



STER eJournal



The STER e-journal is a core output of the STER project, an exciting higher education initiative that supports and encourages education students to share their dissertation research via an annual conference, e-journal and podcast series. The STER project actively contributes to building students' research capacity by helping them to articulate the impact of research on practice and ensuring that they are well prepared to contribute to research-rich environments where practice is investigated, collaboration is valued, and new knowledge is shared.

The STER project is run in partnership with a team of student volunteers and is committed to promoting a collaborative, student-led approach to research dissemination. I would like to thank the team of students from education programmes across Marino Institute of Education who gave their time generously to the project throughout the academic year. It is a privilege to work closely with students who bring such wonderful energy, enthusiasm, and willingness to contribute to the education community.

This third volume of the STER e-journal presents nine short articles prepared by education students and graduates of Marino Institute of Education and Mary Immaculate College. All articles have undergone a double-blind peer review process and are based on students' final year dissertation research. Articles cover a diversity of themes including, inclusive education, curriculum and planning, station-teaching, emergent literacy and more. I would like to commend the student authors on the quality of their research and their engagement with the dissemination process.

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The STER team would like to thank Marino Institute of Education for providing funding for STER 2020. Individual articles can be downloaded from www.ster.ie

Message from the Team

The aim of the STER e-journal is to give students a platform to showcase their research so that they feel that their research has been useful to other professionals and peers across a variety of sectors and programmes; and to give other students ideas and examples that would be helpful for practice.

The STER team is made up of eight student volunteers who worked together with the coordinator to manage the project. We peer-reviewed the articles included in this volume and we worked to promote the work of the project in the college. We found it extremely beneficial to take part in the peer-review process. It gave us an opportunity to explore topics outside of our fields of study, to read research through a different lens, and hear the perspectives of students from other programmes. We were impressed by the insightful, high quality articles prepared and we learned a lot that we can utilise in our own practice.

We hope that this third issue of the e-Journal will be of interest to other students who are still undecided on their research topic or question, the articles in this e-journal may be helpful in narrowing down your choice of topic. The articles provide insight into the various structures and layout of a dissertation in education, they use a variety of different methodological approaches and ways of presenting research findings. Readers can access references to relevant, up-to-date research in the Irish education context, and ideas and examples that would be helpful for practice.

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Foreword

Julie Uí Choistealbha Ed.D.

The 2019/20 academic year will be etched in the memory of millions of students, teachers, policy makers, parents and support staff around the globe. The recent months have united us all in what has been a seismic shift, from classes held in school, to remote and virtual learning. The COVID-19 pandemic has touched every aspect of the world of education whether that education usually happened in schools, in community education settings, through charities and non-Governmental organisations or in the workplace. The *how* of education may have changed, but the resilience of all involved in education has shown that the *what* and *why* of education have remained unchanged.

More than ever, the spotlight has been shone on the importance of education for all of society and many conversations (virtual of course!) have centred on the creative and innovative ways educators are putting in place to ensure that learners continue to learn. Each day our screens and papers are filled with statistics, data, graphs, mathematical models and the opinions of trusted researchers. The trend towards fake news and sensational headlines has been quashed as the public realises that what matters most, and what has the most impact on our lives is the measurable, quantifiable and reliable data, supported by the opinions and hypotheses of trusted researchers.

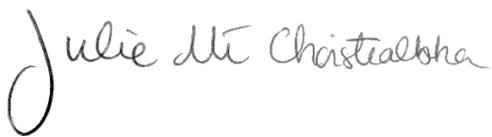
Gambuto (2020) has described these recent weeks and months as the ‘Great Pause’. It is a time for us all to reflect, prioritise and recalibrate. This third volume of the STER e-journal is timely as it provides us with an opportunity to reflect on what is important to us in our education system. The articles call on us to reflect on topics such as inclusion and special educational needs, LGBTQI+, early years education, curriculum planning, language and literacy, multi-grade classrooms and newly qualified teachers.

Marino Institute of Education (MIE) is a teaching, learning and research community committed to promoting inclusion and excellence in education. A key objective of the MIE Strategic Plan 2015-2020 is that we ‘build research capacity and become internationally regarded for our research output in selected academic fields of enquiry’ (p. 13). In order to achieve this objective, a research culture exists ‘that encourages and supports all staff to contribute to research activities and output as a basis for teaching and learning, and prepares all students to use educational

research as part of their professional practice' (p.13). The fruits of this work are seen in this volume of the STER e-journal.

I am delighted that the majority of the articles in this issue showcase the hearts and minds of our student educators who walk the historic corridors and grounds of our beautiful campus, and who now engage with us in new and innovative ways through our online learning platforms. I commend and thank all the students whose work is presented, and I sincerely thank my colleague Dr Aimie Brennan who has inspired, guided and supported every aspect of this journal.

Amidst the storm that is COVID 19, the STER e-journal is like a beacon guiding us toward the safety of shore and reminding us that solid ground lies ahead. The inquiring minds of the student researchers whose work is presented in this journal are our future and through their dedication, passion and drive for creative ways of learning, and their questioning of contemporary issues and controversies, we can be assured that the future of our education system is in safe hands. Ní neart go cur le chéile – our strength is in our unity – is a saying that has been quoted many times in recent months. The message of unity is central for us all as teachers, researchers, support staff, parents, policy makers and students as we embrace a new future and a renewed appreciation of our education system.



Dean of Education: Policy, Practice, and Society
Marino Institute of Education

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Exploring the Connection Between Child Observation and Curriculum Planning in Early Years Settings

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Joanne Roe recently completed a Master of Education Studies (Early Childhood Education) in Marino Institute of Education. Since completing an undergraduate degree in Early Childhood Education (DIT) in 2001, Joanne has gained extensive experience in the Early Years Sector, including direct practice with children experiencing homelessness, a role as a mentor supporting quality improvement in early years' settings and in her current policy role, within a national initiative to support the coordinated roll out of *Síolta* and *Aistear*, the national quality and curriculum frameworks. Throughout her professional career Joanne has been committed to engaging in ongoing professional development is also a qualified play therapist.

