

ASTI Annual Convention 2018

**Clayton Hotel Silver Springs,
Cork**

Address by Guest Speaker

**Dr. Melanie Ní Dhuinn
School of Education,
Trinity College, Dublin.**

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A Uachtaráin, A Aire, Baill Chumann na Meánmhúinteoirí, Éire agus a chairde uilig, is mór an onóir domsa bheith i bhur láthair inniu ag bhur gComhdháil Bhliantúil anseo i gCorcaigh.

Gabhaim buíochas ar leith d'Uachtarán Ger Curtin agus do Choiste Lárnach an Chumann as an gcuireadh labhairt libh mar aoichainteoir. Ba mhaith liom an deis a thapú anseo díriú ar an Mhúinteoireacht mar ghairm agus ar chur chun cinn na Múinteoireachta in Éirinn i láthair na huaire.

It is indeed a great privilege for me to address you here today as you gather to consider and decide on your policy priorities for the year ahead.

While I am currently working in Teacher Education in Trinity College my initial experience in the Profession was as a post-primary teacher of Physical Education and Gaeilge, a role I was exceptionally fortunate to have held. As a teacher I had days in school that didn't go to plan and the learning outcomes weren't anywhere near achieved, days we never got past the Aimsir Caite dearfach not to mention diúltach nor further than a lap of the hurling pitch without mysterious collisions or slips by overly enthusiastic adolescents, but the formative stages of my career were positive, practical and pragmatic with a focus on teaching, learning and time for students .

There are many non-teachers who think they could teach but as everyone here knows well, the reality is different and teaching is a specialist and expert role that extends far beyond learning intentions or

outcomes and indeed one that is difficult to leave behind each evening. Luckily for me the school setting has always been part of my work and in my current role I am in the privileged position where I regularly visit schools to assess student teachers on School Placement where I also have regular contact with cooperating teachers, school management and practising teachers who undertake CPD or further study on postgraduate courses.

Recent reconceptualizations of teacher education have without doubt furthered and improved the pre-service aspect in many ways, the introduction of the induction phase for NQTs has maintained the scaffold while inducting teachers into the Profession while the Continuous Professional Development opportunities allow for real and meaningful engagement by practising teachers. Teacher CPD regularly kicks the Twitter machine into overdrive and I never cease to be amazed at the countless CPD activities undertaken by practising teachers at weekends, during holiday time and at any available opportunity.

The Teaching Profession has undergone unprecedented change and reform over the past number of years that has altered the professional landscape significantly. The introduction of numerous new initiatives and requirements (which in themselves are positive) necessitates that teachers extend their work focus outside of teaching, learning and assessment to address additional set down requirements within an already crowded timetable. Teachers' positionality within this newly constructed framework has been challenged and while teachers recognise the absolute need for compliance and the need to implement

new initiatives they feel squeezed and feel that quality time with students has been impeded.

From my perspective **values** and **value** are key concepts in the Teaching Profession debate.

“Values” are a particularly interesting concept, one that is normally seen or witnessed as lived behaviours, dispositions and actions and reflected in decisions that we make determined by our beliefs. Bandura (1997) refers to values and beliefs as being inextricably linked to self-efficacy in teaching, the evidence being that teachers who have high levels of self-efficacy are confident in their own abilities to be successful teachers, while teachers with low levels of self-efficacy are less confident in their own abilities.

Efficacy is a motivational construct that continues throughout a teaching career. Efficacy not only describes effectiveness, it also refers to usefulness, worth and value. When motivation is negatively affected, confidence, self-esteem and self-worth are diminished.

Strong efficacy beliefs are a vital resource in helping teachers overcome the diverse challenges of their profession (De Mauro & Jennings, 2016). In other words if teachers' efficacy beliefs are strong their outputs and the outcomes will be positive, if not the opposite will be the case. Teacher self-efficacy directly influences outcomes in the classroom, it has been reported by Pendergast, Garvis and Keogh (2011) as being related to student achievement (Moore & Esselman, 1992), increased

job satisfaction (Caprara, Barbarnelli, Borgogni and Steca, 2003), commitment to teaching, (Coladarci, 2002), greater levels of planning and organisation (Allinder, 1994) and working longer with students who are struggling (Gibson & Dembo, 1984). Pendergast et al (2011) point out that it is important to understand and promote the development of teacher self-efficacy beliefs in Student-teachers and Newly Qualified teachers in order to reduce levels of attrition within the profession.

The Values aspect of the profession is therefore one of the most critical cornerstones within it and one that is subject to internal and external influences along the continuum of Teacher Education and throughout a teacher's career.

