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Reflection settings of teachers in three different school types

1. Introduction

It is common sense that the setting in which reflection takes place will have an influence on the actual reflection process. Who takes part, how long are meetings, how often do they happen, what is the formal framework – these factors have a bearing on what is going on when teachers reflect with others.

What then are the currently used/preferred reflection settings for teachers in primary schools? For answering this question I will use data collected via a questionnaire and via interviews with teachers in mainstream schools in Ireland and Germany and with teachers of free alternative schools in Germany. The number of questionnaires that were collected from Irish primary teachers was 95, the number of questionnaires from German mainstream schools was 46. There were 14 interviews held with teachers from free alternative schools, 12 with teachers from German mainstream schools and 9 with teachers from Irish primary schools.

Where statistical data is aggregated in the following chapter it is meant to provide a snapshot of distributions. In some cases in the following passages I will however also refer to comments made in the interview series. By doing so the quantitative statements are partly put into a qualitative context.

The presentation is split in two main sections. In the first part I will attend to the results available for the mainstream schools in Ireland and Germany. For both of these data is available from the questionnaire and from the interviews. Therefore it is possible to display them in the same manner, also using charts. A short interlude will sum up the main aspects as found in this section. For the free alternative schools I rely on the information gathered in the interviews. These results are presented separately in a second section. At the end I will compare the results available for all three school types.

2. Reflection settings used in German and Irish mainstream primary schools

In this section I am going to present and compare the results of the survey on reflection settings as carried out with teachers in German and Irish mainstream primary schools. When referring to percentages in the following passages I am aware of the potential perception of blurring results that are based on rather low figures in small-scale research. (Denscombe 2007, p. 28) Using percentages here is however necessary to allow for a comparison between the two sets of data.

2.1. Distribution of gender, age, and of reflection settings used

In Ireland 78.7 % (n=74) of the respondents were female teachers. This is a slightly lower percentage than 84.99 % of the overall female population amongst teachers as reported by Eurostat for 2010. In Germany the female respondents accounted for 88.4 % (n=38) of the answers which is very close to the 85.55 % of female teachers in primary schools recorded by Eurostat for 2010.

In both countries responses of younger teachers under 30 were over-represented at the expense of teachers over 50. The shift in the German responses is stronger than the one in the Irish responses. However age of the respondents was not found to be a significant influence factor in relation to the reflection settings used.

	Germany total valid responses for age: 38			Ireland total valid responses for age: 80		
	Frequency	Percentage	Eurostat	Frequency	Percentage	Eurostat
Under 30	10	26.3 %	7.44 %	24	30.0 %	22.80 %
30 – 39	8	21.0 %	21.76 %	26	32.5 %	30.78 %
40 – 49	4	10.5 %	22.97 %	13	16.3 %	19.37 %
Over 50	16	42.1 %	57.67 %	17	22.2 %	25.36 %

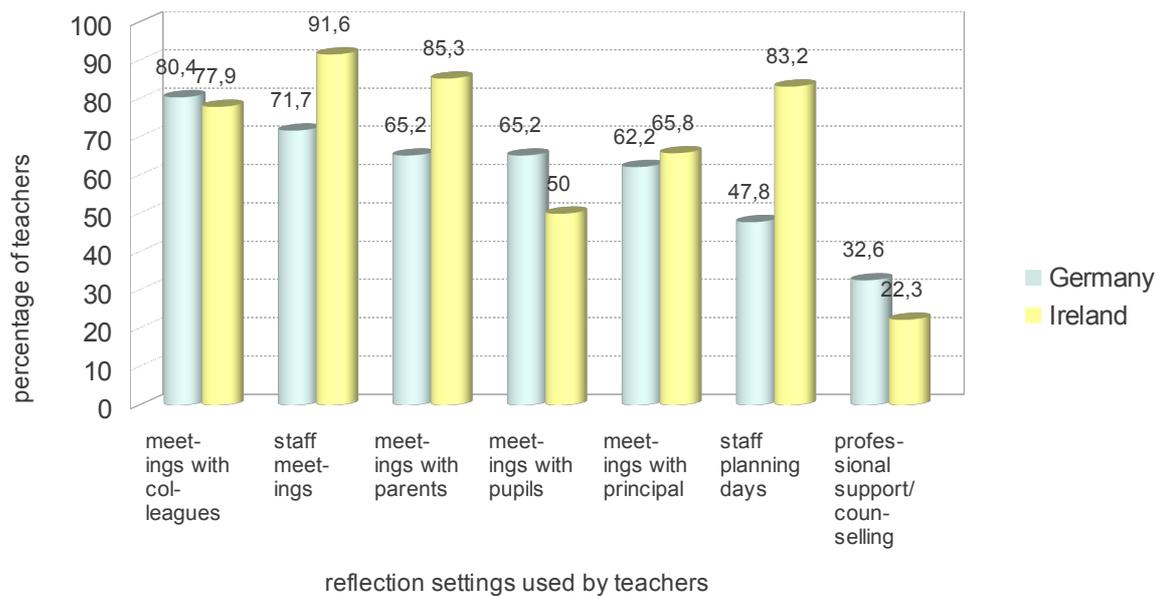
Amongst teachers in German mainstream schools the highest ranked reflection setting were the meetings with colleagues that are not staff meetings. In Irish primary schools the staff meetings topped the list.

Do you discuss situations that are over, to examine your own actions/practice in them, gain a better understanding of your own actions/practice and consciously learn for future (similar) situations?						
	Germany			Ireland		
	Total valid answers	percentage	frequency	Total valid answers	percentage	frequency
Meetings with colleagues	46	80.4 %	37	95	77.9 %	74
Staff meetings	46	71.7 %	33	95	91.6 %	87
Meetings with parents	46	65.2 %	30	95	85.3 %	81
Meetings with pupils	46	65.2 %	30	95	50.0 %	47
Meetings with principal	45	62.2 %	28	73 ¹	65.8 %	48
Staff planning days	46	47.8 %	22	94	83.2 %	79
Professional support/ counselling	46	32.6 %	15	94	22.3 %	21
Other settings ²	46	15.2 %	7	95	11.6 %	

The table can also be visualised in form of a chart depicting the reflection settings used by teachers in Irish and German mainstream primary schools (expressed in percentages).

¹ Of the 95 questionnaires 22 were answered by principals (teaching, or administrative).

² These included: college/university context (1), meeting colleagues outside school setting (2), continuing professional development (1), not specified (3)



I will attend to the various reflections settings in the order as suggested by the German results.

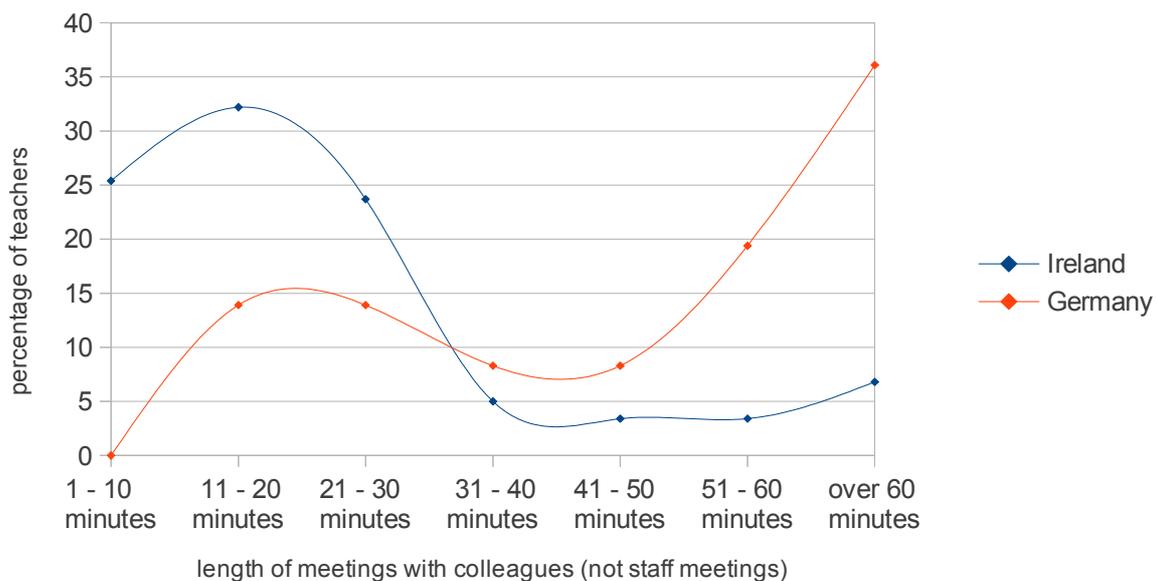
2.2. Meetings with colleagues (not staff meetings)

Meetings with colleagues were distinguished in the questionnaire from staff meetings because participation in the latter is obligatory for teachers and cannot be negotiated. This is different for other meetings with colleagues. Teachers in fact have the power to enter into these meetings or not. There was no distinction made in the questionnaire between formal and informal meetings with colleagues. Even were meetings are formally arranged with a set time or agenda these arrangements are based on the mutual agreement of the participating teachers.

The frequency of meetings with colleagues is reported differently between the Irish and the German teachers. What sticks out here is the significantly lower percentage of teachers in German schools who refer to daily meetings with colleagues as a reflection setting.

Frequency of meetings with colleagues (not staff meetings)				
	Germany		Ireland	
	Percentage	<i>n</i> =	Percentage	<i>n</i> =
daily	10.8 %	4	28.4 %	21
weekly	40.5 %	15	31.1 %	23
fortnightly	16.2 %	6	2.7 %	2
monthly	10.8 %	4	8.1 %	6
bi-monthly	5.4 %	2	1.4 %	1
termly	0	0	5.4 %	4
undefined / conditional	8.1 %	3	10.8 %	8
undefined / unconditional	8.1 %	3	12.2 %	9

A result that corresponds to this finding is also the reported duration of meetings with colleagues (expressed in percentages):



What those two results suggest is that meetings with colleagues in which reflection happens are more likely to happen in greater time-intervals and also more likely to take longer for German mainstream primary teachers.

To understand this result it makes sense to take into account also the interview series from where it is clear that there is a certain bandwidth in speaking about meetings with colleagues. On the Irish side one teacher spoke of weekly informal meetings of at least an hour with a colleague after school which is also understood to be the most important reflection setting for this teacher. Three of the nine Irish interviewees mentioned meetings of parallel class teachers who teach the same age group.

However all but one of the Irish interview partners also included short informal exchanges as reflection settings. This is not the case for the German teachers. Only four of the eleven interview partners in German mainstream primary schools found that informal exchanges during school hours were to be understood as reflection. Two others mentioned informal contacts with one particular colleague that takes place after school via e-mail or on the phone. Another five did not include any informal meetings in their list of reflection settings.