KEYWORDS: Early Childhood Education, Assessment, Planning, Observation, Curriculum, Policy

INTRODUCTION

Recent policy developments in the Irish early years education sector include a requirement to implement the national quality and curricular Frameworks- *Síolta* and *Aistear* to comply with inspection and funding requirements such as the Early Childhood Care and Education programme (ECCE)¹ and Early Years Education Inspections (Department of Education and Skills, 2015). These developments have focused increased attention on the quality of early years provision and have

¹ Early Childhood Care and Education programme, a government funded initiative which provides two years of free pre-school provision prior to formal primary education.

implications for child observation, assessment and curriculum planning practices in early years settings.

Effective structures, methods and practices of observation, assessment and planning for individual children are identified as integral elements of high quality early years provision (Bruce et al., 2015; Alasuutari, et al 2014; Carter & Nutbrown, 2014; *Aistear* 2009; *Síolta* 2006; OECD, 2006) and assessment is described as part of daily practice in striving for quality (Drummond, Rouse & Pugh, 1992). Research such as the EPPE (Effective Provision for Pre-School Education) study (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004) demonstrate that attendance at high quality Early Year's settings has an unquestioned impact on children's learning and development and capacity to assess formatively and plan for individual children's learning is an indicator of quality.

The study of Pedagogical Effectiveness in Early Learning (PEEL) carried out by Moyles, Adams & Musgrove (2002) identified that in many early years settings the links between planning, assessment, recording and the use of records to inform planning and assessment of progression appeared not to be well understood or well used and recommended that training in this area was a high need. This research study explores how child observation methods are used in early years settings to inform curriculum planning for individual children's interests and learning progression. There is a limited body of research into the assessment practices of early years practitioners working with preschool children (Brown & Rolfe, 2005). Consequently, this study explores the following research questions:

- What, if any, child observation, assessment and curriculum planning systems and practices are in place within participating settings?
- What factors influence the child observation, assessment and curriculum planning systems and practices in place?
- Are there connections between child observation and curriculum planning for individual children's interests and learning progression?

This article is based on a more extensive dissertation carried out as part of a Master of Education degree programme in 2018.

CONTEXT

There are increasing expectations for early year's settings to implement high quality assessment and planning practices to adhere to national funding and policy requirements. Contractual obligations for settings receiving government funding to deliver the ECCE programme directly relate to the areas of observation, assessment and individual planning. In order to qualify for funding under

the ECCE programme there is a requirement that early years settings implement *Síolta* and *Aistear*, which offer guidance and set standards related to assessment and curriculum planning, for example *Síolta* Standard 7 focuses on curriculum and suggests planning for curriculum implementation should be based on the child's individual profile which is established through systematic observation and assessment for learning. Area 2 of the DES early years inspection framework, which evaluates the quality of learning experiences for children in settings providing the ECCE programme is underpinned by *Síolta* and *Aistear* and focuses on "*the quality of processes to support children's learning and development*", (DES, 2016, p. 8). This framework evaluates how information about the child's development informs the next steps in learning and to what extent these plans for learning are closely aligned to children's interests and developing capabilities.

Effective structures, methods and practices of observation, assessment and planning for individual children are identified as integral elements of high-quality early years provision (Bruce et al., 2015; Carter & Nutbrown, 2014; OECD, 2006). Assessment is described as part of daily practice in striving for quality (Drummond, Rouse & Pugh, 1992), and "*observational assessment is integral to effective early year's provision*" (Tickell, 2011, p. 30). According to Wall (2006), a clear understanding of the purpose of observational assessment should be a guiding principle for all early years' practitioners. The purpose of assessment is to inform planning for each child in order to deepen and extend the child's learning (Kamen 2012). Practitioners need to reconsider practice and take account of the rich and diverse nature of each child within the planning process (Hayes, 2012), and build on individual children's strengths and interests to provide relevant and meaningful curriculum opportunities (McLachlan, Flear and Edwards 2013). As such, assessment should result in planning which is tailor-made for each child and based on their developing interests, skills and understandings (Fisher, 2013). According to Dubiel "*the explicit purpose of assessment is to ascertain the point on development, the propensity for extension, the skill, knowledge, understanding and/or motivation to be built on by the practitioner*" (2014, p.72). Observation is continually linked with and viewed as part of the cycle of assessment throughout the literature for example in assessing children's progress and needs (Sharman et al., 2015; Dubiel, 2014; Hayes, 2012; Kamen, 2012). The literature suggests that learning is enhanced where practice is planned within a framework of observation and assessment (Palaiologou, 2015) hence this research investigating the connection between observation as an assessment method and planning for children's learning.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative, interpretive approach was adopted for this case study research. A case study methodology was selected as it lends itself well to exploring an issue from a holistic perspective that analyses multiple sources of data (Anderson, 1998). Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2000) suggest case studies can penetrate situations that are not susceptible to numerical analysis and a strength is they observe effects in real contexts recognising the significance of context. Yin (2009) offers a comprehensive definition of a case study and makes the point that it is an empirical inquiry that *“investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real life context”* (p.18).

Data was collected from six case study settings using a variety of complementary qualitative research methods including documentary analysis, one-to-one interviews and focus group interviews. The use of sub-methods allowed the researcher to use a variety of sources, a range of types of data and a variety of research methods (Denscombe, 2014). Methods provided a range of perspectives to develop a richer picture, explaining how and why things happened (Thomas, 2011; Simons, 2009). In total, 6 one-to-one interviews were conducted with the lead practitioner in the setting, 6 focus groups were conducted with other educators in each of the settings and documentary analysis was conducted with relevant planning documents in each of the case study settings. In total, 18 participants took part in the study.