The other type of Value, which is constructed externally, is the Value that is placed on the Profession by external stakeholders. Usually if we own something valuable such as jewellery or furniture or artwork or objects of sentimental value we usually mind them and take care of them and protect them from harm. How the Teaching Profession is valued, how it is considered, minded, protected and how it is invested in and resourced should be no different.

Safely ensconced away from the front line of teaching as we are right now let's allow ourselves an opportunity to reflect and consider the concept of Teaching, as a Profession. For me, when I think about the concept of Teaching it conjures up many images in the mind's eye and beyond, including; classrooms, students, blackboards, whiteboards, schoolbags, P.E. bags, Art folders, Home Economics ingredients and materials, Technology projects, bells ringing, intercom announcements,

text books, copies, foolscaps, Ipads, Examinations, Assessments, Reports, soggy sandwiches, cold coffees, empty kettles, relaxed chats with colleagues, energised discussions at meetings, agreements, disagreements, Concerts, Matches, Debating teams, Green Schools, Active Schools, Choirs, Young Scientists, Curriculum reform, Graduations, Celebrations and much more besides but at the heart of all of the images I have mentioned, the common denominator is “the teacher” and collectively “the teachers”. Teachers are the heartbeat of a system that pulsates day in, day out, that pulsates both within and well outside the school bell timeframes, within and well outside the school calendar timelines, within and well outside “the school year”.

From a policy perspective Ireland has historically operated a deficit model in education and much has been documented and recorded from the deficit perspective that has contributed to and augmented our knowledge and understanding of the development of our education system. Deficit models however are problematic as they elicit deficit discourse. With a deficit model we are constantly trying to fix what is broken, in what is usually an under-resourced and inequitable system. Teachers regularly find themselves on the precipice of societal crises that develop and subsequently manifest in the school that need to be fixed not once or twice but almost on a daily basis.

I mentioned “concepts” earlier when I referred to the concept of Teaching as a Profession. A concept is an idea that is expressed in words or as a symbol. Concepts are regarded as the building blocks of social theories. Theories in turn specify the relationships between concepts and why these relationships exist. Teaching is founded on developing relationships.

So, in order to really understand the concept of Teaching as a Profession let's pause and think for a moment of the words and phrases that are used in discourse to speak and write about Teaching in Ireland, the conversations that describe the properties and dimensions of the Profession.

I want to draw your attention to the Discourse about Teaching right now and in particular to spotlight the dominant discourse that prevails and the impact this discourse has on participation in and promotion of our profession. Working directly in Initial Teacher Education and speaking to student teachers and potential student teachers I have noticed the emergence of a negative discourse about Teaching over the past number of years, a discourse that does no favours to the recruitment or retention of student-teachers, aspiring teachers or practising teachers in the Profession. The discourse stems from a number of potential sources some of which are valid and evidence based, but some of which are not and are the result of misunderstood, misinterpreted or misread communications.

The many negative connotations created by the use of badly chosen, inaccurate or misplaced phrases or utterances in the public discourse of education in Ireland that focus on negative constructions are not really helpful in that they sensationalise and catastrophize aspects of the debate without really unpacking or drilling into the evidence and unearthing the bare facts.

Objective use of available real time data, fully informed and validated statements and meaningful consultation with those on the ground, teachers and school management would eradicate some of the negative spin that tends to be heaped on education "issues" in Ireland. If we think

back to my earlier point on efficacy and motivation, blanket negative generalisation serves to demotivate prospective applicants for teaching programmes, student teachers enrolled on programmes and practising teachers in schools.

Reliable data from HEI providers informs us that concurrent undergraduate teacher education programmes at both primary and post-primary remain popular for CAO applicants and those applying are securing places on programmes with very high points at Leaving Certificate and thus the academic standard at entry is high. Concurrent graduates are more likely to enter the Profession immediately on graduation as NQTs. At post-primary level concurrent programmes vary in terms of subject provision. Applications have remained steady on concurrent programmes and with the Minister's recent announcement to expand and increase the number of available places it is hoped that more applicants will consider teaching as a career. As was referred to by President Ger Curtin data from recent years indicates a definite decrease at postgraduate level in applicants for STEM subject areas, especially in Chemistry, Physics and Mathematics, in Gaeilge and in some of the Modern Foreign language subjects.

There is an expectation that the extended deadlines and additional places referred to in the Ministerial announcement will attract more applicants and that will probably be the case, however it is important to state that numbers of applicants do not equate to the number of registered students on ITE courses. The net effect of the call for more applicants remains to be seen and we will not know for definite until September 2018 what the data will reveal on that.