What featured quite prominently in the interviews with the German mainstream primary teachers were parallel class meetings (nine out of eleven). These meetings were reported in the interviews as taking place weekly, every second week, monthly or every six weeks. In all cases however the duration of these meetings was at least one hour.

2.3. Staff meetings

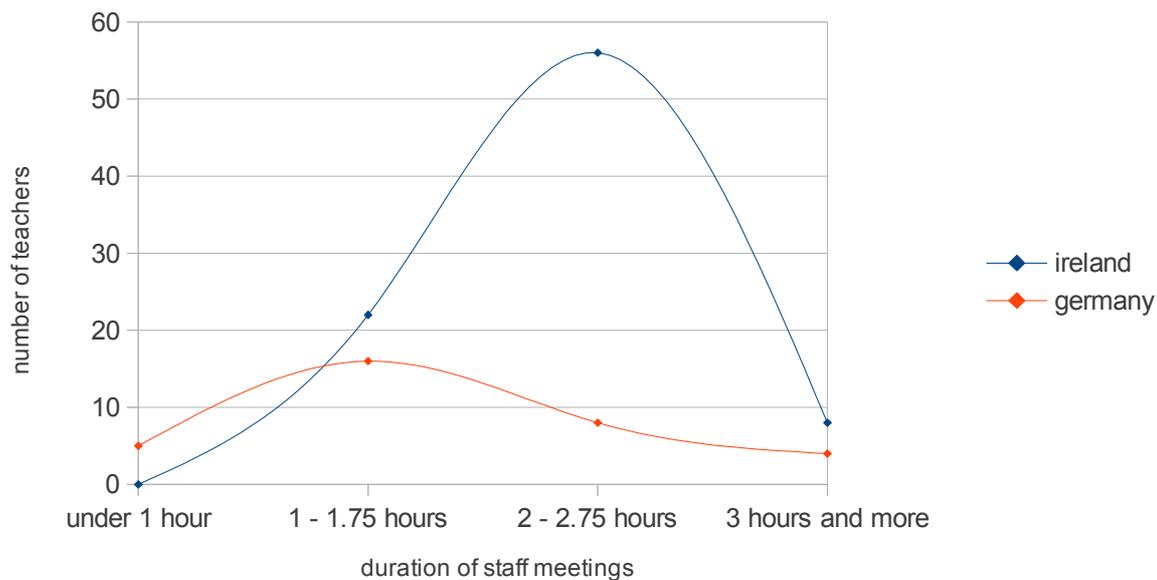
While 91 % (n = 87) of the Irish teachers saw staff meetings as a reflection setting, only 71 % (n = 33) of their German counterparts did so for their own practice.

In German schools staff meets regularly for so called conferences.³ These are formal meetings that are scheduled by the principal and attendance is obligatory. While in principle a conference can deal with any topic it is often the case that formal announcements and organisational questions dominate the agenda. One of the German mainstream teachers commented on this: *“I am waiting for the day to come where it will truly be about children and people as such. It is always about lists, rules, orders or target setting.”* Consequently she regards staff conferences as *“95 % not reflection.”* (GMS 09)

A difference that needs to be kept in mind in this regard is that many of the Irish mainstream primary schools are smaller than their German counterparts. With the size of the school grows the number of classes and the number of staff. With larger numbers of staff there is more need for overarching coordination and consequently in staff meetings there tend to be a lot of announcements and discussion on matters that are not perceived as directly related to the actual teaching practice.

Reported frequency and duration of staff meetings varied. In both countries the length of staff meetings was stated in a range from 1 hour to more than 3 hours with a shift towards longer meetings on the Irish side.

³ I do not distinguish here between the German “Konferenz” und “Dienstbesprechung” - both are subsumed under the translation “conference.”



Irish teachers responded that staff meetings were held monthly, bi-monthly or once a term⁴ while their German colleagues reported higher frequencies also.

How often do staff meetings take place?			
		Germany	Ireland
Weekly		14	0
Every 2/3 weeks		5	0
Monthly		8	54
Bi-monthly		1	5
Once a term		3	27
If needed		2	0

Reflection is an intermediate process that bridges from one act to another. It includes observation, analysis, evaluation and planning. On a sheer processual model the exchange of opinions, suggestions, appreciations on topics of the “packed agendas” of staff meetings can be understood as reflection. It remains however mostly in the safe areas of reflection on “the nuts and bolts” (Stephen Brookfield) of school practice.

The interviews held with teachers from mainstream schools in both countries suggest that this is very much the case. Quite frequently in the German interviews a distinction is made between *pedagogical* and *organisational* topics. Two of the teachers from German mainstream schools stated explicitly that staff conferences are not a reflection setting. The same two teachers however reported on parallel class meetings and on sectional staff meetings which are explicitly reserved for reflection purposes. In their case there is a clear demarcation line between the organisational and the pedagogical areas of work as to address them in different settings.

⁴ The school year is usually understood to consist of three terms: September to Christmas, January to Easter, Easter to the summer holidays.

One of the two German teachers described how in her school pedagogical meetings are held on a weekly basis for four hours.⁵ These are sectional meetings of teachers of two grades. The meetings are structured in a set manner with a brainstorming process at the start to collect topics. From this collection then one of the topics is put up for discussion in the next meeting. In each of the meetings therefore a topic that was chosen a week earlier is discussed. This allows for all members of staff to prepare over a week for this discussion. An arrangement of this duration however is absolutely exceptional for German mainstream schools and for Irish primary schools.

Common standard is rather that agendas for staff meetings are of a mixed nature. This can easily lead to frustration for those teachers who wish for a more profound reflection like the teacher waiting for the day when it is *“truly about children and people as such.”* However the majority of teachers in the mainstream schools in Ireland and Germany still state that, in their view, staff meetings are a reflection setting.

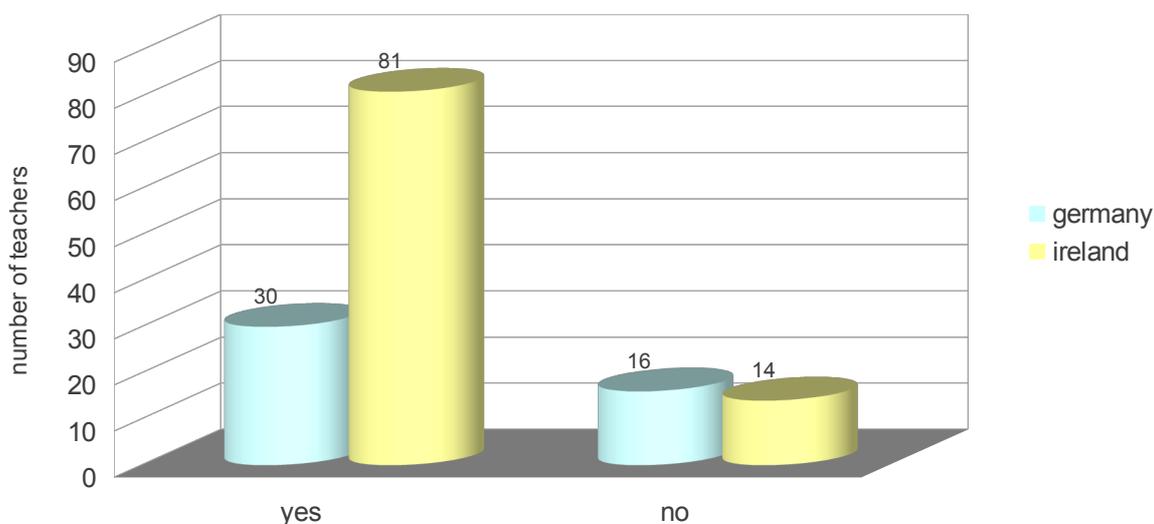
2.4. Meetings with parents

Meetings with parents are second in the list of the most frequently used reflection settings as stated by the 85.3 % of the Irish teachers. In the German questionnaire meetings with parents ranged in third position (together with meetings with pupils) with 65.2 % of teachers maintaining that this is a reflection setting they use.

In this case the visualisation of the difference between the two countries is more explicit when the actual number of cases is taken into account.

⁵ There are also fortnightly staff conferences in this school. The conferences then are reserved for 'organisational matters.'

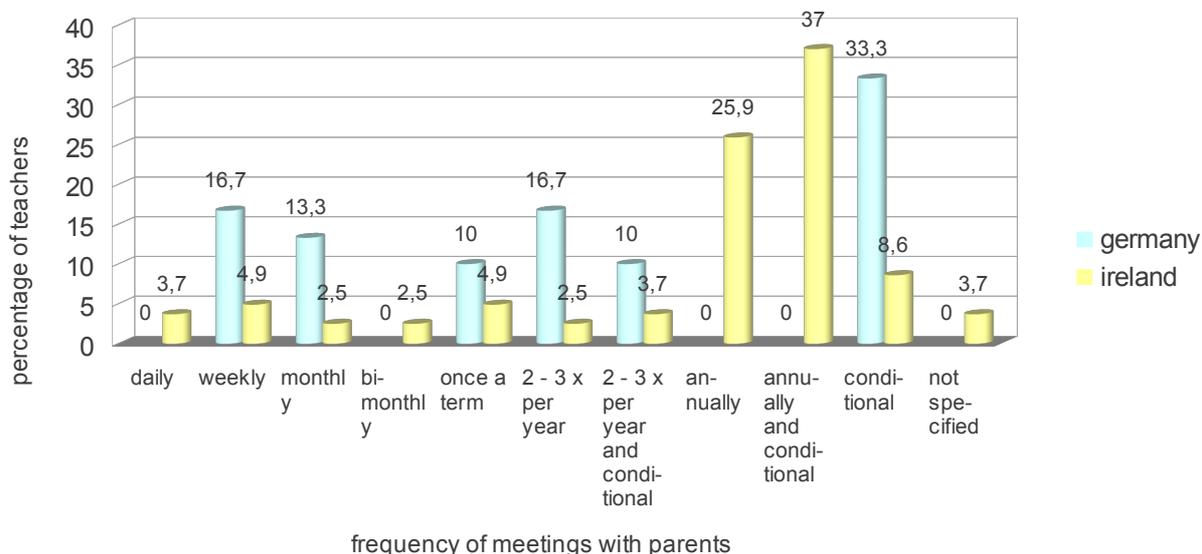
In meetings with parents, do you discuss situations that are over, to examine your own actions/practice in them, gain a better understanding of your own actions/practice and consciously learn for future (similar) situations?