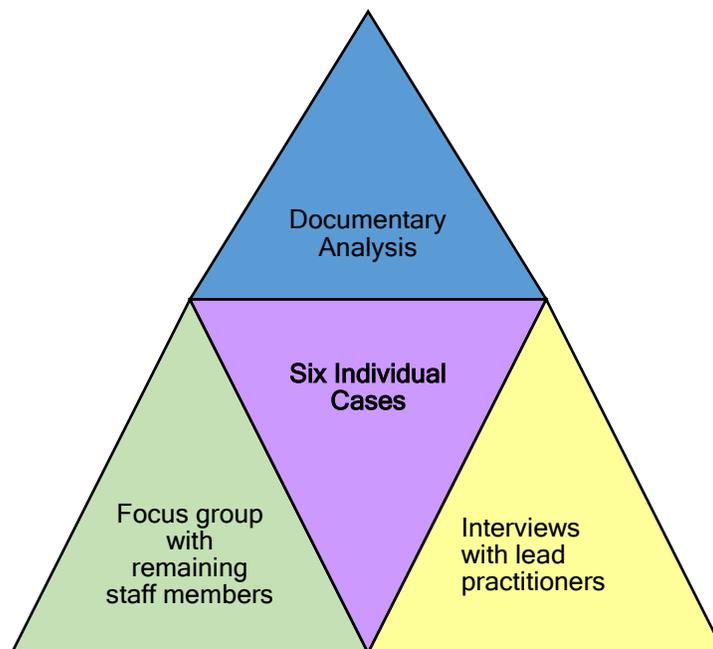


Figure 1. Methodological triangulation used in this study

Triangulation was employed in this study (see figure 1) to increase validity and reliability of analysis. Triangulation is almost an essential prerequisite in a case study approach as viewing from several

perspectives is superior to viewing from one and may make us decide to reject initial explanations (Thomas 2011). The triangulated approach offered an opportunity to compare and contrast the findings from different sources and to consider whether the data converged to determine whether a true picture was achieved (Gillham, 2000).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal the opportunities and challenges for child observation, assessment and curriculum planning practices as identified by practitioners within a range of early years' settings. A number of consistent themes emerged across the breadth of data sources (see Figure 2). For the purposes of this article a brief overview of each theme is provided as each is inter-linked and helpful in understanding the full context.

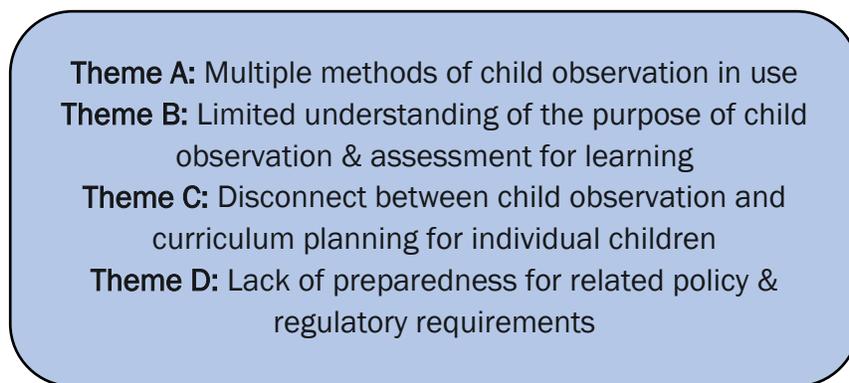


Figure 2. Themes from data analysis.

THEME A: MULTIPLE MODELS OF OBSERVATION ARE IN PLACE ACROSS & WITHIN SETTINGS

A positive finding of this research study was that regular child observation and curriculum planning practices were in place in all six settings. However, even when the same method of assessment was named, implementation varied widely depending on individual or setting interpretation. An example of this was use of the High Scope Child Observation Record (COR)² described as a standardised tool, where despite practitioners receiving training in the use of this, inconsistent approaches to the frequency of use, type of information recorded and sharing this information with parents was evident.

² The preschool Child Observation Record (COR) is an observation-based instrument providing systematic assessment of young children's knowledge and abilities in all areas of development.

In the majority of settings, it seemed the key goal of the practitioner was to meet the needs of the observation system in place, resulting in an unintended lack of consideration for the child within this system. Observational practices appeared to be dictated by the interpretation of the demands of the system, for example, sourcing an observation that ‘fit’ with a particular *Aistear* theme, and therefore failing to observe or tune into what may have been particularly significant for a child on that day. The perhaps unintentional valuing of the system over children’s needs raises questions about the central focus of observation and planning practice which Drummond emphasises “*The choices teachers make in assessing children’s learning must be subject to this one central, inescapable principle: that children’s interests are paramount*” (1993, p.13).

THEME B: LIMITED UNDERSTANDING OF THE PURPOSE OF OBSERVATION & ASSESSMENT

The second theme which emerged, primarily from interview and focus group data was that practitioners demonstrated a limited understanding of the purpose of child observation and assessment for learning. All participants agreed child observation was important and the main reason provided was that it supported an awareness of children’s development “*well, it’s so you know the children are hitting certain milestones*” [Setting A]. A small number of participants referred to child observation as a means of supporting planning; “*What to give the child as well like, activities and stuff*” [Setting C]. When discussing the purpose of observation most participants tended to focus on its uses in identifying deficits “*And if there’s anything going wrong there you pick up from it.*” [Setting C]

All participants agreed child observation was beneficial and a necessary part of their role. However, participants consistently failed to demonstrate an in-depth understanding of assessment for learning. Practitioners overwhelmingly interpreted questions about assessment to mean formal child assessment for additional needs “*I suppose the assessment it needs to be done if the child isn’t hitting certain areas.*” [Setting D]. Respondents were unable to provide information on views on assessment in the context of teaching and learning in early years, demonstrating a lack of understanding; “*When you hear the word assessment, you’re like what’s that? It throws you off*” [Setting B]. Some respondents questioned the suitability of sharing assessments with parents and “*it’s not understandable for the Mothers’ cos the Mothers is not trained in any of it so they don’t know where it’s coming from*” [Setting B] which raises an ethical question about the authenticity and appropriateness of methods used if they are viewed as not suitable for sharing with the primary caregivers of children. The literature suggests involvement of parents in assessment processes should be a critical component and this view raises a question on how fit for purpose particular

methods are. The literature correlates with the finding of this research study that there is misunderstanding and misinterpretation about assessment and it is imperative that a universal understanding of what constitutes assessment is reached (Alasuutari, 2014; Tickell, 2011; Brown & Rolfe, 2005).

