

As part of the development process for *Cosán*, the national framework for teachers' learning, participating schools are exploring their engagement in professional learning, and their reflection on that learning. Some schools may choose to conduct a focus group discussion to support that process. Focus groups are one method for school staff to gather information from a group of people about their experiences and opinions. The information gathered can be used to identify areas of existing effective practice as well as areas for improvement. This document has been designed to guide principals or other teachers who wish to facilitate a focus group discussion.

What is a focus group?

A focus group is an information-gathering tool where a selected group of 6-12 people have a focused discussion on a particular topic. This discussion is guided by a school staff member acting as facilitator who asks up to 12 questions. The discussion typically lasts for 40-80 minutes. A record keeper records issues and views raised. School policy regarding data protection should be adhered to when recording discussions. Generally focus groups meet once only.

Why are they used?

- To elicit ideas/opinions from a selected group of people and/or to supplement information gathered from other sources e.g. questionnaires
- To understand relevant issues from the viewpoint of various stakeholders (e.g. teachers, parents, pupils)
- To remain 'connected' with the various stakeholders ensuring their views are heard
- To yield rich qualitative information on a topic in a relatively short period of time
- To guide future actions

When to use a focus group?

- To hear and explore voices that matter
- To gather more detailed information which can be missed using questionnaires or other information gathering tools

Considerations when planning a focus group

- Participants may either be identified and invited or volunteer to take part
- Participants should be representative of the target group
- The date and time of the focus group needs to be decided and participants advised of the time commitment involved and the focus of discussion
- The power balance in the group should be considered e.g. might interviewing school leaders and other teachers together inhibit honest sharing of views?
- The facilitator should establish a safe context for focus group members by agreeing ground rules for the process prior to commencing and ensuring they are adhered to
- The facilitator needs to establish with the group what confidentiality means
- Participants in the focus group should be comfortable with each other to allow discussion to flow

Planning and Preparing Questions

Devise questions in advance, involving key staff and school leaders.

Questions should be:

- Short and to the point
- Open ended or use a sentence completion format and worded to avoid closed yes/ no answers

Questions should focus on the areas you wish to explore. An example is offered below, but schools should feel free to devise their own questions.

Example

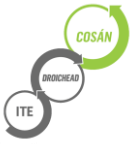
St. John's staff decided to find out more about professional learning in their school. Some questions asked in a focus group of teachers might include:

- **We will start with 'a round' and I will ask you all to complete the following sentence: *I learn best when.....***
- **After listening to colleagues' views, can you tell me other ways in which you like to learn?**
- **What formal learning opportunities do you avail of?**
- **Are there less formal learning opportunities you avail of?**
- **What learning opportunities do you avail of, on an individual basis?**
- **What collaborative learning opportunities to you avail of?**
- **Are there ways the school could be more supportive of your learning? Can you share any ideas?**

How to run the focus group?

The facilitator:

- Thanks everyone for participating
- Outlines the time that is needed (usually between 40 – 80 minutes)
- Reviews the purpose of bringing everyone together and the structure of the meeting
- Agrees ground rules in collaboration with participants. This process can involve for example, asking group members what ground rules they think should be included. It is important to ensure that the limits of confidentiality are outlined, emphasise the importance of talking one at a time, respecting others views and remind participants that all opinions are welcome and there may be diversity of views in the groups and that is to be welcomed
- Recording ground rules on a flip chart can provide a visual reminder that supports safe group process throughout the session
- Shares information on the role of the facilitator for example, to elicit views, ensure the smooth running of the sessions and report back findings to inform school based actions
- Asks the planned questions and expands if necessary on these questions to help the conversations flow



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- It may be helpful to allow participants to think about and note their own ideas initially before discussing ideas in pairs and then in the larger group.
- Uses pauses and probes when needed, for example: 5 second pause and probes such as “*Would you explain further?*”, “*Would you give me an example?*”, “*I am not sure I understand can you explain further?*”
- Providing a template to record individual/pair/smaller group feedback may help members express their ideas in written form rather than requiring speaking out in a larger group
- Summarises what has been said, checking with participants for accuracy and understanding if needed
- Checks with the person recording the discussion from time to time that keys points have been captured
- Ensures that everyone in the group has an opportunity to speak, that everyone’s voice is being heard and that no one voice or view dominates the discussion. Asks if anyone has any general comments to make before concluding
- Thanks the group for their participation

After the meeting

With the support of the recorder check:

- What patterns emerge?
- What are the common themes?
- What new questions arise?
- What conclusions can you come to?
- What actions can be taken to further support teachers’ learning
- It is recommended that another staff member independently reviews the record made to prevent bias in interpretation.

Conclusion

The information elicited can be used to inform school policy on teachers’ learning to, with a view to enhancing professional learning for all members of staff. Schools engaging in the Teaching Council/ESCI series of workshops on reflection may choose to share emerging themes at these workshops and shared learning days, so as to inform the Teaching Council’s deliberations, and the ongoing evolution of the Cosán framework.

The Teaching Council wish to acknowledge the DES for sharing the document ‘Wellbeing Focus Group - A Guide for School Staff’, which we have drawn from in developing this guidance.