national policy to inform the role of principals and deputy principals as instructional leaders; school culture; conducting a school situational analysis; understanding educational change and how people respond; leading instructional change: leadership characteristics, styles, and approaches; facilitating difficult conversations; celebrating and acknowledging good teaching; and showcase of learning.

The roles of school leaders are overloaded with increasing administrative and managerial workloads, which deflect time and attention away from the role of instructional leader (OECD, 2018).

Next steps

Both partners will refine the programme, then it will continue to be made available in both countries. Research has been conducted during the life cycle of this project. Articles and academic papers will be drafted and made directly available to Léargas, the partners, pilot participants, and stakeholders, before being published.

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