THEME C: DISCONNECT BETWEEN OBSERVATION & CURRICULUM PLANNING FOR CHILDREN

A disconnect between child observation and planning for individual children was demonstrated consistently throughout documentary analysis of observation and planning documentation accessed, interviews and focus groups. When asked if practitioners felt that observations and planning were connected, the vast majority found it difficult to answer. One participant said, “ehhhh....I don't really think so, no. not really no” [Setting E]. Furthermore, documentary analysis of planning documentation using the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS)³ indicated that all settings tended to plan for a group of children and differentiation for individual children was not evident in any of the planning documentation reviewed. Learning journals titled as ‘individual’, captured largely the same information for all children ‘*They more or less start of the same, date of birth etc.*’ [Setting C]. Figure 3 below shows a daily planning sheet which refers to ‘*the children*’ throughout and was typical of documentation analysed. Similarly, a participant said, “*I probably plan more for the group than the child*” [Setting E].

The image shows a handwritten planning sheet with the following sections:

- 11:15am Tidy up Time:** The children and adults support each other in cleaning up the room.
- 11:30am Recall Time:** The children talk about what they did during work time with their key workers.
- 11:35am Small group time:** The children engage in small group activities planned by their key worker based on the children's interests and choices during the day.

| | | |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <p>█ group:</p> <p>Table Top</p> | <p>█ group:</p> <p>(Cling film) Painting</p> <p>Table Top</p> | <p>█ group:</p> <p>Table Top</p> |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
- 11:50am Large group time:** Large group activities are planned by the adult for all the children to explore as a large group.

| |
|--------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>Large group activity:</p> <p>outside water play</p> |
|--------------------------------------------------------|

Figure 3. Daily Plan

³ The ECERS (Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale) curricular extension on Diversity, item 13 measures the quality of planning for individual learning needs based on accessing observation and planning records.

When children are consistently considered as part of a group and not as individuals there is perhaps a concern that this may impact negatively on a child's self-identity and individual learning progression. An underpinning principle and critical component of effective preschool education should be the provision of individualised interventions for each child to deepen and extend their learning and development (Wortham & Hardin, 2015; Giardiello et al., 2013; Tickell, 2011; Downs & Strand, 2006). Embedding learning in what is already understood sends a message to children that their competencies and contributions are valued, which can positively impact on self-esteem and motivation (Fisher, 2013). Drummond (1993) describes a constant tension in balancing what is appropriate for individual needs and what is appropriate for the group which is something it seems that practitioners are grappling with on a daily basis.

THEME D: LACK OF PREPAREDNESS FOR RELATED POLICY AND REGULATORY REQUIREMENTS

There was strong consensus from practitioners that they feel inadequately prepared for current policy and regulatory requirements related to child observation and curriculum planning. The majority of participants (95%, 17/18 participants) indicated a complete lack of or very limited focus on child observation and curriculum planning in their initial childcare training "*I don't think the FETAC is doing that, I don't think it does have one thing around curriculum.*" [Setting D] All participants agreed that whilst child observation was covered to a limited degree, planning was not covered at all.

All but one participant felt that they were not adequately prepared for current policy and inspection expectations. Practitioners voiced concerns about lack of clear messaging from the inspectorate "*Nobody's told us. Well, I'm not really 100% what they're looking for*" [Setting E] and at a wider policy level on expectations of settings and as a result were implementing processes based on their knowledge and interpretation "*I'm just kinda winging it with what I'm doing at the moment*" [Setting F]. External inspection was identified as the rationale for particular practices in place and inspectors were often referred to as 'they'. "*They want to see that we've connected what we're doing. It's for the inspectors*" [Setting A]. Participants expressed a worry and anxiety to comply with these requirements "*Yeah. And I think that's one of the fears with the staff. And probably myself that when they do come in are you hitting all the marks*" [Setting D]. Despite inspections reportedly influencing practice, participants consistently expressed a lack of clarity of expectations of inspectors. In this sense, it seems that inspection is creating 'compliance anxiety' (Dubiel 2014) by delivering instruction to settings by outsiders removing practitioners' ownership of processes, further compounded by a lack of coherent understanding of expectations.

CONCLUSION

This study indicated that assessment and curriculum planning practices are influenced by a number of factors (figure 4).

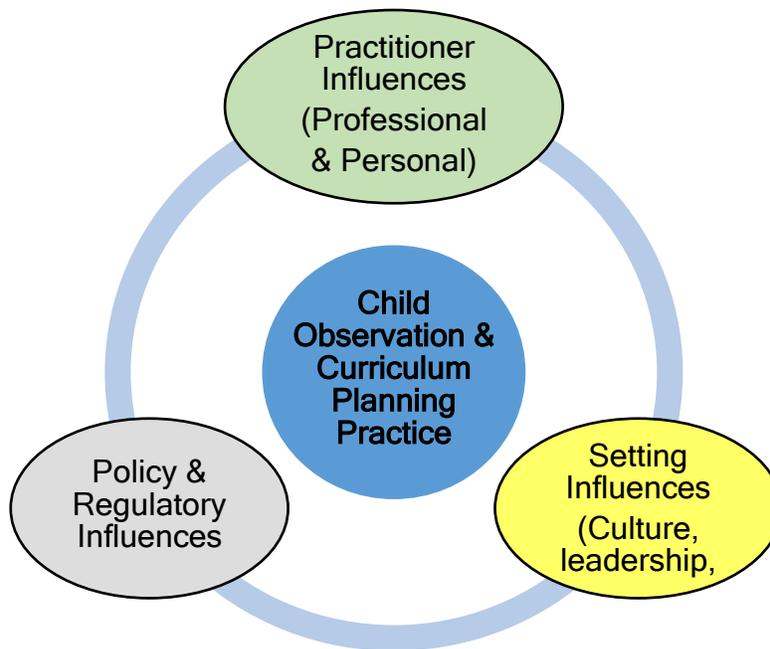


Figure 4: Influences on assessment and planning practices

The competence and capacity of Early Years practitioners is a theme which permeated throughout this research study. It is evident from this study that inconsistencies were evident in observation, assessment and planning practices both within and across settings *'We all do it different. I mightn't do it the way other people do it but it works for me'*. [Setting D]. *Síolta* and *Aistear* were developed as unifying frameworks to support diverse settings to enhance standards of quality but require further resourcing to support implementation. The diversity of implementation raises questions about consistency and quality assurance and perhaps, highlights a need for training and stronger induction and leadership processes within settings. Effective assessment is an essential ingredient of all forms of successful early education (Nutbrown, 2011). However, observational assessment and effective curriculum planning is complex and requires skilled, knowledgeable and informed practitioners with a comprehensive understanding of child development and learning processes (Giardiello et al., 2013). This study indicates challenges in transferring knowledge into practice and suggests that early years' practitioners in both leadership and practice roles would benefit from training and mentoring supports, reflective of individual contexts.

