

# SSE UPDATE

PRIMARY SPECIAL EDITION

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## SSE – SHARING THE LEARNING



Welcome to the fourth SSE Update. This is a special issue covering a landmark event, the SSE Seminar organised by the Inspectorate and held in Malahide on 14 October. As many of you will know, it proved enormously popular and was very rapidly booked out. All the presentations and panel discussions were recorded on the day, and are now available on our SSE website, <http://schoolself-evaluation.ie/primary/index.php/sse-seminar/>.

This Update aims to give you the essence of the day: the learning that emerged from the presentations and professional conversations; the sharing of experience; and some reassuringly consistent key messages from practitioners, academics and the Inspectorate. We're delighted to say that feedback on the day was very positive.

Minister Damien English, in opening the seminar, underlined the importance of professional dialogue, and the value of exchanging learning with those who can see the possibilities and who understand the challenges.

The Chief Inspector, Dr Harold Hislop emphasised at the outset that the seminar's purpose was not to give instructions for a single perfect way to 'do' SSE. Put simply, SSE is working when it is improving the learning experience in schools. You'll find the key points of his address on page 2.

It was a great privilege to have Professor John MacBeath with us. While bringing us an international perspective on SSE, he ensured that the individual learner – whether the small child, the adolescent, or the practitioner – remained at the heart of school self-evaluation. He presented it as a very human and morally engaged activity. For an account of his address, please turn to page 3.

Four principals described their own school's unique SSE 'story so far', providing an honest and at the same time encouraging insight into the process. This sharing of experience was, appropriately, at the centre of the programme and provided the stimulus for the very rich group work that followed. The article on page 5 details the primary principals' presentations, and the outcomes of the group work are encapsulated on page 7. The day concluded with a panel discussion (see page 8), responding to questions that had arisen and consolidating some of the key messages of the day.

We hope this Update will give you a sense of the day!

**The Inspectorate School Improvement and Quality Unit**

## **THE CHIEF INSPECTOR SHARES SOME THOUGHTS ON SSE – PURPOSE, PROGRESS, AND CHALLENGES**

Participants at the SSE seminar may have been a little startled to hear that they were in the wrong place if they were looking for the one and only right way to ‘do’ SSE! But when he made this statement, the Chief Inspector was underlining what everyone there knows to be true: each school is different, and a ‘one size fits all’ approach won’t work.

He went on, however, to say something that is just as true and that provides the common ground for all schools on their different SSE journeys: all schools and all teachers want the best outcomes for the learners in their care. And the purpose of the seminar was for school leaders to share and to learn from each other’s experience, to get a sense of what progress looks like, and how challenges can be faced.

One of the benefits of getting an international perspective on school self-evaluation is the opportunity it provides for reflecting on the unique features of the Irish educational landscape. For example, external evaluation for quality assurance is part of that landscape, but it has to be balanced by internal review, in other words SSE. This is the case in Ireland because of the very high levels of trust that Irish society places in its schools. And, while both internal and external evaluation have an accountability function, crucially their common purpose is to improve the learning experience.



SSE was introduced in 2012, and we’re now just halfway through the first four-year cycle – a good point to take stock, and consider the strengths that have already emerged and the challenges that we can now see more clearly. One of the strengths is the very deliberate way that SSE focuses on teaching and learning and, most importantly, provides a language for reflecting on and sharing experience. The way that SSE gives a voice to the learner has allowed schools to tap into really valuable information about what works and what doesn’t work in the classroom. And SSE empowers schools to make and act on decisions that are soundly based and that will best meet the needs of their learners. It’s a very powerful process.

It’s also a process that brings challenges. The Chief Inspector asked participants to use the day to reflect on the challenges encountered and to share their experience of managing them. One of the early challenges that had surfaced was the over-gathering of data; what had schools learned from that experience? While teachers naturally reflect on their work, sharing those reflections can bring teachers into ‘a raw place’. However, when school leaders create a safe environment where this can happen, it opens up the possibility of really enriching professional conversations. Have any schools managed to do this, and how? And it would be very good to learn how different schools had addressed the requirement to share the SSE process with parents.

