3 PLY – Exploring the potential for transformative workplace learning for and by teachers

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Executive Summary

In the context of changes to the educational settlement (Vickers 2008) and an increasing overlap of education and work, this research project concerns the learning that happens on the part of teachers and students 'around' workplace learning initiatives associated with the senior years of second level schooling across the island of Ireland. The researchers were based in the School of Education Studies at Dublin City University and the School of Education at the University of Ulster.

The field research was undertaken in two schools in the Republic of Ireland and four schools in Northern Ireland during the period between September and November 2013. Further data was generated by way of desktop research of policy documents and extant research, and through the circulation of online surveys with the support of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors in the Republic of Ireland and the Northern Ireland Schools' Careers Association.

The central research questions asked:

- How do teachers conceptualize the work experience and/or part-time work activities of students as part of the senior school curriculum in each jurisdiction?
- How embedded is workplace learning into any careers programme and across school subjects?
- To what extent does the learning generated in and through the organization, delivery and experience of workplace learning of students diffuse throughout the broader school setting? How does this happen?
- Does it make a difference who arranges the workplace learning experience (that is, school organized or organized by the student, or occurring within a part-time job)?

Given the limitations of space, the findings are not presented in this Executive Summary and can be found in the body of the report.

Chapter One: Framing our Interest

This project involved a pilot of one dimension of a proposed larger project that would explore the limits and possibilities for meaningful workplace learning for young people to support their transition to sustainable employment in a recessionary post-Global Financial Crisis (GFC) context. By workplace learning, we refer to 'the opportunity for planned and appropriate experiences of the world of work to increase learner's motivation, develop their employability skills and give relevance to their learning programme' (Department of Education and Department for Employment and Learning 2009). We prefer the term 'workplace learning' as opposed to the term 'workbased learning' with which it is also often used interchangeably: our intention is to underscore our interest in learning that happens in a real workplace rather than learning that might happen in schools or in simulated workplaces while targeted at future work endeavours. Whatever the nomenclature, whilst there may be agreement that the defining feature of such initiatives in second or third level education is that work is the vehicle through which learning will occur, the degree to which learning needs to be or can become more integrated, experiential and cross-disciplinary is not fully understood and may even be contested (Nixon, Smith et al. 2006).

The aim of our research was to test our theory that, in the context of what has been argued to be a new educational settlement (Vickers 2008) the transformative possibilities for workplace learning for students are created, or not, by the learning ethos – the affordances (Billett 2001) – of the workplaces in which they engage as part of their studies. This learning ethos is in part created by the presence of students in the workplace. Attention, or lack of it, to the possibilities of this learning assemblage is in itself framed by the learning affordances of schools. The project acronym – 3 PLY – relates to the idea that the three strands of learning: by young people, by their teachers, by workers in workplace learning sites, must be interwoven for the benefits of workplace learning to be realized.

The importance of the project lies in the broader socio-economic context. There is little argument around the perilous position of young people in transition from the senior years of education to first-time employment in the context that has evolved in the wake of the 2008-2009 GFC (O'Higgins 2012; OECD 2011b; Scarpetta, Sonnet et al. 2010). The youth unemployment rate, always higher than adult unemployment rates, has soared. Young people entering this labour market now have to compete for limited employment opportunities with employees who have stores of work experience – and employability skills – gained through prior employment. As such, prior workplace learning has an increasingly important role to play. Yet as Jeffers (2006) notes, the various workplace learning programmes associated with the school curriculum frequently demonstrate very limited learning opportunities. Our thesis was that teachers have a central, but perhaps underappreciated, role to play if workplace learning is to support students in their transition into, and through, this labour market. Students must be provided with opportunities to gain experience, build their employability skills and *demonstrate the ability to work and learn at the same time*, a key attribute for the 21st century labour market (Hodgson and Spours 2001). Hence the value of workplace learning whether it is through formal work placement arrangements with a clear educational focus, or through part time work or helping in a family business. At this point it is helpful to explore more deeply the idea of a new educational settlement before moving to explore the idea of the kinds of skills that are learnt through engagement in work, either paid or unpaid.

Context: A New Educational Settlement?

For the purposes of this research, we have taken up Vickers (2008) work on educational settlements to explore the current interface of school and employment for senior school students. An educational settlement is an agreement – reached after a period of negotiation by all stakeholders – about the taken-for-granted or dominant ways that things should be done in education: what subjects should be taught, how much choice students should have in what they study, how performance will be assessed, and so on. The agreement is accepted as legitimate by most stakeholders: governments who fund education, students and teachers who are the subjects of educational policy, and parents and employers who are the beneficiaries of the outputs of the education system. The dominant educational settlement since the 1970s has been framed on an understanding that almost all young people will now complete the senior years of school before progressing to employment, or third level education of some form. However in the context of globalization, this settlement is now under pressure. Pathways now overlap: it is suggested that the majority of young people now work while still at school. There is a drive to start working before completing school through involvement in the consumer-oriented society (Bauman 2007). For other students, the driver for combining work and study reflects a more immediate material need as paid work provides a means to contribute to family income or to education costs that fall outside those provided 'free' in the 'cost shifting' neoliberal educational context (Bond 2009).

This shift has forced governments and policy makers to look again at the purpose of education and what is required to equip students with the skills, understanding and confidence they will need in their working lives which will involve working and learning *at the same time*. In developed Western countries at least, the boundaries between school and work are argued to be blurring: many young people are now combining work and school (Hoffman 2011). Such combinations demand a new series of 'agreements' – a new educational settlement – about where learning can take place, who can be a 'teacher', how learning opportunities can be assessed and how conflicting notions of school-time and industry-time might be reconciled. What might be the learning possibilities for the workplaces in which young people increasingly involve themselves as workers – either paid or unpaid? How can students be supported in managing the tensions between these sites? How can teachers be supported in integrating these learning opportunities into achievement of second level qualifications? How can employees be supported in learning with – and through – young people? And how can we ensure all young people get access to workplace learning sites that 'afford' learning? Work in both Australia (Australian National Schools Network 2008) and Canada (Taylor, Lekes et al. 2012) underscores the need for a whole-of-community approach where employers work with schools, parents and students in maximizing the benefits of workplace learning and ensuring that the practical demands of conflicting schedules are managed at a structural level.

Workplace Learning and Employability Skills

Social theories of learning in the workplace locate learning in social participation and dialogue (Siebert, Mills et al. 2009). In contrast to the behaviourist and cognitive theorists who concentrate on the kind of individual learning particularly emphasized in the senior years of school with their competitive examinations process, social theories of learning concentrate on the voluntary communities of practice that form around the pursuit of excellence in various forms of shared enterprise (Lave and Wenger 1991).

The ability to engage with such communities would enhance the learning experience of any student in the process of workplace learning. At the same time, the notion that such communities would be formed by teachers involved in some way with the workplace learning of students in their school would also have a role in enhancing the learning that could be drawn from workplace learning.