Despite the challenges facing Early Years Practitioners it is clearly evident that the individual practitioners who took part in this study are committed to their work with children and have their

best interests at heart “you want to be able to come into work happy, knowing you’re fulfilling every area of every child and that the child leaves here happy as well.” [Setting D]. One of the recommendations arising from this study is to consider the development of a nationally coordinated training programme which comprehensively supports capacity building in assessment and planning and provides coherent, transparent messaging in relation to requirements. Palaiologou (2012) notes the complex nature of becoming a skilled observer and that this requires ongoing self-evaluation and self-development which is something which needs investment and resourcing at a policy and practice level.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to the children, parents and early years practitioners whose engagement in this research was truly appreciated. I would also like to extend a sincere thanks to the academic staff of Marino Institute of Education for their expertise, guidance and support particularly my research supervisor Dr. Siobhán Cahillane-McGovern and Dr. Joan Kiely, Head of Early Childhood Education. Thank you to Dr Aimie Brennan for the opportunity to publish my work in this journal. A final, thank you to my husband, friends and family and a fantastic group of classmates who were a great support throughout this process.

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Exploring Performances of LGBTQ Sexualities in Irish Primary Schools

Darragh Horgan

Professional Master of Education

Marino Institute of Education

I graduated in 2011 from UCD with a BA in Sociology, English and a Structured Elective in Social Justice. The following year I further pursued my interest in gender, sexuality and queer theory through the Masters in Women, Gender and Society in UCD. I most recently graduated from the PME in Marino, where I have had the opportunity to allow my interest to be further broadened to its intersection with education. This keen curiosity has been a constant drive of my academic career. This hunger to critically understand how oppressive structures work, and as such destabilise them has been a drive through this research. I am currently working as a teacher with Senior Infants.

KEYWORDS: Sexuality, Performance, Queer Pedagogy, Primary Education

INTRODUCTION

This research set out to explore the performances of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer) sexualities in a selection of Irish Primary Schools in 2019, looking specifically at how performances of sexuality are negotiated by teachers. When looking at the experience of Irish LGBTQ teachers, it is necessary to examine the educational context in Ireland and the influence of legislative change particularly the Marriage Equality Referendum, the Gender Recognition Act and the Amendment to 37.1 of the Employment Equality Act (EEA) enacted in 2015. It is also necessary to provide a brief description of the theoretical orientation that underpins this research, queer theory. I explore this shortly, but queer here is understood to be an ideology which seeks to critically examine normativity and in the process be liberated from oppressive ideologies.

In conducting this research, I sought to add a queer perspective to the current literature in the fields of education and sexuality (Neary, 2013, 2014, 2016; Egan, 2016). Performances of

sexuality are examined with a lens of authenticity and a specific focus on four key anchors that influence how LGBTQ teachers perform their sexuality in an educational context: security of tenure, school climate, authentic disclosures and authentic performances. For the purpose of this brief research article, I examine the influence of security of tenure and authentic disclosures using empirical data from study participants. The intersection between these anchors and the other anchors themselves are developed in more depth in my thesis.

CONTEXT

EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

The development of Ireland's education landscape has been closely interwoven with the Catholic church for much of our recent history (Inglis, 1997). Roughly 90% of Irish primary schools and 50% of secondary schools are under Catholic patronage, (DES, 2015; Coolahan, Hussey & Kilfeather, 2012). Alternative models of patronage are slowly entering into the educational field (Darmody, Smyth & McCoy, 2012), facilitated by the New School Establishment Group who understand parental preference as the means of supplying patronage to schools (DES, 2019).

All schools must teach according to the ethos of the school Patrons. In the majority of Irish primary schools, this is a Catholic ethos. Ethos is understood to be the “distinctive range of values and beliefs, which define the philosophy or atmosphere of an organisation” (Darmody et al., 2012, p. 3). Ethos infiltrates and trickles down into how the school operates and effects how the school operates (Monahan, 2000). Teachings of the Catholic Church state that homosexuality is sinful and “always a violation of divine and natural law” (Carr, 2004). Heteronormativity is therefore the norm, which can be understood as a presumption that heterosexuality is “the very model of inter-gender relations” (Warner 1993, p. xxi). In schools under Catholic patronage, heteronormativity becomes the limiting norm for LGBTQ teachers (Neary, 2013), pervading all aspects of social life (Hall & Jagose, 2012) as the ethos ‘trickles down the school’. A recent INTO survey has found that 10% of teachers identify as LGBTQ (Donnelly, 2020), yet in the Irish context, all teachers are expected to teach from the heterosexual matrix defined and inscribed with the values of the Catholic church. Those who deviate from the norm of heterosexuality encounter challenges within the school environment (Neary, 2013).

2015 AS A YEAR OF LEGISLATIVE CHANGE

2015 was a year of legislative optimism for LGBTQ people as well as teachers in Ireland. On 22nd of May 2015, 62% of the Irish electorate (Ryan, 2015) voted to extend the Irish constitution to

allow marriage to occur between “two persons without distinction as to their sex” (Thirty-Fourth Amendment of the Constitution [Marriage Equality] Act, 2015). Two months later, on the 15th of July, the Gender Recognition Act (2015) was approved by the Irish Government, allowing transgender people to achieve legal recognition of their gender identity and secure appropriate documentation. These legislative changes mark a shift in attitude towards the LGBTQ community in general (Rhodes, 2015).