The Chief Inspector acknowledged the difficulty of introducing the cultural change inherent in the SSE process in such an unconducive financial climate. Notwithstanding that, much has already been achieved and he asked participants not only to reflect on but also to celebrate their work.

## **“WHO DARES TO TEACH MUST NEVER CEASE TO LEARN”**

### **PROFESSOR JOHN MACBEATH’S ADDRESS**

No-one who listened to John MacBeath’s words at the SSE seminar would have been in any doubt that learning, in his view, is at the heart of self-evaluation: learning as a motivating force and a conscious activity, and not simply learning as an end product. And he made it very clear that learning applies not only to pupils in our schools, but also to teachers and, in particular, to school leaders.



Professor MacBeath began by placing SSE in the context in which education now finds itself, with all the global, societal and local factors that impact on what happens in the classroom and in the 85% of children’s time that is spent out of school. We cannot meaningfully consider children’s learning and how it might be improved unless we consider this context. He gave particular weight to the changing concept of family, and to the technological environment which is native to the children we teach.

What have we learned about SSE from the international experience? Professor MacBeath singled out six key characteristics:

- A clarity of purpose and audience
- Criteria adapted to teachers’ own situation, constraints and opportunities
- Focused on what matters to key stakeholders
- A process of continuing development rather than an event
- A process of bottom-up development with top-down support
- Welcoming of the external eye

He underlined the need for education to be a reflective and morally informed activity; therefore, learning how to measure what we value is crucial. And he asked his audience to consider what were the toxins and the nutrients in their particular school environments. For example, parent pressure can have a toxic effect, but no school can be healthy without partnership with parents. Trust he described as the most important nutrient of all, echoing the Chief Inspector’s earlier observation. And positive self-image is essential if teachers and students are to develop as learners.

Professor MacBeath presented the audience with examples of what it means to “take back the meaning of good schools and good teaching from those who have misappropriated them”. He mentioned the young Scottish teacher who invited the inventor James Dyson to speak to his pupils. They asked him how long it had taken him to come up with his now-famous creation and were amazed when he told them of his 192 attempts before he succeeded. Dyson’s valuable message to the children was that these were not 192 failures but 192 opportunities to learn. The message for us? An educational system that breeds fear of failure will inhibit rather than encourage creative thinking and persistence.

Having described key aspects of context, Professor MacBeath then considered how we can best answer the essential SSE question: ‘How good is learning and teaching in our school?’ He began with three assertions: school self-evaluation improves pupils’ learning; school self-evaluation enriches the

professional lives of teachers; and teachers, as part of their daily professional lives, reflect on their work and the learning their pupils achieve.

He presented a six-level framework for reflective learning which he helped develop in Hong Kong, beginning with the experience of the learning activity itself, next recording it and making it explicit, then reflecting on the experience. The final three levels involve making the connection to prior learning and known situations, then applying this learning to new situations, and finally adapting it to new situations. He observed that most education systems are poor at enabling these final three levels of learning, even though the skills they demonstrate are highly desirable.

Professor MacBeath described two types of reflective practice: reflection-on-action, which is thinking after the event; and reflection-in-action, which is thinking while doing, and which, he suggested, is at the heart of teachers' reflective practice when observing learning. Thus the teacher constantly asks not just "what are they *doing*, but what are they *learning*, and *what am I learning, and what will I do next?* At both classroom and whole-school level, self-evaluation must be viewed as a continuing process, not an event. Improvement is seen in patterns of change, not snapshots. Professor MacBeath consistently connected reflective activity by students and reflective practice by teachers, and warmly recommended David Perkins's work on reflective routines.