A key outcome of workplace learning for students based in senior school settings is the development of 'employability skills': a international policy concept in the face of less predictable labour markets in the globalized context (Bauman 1998; Beck 1992). Employability skills are variously defined, and various named, but generally centre around what are seen as 'soft' generic skills such as literacy (including digital literacy), teamwork, communication, problem-solving, creativity and so on that support the ability to respond to rapidly changing workplace requirements (Scarpetta and Sonnett 2012). Employability skills are suggested to contribute to improved labour market outcomes at the individual level and to societal benefits in terms of enhanced potential for productivity and economic growth. However, workplace learning opportunities also offer the chance for 'hard' technical skills relating to practical training on specialized equipment with experts (OECD 2011a). Workplace learning initiatives also benefit employers by providing the opportunity to see potential future employees in context, potentially reducing recruitment costs (OECD 2011a).

Krahn, Lowe and Lehmann (2002: 276) suggest that two untested assumptions underpin the employability skills discourse. The first assumption is that young people are deficit in employability skills largely because the second level school sector does not directly emphasize these skills as part of the curriculum while, at the same time, students fail to see the central relevance of the academic curriculum for long-term employability. The second assumption is that students themselves have a limited awareness of the skills required in the workplace. Their research of over 2,500 students demonstrated that most students did not recognize school as the source of employability skills: they linked 'people and social skills' to paid and voluntary work they were involved in. Job preparation skills were seen to be a product of formal work experience programmes. For the authors, a key implication is the need for enhanced communication between all stakeholders (schools, employers and community) in enabling the acquisition of a wide range of competencies at the same time (Krahn, Lowe et al. 2002).

These writers argue that, given the dominance of this policy discourse, there is a need for systemic evaluation to determine whether the stakeholder groups 'implicated in the employability skills debate' have a shared understanding of the concept and the issues associated with the acquisition of employability skills. This call for an increased understanding of the limits and possibilities of employability skills and how they can be generated by way of involvement in opportunities that combine work and learning before young people leave the second level system (Scarpetta and Sonnett 2012) is one that we would share. This research aims to make a contribution to this issue by surveying how teachers were prepared for, imagined and maximised the learning possibilities within student workplace learning. In providing context, an overview is provided of the underpinning policy contexts that support workplace learning across the senior years of education on the island of Ireland.

Workplace learning and the senior school syllabus in Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland since 2007, the curriculum has set out eight general Areas of Learning for Key Stages 3 (age 11 to 14) and 4 (ages 14 to 16). In the senior years,

students study towards Advanced Level examinations; students also study Learning for Life and Work (LLW), a programme that embraces employability skills, personal development, and local and global citizenship (Eurydice 2009). The Careers Service for schools within the Department of Employment and Learning is expected to offer students of all ages careers information and advice through professional Careers Advisers. Each school has a designated Adviser who ideally would see a student on a maximum of two occasions a year. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that, with limited resourcing, the priority will be given to school leavers and students might engage with a Careers Adviser in a class setting rather than on an individual basis.

As part of the Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance strategy (Department of Education and Department for Employment and Learning 2009) , careers advice and guidance is provided to allow considered career choices and decisions, as well as an increased understanding of how knowledge and skills can be applied. Careers Education in Northern Ireland is defined as enabling learners to manage their career development, make informed choices, and make successful transitions into education, training or employment. It is time-tabled, allows cross-curricular opportunities to foster employability skills, and makes provision for appropriate workplace learning experiences (Department of Education and Department for Employment and Learning 2009: 4). The intention is that the young person takes responsibility for careers choice but with the support of a range of stakeholders including but not limited to school management, parents or carers and local industry.

The strategy specifically defines employability skills as the 'capabilities, attributes and dispositions that will allow a learner to be employable, to sustain employment and to become a lifelong learner in the world of work' (Department of Education and Department for Employment and Learning 2009: 4). In support of this, 'work-related learning' in Northern Ireland refers to planned visits to workplaces to motivate students, to expand their employability skills, and enable them to see relevance to their learning, possibly extending this across the curriculum. However, there is no mandatory, formal training for qualified teachers who take on this role. The Northern Ireland Assembly (2013) Hansard reported Mark Devenney's comments (citing the Northern Ireland Schools and Colleges Careers Association (NICSCA)) that only 32 per cent of teachers have a specialist qualification. Moreover, many have no interest in teaching in this realm and regard it as an 'add-on'.

> *I have come across careers teachers in schools many times who were basically [lumbered] with a careers portfolio … It is scandalous that this is happening; it would not happen with any other subject. (Northern Ireland Assembly 2013: 5)*

Earlier research suggests that there has been notable difference in provision of workplace learning opportunities between academically focused grammar schools and the more vocationally oriented secondary schools in Northern Ireland (Department of Education 2004). The timing of workplace learning has also differed between selective (grammar) and non-selective (secondary) schools with the former very largely doing this in Year 13, the latter in Year 12. No selective schools arranged work experience in Year 14, although almost half the non-selective schools did so. Job shadowing was more prevalent in grammar than in secondary schools. Year 12 pupils felt more prepared with better follow-up than those in Year 14, but most found workplace learning placements to be interesting and relevant. Although almost all schools required pupils to write a report on workplace learning placements, less than half of such reports were assessed and returned to students.

Workplace Learning and the senior school syllabus in the Republic of Ireland

The senior school curriculum in the Republic of Ireland currently comprises a three-year Junior Cycle starting at age 12 followed by a three-year Senior Cycle leading to one of a number of Leaving Certificate qualifications (the Established Leaving Certificate, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme, and the Leaving Certificate Applied). Each of these has some degree of opportunity for workplace learning. The first year of the Senior Cycle is a nominally optional non-examination Transition Year. However Transition Year is 'commonly conceived of as being more akin to a "gap year" between the junior and senior examination cycles' (Clerkin 2013: 197).

Transition Year first appeared in 1974, with little uptake for 20 years (Jeffers 2011). There was increased participation from 1994 as a result of financial incentives and practical supports being put in place (in 2008 the €100 per capita grant for Transition Year students was withdrawn before being reinstated, albeit at a lower rate of €95 per student). Whilst Jeffers' findings showed some ambivalence in the community with Transition Year being 'embraced and resisted simultaneously' (2011: 70-1), there has been consistent growth in the take up of the opportunity (Clerkin 2013) and consensus among stakeholders that it 'contributes to increased maturity, greater confidence, and more social competence and social awareness': students who complete Transition Year generally also experience a positive impact on subsequent academic performance (Clerkin 2012). Jeffers (2011) suggests these gains in maturity, confidence and so on could be attributed to learning experiences beyond the classroom.

