



STER Podcast

Season 1, Episode 1

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Christina Intro 0:00:

Welcome to the student teacher educational research STER podcast, a partnership project that supports education students to share their dissertation research the wider education community. In this podcast series, student researchers will have the opportunity to discuss their research and impart advice to future student researchers. The aim of the STER team is to promote a culture of research and initial teacher education by encouraging students and graduates to engage in dialogue and critical reflection about education research. In today's podcast, we meet Niamh O'Neill, a recent graduate of the Bachelor of Education at Marino Institute of Education, who is joining us to discuss neuro diversity in the classroom. Niamh shares insights from her dissertation research, which explored the role of music therapy in supporting social and emotional challenges that may be experienced by children with autism.

Christina 1:00

So, Niamh, it's lovely to have you today. And thanks so much for your time. Would you be able to just maybe, introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about your background?

Niamh 1:13

Well, my name is Niamh O'Neill and it's lovely to be on. I'm a BEd4 so I'm in my fourth year at Marino and I'm a couple of months from graduating, so kind of, nearly there. Yeah. So when I did my thesis on music therapy, so that's, that was like my big interest.

Christina 1:36

Okay, and how did you choose your topic Niamh?

Niamh 1:40

I suppose I've always had like an interest in music ever since I was younger. And I did a lot of classical music and stuff like that. When I was in school. I did, I did violin and stuff. And I was trying to find a way how I could bring kind of that interest into education and see how I could you know, I suppose connect to my main interests, which were teaching obviously and music. I was in a SEN placement and there were two children that were diagnosed with ASD that I was kind of looking after and helping. And they I noticed that they really like perked up and were enthusiastic when it came to music, especially, especially when like the main mainstream teacher used to play the guitar and stuff. And they used to completely perk up. So I decided to kind of from there that I'd love to do a bit of research into that area, and quite specialised research, which, which is kind of how I happened to come across my thesis topic, which was mainly music therapy.

Christina 2:47

Great. It was a combination of trying to bring a bit of your personal interest in and to help you through the research process, which can be quite, can be quite gruelling at times. It's good when you're interested in something. Is it something that you recommend to others embarking on research?

Niamh 2:59

Yeah, absolutely, honestly, I think if you don't have a genuine research, or a genuine interest in what you're doing, you're kind of making it harder for yourself, really, because I suppose I actually really enjoyed the research process just because I had the interest in it. And thank God I did, because I can't see how I would have put in as many hours

or as much effort into something that I wasn't interested in, such as I don't know, when ICT or something like I definitely wouldn't have, I wouldn't have been able to put as much effort and as much as I suppose love into it. You know, throughout the research process. I also found as well, I, I kind of chose a topic and thank God it was really open, I could kind of go whatever way I wanted with. But I found a few other people that I was chatting to they would be kind of chose one topic and stuck with it. And that was it. And they kind of decided to roll with it. But really the main thing is keep an open mind when you have your topic because nothing's set in stone. You might turn around and try and do your research in September and you realise there's only like 2000 words that you can write about it or there's only like one or two articles. So yeah, I thank God it worked out for me. But there's definitely, definitely keep an open mind when it comes to the choosing what you actually want to specialise in, I suppose.

Christina 3:04

Yeah. So don't pigeonhole yourself in any way, I suppose is what your advice would be. Do you find that experience of searching for Literature? Was there much already written out there and what kind of information sources did you explore?

Niamh 4:38

Alright, well, I firstly went to the actual college library, and I went in and I just asked whether there was anything on music therapy and or at on anything to do with SEN. And I actually found a book, what was the title of Music Therapy and Autism Across the Lifespan: A Spectrum of Approaches¹ so I was very, very lucky. So I had this book, kind of to go back to and kind of draw from. So the main thing I would say is to definitely go to library, I think the physical books and just seeing like something physically versus going on the internet, I think is very daunting. You know, you could be faced with, I don't know, how many articles if you were to Google something. So yeah, I think, yeah, it's nice to go to the library and actually have a physical book that I could, you know, I could take from and have a look and see how maybe they are authors went about it in their way, because they had two of my topics, I was very lucky, really, in finding it. It had music therapy and autism in the same book. So it was very handy, kind of to, to refer back to it and such. But I had one part of my thesis, which was very hard, I decided to concentrate on relational music therapy. And there was absolutely nothing written about it, there was probably about two or three articles that I found. So I found if there was kind of a place, or part of the topic that you weren't really able to write about, you can kind of spin it in a way and you could kind of say, and this would be a great part, that should be researched. Or it should be, you know, it should be concentrated more on but there isn't enough out there. So you can maybe put that in your recommendations. So I think a lot of it was really how you spin it, or how you twisted the information as well. You know, there's so much information out there. So it's 30 days to narrow down and then finding you know, whatever suits and seeing how you could present it your own way.

