SSE UPDATE

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SSE – THE NEXT CYCLE

Welcome to issue seven of SSE Update, the e-bulletin for post-primary schools. The Update hopes to assist you in your continuing engagement with school self-evaluation as a way of supporting school improvement.

It may be worth your while to take a glance at previous editions if you haven't encountered them before. Previous SSE Updates can be accessed on the school self-evaluation website at http://schoolself-evaluation.ie/post-primary/index.php/sse-newsletter/. Topics which have been dealt with in the past include: Using SSE to support the implementation of the _Framework for Junior Cycle (2015)_ – Key Skills and the Statements of Learning; Target-setting in the school self-evaluation (SSE) process; DEIS action planning and SSE; and preparing the SSE report, among others.

In this issue we'll be examining a number of developments in school self-evaluation, including the move to the next cycle of implementation of school self-evaluation in the period 2016-2020. In particular we'll examine how the SSE process can support subject departments to develop their planning for the new junior cycle curriculum and new subject specifications. These new specifications are based on learning outcomes and incorporate the knowledge and key skills around which the new curriculum is organised.

We'll also be looking at the continued growth of a culture of inquiry in post-primary schools through a meaningful and manageable SSE process.

Finally, the Update gives some information about the new SSE circular which covers the period 2016-2020, and the supports that will be available to assist its implementation.

As the end of the school year comes into sight we hope you've had a professionally rewarding and productive year. Moving into the next phase of school self-evaluation we look forward to continuing to learn from your experiences and insights as teachers and school leaders!

<div align="right">The Inspectorate School Improvement and Quality Unit</div>

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School Self-Evaluation 2016-2020 – The Next Cycle

The first cycle of school self-evaluation will finish at the end of this school year. In 2012, schools all over the country began to engage with this new process and the various aspects that needed to be addressed. At this stage, it's worthwhile taking a moment to reflect on the journey so far.

Over the past four years you have developed and implemented school improvement plans (SIPs) for literacy, numeracy, and an aspect of teaching and learning you selected yourselves. Of course, schools are at different stages of development, with some schools steaming ahead, while others are taking longer to get to grips with all that self-evaluation involves.

Even if the SSE process is not as well embedded in your school as you would like at the end of the first cycle, don't let this discourage you from continuing with your improvement plans. The most important thing to keep in mind and to work on are the changes in practice you've identified to achieve better learning outcomes for students.

Perhaps one of the most useful things schools have learned through their engagement with SSE has been the importance of using evidence to find out how they are doing and where they need to do better. Setting targets has been more challenging for many schools, although as time goes on this too will become more natural and meaningful.

When looking at the third area of focus over the past year or two, more schools have come to realise that targets do not have be expressed as percentages or as outcomes that can be precisely measured in a numeric way. This knowledge should free up schools to look at areas they might have stayed away from up till now, because they felt that the criteria for success could not be measured in hard figures.

The second cycle of SSE will start in September 2016 and will last till the end of the school year in 2020. Because of this timeframe, it would make sense to use the process to assist you in introducing the *Framework for Junior Cycle* (2015). The article on page 3 suggests an approach that subject departments could take when looking at their own practice in the light of the *Framework*.

A new Circular will issue before the start of the new cycle, explaining what schools need to do over the next four years. The SSE *Guidelines* are being revised to assist schools as they embark on the new SSE cycle. Crucially, they will underline a continuing focus on teaching and learning.

You may recall the quality framework for teaching and learning in the SSE Guidelines (2012). The revised *Guidelines* contain a more streamlined quality framework which will enable schools to evaluate their practice against clearly-stated standards.

Paperwork and documentation are not what SSE is about. SSE is all about implementing changes in practice that lead to improvement. In other words, what happens in classrooms is the important thing, not what is produced in a document or written plan. To emphasise this, simplified and more user-friendly templates will be available online for schools who wish to use them.

Schools should ensure that parents and the school community are informed of the SSE process. A summary of the SSE report and SIP should be made available. For the second cycle, a much simpler template will be available for schools to use to provide this information in an easy and accessible way to the school community.

SSE is the school's own process. Therefore, the second cycle will give you more flexibility in deciding how you will focus and pace the process in your school. In the next issue of SSE Update, we will have more detail on the new SSE Circular, the revised SSE Guidelines and the more streamlined SSE templates.

Using SSE to Support Subject Department Planning for the new Junior Cycle

When considering an SSE approach for your subject department in relation to the new junior cycle it is important to remember that SSE and junior cycle share a common focus – improving teaching and learning for our students. The educationalist Helen Timperley has highlighted the need to remember this during the introduction of any new curriculum. She suggests:

Although what is 'new' might be the impetus for engaging in professional learning, it still needs to be examined in terms of the difference it is to make to students. What are the student engagement and learning issues that will be met through the introduction of the new curriculum? How will it be different for students than what happened before? By starting with students, their needs are kept to the forefront with the rationale for their learning retained

All of the new subject specifications for junior cycle will have the key skills of junior cycle embedded in their learning outcomes. This means that the most relevant skills in the context of the particular subject will be brought to the fore. But subject departments where new specifications are not yet determined will also be able to integrate the development of key skills and the building of subject-specific knowledge as they plan their teaching and learning practices.