In 2015 LGBTQ teachers also benefited from a legislative amendment (Equality Act, 2015), though this change was overshadowed by the emotionally charged Marriage Equality Referendum. The amendment, was product of the hard work of LGBTQ community activism through lobbying and groups like the INTO LGBT Group as well as a result of a “trickle down” effect of a shift in attitude (Rhodes, 2015). Section 37.1 of the Employment Equality Act (EEA), provided a unique caveat and protection to educational, medical and religious institutions who chose to discriminate against employees based on ethos (Gowran, 2004; Fahie, 2016). This meant that institutions could discriminate in the name of ethos preservation (Fahie, 2017) when it came to job appointments and promotions as well as dismissals occurring within an institution. This effected all teachers but particularly teachers who were framed in juxtaposition against the values and ethos of the institution, especially LGBTQ teachers or other ‘deviant’ sexualities. This was the reality for Irish LGBTQ teachers until there was an amendment of the EEA (1998). The amendment in 2015 elaborated and made 37.1’s caveat less subjective, further stating that discrimination could only occur in cases which are “objectively justified” placing the emphasis on conduct of the individual rather than the individual’s identity itself (Equality Act, 2015).

QUEER PEDAGOGY

Queer can be used as an umbrella term for the myriad of sexualities that exist, queer sexualities. Though when I use it, it relates to a perspective or ideology which seeks to call critical and undermine the oppression of normativity. Queer is a term of identification which has political connotations, it is the appropriated insult which is “thrown back in the face of the oppressor...to undo oppressive gender/sex designations” and is centred on opposition to resisting discourses which normalise and reify (Morris, 2005, p. 10), seeking to liberate and give expression. Such queer-framing enables us to better understand how we can approach and dismantle schools as sites of problematic heteronormativity for Irish LGBTQ teachers (Higgins et al., 2015; Neary, 2013). Heteronormativity can be understood as a presumption that heterosexuality is “the very model of inter-gender relations” (Warner 1993, p. xxi), which is understood to be problematic from a queer perspective.

This research is queerly framed by authenticity, and how LGBTQ teachers perform a sense of authentic self in relation to security of tenure, school climate, authentic disclosures and authentic performances. Authenticity can be understood “as an ‘inherent quality of some object, person or process’ and cannot ‘be stripped away, nor can it be appropriated’” (Vannini & Williams, 2009, p. 2). In adapting a queer perspective, it draws on queer pedagogy that “aims to analyse discursive and cultural practices that create identities and privilege some over others” (Oswald, Kuvalanka, Blume & Berkowitz, 2009, p. 52), namely that identity of the Irish LGBTQ teacher. Though at times engaging queerly may seem abstract, it is very centrally “about competing narratives and entertaining the unthinkable (Morris, 2005, p. 11). It is through this unthinkable, that ruptures occur, allowing people to express themselves by non-normative means and it is this authentic expression that this research aims to examine.

METHODOLOGY

The research as a whole is framed by queer theory and queer perspectives. This framing is an essential aspect of the research as well as informing the methodology and analysis of the research. Data was collected through semi structured interviews, resting between a structured schedule of questions and *carte blanche* approach (Brown & Danaher, 2019). The semi-structured interviews became more akin to a conversation and had natural flow. Participants were allowed the space and time to let their experiences and narrative be heard and represented in the data. I practiced a form of reflexive interviewing which meant sharing personal information, namely my own sexuality and experiences (DeVault, 2007).

The participant sample was purposive, “so that only people with certain experiences...would respond” (Murphy, 2015, p. 266), in this case, LGBTQ teachers currently employed by the Department of Education and Skills. I recruited participants through a variety of contacts, networks and organisations affiliated with education, including those providing supports to the LGBTQ community. See Table I for a breakdown of the sample demographics. I used Griffins “continuum of coming out” as a framework for examining one’s identity (1992) and. This framework lists different nexus’ of coming out on a continuum, ranging from; closeted (hasn’t disclosed sexuality) in private life and/or public life, implicitly (that their sexuality is assumed without disclosing) and ending at explicitly (having disclosed one’s sexuality). I allowed participants to self-identify their sexual orientation

It should be noted that recruitment for this study was difficult and the data presented is from a small number of participants. Accessibility was an issue in that when recruiting through networks

and organisations, participants had to be ‘out’ in some capacity, be it a personal one or within a work environment. The views of people who are fully closeted are not represented in the data. In this research I felt it was important to use pseudonyms rather than numerical denotation as it is counterproductive to the essence of carrying out queer research. Each participant interviewed is a person with a lived experience. The written description of a pseudonym helps to embody and reflect the approach in how the data was collected, with methodological care and through interaction, not by quantitative means. Denoting LGBTQ teachers as numerics is akin to the marginalisation and making invisible of their identities which LGBTQ teachers experience in schools. It constructs the participants as person-less, when in fact they sit in our staff room and teach in our schools.

Data analysis was conducted by treating data in a naturalised approach, with “idiosyncratic elements of speech, involuntary sounds and non-verbal signals” included (Brown & Danaher, 2019, p. 80). Informed by my paradigm, I approached coding the data heuristically, meaning to discover it and explore, rather than just the act of labelling. In doing so it led me “from the data to the idea, and from the idea to all the data pertaining to that idea” (Richards & Morse, 2007, p. 137). I coded in two cycles, the first to discover themes and the second to prepare and organise these themes.

| Name | Sex (self-defined) | Age | Contract Type | School Type | Continuum of coming out (Griffins, 1992) | Sexuality (self-defined) | Interview Duration (mins) |
|---------|--------------------|-----|---------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| Michael | M | 31 | P | Catholic Boys | Implicitly out | Gay | 83 |
| David | M | 32 | P | Catholic Co-ed | Implicitly out | Gay | 37 |
| Kevin | M | 32 | P | Multidenominational Co-ed | Implicitly out | Gay | 51 |
| Patrick | M | 54 | P | Catholic Co-ed | Closeted in public life, out in private life | Bisexual | 26 |
| Alex | X | 25 | P | Minority Faith Co-ed | Explicitly out | Queer | 58 |
| Moira | F | 34 | P | Minority Faith Co-ed | Explicitly out | Lesbian/Queer | 56 |

Table 1: Sample Demographics.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

SECURITY OF TENURE

A key finding in this research is that security of tenure facilitated five of the six participants to perform authentic performances of themselves through disclosing their sexuality. This is echoed in recent empirical research by the INTO research which locates security of tenure as an important feature for 43% of those who have come out (Donnelly, 2020). Signing a permanent contract allowed the teachers to feel more capable of performing their sexuality and being more authentic: “having permanency is a relief, they can’t get rid of me.... It’s a huge difference. I let my guard down, but it only came down when I had the contract signed, that was the defining moment” Moira. The process of gaining permanency allowed Moira to disclose their sexuality and perform a more authentic understanding of themselves in the work environment for the first time in nine years.