Christina 6:39

Exactly. And I suppose one thesis isn't going to answer all the questions definitely that we have about a topic. So it is using your research even to acknowledge the gaps that are that are currently there. And as you were reading Niamh, what kind of were your specific research aims? Like? What were the key areas you hope to explore regarding music therapy and autism?

Niamh 7:04

Well, my research question was how can teachers use music therapy strategies to support emotional, social challenges facing a child with ASD integrating into the mainstream classroom? So I covered a lot I think in that one research question. Once I found my research question, I found it quite easy to I suppose formulate objectives that I was going to use in my in my, in my research, I think the main thing, the main most important thing, probably in the end from the get go is that you have your research questions so that you're able to focus on specific research so that you're not you don't like it, make a mistake like me and decide, right, I'm going to write a, you know, a massive chapter one, and you know, do however many strategies. So once I had formulated the research question, I ended up doing just three objectives that I was going to explore, and some of the strategies, so maybe one or two music

¹ Dunn, H., Coombes, E., Maclean, E., Mottram, H., and Nugent, J. (Eds). (2019). Music Therapy and Autism Across the Lifespan: A Spectrum of Approaches. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers. ISBN 9781785923111

therapy strategies, and then I decided I would see how music therapy benefits a child with ASD, and with their emotional and social challenges, like referring back to my research question. And finally, I decided to see if there was kind of similar and case studies that have been done throughout the world, really, and see whether I could compare it to the Irish setting. So that kind of was how I approach the objectives and the research question.

Christina 8:40

Brilliant links. And then with your research method, then you mentioned case studies. So did you do an extended literature review looking at lots of different case studies? Or did you complete any kind of research in the field yourself in terms of data collection? How did you go about the process?

Niamh 9:00

I, we were we were told that we should do documentary analysis. So we looked at kind of literature that was already and completed. So I, I looked through, I'd say so many case studies and decided on like, you know, two or three to kind of focus on and, and those two or three ones that I focused on, actually, a few of those were mentioned in the book. So there was a big case study called the TIME-A research project², which was basically looking at music therapy and children with SEN or additional needs, and how music therapy could be used in classroom context or an outside the classroom context. So and that was really I use that very much like that was a huge and thing I drew upon in my research, and I also drew upon a few others, such as there's a Relational Music Therapy, and it was kind of a case study. So I drew upon that. And I drew upon a few other few other things. But then, yeah, I found really like the case studies were the most important part really of the research because, and it's something that you draw upon the most of really like, you know.

Christina 10:17

And I suppose then we've talked a little bit about choosing your topic and about how you went about it. And I suppose what we all want to know now is, what did you find out? Was there any kind of ground breaking discoveries you made? Or what would you say would be the kind of the major findings of your study,

Niamh 10:35

Well the major findings of my study really would be to do with the fact that I found that music therapy could help children with emotional and social challenges in the mainstream classroom, children with ASD. I specifically found out of the main music therapies that I looked at, which were "collaborative approaches", "relational music therapy", which was based on kind of relational psychology and such and "improvisational music therapy", I found mainly that the improvisational music therapy was the one that had the most research done on it was the one that proved the most beneficial. So I found through the TIME-A project because the time a project was based on improvisational music therapy, I found that showed the most benefits. And I mean, some of the children they use kind of two different assessments, such as the ADOS assessment and like different SRS scores. So they use those on it shows that the children were in fact appearing less frustrated, and appearing happier and such so they were able to better integrate into the mainstream classroom, because earlier on in my thesis, I kind of outlined some of the challenges that face children with ASD, specifically integrating into mainstream classrooms and I found that based on the English model, we could, in our own Irish primary schools, we could implement our own sort of improvisational music therapy approaches within school. So I used some of the research from Mendelson and I used his study, which was 'vocals, interactive communication social strategies', which is just basically a choir. So, you know, think something as simple as that can help, you know, can kind of be seen as a as music therapy. And I also just had a look at collaborative approaches, and how maybe we could implement collaborative approaches within classrooms. So I recommended that there should be more continuous professional development based on music therapy.