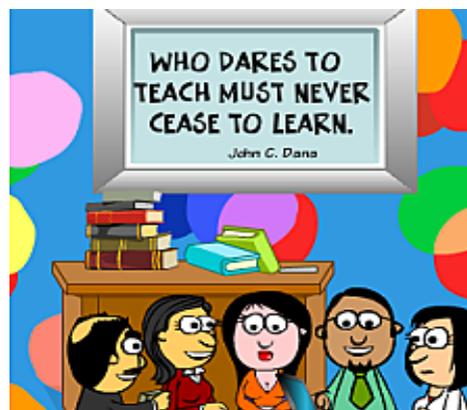
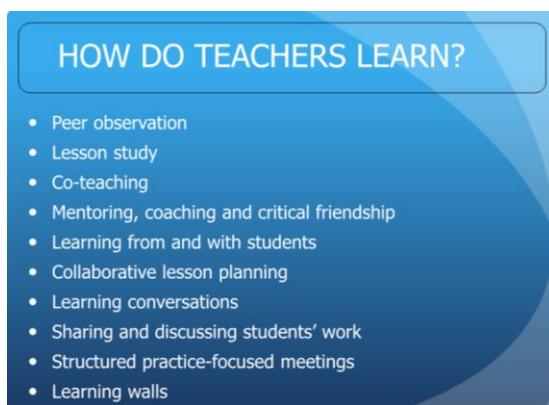
Data is for dialogue in the self-evaluation process, according to Professor MacBeath, not a static numerical accounting. Data should be gathered as a means of stimulating discussion, rethinking directions and monitoring progress. In a similar way, quality and performance indicators are often perceived as measurements or perhaps warning lights, but Professor MacBeath stated that the tin-opener provides the most useful analogy! Indicators should open up discussion, and help to reveal what is actually happening. (Schools may find this a constructive way to use the quality statements in the SSE Guidelines.)

Professor MacBeath concluded his presentation with some thoughts on leadership of the school self-evaluation process. He showed some amusing – and perceptive – illustrations by children of what head teachers do, before offering insights from a number of educationalists.

*"Leadership is exercised at the centre of the web of human relationships, not at the apex of the organisational pyramid."* (Murphy, 1996)

*"The most notable trait of great change leaders is their quest for learning. They show an exceptional willingness to push themselves out of their own comfort zones."* (Hesselbein, 1996)

School leaders must accept that change will happen at different rates for different teachers. The skill is in identifying and deploying the innovators and early adopters, allowing the momentum to build, and ensuring that those who lag behind don't prevent change. He suggested ten ways in which teachers learn, and saw the role of school leaders as creating the environment in which this crucial learning could take place.



And finally, quoting an old Spanish proverb, Professor MacBeath reasserted the uniqueness of each school's journey: "Traveller, there is no road. You make the road by walking." So concluded a sincere, thought-provoking, and quietly engaging keynote address.

## SHARING THE EXPERIENCE – PRINCIPALS SPEAK ABOUT SSE

At the seminar, four principals delivered presentations about how the school self-evaluation process, and differing aspects of this process, are having an impact in classrooms. The four principals who presented came from schools that differed greatly in pupil/student profile, enrolment, context, teaching traditions and practices. They were at one, however, in their combined enthusiasm for SSE as an improvement mechanism. The content and dynamism of these presentations can be viewed fully on the school self-evaluation website. See the link on page 1 above.

The participants found the presentations by principals of the SSE process in their particular schools, in their particular contexts, with their particular pupils were of enormous benefit. The presentations revealed the highs and lows of SSE, the triumphs, the pitfalls, the factors that made it work, the limiting and constraining factors. More than anything, the enthusiastic principals who gave an account of how SSE was working in their schools gave a real sense of the challenging reality of SSE in the day-to-day life of busy, complex schools. Below is a summary of the two primary principals' presentations.

