



Think Tank on Continuing Professional Development for Early Years Practitioners

A Think Tankⁱ was held at the third COST Action meeting in Larnaca, Cyprus, 17th – 18th March, 2016. The aims of the Think Tank were identify what the gaps in knowledge are with regard to the in-service training of early years practitioners with regard to digital literacy and develop plans for research projects that could address the gaps in knowledge. Participants were invited to address three key questions:

- What are the problems faced in this area?
- What would things look like if these problems were solved?
- What would we need to do to achieve this?

This report outlines the key outcomes of the Think Tank in relation to each of the three questions.

What are the problems faced in this area?

- Digital literacy understood in a narrow way (mostly, in technical terms) – not organized around teachers' and students' identities → compartmentalisation of knowledge (and tools).
- Technologies continually change, which is linked to some teachers' fears about loss of authority.
- Some teachers may want to find the 'right' answer.
- Some teachers believe that they are already fostering digital literacy – or, that playing with technology is "just playing".
- There is a lack of workforce qualifications and regulation, with much variation across Europe.
- There is sometimes a lack of expertise and/ or confidence with digital media.
- Mindsets/ perceptions of childhood may limit teachers' desire to use technology.
- Resources – cost of hardware/ software, inequity of distribution.
- Lack of vision in terms of policy for digital literacy.
- Not many resources available in languages other than English.

What would things look like if these problems were solved?

- Technologies embedded in everyday pedagogy and curriculum delivery (e.g. use of Twitter, blogs, digital stories).
- Sharing and collaborative learning in and out-of-school.



- Teachers researching children's practices and exploring those practices in order to understand what digital literacy is.
- Teachers exploring new directions e.g. gamification of education; virtual reality.
- Bring your own device (BYOD) policies in place.
- Teachers learning that there are multiple answers and it is OK to say, "I don't know".
- Designers of interactive technology and educators working together to address complexities of designing for young children.
- Ongoing customised professional development to embed practice.
- Groups of teachers working together; self-directed learning communities.
- Use of both face-to-face meetings and online platforms.
- Utilisation of social network media.
- Professional development is localised, situated, not prescriptive.

What would we need to do to achieve this?

- Put the pedagogy first.
- Develop a participatory process of curriculum development.
- Work with parents.
- Make boundaries more permeable.
- Be forward looking, rather than going with the status quo.
- Have a systemic approach which involves: clear policy; professional development; respect for the profession; parents' perspectives on media use.
- Develop professional developments programmes that can be conceptualised as a toolbox – a set of possibilities that can be used; an enabling, facilitating space (resources, multiplicity of possibilities), mapping onto existing communities, allowing for emerging communities, communities adapted to different localities (providing the possibilities but allowing the locality to adapt those and research how this adapted).

Next Steps

Participants in the Think Tank agreed that there was a need to develop a professional development programme for in-service early years practitioners that blended online learning with face-to-face elements, including opportunities for action research.



Members of Working Group 2 were then asked to consider what the key principles of such professional development programme should be. The following elements were identified:

- There should be an emphasis on the development of collaborative professional networks.
- The programme needs to consider the history of school literacy/ the historicity of school literacy and the ways that connects to what might be considered as “new”.
- Similarly, it needs to consider the in/out-of-school traditions along with dominant understandings of technology and literacy that might interact/transact with the “new”.
- The programme designers need to consider the attitudes of some teachers toward technology and digital literacy; given the reluctance of some, and even negativity towards technology, there is a need to consider teachers’ ideological conflicts.
- Need to underpin the development of the programme theoretically (for example, see Stein’s (2001) work on inforatorium, pedagogicum, politicum, (plus) civilizatorium).
- Attention should be paid to teachers’ identities in/from local and cosmopolitan/globalised perspective.
- There should be consideration of the relationship between students and teachers – need to understand the profile of the teacher, especially as it relates to digital literacy → might help understand what we need for teacher training.
- The programme needs to acknowledge teachers’ differentiated needs, yet challenge the distinction between veterans and younger practitioners as “digital natives”.
- There should be consideration of issues relating to how skills may connect (or not) to teachers’ pedagogical knowledge and ability to transfer skill to practice.

Working Group 2 will now collaborate with Dublin City University’s Institute of Education in the development of plans for a project in which an existing MOOC developed by Dr Deidre Butler and team, “21st Century Learning Design”, can be used and adapted by early years practitioners and embedded into a professional development programme in which practitioners undertake action research as a collaborative network.

ⁱ Think Tank participants: Professor Cathy Burnett, Dr Deidre Butler, Dr Bernadette Dwyer, Dr Rosie Flewitt, Dr Julia Gillen, John Hurley, Dr Eithne Kennedy, Dr. Dimitrios Koutsogiannis, Professor Eleni Kyza, Professor Heather Lotherington, Professor Jackie Marsh, Dr Stavroula Kontovourki, Professor Brian O’Neill, Dr Ioanna Palaologou, Professor David Poveda, Dr Anca Velicu, Professor Charalambos Vrasidas.