Christina 13:01

² Bieleninik Ł, Geretsegger M, Mössler K, et al. Effects of Improvisational Music Therapy vs Enhanced Standard Care on Symptom Severity Among Children With Autism Spectrum Disorder: The TIME-A Randomized Clinical Trial. *JAMA*. 2017;318(6):525–535. doi:10.1001/jama.2017.9478

It sounds like the findings were really positive and really tangible, which is great. That can often be hard when it comes to discussing things such as emotions, were you surprised to find the results were so tangible?

Niamh 13:16

I was very surprised. And I thought that maybe it would be, you know, going into it, I wasn't really sure that there would be as you were saying kind of tangible results, because as it is, it's sort of emotional, but really, when I went into it, I didn't realise that there's so many ways to measure sort of emotions and social responses. I wasn't aware of all the different assessments that they can do when it comes to ASD and children who have been diagnosed with ASD. And when I came to the results, and I was able to, I suppose, interpret the results and kind of have a look at the different case studies. I was surprised and very happy to discover the different ways that it can be made tangible.

Christina 14:03

Unfortunately we might avoid those areas, because they're not as measurable and now there's a big emphasis on kind of monitoring outcomes and education and stuff like that. It's great to know that there is that option for those what some might call the softer areas of education, but equally important areas as well, which is great. We hope that you're enjoying this podcast episode. If you want to read our researchers published work, please visit www.STER.ie for all details. A transcript of this podcast will also be available. Another thing I picked up there Niamh that you mentioned was that and you were really surprised even something very simple, such as like a choir in the classroom because I think when we hear of words such as therapy and even improvisational music, it all sounds very, fancy and scientific and I suppose I was wondering and just kind of listening there. In terms of practical implementation into the classroom. Was there any guidance in the literature about is this something that should be done separately to your normal music lessons and schools? Should it be a teacher? Or should it be a qualified music therapist, like a specialist? Did you get any guidance around that?

Niamh 15:22

Well, I suppose what I looked at mostly was the model in the UK. So in the model in the UK, there's a music therapist assigned mostly to each school. So I kind of thought that maybe if music therapy was going to be implemented into Ireland, there would be a way in which that maybe a music therapist would be assigned to each school in, in a kind of a dreamland, in an ideal scenario. In practical terms in the classroom, it doesn't have to just be something that is taught by a music therapist, or that is a CPD course that teachers have to be taught these different strategies, it's something as simple as you know, kind of just singing as you said, choirs or it can be you know, sort of transitional things that are normal and everyday such as singing or, and, you know, rhymes and stuff like that anything to do with music. So I think the main thing to do with music is to make it as simple as possible, I suppose, if the strategies and all everything I have been talking about it does look, it does sound I think scary when you when you do put it like that, but and what I mostly found is the easiest way to do it was the singing and the bit of instruments, and every, every little thing really helps, you know, it's a bit a little bit of music that you can get it into a child's day is enough really and truly

Christina 16:56

So we're aware that yes, the gold standard is with a music therapist, but there are some kind of practical strategies that teachers can be using just to the best of their ability in the classroom to assist children with ASD, which is fantastic. We've talked a good bit about the findings now and initially at the start of our chat today, we mentioned your process a little bit and how you kind of came about choosing a topic and your use of the library and things like that. Were there any other kind of main tips that you would have for any peers who are embarking on research that you found were really useful for you in terms of managing your time or managing your sanity as you as you were doing the project.