With this in mind, you can use an SSE approach to support your subject department improvement planning for the new curriculum. Your plan can link into whole-school improvement in areas like, for example, key skills or formative assessment, while taking into account specific aspects of teaching and learning most relevant to your subject.

Investigate

The first step in self-evaluation in your subject department is to **identify** an area of focus and inquiry based on your own understanding and knowledge of your school context. In examining your practice as a subject department and potential outcomes for your students a good place to begin is by scanning the *School Self-Evaluation Guidelines*. Of course *Learner outcomes* are at the core of the business of any subject department, so this part of the guidelines could be a good place to start.

How are your students currently performing with regard to the *Learner outcomes* in the guidelines? How might this change with the new curriculum and specifications? What learner outcomes are worth investigating a little more? For example, does any one of the following make sense as an area in which to gather evidence in your subject area?

- *The students have an appropriate knowledge and understanding of the subject or programme*
- *The students' subject-specific skills are developed in accordance with the learning outcomes*
- *Students use their skills and knowledge competently*

You'll need to **gather evidence** about 'how we are doing' in your chosen area. This can be accomplished through a range of approaches that shouldn't be too time-consuming. For example, members of your department could undertake classroom observation of their students, you could organize a departmental review of student project work, or you could meet with focus groups of students asking them about their learning.

But that is not the end of the investigation phase – if there are learner outcomes that could be improved, what needs to change in classrooms to improve them?

Here, scanning the areas dealing with teachers' practice would be worthwhile. What makes sense to investigate a little more in the context of what has already been learned?

If students display limited awareness of the key skill *Working with Others*, for example, you might investigate approaches to collaborative and co-operative learning. A focus group discussion on this area within your department might be useful. Classroom observation by a peer, or self-reflection, could also serve to aid thinking and dialogue on how things might be improved. Based on the

evidence gathered you can now **analyse your evidence and make a judgement** about the quality of current practice in your department. You can also begin to plan for how practice might be improved.

Write the plan and put it into action

The main focus of school self-evaluation is to use evidence about student learning to improve teaching and learning. This might sound obvious, but without adjustments to teaching in classrooms, it is unlikely student learning will improve. Consequently it is important for your subject department to record decisions made and set out a brief, clear **record of the findings of your investigation** and a **plan** for how the decided upon improvements in practice will be implemented and monitored over time.


When setting out a departmental improvement plan as either a subject-specific document or linked to an overarching whole-school plan, enhancing professional knowledge with expert assistance will of course be important. The Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT) support service has numerous modes of CPD that will prove very beneficial in this area. This can be accessed at www.jct.ie. Another useful resource can be accessed through the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) website at www.curriculumonline.ie.

Monitor actions and evaluate impacts

Over time, where a need for improvement has been identified, planned for and acted upon, your students will benefit and this will be reflected in the relevant learner outcomes. This will not be immediate – Rome wasn't built in a day! But it is the discussions that ensue between colleagues about how things are going that will advance everybody's learning over time.

The SSE process allows for time for new practice to embed and become a part of 'the way we do things in our department'. To support this it is important that monitoring of the changes in practice and student outcomes be included in the plan. This might be done through scheduled discussion of progress at your subject department meetings, teacher self-reflection sheets, student self-reflection and feedback, and peer observation – just to name a few possibilities.

The monitoring process should, importantly, be used to celebrate advances in learning that are observed. This is vital. Alongside this, the challenges that ensue are a very important part of what should be respectful, but challenging, evidence-based conversations between colleagues. At its core, SSE is about learning for everyone – teachers and students – which is embodied through practice that will make a difference for your students.
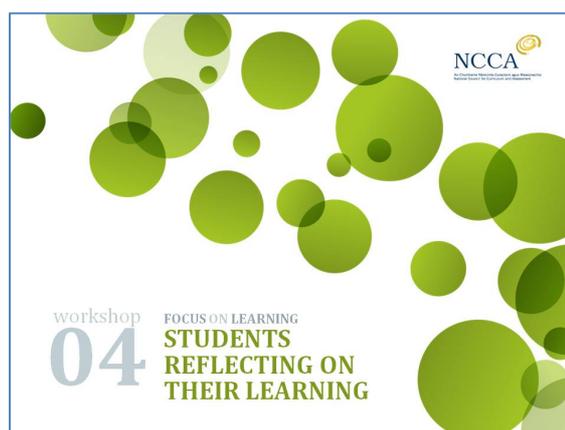
Knowledge is deepened through trying things out in practice
Helen Timperley, 2011

An Inquiry Habit of Mind: Manageable, Meaningful and Motivating SSE

Data do not provide right answers or quick fixes. Instead, they are necessary, but not sufficient, elements of the conversations that ensue … they are a necessary part of an ongoing process of analysis, insight, new learning, and changes in practice

- Earl and Katz, 2006

As we move towards the next phase of school self-evaluation it's a good idea to take time to look back on how the development of a self-evaluation culture in your school or subject department has progressed. After all, self-evaluation is all about professional learning and reflection.