By design, and in the perception of the teachers we spoke to, Transition Year is where workplace learning in second level curriculum in the Republic of Ireland has its true home. Various approaches are adopted: in some schools Transition Year students spend a day every week in the workplaces they have chosen; other schools adopt a block approach with students spending two one-week, or one two-week period in a workplace. Both approaches were argued by our respondents to have value: weekly placements allowed a cycle of work over the year to be experienced; block sessions allowed in-depth understanding of a particular aspect of work to be gained. While this research was focused on workplace learning more broadly, we found interviews in the Republic of Ireland became a conversation about Transition Year. As in the North, the type of school does make a difference in terms of the form and timing of workplace learning opportunities. Clerkin (2013) suggests that schools designated as disadvantaged were comparatively less likely to offer Transition Year however, in the recessionary context in Ireland, many schools were finding their provision compromised given staffing reductions and cuts to funding across the education sector. Students who do not have Transition Year as an option, or who choose not to take the option, can still access some level of workplace learning through involvement in the Leaving Certificate Applied or Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme both of which have a strong vocational emphasis.

The Republic of Ireland does not have a Careers Service that is equivalent to the North. Rather, careers advice is provided through in-school guidance counsellors. Guidance counsellors are teachers who are professionally qualified at tertiary level (equivalent to one year full-time postgraduate study) for a full-time, multi-faceted role with their professional body being the Institute of Guidance Counsellors. Counselling forms a major element of the school guidance programme; this may be personal, educational or career counselling or a combination of these (NCGE 2004: 21); these staff may also have a significant role in the co-ordination of workplace learning. Depending on the staff configuration in a given school, guidance counsellors can know

students well, potentially meeting fortnightly along with other key personnel in the arena of guidance and support. Government policy places responsibility for careers advice on the Board of Management and school management team, guidance counsellors, subject teachers and any Transition Year Co-ordinator, the students themselves and the local community (embracing numerous agencies and organizations that provide resources and training) (NCGE 2004: 20-1).

Chapter Two: Selected literature review

International perspectives on workplace learning

For Jeffers (2006) – writing in the Republic – workplace learning that is undertaken by students often permits only limited learning opportunities. Similarly, in Northern Ireland, McGonagle found that while workplace learning has the potential to be a valuable learning experience, many actors exist within such a programme, each with different roles and each enacting that role with particular consequence:

> *What becomes clear is that all students will not necessarily achieve the same benefits. This does not devalue the work experience programme, instead it perhaps reflects the need to ensure that students are fully prepared before, monitored during and debriefed after the work placement.* (McGonagle 2006: 78)

Yet internationally it is acknowledged that, in the globalized context, workplace learning has a significant role to play. The OECD argues that it is necessary for *all* stakeholders – rather than only students – to be trained and prepared for the full process of workplace learning (Scarpetta and Sonnett 2012). Putting aside preliminary processes of any legal consents and risk management processes involved in students entering work settings, preparation should begin with staff building readiness in the student and the workplace setting by identifying the purpose, expected outcomes, and roles and responsibilities related to the workplace learning both in, and after, the placement. The Western Education and Library Board (2002)[1] suggests that a school's role in regard to workplace learning means close monitoring of the pupils (whether on block placement or day release). This includes provision for live assessment of learning either by teachers or by industry-recognized workplace assessors[2] [3]. Huddleston (2012: 70) highlights that this is a 'significant undertaking and involves a set of complex relationships between students, parents/carers, teacher, employers … essentially … a shared enterprise.' While there is an obvious difference in scale, the parallels with the detailed guidelines on school placement published, for instance, by the Teaching Council in the Republic of Ireland offer a template. These guidelines go to great detail to emphasize that 'a well-managed school placement is mutually enriching for learners, student teachers, co-operating teachers, the wider school community and HEIs' (The Teaching Council 2013: 9).

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[1] One of five Boards in Northern Ireland with statutory responsibility for education.

[2] Some interviewees in the Republic mentioned the reform process of the Junior Cycle in Ireland as an opportunity that would open possibilities for enhanced workplace learning by school students at all levels. In large part, this concerns the move towards internal assessment which opens up these kinds of opportunities. However, they also noted the work that would need to be done to overcome resistance by some teachers with one respondent noting that the '*ultimate insult'* for opponents of reform was that Junior Cycle would become '*three years of Transition Year*.'

[3] New Zealand offers a model in this regard. The National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) awarded by second level students is standards based, with both internal and external assessment. Building on this, the Gateway programme provides funding for schools to build networks with appropriate workplaces in broad areas of the curriculum. Placements are subject to a formal placement agreement with assessment of learning taking place in the workplace by either a teacher or a workplace assessor; teachers who assess must meet workplace standards of industry knowledge. This learning is recognized on the student's Record of Learning and contributes to achievement of the NCEA and/or other NQF qualifications (Tertiary Education Commission 2013).

Nielson and McNally (2010) considered the impact of workplace learning in the United Kingdom on the career choices made by high achieving second level students. Their research was focused on students interested in nursing; they found poor quality workplace learning placements and a situation where the workplace learning was considered to poorly represent the reality of nursing (for instance, placements often occurred in nursing home settings to the exclusion of other nursing settings). Students reported that more meaningful workplace learning could make nursing a more attractive career choice. While realistic workplace learning will, by necessity, make clear the less attractive aspects of any job ideally, whatever the context, this should be one part of the total experience. One interviewee underscored this point, noting

> *Some of them didn't enjoy the placement because the jobs they were asked to do weren't as glamorous as they expected but talking them through it afterwards they all benefitted in some way, even if it was only finding out that it wasn't for them.* (NI interview)

A programme in the USA – Linked Learning – is described by Rogers-Chapman and Darling-Hammond (2013). The programme seeks to prepare students for a future in either university or workplace by connecting learning in the classroom with 'real-world' applications in workplaces. Classroom-based study is, in turn, linked to the skills students acquire outside and bring into the school, a point which aligns with our own interests in this research project. The authors suggest that connecting curriculum to real-world experiences requires teachers to work with industry professionals and with each other. The investment here is in the quality of the workplace learning and requires: integrated, relevant curriculum, integrated career related activity, authentic assessment; joint planning time (to develop integrated curriculum and assessment tools, and for professional development) for teachers, and the possibility of flexible scheduling.

Drawing on research in Finland, Tynjala (2008: 130) echoes the ideas of a new educational settlement that we engaged with via Vickers (2008):

> *the worlds of education and work are moving closer [to] each other and that the integration of formal and informal learning is an essential prerequisite for developing the kinds of expertise needed in response to the changes taking place in working life*.

The argument here is that school learning needs to be more like workplace learning, integrating both formal and informal learning. These authors echo the point that effective workplace learning for *all* students requires co-operation between schools and workplaces (Tynjala 2008: 150). The authors challenge the notion that workplace learning is limited to learning that is informal and incidental, arguing that this neglects the fact that in the globalized context, many workplace practices are *of necessity* inherently pedagogical (Billett 2004). Professor Billett's widely-cited work (at the time of writing 7,602 citations on Google Scholar) highlights that the possibilities for workplace learning are in large part established by the organizational context in which the workplace learning takes place (Billett 2004); as such an ability and opportunity to gain understanding of organizational context must be of concern to educators who are focused on maximizing the benefits of workplace learning endeavours within the senior school curriculum.