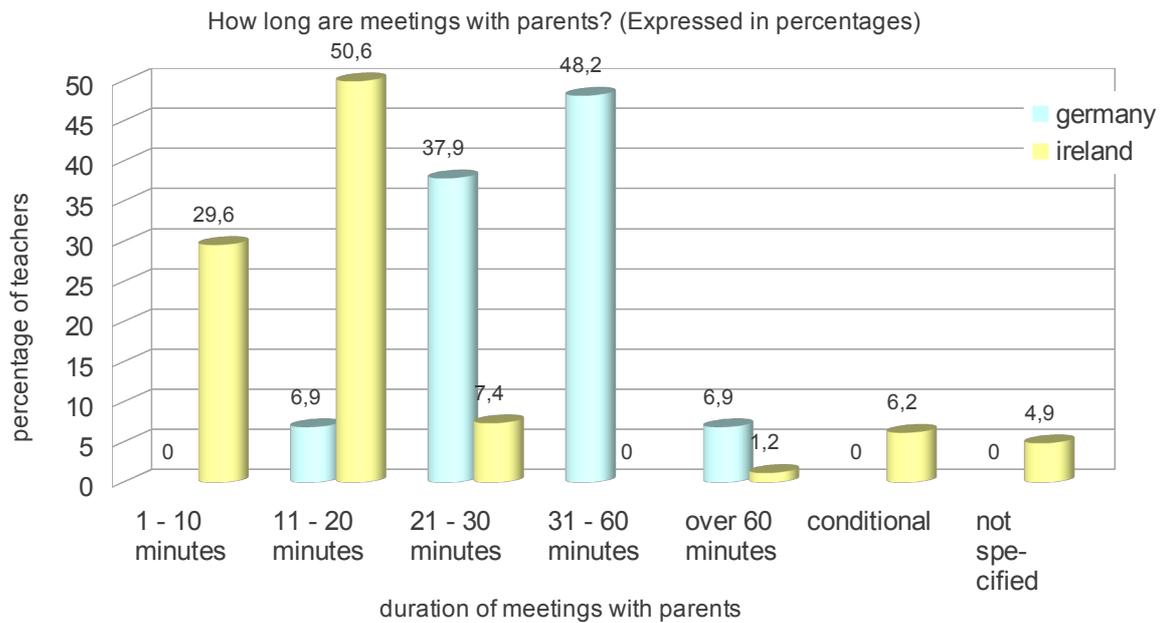
In the German mainstream school for every two teachers who hold that they do reflect on their own practice with parents there is at least one who says s/he doesn't.

As for the frequency of meetings with parents there is a variety of options stated by teachers in both countries. For the Irish mainstream teachers the most likely scenario is that these meetings take place once a year or on a conditional basis. An annual frequency for meetings with parents is completely absent from the German results, instead conditional meetings are the most mentioned.

How often do meetings with parents take place? (Expressed in percentages)



A stark difference is obvious in terms of duration of meetings with parents. While 80 per cent of the meetings with parents for Irish teachers are not longer than 20 minutes, on the German side meetings with parents to 85 per cent last between 20 and 60 minutes.



These results need to be understood against the background of the two school types. In German schools it is common practice to have meetings with the assembly of all parents of a class at least once, more likely two or three times a year. These meetings are usually an hour long, sometimes longer. From the perspective of teachers it is possible to see these also as a reflection setting.

German teachers would also meet parents of individual children. The high number of answers emphasizing the conditional character of meetings with parents can be read as an acknowledgement of the fact that teachers get in contact with parents in cases where they feel a need to address an issue arising from their practice.

Conditional meetings range similarly high amongst Irish teachers. From the interviews with the Irish teachers it is also understood that it is a frequent view that informal chats with parents, e.g. in a situation when children are collected after school, are seen as reflection settings. Apart of those the annual parent-teacher meetings that are organised in Irish primary schools are the setting mostly referred to by Irish teachers in the questionnaire. These meetings fit quite neatly in a pattern of school rituals themselves. Jorunn Midtsundstadt has made available a brief presentation on a research project carried out in Norway about “school-home-conference” meetings in which she refers to them as “ritual as different to reflexive communication”. (Midtsundstadt 2006)

This is also a hint on the question how much of what happens in parent-teacher meetings in Irish primary schools should actually be understood as reflection, and particularly reflection on the teacher's practice. The responses in the questionnaire cannot give a clear picture on that. By taking a look at the interviews with teachers it becomes clear that there is in fact a spectrum of experiences behind the simple figures.

On the one end of the spectrum an Irish teacher reports that she arranges to meet the parents of each child individually at the beginning of the school year. During the school year then there are a further two parent-teacher meetings. This teacher approaches parent-teacher meetings with the understanding that they are a chance for discussion of reciprocal expectations. (IPS 09)

The other end is mirrored when another teacher states that parents are also “*called in as a last resort, really. Let's say if it's behavioural, if it's an issue in the school yard, or if it's, well more so if a child is having difficulties maybe with a subject or whatever. Those are the situations maybe when you'd, let's say, call a parent in. Aahm, yes, we call parents in also to help us with transport to whatever, you know, there'll be that aspect of things as well. But in reflection on let's say, maybe, well you know, where we're going with the history curriculum or how we should maybe approach the Irish or whatever, I suppose in general there isn't really, there wouldn't be a whole pile of communication with parents in relation to that, not really.*” (IPS 08)

This does not mean that there is no communication between teachers and parents. In many schools there is in fact a lot of communication. However this communication is far from being symmetric. The one-up position is clearly on the side of the school as represented by the teacher.

From the position of a teacher however, this can still be seen as a chance to reflect, albeit incidentally:

“Q - O.K., again coming back to the idea of reflection. You have parent-teacher meetings, I presume that the initial purpose of parent-teacher meetings is not to reflect on your practice?

A - No. No. It's to inform parents.

Q - So, does it still happen?

A - Does reflection happen?

Q - Hmm.

A - Yes, in that sometimes you get information from parents that causes you to reflect on your practice. They tell you of something that interests the child or that terrifies the child. And you know then that your practice has to, you know, work around that difficulty the child has. Or, so definitely having lines of communication open helps reflection. Because otherwise you're working in a vacuum. So, it would be incidental, but it would involve reflection.” (IPS 02)

These experiences are echoed in quite similar fashion also by German mainstream teachers in their interviews. Communication between teachers and parents is obviously hampered very easily. A German mainstream teacher describes reflection with parents as a rare thing. It should happen, but doesn't. Relationships to/with parents remain hierarchical although she herself doesn't want it.

“Q – Are there processes of reflection with parents?

A – That is very rare, because, sometimes it may happen. But then it is always very concretely about the child, of course. (...) But it is rare because we have a clientele, well, I think, I would find it actually normal that there would be a reflection process in every conversation with parents.

Q – Where there is a feedback for you?

A – Yes, of course. I try to think how to say it, that, in fact it isn't like that. I always find myself in a role where I am sitting in front of people who say nothing. That brings me into a role where I am telling them or I ask them. That in essence is not a dialogue, or I, I don't get it into a dialogue. It remains within a type of hierarchy. It is very rare that this dissolves.” (GMS 04)

Interestingly the same teacher reports of her experience where she felt that it worked for her at the beginning of her teaching career with a generation of kinderladen-parents.

“Q – Did you experience it at all?”

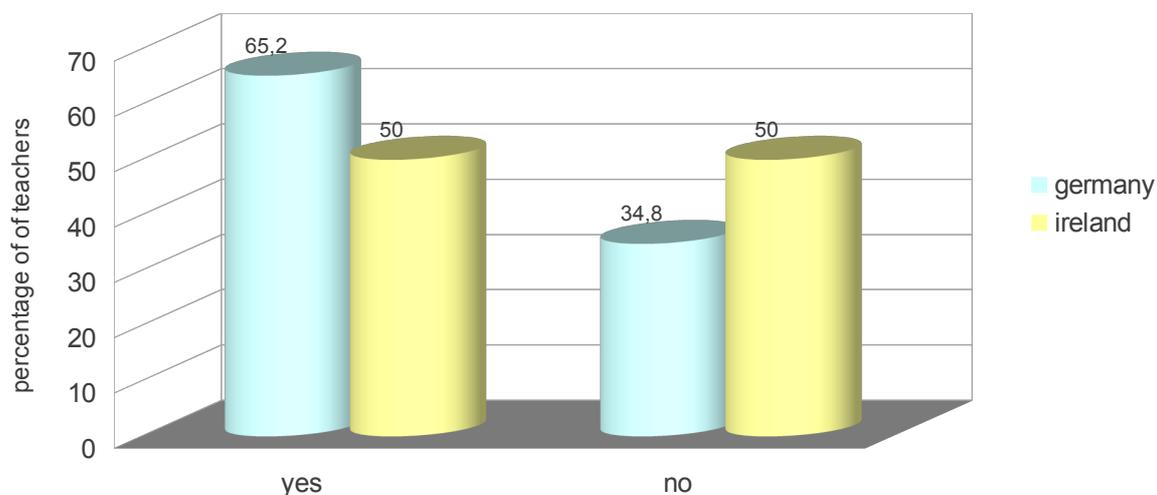
A – Yes, sure, with the parents of the kinderladen-children. At the time, this was my first year of teaching, that was incredibly strong and I thought: 'Yes, that's how it should be.' They hustled me quite a bit, and I have learned a lot from it. Afterwards, afterwards only very occasionally.” (GMS 04)

There will be more to say about the role of parents in schools when we come to the free alternative schools. At this point it may suffice to note that a majority of teachers in mainstream schools in Ireland and in Germany think that in meetings with parents reflection happens. Differences are obvious in terms of frequencies and duration of meetings as pointed out above.