For those who make the decision to enter the profession and to register on an initial teacher education programme it is a big decision for most and without exception one which incurs costs, both financial and emotional. President Curtin referred to the mounting costs of being a PME student and I would like to further expand on that point and alert you to ongoing research being conducted by two TCD School of Education colleagues and I into the cost of being a PME student. Dr. Mark Prendergast, Dr. Andrew Loxley and I initiated a pilot research phase in the 2016/2017 academic year to examine and explore the real costs involved in becoming a teacher.

Since the commencement of the PME in 2014 we had observed and noted evidence of financial hardship across a significant cross-section of registered students coupled with evidence of high anxiety and high stress levels, evidence of attrition and despite the high workload of a 120 ECTS programme significantly high levels of part-time work by students (78% of the cohort) to enable them meet their financial obligations. The findings from the pilot phase indicated that of the 157 respondents, 4 indicated that they had their fees paid through SUSI (Government grant) while a further 7 indicated some other form of grant/ scholarship of varying amounts.

After payment of course fees of approximately €6000 per annum, over two years other course related expenditure, non-placement related transport costs, childcare, loan repayments, socialising and food students' mean monthly expenditure in addition to the above was **€873.12**. This covered travel to School Placement, Teaching Materials Accommodation and Utility Bills.

The second phase of the research is currently underway and we will be reporting on a wave of second phase data at the ESAI conference later

this week in which we have also captured the socio-emotional costs concomitant with the financial costs. Preliminary findings indicate that students' self-efficacy, confidence and motivation to teach is negatively impacted by ongoing financial adversity and obligations.

The evidence from the pilot phase and preliminary findings from the second phase are staggering and point to huge unsustainable financial burden on student teachers.

Once graduated, newly qualified teachers often look further than the Irish education system for guaranteed full-hours employment to earn enough money to pay off loans accrued as student teachers. It is a fact that a proportion of our students had no option but to teach out of jurisdiction to meet their financial obligations and repay their debts. They found it easier to secure full-time contracts in their respective subjects out of jurisdiction than within. They may well return to Ireland to teach in time but their immediate decision was to move jurisdiction to teach.

It seems somewhat paradoxical that on one hand we have the real issue of teacher supply in certain subjects and on the other hand we have the issue of underemployment of graduates. PME students are acutely aware of the precarious nature of teaching hours in certain subject areas post-graduation and many are disappointed that having paid huge sums of money to qualify that they may find it difficult to secure a job and when they do that it might only be minimal hours. They often refer to the value of their qualification and the usefulness of it in securing a teaching job rather than teaching hours.

When I qualified as a teacher and secured a position not only was I delighted to have secured a job which meant I would finally start earning a salary and officially commence a career but I felt validated to be

receiving a qualification allowance which rubber stamped and endorsed my professional training and identified me as a qualified teacher and as a member of a profession. The commitment to pay practising teachers qualification allowances held the profession in high esteem and conferred a unique professional identity on me and many more like me. I am of the view that the removal of that qualification allowance among other financial changes has been damaging to the professional identity of the teaching profession. Restoration of that allowance would go a long way to addressing and ameliorating some of that damage and it would send out the message that we really do value teachers in our Profession.

It would be remiss of me not to take the opportunity here today to acknowledge and to thank the many ASTI members who are mentor teachers and cooperating teachers with PME student teachers and with NQTS who have recently entered the Profession. There is an Irish seanfhocal that says: “Tá sé deacair ceann críonna a chur ar cholainn óg” and the role of the mentor teacher and cooperating teacher should not be underestimated in terms of the impact and influence it has on the development of pre-service and career entry teachers. The professionalism and commitment of mentor and cooperating teachers is to be admired and recognised as one of the most critical aspects for teacher development at early career stage.

Mar fhocal scoir;

I opened my address by referring to the motivational construct of self-efficacy. I would like to conclude on the same note. Self-efficacy stems from the intrinsic values, beliefs and dispositions we hold. Self-efficacy ebbs and flows throughout a career and at various points along the way can increase or decrease. Teachers’ perceptions of their own individual

usefulness, worth and value is enhanced by confidence, trust, acknowledgement and affirmation. Intrinsically teachers are motivated to teach their subject or subjects and there is no greater satisfaction for any teacher than when we see or recognise the learning in our students when the topic, lesson or concept we have taught is no longer new or strange to them but instead a construct they are both familiar and comfortable with and confident to discuss.

Teaching as a profession offers wonderful opportunities as a career not only in terms of teaching, learning and assessment but more importantly perhaps, the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of the students you teach. The seanfhocal : Ní thagann an óige faoi dhó” reminds me of the privileged position teachers occupy as custodians of the formative years of students in the very short timeframe of childhood and adolescence.

Guím gach rath oraibh agus ar an gComhdháil sna laethanta romhaibh agus mo bhuíochas arís as an gcuireadh labhairt libh inniu.