As Shaw and Ogilvie (2010) noted in their research with third-level students using part-time work for workplace learning, while the size of the employing organization and the capacity of its staff to create learning spaces are not aspects that

can be controlled by schools, other aspects can be. Teachers can take steps to engineer the 'learning factors' of workplace learning to enhance student learning (Kyndt, Dochy et al. 2009; Li, Brake et al. 2009) and, we would suggest, in the process building their own industry expertise as a teaching resource. How does this happen? For Shaw and Ogilvie (2010: 817), it meant stimulating the social aspects of learning: maximizing the likelihood that students would become part of the learning community in the workplace. For this, teachers must have opportunities to experience the learning contexts their students will enter. It also meant paying attention to those aspects that were under the full control of the teacher: feedback, support for learning, challenge and work value.

By necessity, or a desire, it is suggested that increasing numbers of young people now hold part-time jobs while completing the senior years of school. While international research suggests part-time work has 'transition' benefits – gaining independence, building experience and confidence, making new networks and developing a more competitive CV (Hodgson and Spours 2001; Vickers et al 2003) – in Ireland involvement in part-time work during the senior years in school is generally discouraged, particularly in examination years (McCoy and Smyth 2007). Time at work of necessity takes away from time to learn rather than being seen as a site of continued learning. As such, part-time work to the extent that it does happen is likely to be done 'on the quiet' and does not present itself as a learning opportunity. Research in Australia suggests students themselves make a distinction between their part-time work and workplace learning associated with school:

> *Part-time work and work placement are often regarded differently by the young people. They are aware that both contribute to life skills such as communication, time management, developing responsibility and building confidence. However, young people see part-time work as being more closely related to their student identity, involving an opportunity to have disposable income, to socialise and to have some work related experience.* (Stokes and Wyn 2007: 504-5)

This suggests that workplace learning opportunities arranged within the school curriculum are the privileged learning moment and focus attention on how teachers can maximize that moment.

Learning to learn: teacher reflection and workplace learning

Teacher learning is in itself an example of workplace learning, a point that is central to our interests in this project. As Hodkinson & Hodkinson (2005: 112) outline in their detailed review of the limits and possibilities of individual and social forms of workplace learning for teachers, the literature on the further development of practicing teachers has its genesis in a perspective that emphasizes learning that occurs on courses that are delivered away from the workplace within the limits framed by school timetables. By contrast, the workplace learning literature tends to a perspective that such formal learning is inadequate and that meaningful workplace learning occurs through the engagement of teachers (or any other employee) in informal processes that occur within, for example, communities of practice (Beckett and Hager 2002; Lave and Wenger 1991; Marsick and Watkins 1990).

Research with second level teachers suggests teacher learning in support of student learner can be enhanced through the pursuit of a strategy that increases opportunities to learn and the likelihood that teachers will take up those opportunities

(Hodkinson and Hodkinson 2005). To achieve this, Hodkinson and Hodkinson take up the idea of an 'expansive' learning environment. The concepts of expansive and restrictive learning environments were developed by Fuller and Unwin (2006) who identified differences in the quality of apprentice learning which flowed from variations in the learning environment. The apprentices with the poorest experiences experienced 'restrictive' learning environments whilst those with the richest experiences experienced 'expansive' environments.

An expansive learning environment is one that presents diverse opportunities to learn, in a culture that values and supports learning. It increases what Billett (2004) terms the 'affordances' for learning at work, whilst also increasing the chances that the employee will want to make the most of those affordances. Teachers learn at work through individual and collaborative incidental learning as well as any formal in-service training; collaborative learning includes conversation and discussion, *observing and taking an interest in what others do*, and joint activity (Hodkinson and Hodkinson 2005: 115, our emphasis). The authors suggest this kind of collaborative learning occurred between teachers, and could also occur between teachers and student teachers.

Our position is that it should also happen in the intersection between students' workplace learning and teacher workplace learning. This perception is suggested in Canadian research which notes the very few opportunities for students to discuss the relevance of both their work experience and their formal education to future employment outcomes (Lehmann and Taylor 2001). In part, this reflects that teachers may have become distanced, or may not have, industry experience of their own to draw on[4]. The OECD (2011a) note a key policy challenge in ensuring teachers have opportunities to spend time working in industry and that those responsible for senior school workplace learning would benefit from spending time in this setting updating their knowledge and pedagogical practice.

Research by Timmerman (2012) that explored the increasingly close relationship of teacher training colleges with schools in pre-service teacher training in the Netherlands suggests similar findings for these workplace learners: the quality of learning in the workplace for student teachers, and the amount and type of activities in which they were able to involve themselves, was largely determined by the teachers they worked alongside in their placement. The perspectives of established teachers and their appreciation of potential opportunities for learning, had an impact on the limits and possibilities for learning just as the perspectives of employees and their appreciation of potential opportunities for learning will have an impact on the possibilities students encounter in workplace learning. A number of responses from respondents concerning the possibilities for learning that sit around a school's approach to the workplace learning of its students indicate there is room to build capacity here. Here, the training of guidance counsellors in the Republic is to be noted including the compulsory requirement that they arrange and undertake a workplace learning experience through which they 'encounter a similar learning experience to what their future students will meet' (Jeffers 2006: 411).

[4] Clearly, current options for initial teacher education that draw industry practitioners into post-graduate programmes of teacher education and certification offer great possibilities here, albeit not without their own challenges (Kamp 2006).

Chapter Three: Methodology

The aim of this research was to shed some preliminary light on the potential for workplace learning for students completing the senior second level curricula on the island of Ireland and the role of learning – by teachers and schools – in facilitating this learning. This pilot study was funded by the Standing Conference on Teacher Education North and South (SCoTENS) and was approved by the Research Ethics Committees of Dublin City University and the University of Ulster prior to the commencement of data collection.

Research Objectives

The proposed project outcomes were:

- Complete a desktop review of workplace learning in the context of senior second level curricula in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland
- Undertake a limited review of empirical research into the dynamics of workplace learning initiatives within formal education
- Gather the perspective of a sample of practicing teachers in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland on the benefits of workplace learning within the context of senior second level curricula
- Explore the barriers to the realization of the benefits of workplace learning
- Make recommendations on how any benefits of workplace learning can be supported by policy makers and others.

Data Generation

Literature review

A desktop review was undertaken by the University of Ulster of policy documents that engaged with the role of workplace learning in the senior school. This was complemented by a necessarily limited review of recent extant research. Here the terms 'workplace learning and secondary schools'; 'work experience and secondary schools' were used as keywords in academic databases including Academic Search Complete, Education Full Text, Education Research Complete and Business Source Complete. This review was not limited geographically.

Interview Framework

Semi-structured interviews were under taken in six schools (two in the Republic and four in Northern Ireland). We used purposive sampling, approaching schools we believed could best inform this small project given the intent of the research was conceptual – we were seeking to test some of our assumptions about the organization, potential, and accrued benefits of workplace learning experiences within the senior school cycle rather than making any claim to generalizability.

In the Republic of Ireland, two Catholic boys' schools were selected (one rural, one urban). Both schools were under the Trusteeship of Edmund Rice Schools, formerly the Irish Christian Brothers and both are non-selective. Four interviews were conducted (1 Principal; two subject teachers; 1 Transition Year Co-ordinator).