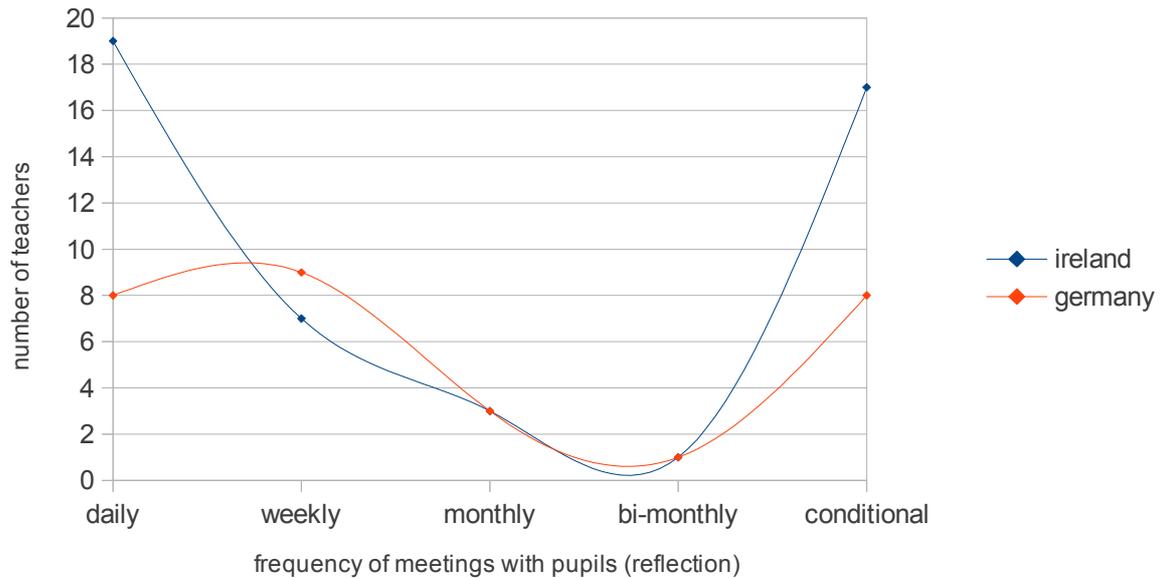
2.5. Meetings with pupils

Two thirds of teachers in German mainstream primary schools were of the opinion that pupils are partners for reflection processes for them. This was a higher proportion than in the Irish primary schools where only half of the teachers shared this opinion.

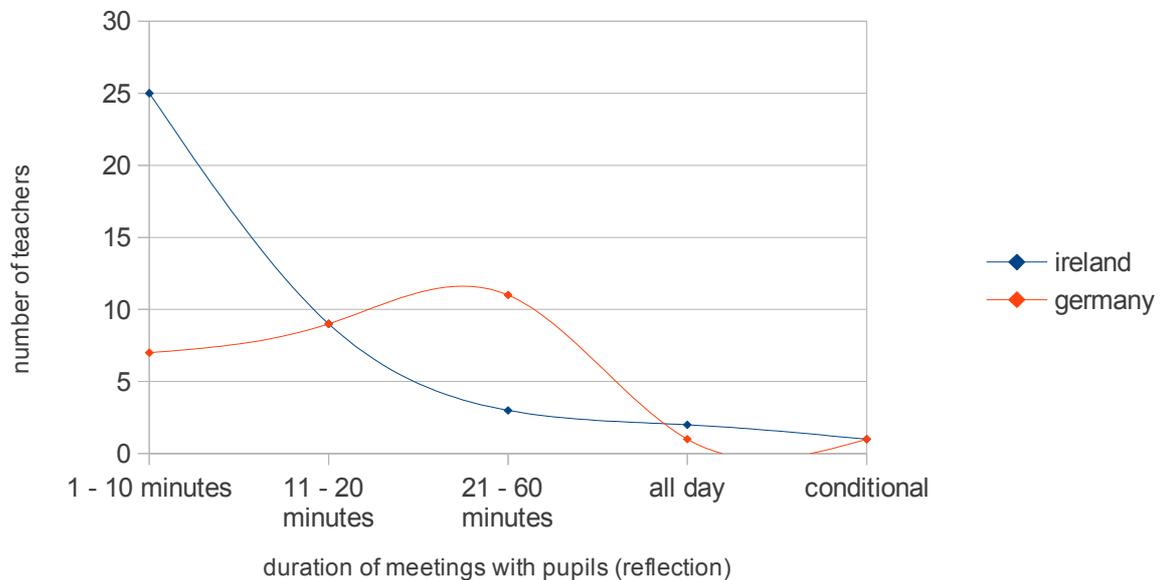
In meetings with pupils, do you discuss situations that are over, to examine your own actions/practice in them, gain a better understanding of your own actions/practice and consciously learn for future (similar) situations?
(Expressed in percentages)



Differences in the frequencies of meetings with children that are understood by teachers as reflection settings were observable in relation to the daily meetings. Apart of that the overall trend was similar in both countries.



The duration of reflection with pupils however varied stronger in that the two curves didn't merge and there was a higher number of teachers in Germany who reported of meetings of 20 – 60 minutes length.



Three teachers answered that in their opinion children are partners for reflection all day. An answer like that is based on the assumption that feedback of the children equates to reflection for the teacher. One of the Irish teachers in the interviews put it like that:

“A - Meetings with the children would be, as I work with the children. As the class teachers working with the child and praising the child or seeing can they motivate the child in a different way or whatever. That would be ongoing, it would be several times a day.

(...)

Q - So you basically get information, feedback from the children on the type of work that you did.

A - Yes, yes, and know what they enjoy and what, what works well for them, you know, really what motivates them. And that's observation as well.

Q - And you'd classify that under the term reflection for yourself?

A - Yes.” (IPS 02)

Two of the Irish teachers in the interviews stated that they discuss issues as they arise as part of SPHE⁶ or otherwise during class times. Two others reported of a more formal framework in the shape of circle-time. These discussions could be about classroom rules or school rules, about ongoing issues where there are conflicts amongst the children or about activities in relation to certain subjects (projects, excursions). Circle-time is also a specific format referred to by German teachers in their interviews.

At any rate what is clear from the questionnaire and also from the interviews is that a significant number of teachers actually identified children as partners for their reflection processes despite the fact that a discussion about a situation that is over with a six year old child in first class takes different shape than a discussion with a forty-five year old colleague.

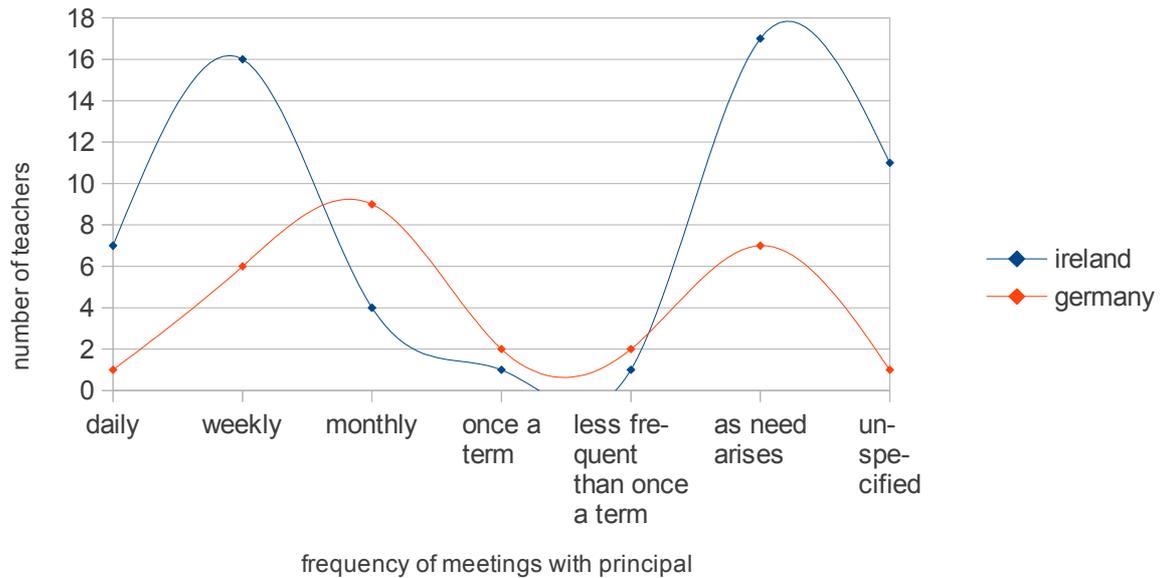
The problem here is similar to the one that arises if a conversation with a parent at home time is depicted as reflection, thereby using the same term as in describing a discussion over two hours with a parallel class team. The differences in scale, function (or orientation) are only expressible with additional terminology. While this may be available in academic parlance, this is not the case on everyday level. Hence the subsumption of a great variety of processes under the term reflection. The common denominator here is the bridging process from action to renewed action.

2.6. Meetings with principal

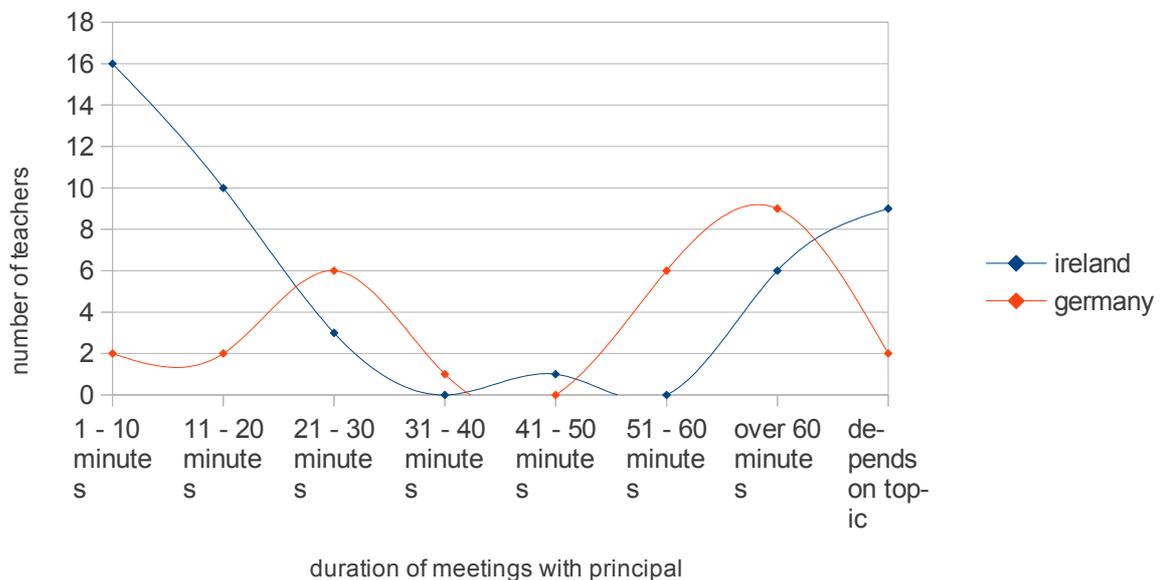
There was only a very small difference in the overall percentage of teachers in Irish and German mainstream primary schools who used meetings with their principal as a reflection setting. On the Irish side 65.8 % said that this is the case, of the German teachers 62.2 % confirmed this also.

Irish teachers were more likely to have meetings with their principal on a daily or weekly basis while monthly frequencies are more prevalent for German teachers. In both cases it is also clear that meetings were often arranged on a conditional basis when a need arises.