Apprehensions can surround ‘precarity’ (Egan 2016), and result in modulating and editing behaviour prior to disclosure in the upkeep of performance of an inauthentic self (Clarke & Turner, 2007). Michael and Alex reinforce this saying they left out LGBTQ volunteer work from recent job applications, minimising LGBTQ indicators, minimising their sexual identity to make themselves seem more professional and competent (Rumens & Kerfoot, 2009). Moira also notes that in future interviews she would go back into the closet “No, ummmmm, I don’t think I’d be out in the interview”. Their hesitation conveying a self-annoyance and disappointment at having to performing an inauthentic version of themselves and go back into the closet. This is echoed in a recent INTO survey (Donnelly, 2020).

Michael and Alex suggest even in light of an amended 37.1 (EEA, 2015), that job precarity still exists as an LGBTQ teacher. Michael indicates that the amendment to 37.1 though is a step in the right direction, but it is not enough, “I’d still be conscious of 37.1” and that a misinformation has led some teachers into a sense of job security that on closer examination, is still a threat to LGBTQ teachers. Of the five participants who are out in school, all recognise the impact of their legal permanent contract on their disclosure of their sexual identity, even in schools with hospitable school climates. Though interrelated, permanency is a more important feature than ethos and school climate for these participants. This directly contrasts with Connell (2014) who suggests that legal protections have a limiting effect, whilst school climate has a more important impact on how LGBTQ teachers perform their authentic sexualities.

AUTHENTIC DISCLOSURE

Like Egan's research in 2016, the majority of participants in this study (2019) are out in some sense in their school environment. This represents an optimistic contrast to earlier research produced in the Irish context (Gowran, 2004). Even though disclosing one's sexuality is an authentic performance, it can lead to a post-coming out or post-gay rhetoric, which influences how LGBTQ teachers. To tease these terms out and differentiate them, I use both more akin to how postmodernism is a particular perspective, instead of the chronological "after" period of coming out. When I use post-coming out, I am discussing one's lack of importance and/or relevance denoted in coming out or the need to come out surrounding one's sexuality. Similarly, post-gay when used refers to the lack of importance and relevance one accredits to their sexuality and identity. These terms both are centred on the rejection of the idea of coming out and of the importance of one's sexuality.

Kevin says he never came out at school, but was always out, "I don't think I felt the explicit need to come out.... it's not a big deal for me". By not coming out, Kevin is trying to reduce the need for explicitly disclosing sexuality, undermining the closet and coming out as oppressive experiences. By marking himself through sameness, he works in a manner to "expose heterosexuality as an incessant imitation of its own naturalization" (Butler, 1990, p. 22-23). Kevin is in no manner the same as his peers when it comes to his sexuality, yet this façade of "sameness" operates to deligitmise heterosexuality as the norm. Kevin's sexuality not being "a big deal" captures his understanding of his sexuality as not requiring enormous mental and emotional inputs, as it may for other people, or as it may be at other stages in his life. Allan et al., notes that heteronormativity subtly infiltrates the school environment (2008) and in a similar manner Kevin employs the same subtle strategy by informing his sexuality through discussing his "night out in the George...RuPauls Drag Race" or his boyfriend.

In practicing a post-coming out ethic, teachers are avoiding marking themselves as a LGBTQ teacher and as 'other' (Ferfolja, 1998), they are equating themselves to their cohort. For Kevin coming out has become inconsequential to himself as a process, but that does not mean the process is absent from his practice. Gray's claim of coming out as a multi-contextual practice (2013) becomes evident here through using indicators and identifiers which are built off of stereotypical assumptions. This post-coming out rhetoric involves LGBTQ teachers carefully treading on the 'bayonets blade' (Sedgwick, 1990), that calls for him to be out in his private life but professionally closeted. Similarly, David elaborates that his sexuality "is one facet of me, I don't think it's that important". It's hard not to think of LGBTQ teachers who edit and minimise their presentation to

seem ‘less LGBTQ’ and more competent in the process (Rumens & Kerfoot, 2009). In practicing a post-coming out ethic he is equating sameness with non-LGBTQ teachers.

Even though post-coming out undermines the function and role of the closet, it erodes the difference that separates LGBTQ teachers and straight colleagues. LGBTQ teachers are treated through this lens of sameness, when in fact they should be celebrated through Sedgwick’s Axiom 1 : “People are different from each other” (1990, p. 12). This lens of sameness is focused on “equality and inclusion” but in fact becomes essential in “the maintenance of the status quo” (Neary et al., 2016, p.16). Through this sameness and invisibility of LGBTQ identities, these LGBTQ teachers are seen to be working to maintain heteronormativity, a practice known as homonormativity (2003). Homonormativity doesn’t allow for difference to be extoled but works from the ideas and structures of heteronormativity and produces what Duggan understands as “conventional gays” (2002, p. 179). Sexualities which don’t fit in with ‘conventional’ gay sexualities, become tarnished as unacceptable, deviant and other. Though post-coming out and post-gay rhetoric are authentic performances of sexuality, these performances can reinforce the oppressive regime and structures of heteronormativity in schools for Irish LGBTQ teachers.