In Northern Ireland a further four interviews were conducted. Two boys' schools were selected, and two co-educational schools. Both boys' schools were voluntary grammar schools, one from the maintained sector and one controlled. The

co-educational schools were non-selective schools, one from the maintained sector and one controlled. Two schools were urban and two rural. All interviews were with the Head of the Careers Department.

An interview schedule was drafted for use in both jurisdictions which included twelve questions which focused on how students were involved in workplace learning, who arranged the work placements, whether part-time work was used for workplace learning and whether staff were aware of part-time work of students. We also queried whether it made a difference who arranged the workplace learning and how knowledge generated in the course of workplace learning by the student was able to be integrated by subject teachers and by the school itself to inform its practice. Finally, we explored barriers to maximizing the benefits of workplace learning. (Appendix A).

Survey

To broaden the perspectives beyond those in the interview schools an on-line survey was circulated in both jurisdictions. The survey 'echoed' the questions that had been used in interviews. In the Republic, the survey was circulated to the full membership of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors; 40 responses were received (37 from guidance counsellors in second level schools; two from guidance counsellors in YouthReach; one from a Principal). In Northern Ireland, the survey was circulated through the NI Schools' Careers Association; 31 responses were received (24 from Head of Careers; three from careers teachers; four others such as Key Stage 3 Employability Teacher).

All data was subjected to narrative analysis (Polkinghorne 1988).

Limitations

The limitations in this study primarily relate to the scale of the project and the limitations of time and resourcing. The literature review was necessarily limited given the fixed hours we were able to offer a research fellow. Similarly, meetings between the research team were necessarily limited and were conducted in contexts that minimized the travel of all parties. The team were able to meet face-to-face on three occasions.

Our original intent was to also gain access to workplace learning settings that students were using yet it quickly became apparent that resource limitations would not allow us to complete this aspect of the project. Accordingly, we replaced these interviews with an online survey that we were able to issue while interviews in schools were conducted. This enabled enable us to gain a more rounded picture of teacher perspectives. However, the research suggests this would be a fruitful area for observational research if resources could be secured.

Chapter Four: Presentation of the Findings

Given the limitations of space, the data has been integrated under a series of headings that capture the focus of our enquiry. Survey respondents offered an initial overview of where workplace learning featured in their schools' provision.

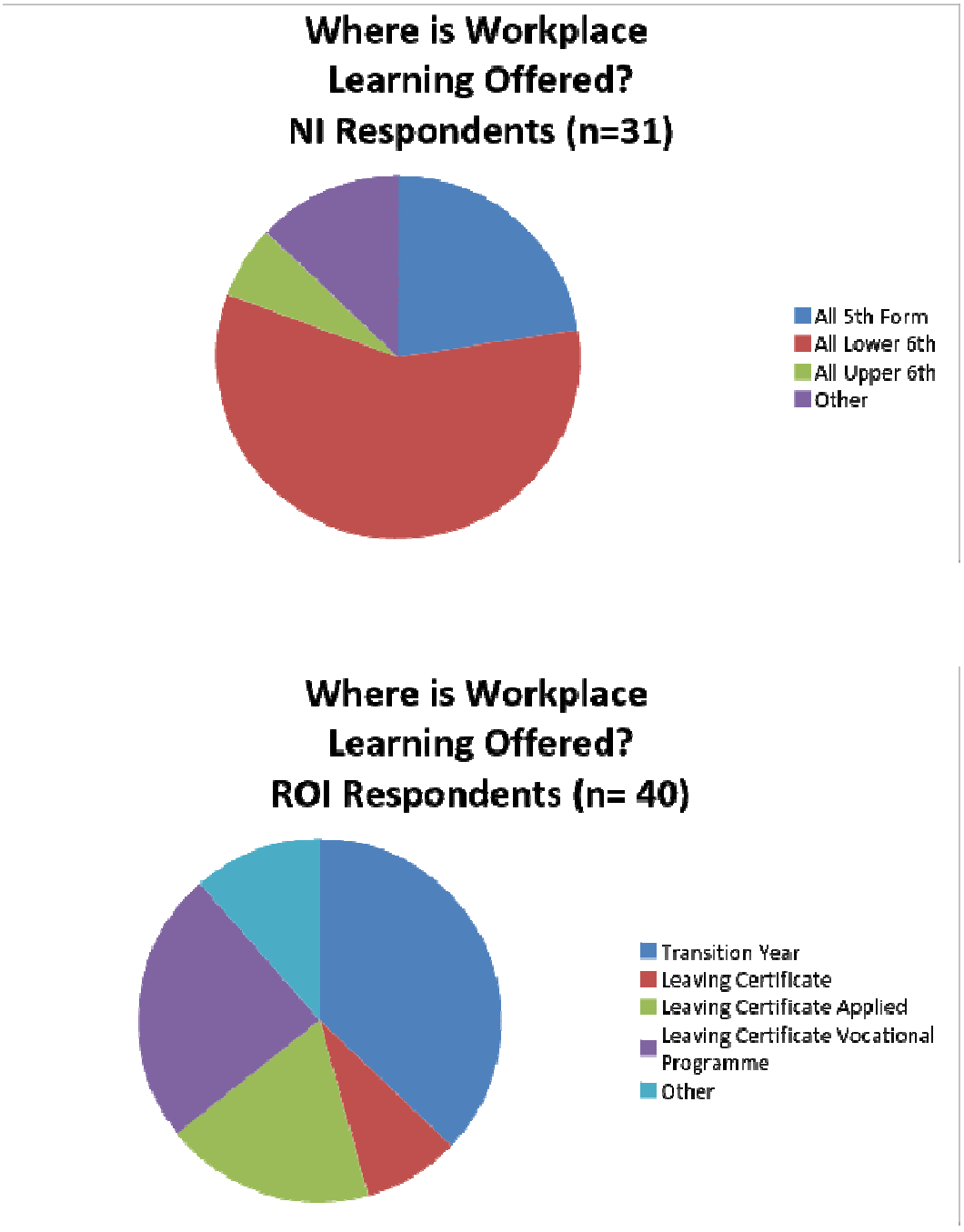

FIGURE 1 – LOCATION IN THE CURRICULUM OF WORKPLACE LEARNING

This data suggests that for participating schools, a higher proportion of students could

be involved in workplace learning at a younger age in the Republic of Ireland given its central role in Transition Year. This question of 'when' was posed by one of the interview respondents in the Republic of Ireland:

> *[...] Is there an appropriate starting age? In other words, could a primary school student for example be asked to do some form of mini work placement or whatever it might be. [...] Could it be done in first year? Or should it be left to fifth year, or maybe should it be left until after they do their Leaving Certificate and they're finished with the school, should the school invite them back for another year called 'a work placement'?* (RoI interview)

> *Traditionally, work placements have been undertaken in Lower 6th but now with more boys leaving in 5th Form we should think about offering it in 5th Form, particularly to those boys who aren't going to make the grades to come back.* (NI interview)

Who organizes workplace learning?