⁶ One of the strands of the curriculum: Social Personal and Health Education



In relation to the length of meetings with the principal there is a shift observable in that the German teachers reported more frequently of meetings to last longer than reported by their Irish colleagues.



The questionnaire distribution on the German side took place in the state of Hessen. For teachers in Hessen it is a statutory part of their work to have an annual meeting with their principal. These meetings are called *Jahresgespräch*. They are supposed to lead to a review of the teachers practice and to a target setting for the teachers' future practice. In this way these meetings fit quite well into the definition of reflection. Jahresgespräche are not done and over within a few minutes. They require sufficient time, usually around an hour.

Considering this it is in fact a surprise that meetings with the principal were not represented at a higher ratio in the responses of teachers to the questionnaire.

This becomes understandable however if the double character of these meetings is taken into account. While at the one side they can offer an opportunity for reflection, on the other side they are also formal meetings between a superior and inferior member of staff. They have been heavily criticised by the teachers union who sees in them a “milestone on the path to transform school according to principles of business administration. (...) It is embedded in a hierarchical system where targets are set top down regardless of taking into account if the necessary resources are actually available on the ground. It comes along in a cooperative camouflage and sneaks in on topics like everyday time constraints and the lack of opportunities for meaningful communication.” (GEW 2006, p. 11)

In the interviews with German mainstream teachers reference is made to the annual meetings with the principal, too. Interestingly enough some of the teachers actually report that these meetings don't happen on an annual basis at all. As one of them puts it: *“Yes, then it is the case that we once had, aahm, these annual meetings, where there was, what do you call it, I believe with children this is called learning review, and aahm, yes, there it was about these annual meetings where one more or less reflected with the principal on: what did I like, what not, and that, well, but when they come again? [laughs] I mean, the principal has a lot to do herself.”* (GMS 01)

Two others who feel that for them the meetings are a reflection setting report that they take place every two years. Yet there is also the example of another teacher who values the meetings with the principal as reflection setting and explains that in her case they are arranged twice every year.

Teachers thus may individually feel comfortable with the annual meetings or not. Either way the double character of these meetings remains a factor that is to be considered in understanding that not all teachers see them as a reflection setting.

An equivalent to the annual statutory meetings is missing in Irish schools. Here it is up to the teachers (or principal) to arrange for meeting for reflection purposes without having a binding commitment stemming from work related rules or regulations. Hence these meetings take place as it suits the teachers (or principals).

In the interviews with Irish teachers four of them stated that they do not reflect in meetings with the principal. One of them reported of adverse relationships with the principal whom she identified as constantly putting obstacles in the way of initiatives from teachers. Only one teacher stated clearly that she engages in discussions with the principal on various topics in relation to her teaching practice.

2.7. Staff planning days

Staff planning days were a regular feature in Irish primary schools up to the school year 2010/11. For purposes of school planning, or particularly also for in-service tuition on the introduction of the (new) curriculum (after 1999) schools could close for two days. Children stayed at home, teachers were obliged to take part in these days.

With the Croke Park agreement these extra two days of school closure have been jettisoned. The central purpose of the arrangements under the Croke Park agreement was to provide for certain essential activities to take place outside class/tuition time. Key objective is to maximise class/tuition time. The essential activities are: school planning, continuous professional development, induction, pre and post school supervision, policy development, staff meetings, nationally planned in-service, school arranged in-service.

The questionnaire was distributed and collected in Ireland before the implementation of the Croke Park agreement. Out of 95 respondents 79 found that in staff planning days they discussed situations that are over, to examine their own actions/practice in them, gain a better understanding of their own actions/practice and consciously learn for future (similar) situations. Sixteen of the respondents felt, that for them no reflection took place in staff planning days.

With the interviews conducted after the implementation of the Croke Park agreement it comes as no surprise that of the interviewed teachers all but one do not list staff planning days as a setting in which they reflect. Irrespective of the quality of the actual discussion processes in staff planning days it is simply a feature that in this format is not available any more for teachers in Irish primary schools.

The equivalent of staff planning days in German mainstream schools are what is called *pedagogical day*. These are days where the children are not in school and staff discusses a particular topic. Topics as mentioned in the interview series included competence standards, school profile, public relations, homework, school internal curriculum, teaching English in primary school, evaluation, aggression. One teacher reported also about a staff planning day that dealt with rituals in school. In some cases external tutors or guest speakers are invited to take part in the staff planning days.

Considering that all German mainstream teachers in the interviews stated that there are staff planning days in their schools and that they also reckoned these are a reflection setting for them the real surprise is that in the questionnaire just under half of the respondents (22 of 46) listed staff planning days as a reflection setting. In this case it cannot be fully ruled out that there was a problem with the translation of the questionnaire and not all teachers may have equated the term used (*Teamplanungstage*) with pedagogical days. On the other hand, no respondent included in the questionnaire the pedagogical day under *other settings* either which would suggest that the translation was not the problem but rather teachers who responded did in fact not see these days as a reflection setting.

2.8. Professional support/counselling

In Ireland in 2010, in a major programme of rationalisation many support services were discontinued and a new multi-disciplinary Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) was established. With effect from 1 September 2010, support for school development planning was part of the remit of the PDST. Before that there were a number of programmes and agencies operating as support for schools.⁷

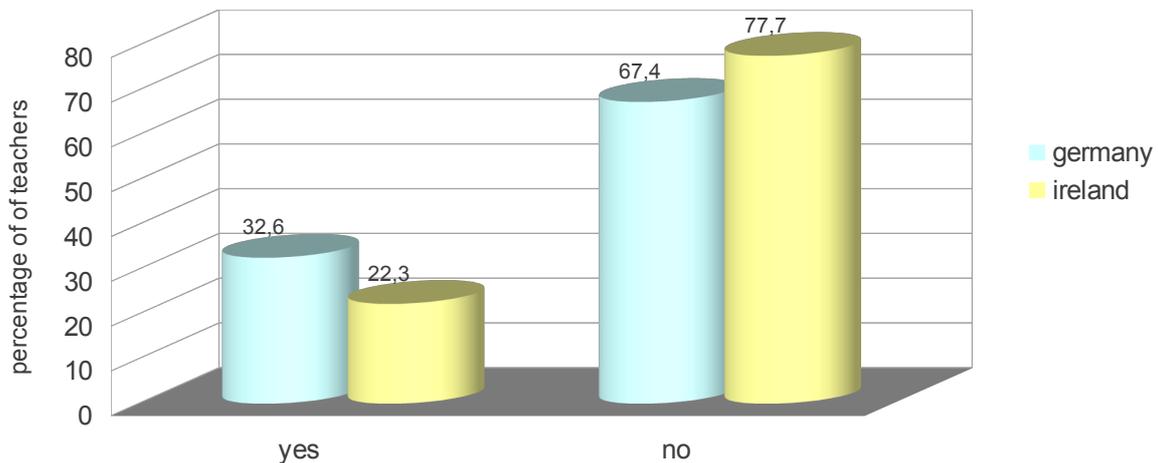
⁷ E. g.: Primary Professional Development Services (PPDS), School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI), Maths Recovery, Reading Recovery (see also: <https://sites.google.com/a/pdst.ie/pdst/home>)

Teachers in Ireland can also avail of the services of the National Educational Psychological Service. NEPS psychologists work with both primary and post-primary schools and they are concerned with learning, behaviour, social and emotional development.

Obviously teachers are also free to use the services of independent counsellors, psychotherapists or personal coaches.

Professional support/counselling ranged at the bottom of the list of reflection settings used by Irish primary school teachers with a rate of 22.3 % (n = 21). The results of the German questionnaire also showed that professional support/counselling of the listed reflection settings was the least frequently used one amongst respondents, albeit the ratio of 32.6 % (n = 15) was higher than in Ireland.

In professional support/counselling,
do you discuss situations that are over, to examine your own actions/practice in them,
gain a better understanding of your own actions/practice and consciously learn for future (similar) situations?
(Expressed in percentages)



The overall numbers of respondents who provided information on frequencies and duration in relation to professional support/counselling was rather low in both countries (Ireland, n = 17; Germany, n = 15). In this case it does not make sense to include a distribution of frequency and length of professional support/counselling in form of a chart. As can be expected meetings with/for professional support/counselling overall were reported as lasting longer than in many other reflection settings.

Length of professional support/counselling			
		Germany	Ireland
20 - 30 minutes		1	2
31 - 60 minutes		2	6
61 - 90 minutes		6	2
91 - 120 minutes		3	2
3 hours		2	1
full day		1	0
5 days / summer course, in-service		0	2
varies / conditional		0	2

When teachers of Irish schools in the interviews referred to professional support/counselling as a reflection setting they spoke of a) school psychologists, speech therapists with whom the teacher discussed special needs requirements, or b) members of the PDST who visited the schools to support teachers in implementing specific curricular programs.

German mainstream teachers in the interviews mentioned meetings with school social workers, school psychologist, but also reflective supervision⁸ and open meetings with guest speakers who were invited regularly to the schools.

3. Interlude - Comments on comparison of German and Irish mainstream schools

As mentioned above the data collection via the questionnaire in Ireland took place just before the Croke Park agreement came into effect. As a part of the deal between public sector unions and the Irish government teachers were supposed to work an extra 36 hours annually. “The purpose of the Croke Park agreement is to provide a block of 36 hours to be allocated to non-class contact activities which would previously have necessitated a school closure / half day. Accordingly, such closures on a teaching day are no longer allowed (...)” (INTO 2011a)

It is not clear how exactly the Croke Park agreement will influence the reflective culture in Irish schools in a long term perspective. Statements of teachers in the interview series indicate that there is a chance for an increase of time given to reflection, however this cannot be sufficiently represented in the context of my study. If there was further interest in this matter it would need to be monitored on a basis of updated surveys in a few years.⁹

⁸ The concept of reflective supervision will be attended to in more detail in section 4.7.

⁹ In the context or re-negotiations of the Croke Park agreement the Department of Education and Skills has conveyed a survey with all schools in Ireland at the beginning of the school year 2012/13; see: (<http://www.education.ie/en/The-Department/Re-use-of-Public-Sector-Information/Use-of-additional-hours-provided-under-the-Public-Service-Croke-Park-Agreement-%E2%80%93-Completion-of-Online-Survey.pdf>). The aim was to find out how schools had made use of the 36 non-class hours. There were seven categories listed: School Planning and Policy Development, Staff Meetings, Parent-teacher Meetings, Induction, Approved School-arranged-in-service, Nationally-mandated-in-service (CPD), Appropriate Further Education Activities; plus 'other'. Although requested by me, the results of this survey were unfortunately not made available by the DES.