Séamus Conboy, principal of Scoil Niamh Community National School delivered a presentation on the impact of professional collaborative review on improving pupils' learning. Professional collaborative review is a process where teachers observe learning in each other's classrooms on a planned and recorded basis, according to shared and agreed protocols. In his school, thus, professional collaborative review provides an opportunity for teachers to observe learning in other classrooms, to self-reflect on learning on their own classrooms and to engage in professional dialogue within a school culture that promotes openness in relation to best practice.



Séamus described how the system actually works and what it really looks like in the classroom. He outlined how the focus of the professional collaborative review was fully in line with the school self-evaluation process: teachers recorded their observations in respect of learning outcomes, learners' experiences and teachers' practice. The findings from the observation schedule provide one source of evidence in step two of the school self-evaluation process. Full details of the steps taken in the observation sessions, the recording process and the feedback sessions can be viewed on the on-line presentation.

Séamus outlined the particular challenges that related to professional collaborative review, those of timetabling, initial reaction of teachers, the difficulty of providing time for the feedback session and particular challenges in respect of providing constructive feedback. Notwithstanding those challenges, Séamus gave an enthusiastic account of the potential use of professional collaborative review as a powerful tool in improving teaching and learning.

Annemarie Hogan is principal of St Brigid's NS, Haddington Road. Her school encompasses a very diverse pupil profile, with many different home languages being spoken by the pupils. The school specifically focused on the self-evaluation of oral language and developed their own oral language programme that was designed to enhance the vocabulary level of the pupils.

Annemarie described how the SSE process offered a framework to the school within which they could examine teaching and learning. The school used this framework to assess how they taught oral language. They gathered a significant amount of evidence, using, in part, findings from Drumcondra standardised tests, and identified that some areas of language needed to be explicitly taught. Annemarie indicated that success was measured on the basis of the examination of pupils' work

samples, their test scores, their interest and enthusiasm. Children's ability to write poetry was found to be a good measure of language use.



The reasons why this particular approach within SSE worked were multi-fold: teachers had high expectations, pupils encouraged each other, teachers shared knowledge, they learned from each other, they spread contagious energy!! A number of clear lessons were learned as a result of the SSE process, including the conclusions that it was better to start with a focus on a specific area, and look at all the evidence, not just standardised test scores.

The four schools took different approaches to SSE. This reflects the uniqueness of each school context. There are some central messages, however, that relate to all the schools. There is a need to focus on simple actions and to be prepared for disappointments, surprises and setbacks as well as joys and triumphs. In all contexts, a central message prevails: enthusiastic teachers working collaboratively can achieve a lot. SSE works best when the focus is on children's progress and on teaching methodologies and when it is part of the daily process of teaching and learning that is instituted by every teacher in every class every day.

## LEARNING FROM EACH OTHER- GROUP WORK SESSION

The opportunity to share their personal experiences of the SSE process with colleagues was valued by the participants, and they engaged enthusiastically in the group sessions. The discussions focused on four key questions. “What worked well?” “What challenges were encountered?” “What might you do differently?” “What further supports are required?”

**What worked well?** Schools’ engagement in the SSE process was perceived very positively, “the SSE process has provided direction to the school” “SSE works”. It is evident that engagement in the SSE process resulted in enhanced professional collaboration among staff and increased reflective practice. Among the comments noted were “Encouraged dialogue....very positive experience of working together...agent of collaboration....structured reflective practice.....unleashed significant experimentation and trialling of new practices... focused conversations....conversations changed...

The input from parents and pupils was also identified as a positive “talking with parents was very useful....survey of parents gave very positive feedback and also some new information...focus groups with pupils – lots of information gleaned...student voice was most informative”. Teachers shared strategies that they utilised in addressing their prioritised areas for development and also discussed their approaches to gathering and analysing evidence. These included the setting up of SSE committees, appointment of link persons, use of DEIS templates, instruments to assist in surveys, data collection and analysis. The materials available on the SSE website and support provided by PDST along with individual teacher expertise and subject department collaboration were seen as assisting schools to engage meaningfully in the process.