In both jurisdictions, schools favoured students organizing their own workplace learning placements. In Northern Ireland 55 per cent (n=16) of survey respondents and in the Republic of Ireland 60 per cent (n = 24) of survey respondents indicated students' primary responsibility in this regard. However, the majority of staff noted that while this was considered ideal in terms of building students' confidence and that there was '*more learning'* and '*more commitment'* where the student managed the process (ROI survey), some needed support in this: '*I help to find placements for young people who lack confidence'* (NI survey). This support was provided by careers staff and the Head of Careers or careers staff in NI and by guidance counsellors or Transition Year coordinators in the Republic.

Only one school indicated subject teachers would be involved in the North; nine schools in the Republic noted that subject teachers could have a role in this regard. One school in the North mentioned the important role parents could play: *'It would be an impossible job for me to find placements for all young people concerned. It should be remembered that using parental involvement means placements can be found that I might not even know about.'* In the Republic, it was noted that a choice for Transition Year can be influenced by whether parents could afford the additional contributions required to meet the costs of TY activities. One respondent suggested that those students whose workplace learning occurs in TY may gain much more than those who accessed workplace learning as a component of the Leaving Certificate Applied which might not demand the same kind of financial commitment from parents.

The majority of respondents in both jurisdictions noted that advice was given to students in framing an ideal workplace learning opportunity: in the North this was commonly that it should be arranged by the student and should it should relate to a potential career pathway. In the North, other criteria were suggested that it not be undertaken where a student had an existing part-time job; neither could it be paid, be at sea or at height for safety and health reasons. In the post-GFC recessionary context, the opportunities had changed, as an interviewee from the Republic outlined:

> *there was kind of two sides to the recession that we are having at the minute in that some places weren't offering work placements because of the recession and some places were because of it. So it was difficult to evaluate that. It was evident that some places didn't exist anymore for a start, so people just didn't have the jobs, especially in the trades where lads might have been working on building sites and so on. They were coming back and saying to me, 'Oh well*

> *you know my brother had worked for this guy that employed twenty people, he just does a few odd jobs on his own now. ... So that became evident. But then in other places where self-employed people had little businesses they were happy to take on what they seen, I suppose without being crude about it, what they seen as free labour.*

The question of workplace learning occurring in family-related businesses was complex. Nearly all respondents commented that it was not ideal for students to complete their workplace learning in a family business given it did not push students to expand their horizons or move beyond their 'comfort zone' yet, particularly in the rural school, this might be their only option. At the same time, a blanket discouragement could mean the loss of excellent opportunities that some students had gained through parental employment. As such, each case had to be judged on its merits. However, in both North and South there was frequent reference made to the lack of time and resourcing to work with students on ensuring students did not '*settle*' for whatever was easy to arrange or did not present transport issues.

> *I have to arrange placements for 117 pupils so now before they go out I have a parents night and it is amazing how this generates interest and additional places, but the administration is a nightmare. I depend on additional funding from the local business education partnership and past pupils who are willing to offer placements. There's limited money to go out to visit the boys and no time to either prepare other colleagues who would have gone out to supervise or to follow up with them because teaching time increased due to staff not being replaced.* (NI interview).

Part-time work as workplace learning

The surveys indicated a complex situation in regard to perspectives on part-time work being secured by senior students, and the recognition of it as a source of workplace learning. The great majority of schools in both jurisdictions had no policy on students taking part-time work, in part because *'we obviously cannot enforce a ban'* (NI survey), *'it would be impossible to implement as parents actively encourage these students to take part-time work to help finance their social life'* (RoI survey). In the North, 63 per cent of survey respondents suggested the school would be aware of the part-time jobs of students. However, in large part this reflected the relationship a given teacher had established, particularly with more senior students: '*when you're in senior cycle … you would get to know your students a little bit better than you would at junior cycle so that unless they basically tell us that they are working here or there, we wouldn't know'* (RoI survey). In both jurisdictions, but particularly in the Republic given the economic context of recent years, the dynamics of part-time work had changed. It was suggested, in contrast to the literature, that very few students now had part-time jobs and, for one respondent, this underscored the importance of workplace learning as

> *For many students this may be the only experience of work they get, particularly if they themselves do not have a part time job.* (NI survey)

At the same time, a number of respondents in schools in both jurisdictions indicated awareness of the benefits of part-time work indicating their school '*favoured'* and '*encouraged'* some level of part-time work, always with the caveat that the student could be assisted in managing the challenges it clearly presented for time management in the senior years of school when academic demands are high:

> *The school doesn't have a written policy. It is at the parent's and student's*

discretion. However the school would be of the belief that as long as the study time of the student is not affected, students should engage in part time work. The school would feel that with the work load in 6th year, it is not suitable for students to have part time jobs. (RoI survey)

Generally, the extent of this assistance was to '*advise'* or '*warn'* students of the risks to academic performance of excessive hours of work which respondents suggested would be anything above 10-12 hours in any week. That the nature of the part-time work is the source of the problem was noted by one interviewee: some jobs, particularly in the hospitality trade, demanded night work that would always compromise students given the fixed timetables of schools. However, one NI respondent argued that this was clearly an issue of pastoral care and that schools had a responsibility to ensure pupils could manage conflicting demands effectively.

A majority of survey respondents in both jurisdictions, and a larger majority of respondents in the Republic, indicated that part-time jobs held by students were recognized as a further avenue for meaningful workplace learning:

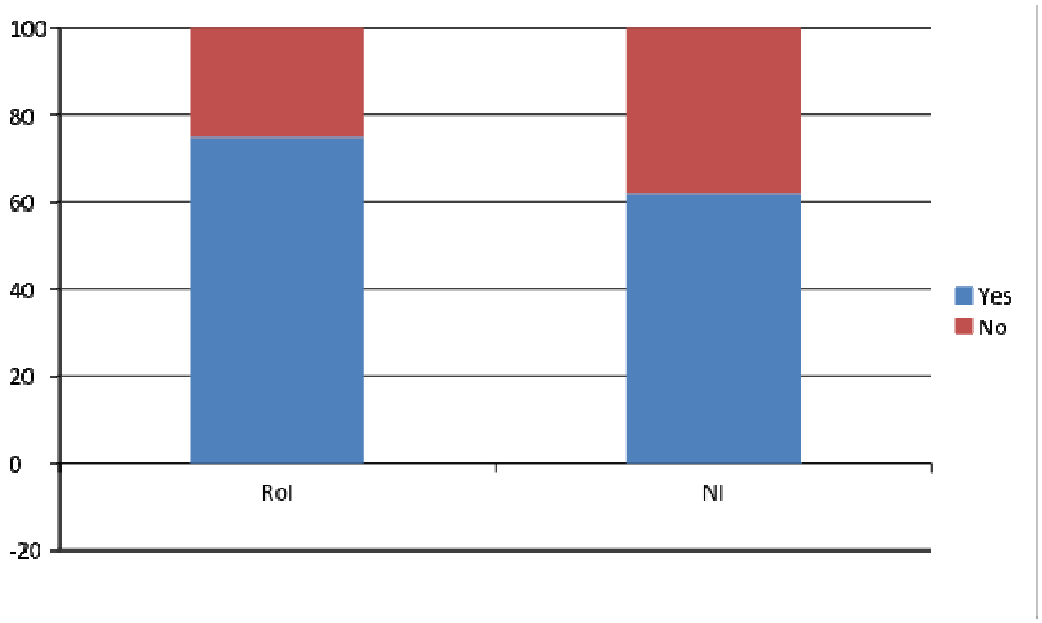

FIGURE 2 – PART TIME JOBS AS A SOURCE OF WORKPLACE LEARNING

One survey respondent summed up the comments of many respondents:

Do not discourage it as such activity can provide valuable support for vocational applications and employability skills. It is also often necessary for financial support of student. However with weaker students it can impact on academic achievement. Careers/reference staff are aware, other staff are generally not. (NI survey)

Teacher learning through and for workplace learning

One of our areas of interest was this question of who was aware of and learnt through the workplace learning that various students were involved in. From both survey and interview data, it was clear that the guidance counsellor or Transition Year co-ordinators in the Republic, and careers teachers in the North, were seen to be the people who knew about, and learnt from, what was going on in the various forms of

workplace learning. Comments such as '*the teacher organising placements deals with this'* were common. A careers advisor from NI noted that '*I am sure other staff may also ask them how they got on but generally this is viewed as the responsibility of the Careers Department';* this perspective was also articulated by survey respondents from the Republic of Ireland.

In response to the question of how information was shared between the school, the student and the workplace the default approach in both jurisdictions was written comprising, predominately, letters and forms/official documentation sent to the employer and written reports from the employer after the workplace learning experience. A number of respondents did not answer this question; one indicated that there was no communication at all. One school in Northern Ireland ran an information evening which included all stakeholders, including parents. Two were using on-line technologies and one further school was investigating the possibilities of such technologies. Many respondents noted that ideally they would visit the students in the workplace yet the lack of resourcing severely limited any structured approach to this.

> *So there would be a small cluster there* [a student mentioning something in class] *but it is only the teacher that is there at the time that is hearing that interaction. With schedules getting so busy, and teachers' time getting so busy, so much more being packed into such a small amount of time, like it is nearly impossible to get a meeting to pull all the teachers together at this stage. To disseminate that information, the issue of communication comes into it. Effective, meaningful communication. Really and truthfully, unless the communication is two-way communication it is ineffective. ... To effectively communicate we want foryt odd teachers going out there and visiting them on a Friday. It's an impossibility.* (RoI interview)

This school was exploring the use of social media to try and gain two-way communication and students wrote a classroom journal which was there for other teachers *'to look at*';

> *With the reduction of staff and everything, we are trying to come up with new ways of keeping that information flowing around rather than letting it go stagnant between me and the student, the student and the employer, trying to keep it flowing around all the members of the education and the community.*

However, other teacher comments at the school suggested they were unaware of this journal. In interview, one respondent noted that she had never considered the use of student experiences in the workplace as a resource for classroom work despite always having taught Transition Year. This teacher had no information on where students were or what they did when they were on workplace learning placements:

> *I never thought of that … if I knew what they're doing... I could do a topic ... about their work experience, but I never ever thought of connecting the two.* (RoI interview)

Others did not see any potential in such an idea, despite not knowing where the students were:

> *I don't see how I could use anything they are using out there ... in my line of work.* (RoI interview)

In the North, responses to the survey suggested that a number of schools used insights from workplace learning placements in GCSE English classes as a basis for speaking and listening tasks. The opportunity provided by workplace learning experiences in

enhancing applications for higher education was noted by a number of survey respondents from Northern Ireland, one suggesting it was '*vital for applying for anything competitive at university or employment*'. However, for the purposes of the school itself learning about how learning happened in the workplace and how the 'learning factors' could be enhanced there were few mechanisms in place to facilitate knowledge generation. Survey respondents noted that information about what happened on workplace learning placements only moved around the school in an '*adhoc'* fashion and, where specific initiatives were noted, these were framed as an opportunity for students, rather than staff, to learn: '*students put together a poster on their work experiences. These are distributed to departments across the school and displayed on careers noticeboards for other students to learn from'* (NI survey).

Barriers to realizing the potential of workplace learning

The literature suggests there are two major pressures restricting formalised teacher learning that equally apply to the possibilities for workplace learning: time and funding (Hodkinson and Hodkinson 2005). The participants noted the limitations of both of these, but most particularly time. This lack of time is in large part related to the resourcing question: all school staff are being asked to absorb more work. In response to a question as to whether the kinds of insights gained by students in workplace learning informed other aspects of school life one respondent noted:

> *It could have, but it didn't. The reality is ... they don't have much experience themselves in a workplace other than teaching and they are so focused on, 'what has that got to do with me? I am here to teach maths. So what? Johnny is in my maths class, he did his work experience. Good for him. But I am here to teach him maths. And I have a curriculum that has to be covered. I have papers that have to be corrected. There is an exam coming up in x amount of days. I'd love to hear about his work experience' is probably what they would say, 'however I just don't have time because if I am listening to Johnny's story I have thirty others who want me to listen to their story and there won't be one sum done in the room.' ... The syllabus and the curriculum is just crammed and there is so much stuff to get through and teachers are so focused on that. So in theory it would be brilliant if that feedback got back to everybody but the reality is that it doesn't. And the reality is that as TY coordinator I didn't have time to even ask teachers would they like to have got it because to get the amount done for TY itself is a struggle.* (RoI interview)

The impact of this was noted by a NI survey respondent:

> *the greatest limitation/barrier to WPL is the lack [*of*] understand[*ing*] of its importance. Some employers and educationalists feel WPL is some add on or bolt when in fact it is an essential part of the curriculum and the benefits it can bring to all are immense.*

Those who are responsible for workplace learning are left 'holding the baby' with one NI interview noting '*some days I'm not sure which way to turn there are so many competing demands.'* In these responses, the privileging of other aspects of a crowded curriculum (particularly those that linked directly to external examinations) in the face of insufficient time and resources is underscored. This is occurring at the same time as some industries are introducing elevated risk management requirements and processes to cover students entering the workplace (Huddleston and Stanley 2012). Both interviews and survey responses highlighted a consistent theme of 'stretch' in being able to frame, arrange, manage, support and learn from workplace learning when the

curriculum was loaded, when hundreds of students could be involved at any given time, when employers were facing their own pressures and the demands of a number of students from both second and third level education looking for opportunities to learn in the workplace. Survey responses from the Republic placed the most significant limitation to successful workplace learning as lack of time to work with employers (82.5 per cent rating this first or second as a barrier). The second most significant limitation was a lack of willing employers (49.5 per cent rating this first or second as a barrier).