For now we may note in a brief summary that staff meetings in Irish mainstream schools were reported to happen less frequently than in their German counterparts, but to last longer. We will also see soon how accumulated times of staff meetings in the two types of mainstream schools compare to those of free alternative schools.

For meetings with colleagues that are not staff meetings the relation between frequency and duration is turned the opposite way. German teachers reported such meetings with less frequency but with longer duration. That this is also an indicator of more formal settings in which these meetings happen is supported by the absence of informal meetings (corridor talk) in the reflection settings for half of the interview partners from German mainstream schools.

Irish teachers who see parents as partners for reflection are more likely to meet them less frequently than their German colleagues. At the same time these meetings are likely to also be shorter on the Irish side with 80 % of them not extending 15 – 20 minutes.

Where teachers see pupils as partners for reflection the meetings with children in which reflection happens are more likely to be slightly longer in German mainstream schools, but slightly more frequent in Irish schools.

For both settings, meetings with parents and meetings with children, questions are to be asked about the actual nature of the communication processes that are deemed reflection by the teachers. Status and role definitions are likely factors to influence these processes in a manner that can be clearly felt as problematic also by teachers. On this background it is actually surprising that the ratios of teachers in both countries who see meetings with parents as a reflection setting are as high (IE = 85.3 %; D = 65,2 %).

Meetings of teachers with the principal for reflection purposes happen slightly less frequently in German mainstream schools than in Ireland. These meetings are however shorter in duration in Ireland. The annual Jahresgespräche as a statutory element are obviously not seen as a reflection setting by the majority of German mainstream teachers.

While staff planning days are an obsolete feature for now in Irish schools, they were yet a prominent reflection setting as long as they were available. The rather low ratio of teachers in German mainstream schools who refer to staff planning days as reflection setting is surprising and would require a closer investigation.

Professional support/counselling ranges at the bottom of the pile of the reflection settings in both school types. The reason for this is not exactly clear from the data available. A number of factors may play a role in this. One interview partner in Ireland for example reported a long 'waiting list' with the PDST which indicates a lack of availability of particular services. Organisational factors like perceived time constraints can play a role in this as can lack of funds, and last not least the organisational culture of these schools.

4. Reflection settings in Free Alternative Schools

In this section, I am going to attend to the results of the 14 interviews with teachers from 11 different free alternative schools regarding the reflection settings used in these schools. I will however also refer to the results of the Irish and German mainstream schools wherever such a reference makes sense as a comparison.

4.1. Meetings with colleagues (not staff meetings)

As mentioned above the teachers of mainstream schools who responded to the questionnaire in Ireland and Germany included under this heading informal exchange on a daily basis (corridor talk, lunch-break, brief exchanges before school) as well as more organised meetings with a set time, space and possibly agenda. Both varieties were also represented in the interviews with teachers from free alternative schools.

It is clear that informal exchanges in the interstices of time-tables and work schedules play a role in all three school types in relation to bringing up topics for reflection. We have however seen already that between the mainstream schools in Ireland and Germany there is a difference about how much the teachers in these schools referred to such exchanges as reflection.

Equally for teachers in free alternative schools informal exchange did not play as prominent a role as a reflection setting as it is the case particularly for the Irish teachers. They were mentioned by teachers of seven of the eleven schools as a possibility for reflection to happen. Their importance was however not specifically highlighted by any of those teachers.

A kind of intermittent form of meeting was reported by one teacher in whose school there is a daily lunch-break and all staff members are meeting in the school office for 30 – 60 minutes. *“What I mean is that all staff members meet in the school office and the children are not directly supervised. And when we sit together there having a cup of tea these informal conversations happen. They are about private matters. But there are always school matters touched also.”* (FAS 03) These school matters are then brought into more formal settings where reflection takes on a different form, more concentrated and focussed.

For the more organised meetings: In seven of the free alternative schools the teachers reported of sectional meetings in which only a part of the staff takes part. These meetings were organised usually between those teachers who work with the same age group.

The free alternative schools are relatively small schools. There were only two schools of the eleven where the enrolment figures are above 100, and in both of these schools this figure included primary and secondary school. Enrolment figures of the other schools ranged between 25 and 89.

In addition to the low number of children it is also a common conceptual element of the free alternative schools that where formal groups of children are built, they are usually multi-grade groups of two, three or more years together. In two schools for example the age grouping was: 3 – 6 years; 6 – 9 years; 9 – 12 years. This grouping is similar to small Irish schools. However it is based on the conscious decision for multi-grade groups. They are seen as an advantage in terms of peer

relations, peer learning and social learning.

In all free alternative schools there were always at least two adults, often three or four adults working together with one age group. Sectional meetings thus refers to meetings that are organised between these adults.

In the free alternative schools the sectional meetings are an important addition to the staff meetings in which all staff members come together. The frequency of these sectional meetings is usually weekly with a duration of 45 minutes to 2 hours. In one case the meetings happen 2 – 3 times a week as long as needed, in another one monthly for 2 hours.

Amongst German mainstream teachers meetings with their parallel class teachers were the most important reflection setting. For many Irish teachers parallel class meetings play a minor role. Only three Irish interview partners stated that they are using parallel class meetings at all.

4.2. Staff meetings

All teachers of free alternative schools classified staff meetings as reflection setting. Considering their frequency and duration one can say that staff meetings play an immensely important role in the running of free alternative schools. In ten of the eleven schools staff meetings were on a weekly basis, only in one school they happened monthly. The shortest duration of the weekly meetings was stated as 90 minutes, five schools had meetings of 2 hours length, in two cases the meetings were 3 hours long, in one it was four hours and in another one it was 4.5 hours.

In the combination of frequency and duration of staff meetings there is a clear difference between the free alternative schools and the other two school types.

Once a staff meeting is considered to be a reflection setting – which as we have seen is already not the case with 29 % for the German mainstream teachers – it is obvious that teachers in free alternative schools have a multiple of the time available in staff meetings in comparison to their colleagues in Irish or German mainstream schools.

As a simple arithmetic operation, if the accumulated time of staff meetings is considered for a given school year¹⁰, figures add up significantly for the teachers of the free alternative schools. In the following table are also included the figures of accumulated time for sectional meetings as in larger schools these can take the function of a reflection setting instead of a staff meeting.

Not for all interview partners figures for staff meetings or sectional meetings are available. The meetings may still happen, but what happens during these meetings the teachers don't classify as reflection.

¹⁰ The school year in the 16 German states is normally 39 weeks long. The school year in Ireland is normally 36.5 weeks (183 days) long for primary schools. In the calculation I used 37 weeks as a common multiplier.

Accumulated time of staff meetings (annually)					
Free alternative schools		Irish mainstream schools		German mainstream schools	
Staff meetings	Sectional meeting	Staff meetings	Sectional meeting	Staff meetings	Sectional meeting
12 – 55.5 hrs	27.75 hrs	05 – 9 hrs	n/a	01 – 27.75 hrs	37 hrs
03 – 74 hrs	a/n	03 – 10 hrs	n/a	10 – 37 hrs	n/a
06 – 74 hrs	a/n	02 – 18 hrs	18.5 hrs	07 – 18.5 hrs	37 hrs
08 – 74 hrs	37 hrs	06 – 18 hrs	a/n	03 – 37 hrs	27.75 hrs
07 – 74 hrs	74 hrs	07 - 22.5 hrs	4.5 hrs	06 – n/a	6 hrs
02 – 83.5 hrs	a/n	04 – 27.75 hrs	18.5 hrs	05 – n/a	18.5 hrs
13 – 111 hrs	N/a	01 – 37 hrs	a/n	02 – n/a	37 hrs
04 – 129.5 hrs	N/a	08 – 37 hrs	n/a	08 – nts	37 hrs
01 – 148 hrs	n/a	09 – n/a	n/a	09 – n/a	37 hrs
14 – 166.5 hrs	n/a			04 – nts	148 hrs
05 – nts	55.5 hrs			11 – n/a	n/a

Legend:
n/a – not applicable, these are not referred to as reflection settings by the respective teachers
a/n – as needed, the length of meetings depends on topic
nts – no time stated, in the interview the teacher did not state how long the meetings are

The compilation as presented in the last table may be based on a rather low number of cases. However it still gives a rather reliable indicator of trends in comparing the three different school types.

The difference in time is obvious. Only in one of the German mainstream schools are the accumulated hours equivalent to the higher results of the free alternative schools. The majority of the German mainstream schools don't even reach the lowest figure of a free alternative school. The figures for the Irish schools are also such that the highest result is yet to reach the lowest figure of the free alternative schools.

4.3. Meetings with parents

Teachers of nine of the eleven free alternative schools saw parents as partners for reflection. The frequency of these meetings ranged from weekly (2) over fortnightly (3) to every 6 weeks (1). Other teachers mentioned meetings are arranged as needed. Parents also play a role as reflection partners in discussions in context of annual seminars, conventions or similar events. The role of parents in free alternative schools is often very different to the role that parents play in a mainstream school. Free alternative schools rely heavily on a group of determined parents to actually start up at all. Where parents are members of the association that runs the school they are effectively co-owners of the school. Parents often take on active roles on various organisational levels.

There is a pattern to the internal developments in alternative educational institutions. In an earlier work I have described how the processes of professionalisation and institutionalisation influence the role and status of members within the social system of kinderläden. (Hamm 2005) The same dynamic applies to free alternative schools.

For the first number of years in these institutions parents often play a very decisive and important

role in many aspects of the running of the school. They hire staff, monitor finances, manage school premises, but also influence the conceptual discussion and thereby make definite claims as to the concrete daily activities and particularly the overall atmosphere in the schools. With the departure of founding members and also with the growth of a school the decision making powers can change in favour of the staff.¹¹ It is a matter then of the local circumstances how exactly the positions between parents and staff are defined.

In schools where parents still play a strong role in the organisation of the school teachers can feel uneasy about their own position. The relationship of teacher and parent/s is one that is not like in state's schools defined along institutional boundaries that keep parents well at bay. Parents approach teachers in free alternative schools mostly with a great sense of self-assurance.

One of the teachers in the interviews highlights the effects stemming from the positions from which she meets parents in her job in the free alternative school compared to her former employment in a state's school. Particularly the idea of being employed by the parents plays a role here:

“Well, parents were always for me in professional, involved in my reflection. That was the case earlier, too, always in meeting parents, where we developed thoughts and had exchange and looked at how things are at home, how are things at school, who does what and so. Here this is a different situation (...) I find it difficult at times. Because, they are my employers (...) and they are parents, yes, and that makes, that they are also employers makes it difficult at times, you see, because it makes me unfree also at times.