**“What challenges were encountered?”** Sustaining momentum in SSE and implementing the School Improvement Plan (SIP) were identified as major challenges. Difficulties around collecting and analysing data were also discussed, as was the need for increased support for schools engaging in the process and the time needed to ensure meaningful engagement. Some participants identified the pressure of overload and the fact that they were implementing too many initiatives as a challenge to the successful implantation of SSE in their schools. Others felt that there is a need to clarify the SSE message. The setting of specific targets and the communication of the SIP were recognised as challenges by a few participants.

**“What might you do differently?”** Having heard the input from Professor MacBeath and the presentations of the four principals along with reflecting on their engagement with SSE, participants identified practices that they might do differently. Many stated that they would use a different approach or strategy e.g. use progress reports as a source of evidence, experiment with peer observation, take the context of the school into consideration. They would also gather less evidence, keep it simple and be realistic about timelines.

**“What further supports are required?”** The majority of participants expressed a need for more training to be provided to schools and individuals, particularly in the area of data handling, assessment, and tools to gather evidence. The lifting of the moratorium on posts of responsibility, so that responsibility for leading SSE could be assigned to a designated person, along with increased

time allocation, were also identified as being highly desirable. Opportunities for schools to work together was also suggested as a means of progressing SSE in schools.

## **CONSOLIDATING THE LEARNING – PANEL DISCUSSION**



The panel: Dr Harold Hislop, Chief Inspector; Máire Ní Bhróithe, Principal of Ratoath College; Treasa Lowe, Principal of Scoil Choilm, Dublin 15; Dr Gerry MacRuairc, Education Department, UCD; Anne Marie Brosnan, Principal of Sacred Heart School Clonakilty; Dr Deirdre Mathews, Assistant Chief Inspector; Annemarie Hogan, Principal of St Brigid's School, Dublin 4

A number of questions arising from the group workshops were posed to the panel. Among the issues discussed were the SSE process, SSE as a tool for improvement, leadership and SSE, SSE as an integral part of the work of the school and not as a new initiative, the work involved in SSE and teacher overload, improvement versus accountability, publication of school self-evaluation reports and improvement plans, and the capacity of schools to use data.

Each principal spoke of the benefits of engaging in the process, the professional conversations that have resulted from engagement, the sharing of practice, the collaboration with parents and pupils, the focus on the learner. Arising from their own experiences they reiterated the need to keep it simple, taking time to embed the process in the culture of the school, making it relevant to teachers and pupils. They agreed on the importance of celebrating each success, no matter how small.

Gerry MacRuairc spoke of the need to build capacity for data handling in schools to avoid an over-emphasis on the use of standardised test results. He also emphasised the need to keep your school context in mind as you engage in the process, making self-evaluation an integral part of what we do in schools and not a stand-alone initiative.

Harold Hislop and Deirdre Mathews affirmed the benefits of the professional conversations which are featuring in schools, and strongly endorsed the view that SSE be seen, not as an extra job, but as the conduit for any initiative which has school improvement at its core.

The Chief Inspector referred to the need for posts of responsibility to be focused on SSE and curriculum leadership roles to support the effective implementation of the process. He also responded to a concern that the SSE process was really an exercise in accountability, and reiterated the Inspectorate's commitment to supporting SSE as, first and foremost, a school improvement process. However, at the same time he emphasised the importance of being open with your school community, and said that SSE reports and improvement plans offered a very good opportunity to enhance partnership with parents.

Deputy Chief Inspector Gary Ó Donnchadha concluded the seminar, recapitulating the key learning from the day: work within the unique context of your school, adapting the criteria so that SSE is rooted in the reality you know; build on your existing strengths so that SSE can grow successfully; and harness the power of professional collaboration to improve learning. He thanked the principals who had shared their learning so generously, and reaffirmed the Department's commitment to the SSE process, and to supporting principals as leaders of the process.