This lack of time also has an impact on knowledge generation in schools subsequent to any workplace learning that had occured: even where information was received, it did not generate reflection on the value of workplace learning and how its benefits might be enhanced or its challenges lessened. An interviewee in NI noted the work to be done to build appreciation within the school of the benefits of workplace learning:

> *Some staff think that the week the pupils are out on work placement that all the knowledge they have gained in their subject area will drain out their ears and their grades will fall so sometimes you have to convince colleagues of the value of a placement.*

This quote, as did others, indicates the unremitting pressure felt by many teachers to ensure their students achieve high grades at GCSE and A level, a situation that is equally evident in the Republic of Ireland with multiple references to the dominant focus of schools on Leaving Certificate 'points' as the ultimate measure of school success, a situation reinforced in the community by a yearly cycle of intense media coverage focused on how to acquire 'points', what the examinations contain and which schools' students secured the highest points. This means of measuring success often means that anything that takes away from what is categorized as 'academic' work is seen as a distraction and its value questioned. The consequence of this is that there is no priority accorded to workplace learning in the curriculum, in timetabling or in continuing professional development for teachers, whatever their subject specialism. While workplace learning has become accepted as vital component of the skills agenda for government and a necessary part of assisting young people for the challenges of securing employment in the 21st Century tensions remain between that agenda and the achievement of grades for entry to university – the pathway that is, for the most part, portrayed as the preferred transition destination for senior school students.

Chapter Five: Conclusions and Recommendations

This project used a mixed methods approach to explore the limits and possibilities for meaningful workplace learning for young people to support their transition to sustainable employment in a recessionary post-Global Financial Crisis (GFC) context. Our thesis was that, in the context of a new educational settlement, workplace learning was of increasing importance and could be accessed through school workplace learning processes or part-time work.

The nuances of a new educational settlement were demonstrated. While it may a large-scale global trend for increasing numbers of young people to be working while completing second level schooling this was not supported in this small research project, particularly in the Republic where in a recessionary context part-time opportunities for young people had largely evaporated. As noted by some respondents, this elevated the call for *meaningful* workplace learning to be an integral part of the senior school curriculum as this may be the only workplace learning opportunity some students would have. This research suggests that severe limitations on time have compromised workplace learning in both jurisdictions, even where schools have a strong appreciation of and commitment to workplace learning for their students.

Resourcing, timetabling and management

Resources for schools and teachers are readily available from NCEA, CCEA and the IGC. However, access to time and funding are key to supporting meaningful workplace learning therefore we recommend that

- a review be undertaken of the adequacy in the current context of the funding for CEIAG in Northern Ireland and Transition Year in the Republic of Ireland
- such funding, and any timetabling allocation, be ring-fenced
- longitudinal research be commissioned to explore the impact of various approaches to workplace learning on future transitions, including a specific focus on identity factors such as culture, gender and (dis)ability.

Professional development

This research suggests that there is a need for professional development at various levels of the school system specifically focused on and around workplace learning. This involves building an awareness of the need for professional development, support for professional development (both formal and informal), skills in maximising the benefits of ICT in building knowledge. This research highlights the potential value in building capacity for communities of practice for workplace learning; this is particularly the case given that the current fiscal situation is not likely to result in more school staff in the short to medium term. Our position is that there is much more to transformational workplace learning than 'close monitoring of students'. All stakeholders must have space to explore the learning affordances offered by workplace settings and to agree how that is to be maximized for all learners, not just students.

Our recommendation is

- for professional development for school leaders in creating the conditions for informal learning in and around workplace learning in the senior school curriculum
- that this professional development should include mechanisms to leverage the pedagogical practices brought into schools by early career teachers who have entered initial teacher training via industry pathways

- as a matter of urgency, there is a timescale for the introduction of accredited professional development modules for careers teachers in the North.

Collaboration and capacity-building

The literature review suggested the benefits of stakeholder collaboration in workplace learning arrangements. Yet our data suggested there was an overwhelming lack of opportunity for teachers to work collaboratively, let alone collaboratively with industry professionals and other stakeholders. While creating this kind of opportunity could be argued to be a case of mind-set and workplace affordance rather than resourcing, we suggest that it is dependent on people having the opportunity to work collaboratively and this, in turn, is compromised by current workloads in a recessionary context.

Our recommendations are

- for current structures of industry/school engagement to be promoted through a sustained capacity-building process led by relevant government agencies who have the authority and ability to act on barriers to engagement and collaboration
- for a greater uptake of on-going industry placements for all teachers, and particularly for careers teachers who lack experience of industry
- that high-quality Irish workplace learning placement resources be developed by government in consultation with *all* workplace learning stakeholders to enhance shared understanding and ability to influence the learning affordances of workplace environments.

Communication and assessment

The research indicates that in some schools enhanced communication is an area where immediate, low-cost gains could be secured. Our respondents indicate that there is a heavy leaning on programmed, written material that reaches key staff such as Transition Year coordinators or Careers Advisors but does not flow beyond them into the school. Even where schools had structured processes that would enable subject teachers to be informed of and work with the workplace experiences of their students, responses indicated these structures were ineffective: diaries were not read either because teachers were not aware of them or did not value them.

Teachers suggested this reflects a packed curriculum and specific forms and measures of school success that drive a 'teach to the test' focus. It was also suggested to reflect a lack of appreciation of the value of the learning that occurred in workplaces as a resource for further learning.

Our recommendations are

- for further research into how ICT could enhance the flow of information. We also restate our earlier recommendation on leadership for informal learning in school settings
- for research into the possibilities for enhanced assessment and recognition of workplace learning placements
- for government to explore mechanisms to counter the overwhelming driver of the 'points' race and academic results in second level schools.

We wish to close with the question that was put to us by interview respondents in regard to when workplace learning in school settings should occur. Should this be earlier in the curriculum? Some students who might most benefit from structured,

quality workplace learning given a lack of ability, or desire, to transition from school into higher education may leave school before a meaningful workplace learning opportunity can be made available to them. If they also did not have access to part-time work, they could effectively have no work experience to draw on at all in entering a challenging labour market. This question is not one that could be addressed given the limitations of this research but is one that should be considered moving forward.

Appendix One

SCOTENS – 3 PLY
RESEARCH QUESTIONS FOR SCHOOLS

General introduction to the focus of the research – the extent to which insights from, and about, workplace learning are a source for learning between the student, the school and the workplace staff

- Tell me about how students here get involved in workplace learning initiatives.
- Who arranges their workplace learning initiatives:
    - Arranged by student
    - Arranged by school – if so, whose responsibility is this?
- What about the part-time work that students might be involved in: is that seen as an opportunity for workplace learning
    - Do you feel staff are aware of the part time work undertaken by students?
- Would you have an opinion on whether the quality of the learning opportunity is influenced by whether the school organises it?
- How much information / reflection flows between the student, the teacher and any learning co-ordinator based in the workplace setting
    - How do the school, the student and the workplace communicate?
- How integrated is workplace learning into the balance of the student's programme of study?
- How integrated is workplace learning, and reflection on it, in the life of the school?
- What do you think this school does well in the arena of workplace learning for and by senior students?
- Where do you think the limitations are?
- What would it take to really maximise the benefits for students?
- Is there any other comment you'd like to make that you feel we should have asked about.
- Who else do you feel we need to talk to?

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