Niamh 17:43

I suppose the main thing I would say would be referencing that was, that would be an absolute nightmare. If I can, can I if I could go back and, and I suppose redo my thesis. I would definitely make sure to mark down each of the references and have one main list for the references. Every chapter, I would make sure to complete the reference

list and have the reference list with the chapter. But if I was to do it, again, I would amalgamate all of those references. Because at the very end of the process, when I was putting everything together, it was an absolute nightmare, trying to, you know, realise that I had the same reference in chapter two and three, and they were already there. So I couldn't really just, you know, copy and paste and put everything together. So that took a long, long time, I would definitely make sure that, you know, you leave time to, I suppose bring everything together. And it's not just a rush at the end, leave yourself at least a week to really just get into the nitty gritty and look at it and you know edit it. Leave yourself a lot of time to editors. Because looking back now I probably rushed the very end of it just because you don't realise how much time really goes into editing it and putting it everything together and making sure all your words are correct and your spelling is correct. It's a lot more involved than you realise when you start it.

Christina 19:07

A lot of practical tips today go to the library, a topic you like, stay on top of your referencing and lots of editing time, which is great. And I said I was thinking back then reflecting on the process a little bit more - what was the most challenging aspect and what was the most enjoyable aspect of the research process for you?

Niamh 19:28

Definitely, I think the most challenging aspect of it was getting started and actually narrowing it down specifically when I was and when I was starting out and my I suppose my first draft and I wrote it out and I had my five or six strategies and I thought everything was going you know, it was all everything was great. And I sent it off to the head of my thesis and got it back and she said it was way too broad. So you know you just have to be prepared to realise that you're not going to get it perfect from the get go, which I thought I was very shocked. Not that I thought, easy, but I honestly thought it wasn't going to be so much re-drafting, you're really going to stare at your own writing for long hours to redraft, it was the most enjoyable part I found was and the reading and the actually the fact that we had a chance to look at something that was genuinely of interest, you know, really, the fact that you could pick your own thing and run with it and go wild and pick whatever route you could go down, you don't have a lot of chances to that in your assignments or your essays. So, I mean, I would say enjoy it, enjoy the fact that you, you have that chance to run with it and go wild and really, you know, pick whatever topic you want.

Christina 19:38

And I suppose just one kind of file thing then Niamh would be? Did you learn anything about yourself as a person or as a future teacher in the process? Is there anything that you feel from, from doing the thesis that you're really going to take what you know, going forward?

Niamh 21:08

Absolutely, I think the main thing that I found is that any teacher can be a researcher, I didn't realise going into it that, you know, I thought teaching was you just sat in your classroom, you taught your children, and that was it, and you go home. But really doing the thesis, I realised that you can do things outside of teaching, and you can do research, you can do research at any stage, or at any stage of your degree or at any stage of your teaching. So I think it's just important to remember that. Teaching is great but as well, you can research alongside that and it's important to do that, because a lot of the developments in teaching and the developments in music therapy, in fact, to do with, you know, teachers engaging with research. So it's really important as a teacher that we remember that that we're researchers alongside teachers, and it's a, I suppose it's a privilege to do it, you know, it's a privilege that we have that we have that opportunity to engage in research and, you know, we can almost see it first hand because we're teaching the children ourselves. So that's really what I found, I suppose, in my research.

Christina 22:17

I think you're dead, right? Because, you know, teachers are doing a lot of great stuff in the classroom and it's about having that evidence to back it up now having that kind of, you know, established research kind of scientific evidence rather than just anecdotal evidence behind this, because there are a lot of developments happening in the classroom and kind of, I suppose to mirror other areas as well. It's nice to see that kind of growing body of research in education. So I think no, definitely I think anyone listening today would feel a bit inspired after that. And I think

knowing it's doable as well, like, you know, it's just demystifies the process and that, you know, any prospective educator has the option to do a bit of research, they just have to find the right question, I suppose.

Niamh 23:05

Exactly. Yeah. No, anybody do it. Yeah, if I can do it, anybody can.

Christina 23:10

And thanks a million Niamh. And it was really interesting to hear both out and about the process as well. So thank you so much for your time today.

Niamh 23:19

Okay, no problem at all.

Christina 23:22

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