In the last four years you will probably have gained valuable insights into the process of evidence-based action planning for improvement. In particular, many schools have learned about data-gathering – the advantages and the pitfalls! Often, principals and teachers have talked to us about initial mistakes in collecting too much data.

As the process has developed, you may have refined your approach to data-gathering to ensure that good, manageable information is gathered that gives a clear view of teaching and learning in your school. In one County Dublin school, the use of different tools for different purposes has been part of their learning about effective self-evaluation:

We already had people running surveys … that's quantitative, you're getting facts, you're getting figures. But … I'm really into the stories … qualitative information and the experience … and how you can learn from just sharing this information … I started by just sitting with the students … an informal focus group style. We've done things like photo stories … if they were discussing their school environment, they went out and photographed their examples. We used things like … game-orientated surveys on Kahoot … live projected on the screen so their answers are happening in real time … they're getting facts and figures, but they're also seeing what other people are saying

- *Co. Dublin Teacher*

What is particularly enticing about the sort of approaches used in this school is that the key partners in the school community – the students – are being directly involved in a conversation about their learning. The most powerful resource in linking with the home is being activated – the students themselves! The SSE report is another means of sharing the findings of the SSE process with all members of the school community. It serves as a mechanism to highlight that everyone can help in improving learning – students, teachers and parents. It is also an important way for your school to tell, and celebrate, its own story.

As highlighted by this teacher, the process of data-gathering can sometimes lead to more questions about what is really going on! Quantitative information regarding a particular area can lead to a 'digging down' to find out what is happening beneath what was surfaced in an initial survey or analysis of results. This can be done through focus groups and other qualitative approaches where the voices of students, teachers or parents can be heard in greater detail.

The *School Self-Evaluation Guidelines* highlight this aspect of SSE as 'it facilitates repeated cycles of analysis or a return to a previous stage of the cycle as required'. This doesn't only suggest 'digging deeper' as part of one cycle of SSE. It also highlights the possibility of returning to the same area to further refine practice following an initial cycle of SSE. It is this constant search for areas of practice to improve that lies at the heart of schools having what Earl and Timperley (2008) describe as an 'inquiry habit of mind'.

Another aspect of schools' experience has been a growing awareness of the need to avoid what have been described as 'activity traps' (Katz, Earl & Jaafar, 2006). We all know that SSE is really

about improving practice in the classroom through the effective use of data. But sometimes there is a temptation to do things that are not necessarily linked to the data which has been gathered - to 'get on with it'. The careful consideration of data and what it suggests as the next steps in improving practice is a key part of making a successful SSE process.

Perhaps the most important aspect of SSE that has been highlighted for us by teachers and schools is the learning it has engendered. This learning has not just touched on students' experiences in the classroom, but teachers' as well. The teacher quoted earlier summed up this approach to professional practice well:

We are still learners. As teachers we are learners. I learn every day and I try to reflect on my learning and that affects my teaching.

With this in mind, it's important to recognize that part of how anything new is learned in teaching is through implementing it. Every school context is different, so deep learning about practice comes, not from uniformly, unthinkingly following a 'tick the box' approach. It is from the consideration of adjustments to practice and their impact on student outcomes. This is the monitoring and evaluation side of the SSE coin. It is key to ensuring a manageable, meaningful, and motivating SSE process for everyone in your school community.

Learning is like rowing against the tide. Once you stop doing it, you drift back

-Benjamin Britten

Supports for SSE 2016-2020

- A new Circular will issue in June 2016 to set out the requirements for school self-evaluation, 2016-2020.

- Revised SSE *Guidelines* will also be published in June.

- A revised quality framework will be included in the *Guidelines*.

- Revised templates for schools to use for SSE reports and improvement plans will be available on our SSE website, www.schoolself-evaluation.ie. These will include a simplified report and plan which you can use when communicating with parents and your school community.

- The SSE website has an increasing amount of video material from schools, giving an insight into key aspects of SSE practice. The website is being redesigned to make content more accessible and relevant, following a survey of a sample of schools which have used it. All SSE materials for 2016-2020 will be published on the website.

- We will continue to publish the SSE Update, making it more of an e-zine to provide you with options on the level of detail you can engage with, and providing better links to other relevant resources and materials.