I sometimes felt, the situation here now is like 'we ought to make it', you know, as if we are on a probe, the new ones [laughs], and I can be let go, they can fire me. That was not the case before,¹² you know. And I realise that has an effect, definitely.” (FAS 06)

Parents who send their children to a free alternative school have made a very conscious decision to do so. They are usually not only familiar with educational theory in general but often have a concrete interest in the upholding or development of the pedagogical concepts of the schools. For teachers this means that there is always a chance that parents will push for a discussion of the daily practice of the schools in light of observations they make.

“We have plenary assemblies [assembly of staff and parents; RH] on specific topics. That is, staff of the school may say, we need to, or we would like to discuss what is going in the age group of the young ones. It can also be that parents bring up a topic. They may say: 'you claim to work on the mathetic principle, but we don't see that in your practice, we need to discuss this.' Both is possible.” (FAS 03)

Teachers in free alternative schools can also tap into the resources that parents offer via their talents or knowledge. In terms of reflection processes this has a concrete effect in the sense that it increases the potential of changing perspective. And it can have significant effects on the daily practice. One example that also relates to the idea of rituals:

“(...) when the class had to leave our school after four years (...) I have, aahm, the initiative actually came from this mother, together with her we thought about, can we create a ritual to mark this departure in a dignified way and make it nice. At the time we have discussed it explicitly in

¹¹ The formulation “can change” is a rather euphemistic way to express what actually happens on interpersonal level for such change to come into effect. “... we have fought our case, in massive struggles ... until we were in the position to decide who will be employed to work with us, yes, not with the parents, but with us.” (Interview Gabi Asal 1996; Archiv Beniro e. V., Langen) For an impression of the dimension of such struggles see also: Rödler (1984).

¹² “before” refers to an earlier job in a state's school

these terms. And we have together, the two of us, and also with the children, thought about, aahm, how is that, what all is needed, what is important for us, what elements should it have, how should it be. And we have you could say in advance developed together, and then also did it in that way.” (FAS 08)

From the perspective of teachers in free alternative schools it is rather unthinkable to assume that parents may be “*called in as a last resort*” (IPS 08) or that in meetings with parents the teachers find themselves “*sitting in front of people who say nothing*” (GMS 04).

In relation to reflection processes such an observation highlights the restricted informative value of a purely statistical approach. Where the aim is to understand reflection processes of teachers the numerical representation of reflection processes in terms of frequencies and duration therefore need to be seen as indicators always in need of qualitative specifications.

On a general plane the differences that are prevalent between mainstream schools and the free alternative schools would also be a highly valuable field for further studies with a focus on the actual quality of reflection processes.

4.4. Meetings with pupils

In ten of the eleven free alternative schools teachers reported that they see pupils as partners for reflection processes. Teachers of six schools found that for them regular meetings with children on a daily (circle-time) or a weekly basis (school meeting) were a reflection setting. Another four teachers stated that for them reflection with children happened on an ongoing basis in informal manner.

Similar to the difference in status that parents have in free alternative schools compared to state's schools it is a logical consequence of the conceptual framework of these schools that children also enjoy a different status than in mainstream schools. The practice in free alternative schools is based on a model of intergenerational relationships that is kept open by the old generation. It is understood as experiment, that is: subject to negotiation between adults and children. Thus there is a constant process of change in the activities also.

Essential for free alternative schools is the attention given to the explicit culture of discussion and radical democratic decision making. In this culture children are included. For such a culture to become real in many of the schools formal settings are established in which discussion and decision making takes place. From the perspective of a teacher the meetings in these formal settings can be a reflection opportunity, too.

It is worth pointing out that for a teacher reflect upon the actual teaching of a topic/subject could be part of a group discussion with those children who take part in the activity. It would rarely be part of a discussion in a school meeting. Topics in these meetings may include discussions on certain activities (school tours, excursions, events to be organised etc.) but often are also concerned with regulating relationships within the school, hence: negotiations about acceptable standards of behaviour, use of spaces (rooms), discussions about rules etc.

“So someone makes a proposal [... in the school meeting; RH ...] you should be able to play

computer games all the time. We don't vote on it immediately. That gets then to the morning circles for a week for consideration. And that's where I'd say that reflection happens with the students, where we within the morning circles in that week, we look at, yeah, what the rule has been, how the rule works, how well it works, what doesn't work in it, whether the proposal solves those problems, ahm, whether it's responsible to take on the new proposal, what might be problematic in it, whether we want to develop an alternative proposal to it before the vote. That kind of thing. So it's like a space, that it's like the school meeting is presented with an issue and then we take that to the morning circles for reflection of, on that issue and how do we want to go about it.” (FAS 09)

4.5. Meetings with principal

As a reflection setting this does not play a significant role in free alternative schools. Conceptually these schools are indebted to the idea of radical democracy. Hierarchies are kept as flat as possible. For formal reasons there may be a person who is declared *team-leader* vis-a-vis agencies of the state or the general public. Internally this however does not play a role in most cases either.

Only one teacher referred to meetings with a so-called leaders-team (three staff members) as a reflection setting. For this teacher it was the first year of teaching at all and meetings with the leaders-team had a mentoring function, too. In this regard they clearly included reflection on the teacher's practice in the context of the free alternative school.

5.4.6. Staff planning days

In most free alternative schools staff planning days are an important reflection setting as documented by teachers of nine schools in their interviews. The number of days reported remarkably extends the maximum of two days as granted in German mainstream schools.

The figures from the interviews with teachers in free alternative schools are:

- 2 x per year: 1
- 4 x per year: 2
- 5 x per year: 1
- 6 x per year: 1
- 7 x per year: 2
- 9 x per year: 1
- 19 x per year: 1

Notably in five cases these days take place during holiday times, particularly concerning the last week of the summer holidays. Often these days are reserved for longer discussions on the school concept, but they also play a role for concrete planning of activities for a school year. Not all staff planning days are however during holidays. There are cases where staff planning days are organised during the school year. On such days often parents take care of the groups in the school on the day while teachers retreat for the day for discussion.

Staff planning days are also referred to by teachers of free alternative schools as *pedagogical days* or as *team days*. Where they are held during the school year the topics can be ongoing developments that are monitored.

Two teachers in their interviews also mentioned meetings to take place once a year over a weekend in which the whole school community, teachers, parents, children can take part. These have the character of an annual convention. In them all aspects of the school life can become a topic.

4.7. Professional support/counselling

External support plays a role in a variety of ways for reflection of teachers in free alternative schools. In two cases, teachers report of experts on specific topics being invited for discussion in either team-meetings or staff planning days. In another case the team of the school availed of the service of an outside person to engage in team-building exercises on a monthly basis. These examples resemble ways of professional support as it comes into play in the mainstream schools.

However there is a particular aspect of professional support/counselling prevalent in free alternative schools that is completely unknown to Irish teachers and is only marginally used by German mainstream teachers. In ten of the eleven schools teachers take part on a regular basis in reflective supervision. This was mentioned in passing already as a reflection setting above and shall be explained a bit better here now.

In an English speaking context “supervision has been defined with words like surveillance, regulation, and administration. At the same time, it has been associated with words like guidance instruction, and leadership. (...) In many school systems, for practical purposes, supervision has been closely connected to assessing the performance of teachers.” (Snow-Gerono 2008, p. 5)

In a German context it is common to speak of supervision as a concept of counselling that can also be described as reflection under guidance. I will however use the term *reflective supervision* when I speak of supervision in the context of German mainstream and free alternative schools.

Reflective supervision enjoys some dissemination within health related professions also in the English speaking world. Here a distinction is made between administrative supervision which is concerned with the oversight of rules, regulations, policies, procedures, clinical supervision which is case-focused, but not necessarily taking into account the practitioner's shares/interventions, and reflective supervision in which attention is paid to all relationships (practitioner - supervisor; practitioner - parent; practitioner - child; parent - child). (MACMH 2012)

In educational fields in Ireland reflective supervision however is a rather unknown feature.

Reflective supervision in Germany is offered as a service by specially trained professionals. To become a certified supervisor one has to complete a postgraduate course with one of forty providers nationwide. Supervisors who work with free alternative schools are normally free-lance professionals.¹³

¹³ There are also certified supervisors who are employed in various capacities by e. g. school psychological services, community social services or other states agencies. Acquiring a certification as supervisor can be an add-on to existing professional qualifications (for social workers, psychologists, teachers) that may open an alternative career path within (or outside) institutions.

The concept of reflective supervision aims at a process of recognising, understanding and learning about perspectives for professional practice. There are different organisational formats in which reflective supervision is practised: individual sessions between a client and the supervisor; group supervision whereby a group is built of practitioners from a specific field of work but not normally all working in the same institution; team supervision whereby the team of an institution takes part.

Peer supervision is used as a term when there is no supervisor present. It resembles concepts of peer review groups in an English speaking context. *Kollegiale Beratung* (aka: *intervision*)¹⁴ is a specific way of peer supervision whereby the process is strictly structured and follows a number of clearly defined steps. Essential for peer supervision and intervision is that there are no hierarchical relationships amongst the participants.

Reflective supervision relies on voluntary participation. During reflective supervision questions, problems, conflicts and cases of the concrete experience of the participants are reflected upon. The teachers of the free alternative schools refer in their interviews to two different approaches.

The first is usually called case supervision. Here the participants discuss a case of a particular child as presented by one of the participants at the beginning of the session. The second is called team supervision, here now referring not only to the composition of the group but also to the topical direction that the session takes. Topics are usually connected to internal dynamics amongst members of the team. In both cases however the institutional conditions for the professional practice is taken into account as well as the emotions of participants and interpersonal relationships in the workplace.

In Germany reflective supervision as an instrument for reflection is sometimes also promoted as a means for mainstream schools. However the hierarchical organisation of the administration of mainstream schools seems to be a grave hindrance for reflective supervision to take root in this sector. This is mirrored in the quote of Jürgen Mietz, himself a member of the school psychological service in Duisburg: “Fred Kofman and Peter M. Senge (...) have mentioned characteristics of learning organisations. Interestingly these are characteristics that are at the core of supervisory work and which via supervision could find their way into everyday practice of the organisation. These include: slowing down, accepting of the other, interest in analysing and processing of systemic consequences of interventions, dealing with different values. Furthermore supervision offers the chance to combine individuality with the demands of the organisation. Supervision turns the case of the learning organisation (or what is likely to be meant by it) from the head down to the feet. Whoever speaks of a learning organisation without speaking of the subjects risks the suspicion of manipulation. Supervision thus finds itself in a contradictory field of tension between the basis and the elites. It is – like the subjects – called for and is needed, but similarly avoided and fended off, because it questions central processes of regulation. In this sense supervision is political throughout and touches on questions of democratic culture.” (Mietz 2000)

In the context of free alternative schools with their flat hierarchies reflective supervision is an instrument that is highly regarded as an approach for reflection processes that are inclusive of the diverse influence factors that all can play a role for professional practice. Although concepts of reflective supervision are often strongly informed by theories of psychoanalytic descent, it is not to

¹⁴ There is no exact translation for the term “Kollegiale Beratung” from German to English. In a German context it is sometimes also referred to as intervision. The differences between intervision and supervision are that there is no group leader in intervision. A rotational system of chairing and steering meetings amongst participants is an essential methodological element of intervision. One can say that intervision is a form of collective counseling.

be seen as a therapeutic process, but rather aiming at increased professional capacity.

A basic idea that is quite common to reflective supervision is that solutions are not offered by a supervisor. They are found by the participants in their own reflective engagement with the topic. The supervisor functions merely as a tour guide through the labyrinth of one's own thoughts, feelings, wishes. These dimensions are quite in-fitting with the professional structures and pedagogical approaches familiar to the free alternative schools. On a certain level the approach of reflective supervision mirrors the mathetic principle. Therefore it is of little surprise that reflective supervision is named as an essential reflection setting by the vast majority of the teachers in their interviews. In two of the free alternative schools kollegiale Beratung is also used in addition to reflective supervision.

The frequency of regular reflective supervision sessions varies from every two weeks to every two months. These sessions are 90 minutes or two hours long. In two schools there were in addition also 4 full days reserved for team-supervision. These days were usually scheduled as weekend dates.

4.8. Peer evaluation

Teachers of three free alternative schools also spoke of peer evaluation networks as another reflection setting which they found very helpful for their own practice.

The peer evaluation is carried out in a network of schools (in these cases the number of cooperating schools was always four). Delegates of each school visit each of the other schools every year for a period of three days. The hosting schools provide an observation task for the delegates who are supposed to give the hosts feedback on the observed topic. The delegates obviously bring their experiences back to their own schools also.

“(...) it's amazing, and that, so you're very specifically there to evaluate the school that you are visiting. So we do a verbal feedback around at the end and then they get written feedback from every individual observer that we all receive, all of the feedback. And I felt like, for me that was a, we were there to be giving feedback to that school that we were visiting. But we received, but what I, but I felt like our school benefited significantly from what myself and my colleague experienced there and the idea that we brought back from that school.” (FAS 09)

The value of such a reflection process is also highlighted by another teacher who specifically points to the fact that free alternative schools have a lot of visitors from a mainstream background. These visitors are appreciated by the free alternative schools as a way to promote the conceptual ideas of the schools on education. However the gain for the free alternative schools of these visits in terms of reflection is very limited. Here the peer evaluation network offers an opportunity for teachers from the free alternative schools to come into an exchange with others who are already informed about the conceptual foundations and with whom discussion is possible on the basis of similar practical experiences.

“They give us feedback and we reflect on the processes. And there are a lot of questions like: 'why is that done this way, and why did you do this in that situation?' And that is really, it can be in individual meetings also, you know, if one of these colleagues is present in one of your sessions. Or it is also possible that one asks directly for a peer to come to observe, like: 'I would like to have a feedback from you, can you come in?’

And it is great, you know. We have a lot, a lot of visitors. But their questions are often on a different level that is rather fruitless for us, you know, stuff like: 'If the children sit on desks, can they learn at all?' You know, and these now are people who are all working in similar settings like ourselves, aahm, they are all pros in what is going on here, if you like. And they question us on a different level. And that has been very helpful. It is fantastic.” (FAS 08)

Peer evaluation networks have also been promoted for mainstream schools in Germany. (Gerriets/Möller/Giebenhain/Basel 2006; Institut für Qualitätsentwicklung 2006) However their practical spread amongst mainstream schools is certainly not at all matched in proportions as in the free alternative schools. None of the teachers from German mainstream schools, neither in the interviews nor in the questionnaire mentioned peer evaluation as a reflection setting.

5. Reflection settings – comparing free alternative schools and mainstream schools

As mentioned in the interlude above, there are differences between Irish and German mainstream schools in terms of frequencies and duration of opportunities for teachers to reflect with others on their practice in various settings.

It is obvious however that measured in simply quantitative dimensions the reflection opportunities that are normally available for teachers in mainstream schools don't match at all those that are available for teachers in free alternative schools.

This was partly shown in the compilation of accumulated times for staff meetings. It can also be illustrated in a table display of accumulated times for a teacher in each of the three school types. For this purpose I pick two of the teachers of each series of interviews (Irish primary, German mainstream, Free alternative school).

Accumulated hours annually in reflection settings in school types (based on 37 weeks/school year; a full day is calculated with 6 hours ¹⁵) figures in <i>italics</i> refer to weekend dates						
	FAS 08	FAS 03	IPS 07	IPS 02	GMS 07	GMS 03
Staff meetings	74 hrs	74 hrs	22.5 hrs	18.5	37 hrs	37 hrs
Sectional staff meetings (parallel class teachers)	37 hrs	weekly as needed	4.5 hrs	18	18.5 hrs	27.75 hrs
Professional support	On demand	-	18 hrs (PDST)	On demand	-	-
Reflective Supervision	12 hrs (case) 12 hrs (team)	37 hrs	-	-	-	-
Meetings with principal	-	-	On demand	-	1 hr (Jahresgespräch)	-
Staff planning days	30 hrs (team)	-	-	6 hrs	12 hrs	12 hrs
Peer evaluation	8 hrs ¹⁶	-	-	-	-	-
Meetings with parents	12 hrs (school plenum)	37 hrs	-	incidental	-	3 hrs ¹⁷
“CPD”	12 hrs (conference participation)	-	-	8 hrs (courses in Education centre)	-	-
total	187 hrs	148 hrs	45 hrs	50.5 hrs	68.5 hrs	79.75 hrs

The figures included in the table are those accumulated hours available for the respective teachers in settings that are based on formal arrangements, be it on basis of mutual agreement or on basis of contractual rules and regulations of working hours. Not included in the calculation are those times

¹⁵ This is based on the Irish school day which runs from 9.00 h – 15.00 h. From personal experience I can say that particularly weekend seminars in free alternative schools tend to be of a longer duration. This however may be neglected for purposes of comparability.

¹⁶ The system of peer evaluation has been explained above. The figure here is based on the assumed time that a teacher is engaged in discussion with peer evaluators. The time for observation is naturally much longer.

¹⁷ Two parents assemblies of ca. 90 minutes duration.

that teachers spend in informal meetings (corridor talk). I will come back on this soon.

What the figures in the table show is at any rate that there is a huge difference between the free alternative schools and the mainstream schools in terms of time reserved for reflection. I have not picked the more extreme cases in this regard. FAS 10 for example spends an accumulated 235 hours annually in formal reflection settings while IPS 03 spends a total of 10 hours and IPS 05 a total of 22 hours in formal reflection settings.¹⁸

On viewing such figures it is tempting to ask the question: Do teachers in mainstream schools not reflect, or reflect less on their practice than teachers in free alternative schools? I would hold that a question asked in this manner is misleading as would be any answer that remains in simply quantitative dimensions.

Concepts of reflection are manifold. Attempts to categorise reflection processes in processual manner (e. g. Griffiths/Tann) come closest to a quantitative measurement. Each and every reflection process however has always a qualitative component, that is: it is based on and refers back to concrete acts. These acts themselves are context-bound. They happen to be part of a system of acts that in itself is grounded in a way to interpret their meaning in a particular fashion.

In concrete terms in relation to the various school types one can say that the difference is first and foremost one of interpretations and definitions of the basic activity that goes on in the institutions: education. From here the differences are comprehensible.

In free alternative schools the role of the adults vis-à-vis children is defined differently to mainstream schools, the concept of radical democracy leads to flat hierarchies, the schools become “schools of negotiation” (Scholz 1996). In this context reflection is a far more collective endeavour than in mainstream schools. To bridge from one action to another action, hence: to confirm, or else to change the course of action necessarily involves the input of a greater number of people. This may be interpreted as an obligation, or a chance, it is first of all a condition. Where decisions are made and responsibility is shared collectively it is inevitable that the participants collectively reflect on the rationale and the consequences of these decisions.

This however needs more time and effort than a reflection process of either a small number of people or even only one person. For teachers in mainstream schools it is much easier to reflect as the lonely practitioner – it matches their situation as master/mistress who is the sole responsible person for what happens in the classroom. Decisions in an environment with a strict hierarchical structure don't need a reflection process of all participants.

Thus with the principle orientation of free alternative schools as radically democratic it is a logical consequence that reflection will be more visible in these schools, simply because it potentially happens on all sorts of interaction levels between all status groups at all possible times, and particularly: on a basis of formal arrangements.

It is in fact essential for these formal arrangements to be nurtured and well looked after so that the potential for friction within the collective is minimised and potential conflicts can be expressed and addressed as soon as they arise. Therefore it is not surprising that the times available in the various reflection settings are so different between mainstream and free alternative schools.

¹⁸ The case of GMS 04 in German mainstream schools is absolutely exceptional with an accumulated reflection time of 189.5 hrs.

As mentioned already in the table on accumulated reflection times the figures for the informal meetings (corridor talk) are not included. Were this to be done, the picture would change. Teacher IPS 03 for example who reported of no more than a total of 10 hours reflection time annually stated also that there is informal daily reflection during lunch-break. If that was added in the accumulated annual reflection time this teacher would come to a total of 151 hours.¹⁹ Teacher IPS 05 would accumulate 163 hours. One could further try to add together the five minute chats with colleagues in the morning before school starts or the ten minutes with parents at the school gate at home time.

I refrained from integrating these figures in the calculation as it would lead to a blurred picture. Similar informal chats as reported by the Irish teachers are happening in all schools. We remember the teacher who stated: *“And when we sit together there having a cup of tea these informal conversations happen. They are about private matters. But there are always school matters touched also.”* (FAS 03) This is not different in free alternative schools from mainstream schools. If the times of the daily tea-break for teacher FS 03 were included, this teacher would come to a figure of 333 hours accumulated reflection time.

The phenomenon understood as reflection obviously defies attempts to fit it into a neat measurable scheme. Reflection as it is understood by the teachers in their professional practice can happen at any given time and in all possible settings. For the presentation of the accumulated hours as shown above drawing the line on the basis of formal arrangements then is a way to make the material accessible in a statistical manner. It is necessary to be aware of the limitations in relation to a statistical approach as applied in this chapter. It is important to also include a qualitative approach.

¹⁹ Based on a lunch-break of 45 minutes

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