CRUCIAL RESONATIONS

An important resonance occurred whilst carrying out this research, that I feel is important to share. As I waited for one of my participants to join me, I noticed a homophobic slur engraved onto a notice board (Figure II). The dissonance of this casual homophobic inscription and the reason why I was present in the room, was profound. It reminded me with a sharp tinge, of my own heteronormative environment as a student and soon to be NQT teacher. As I sat there and waited, I was reminded of the importance of conducting queer based research and constructing a space in which non-normative performances, sexualities and identities could be liberated and expressed. The alienation and othering, generated by this slur meant that even the interview space was not a queer safe space, and I was reminded of work yet to be done.



Figure II – Engraved Homophobic Slur

CONCLUSION

This research exposes key aspects of LGBTQ teachers disclosing their sexuality and performing a more authentic version of themselves. What is clear is that security of tenure plays a vital role in these performances. The research also found that by playing down one's LGBTQ identity, LGBTQ teachers become complicit in reproducing heteronormative structures. The research exposes the need for LGBTQ teachers to celebrate their own uniqueness of identity to create a shift from reproducing heteronormative society through homonormativity. This queer celebration inherently involves marking oneself as other, as different. This project will and should strike difficult conversations, in the staffroom and hallways, yard and classroom. It is a conversation that isn't in the job description of a teacher but one that might be necessary to rewrite the story of Irish LGBTQ teachers.

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Exploring the Impact of *Aistear* on Montessori

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KEYWORDS: Curriculum, Montessori, Aistear, Integration, Implementation, Inspections.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to explore the impact of implementing *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009) on Montessori education. It also examines the extent to which *Aistear* and Montessori can be integrated successfully. Although this article is just a snapshot of a wider piece of research, which was guided by the overarching question 'Can the Montessori curriculum be integrated with *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* and delivered as one unified curriculum?' It presents some evidence that current Early Years (EY) regulations have the potential to create a monopoly of *Aistear* play based services, and that increased reliance on government funding could cause an imbalance of power between the inspector and the provider that undermines the Montessori approach.

Whereas Montessori is based on a socio-constructivist theoretical approach to learning and development, with emphasis placed on cognitive play and independent learning (Colgan, 2016), *Aistear* is underpinned by a socio-cultural theoretical approach to learning and development, with emphasis placed on pretend play and social learning (Daly & Forster, 2010). Montessori classrooms are generally divided into five curriculum areas: practical life, sensorial, numeracy, language and culture. Each area has a range of didactic Montessori materials. Designed to help children develop physical skills and understand specific concepts (Prochazaka, 1993). In contrast, *Aistear* play based settings are usually divided into play areas, such as home corner, construction, small world and messy play. Within these areas, children learn and develop while playing with open-ended toys and natural resources (NCCA, 2009).

Findings in this study show that the Montessori curriculum has been undermined in settings and some services had abandoned their Montessori curriculum altogether. Most of the participants succumbed to inspectors' recommendations because they feared losing their funding and were concerned regarding the future of Montessori in Ireland. While *Aistear* is considered a positive step, it is important that its implementation does not dominate the sector. As Moss (2006) argues "there is not, nor should there be, one agreed upon understanding of early childhood education." Attaining quality and high standards is vital. But a monopoly of *Aistear* play-based services, all following the same format, may not necessarily achieve this. Therefore, this article considers should registration with the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme be contingent on all services agreeing to implement *Aistear*.

CONTEXT

Montessori preschools are embedded within the historical development of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in Ireland (OECD, 2004). They follow the Montessori curriculum using specific didactic materials and adhere to the Montessori principles of teaching and learning (Flood & Hardy, 2013). However, significant changes to early years policy, including the mandatory implementation of the *Aistear* curriculum framework (2009) supported by the ECCE scheme (2018), the introduction of Early Years Education-Focused Inspections (EYEIs) (DES, 2016) and the continuation of TUSLA (the child and family agency) inspections (2011), could have a significant impact on Montessori services and practices.

As an overarching framework, *Aistear* was designed to support existing pedagogical curriculums, such as, Montessori, Froebel, Steiner and HighScope (Kernan, 2007). It focuses on

learning and developing through play and building relationships with parents and families (Daly & Forster, 2010). It was also intended to provide continuity across settings, raise standards and improve quality (NCCA, 2004). Both TUSLA and the DES inspections are guided by the principles of *Aistear*. To ensure services are implementing *Aistear*, settings which seek public funding under the ECCE scheme must demonstrate that they are adhering to the principles and standards of *Aistear* (Pobal, 2016). Other preschool services, not funded under the ECCE scheme, are under no obligation to implement *Aistear*.

However, the attractive nature of the ECCE scheme has led to an increase in parents sending their children to preschool. It is worth noting that the ECCE scheme was introduced during a time of recession. In 2009 the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA) contacted all parents in the State, encouraging them to actively recruit their current service provider into the scheme, stating; “If your child is already attending a preschool service... you can ask the service provider if they plan to participate in the scheme” (OMCYA, 2009 cited in O’Donoghue-Hynes, 2011, p.7). This strategy proved to be successful. Within the first year of the scheme participation rates were in excess of 90% (Wolfe, et al. 2013). From my experience of working with parents (during this time) it was a case of register with the scheme or go out of business. Today 95% of all eligible children in Ireland are availing of the ECCE scheme (Pobal, 2016). As a result, most preschools are now financially dependent on state funding (Wolfe, et al. 2013).

Currently, Montessori preschools must implement *Aistear* in order to access or retain public funding. Moloney (2016) suggests that regulatory compliance can be linked to fear. In the context of this study, fear of losing ECCE funding may result in some practitioners making significant changes to the Montessori curriculum. Providers are now in a position whereby they have all the responsibilities of running their own business, but very little of the say (O’Donoghue-Hynes & Hayes, 2011). It is worth considering the implications of state funding on service providers.

METHODOLOGY

This research was guided by a qualitative phenomenological approach. As the implementation of *Aistear* is currently affecting the majority of practitioners in Ireland, it was perceived as a phenomenon. Phenomenological research seeks to uncover the participant’s individual perceptions, regarding a phenomenon or experience (Mertens, 2015). The researcher’s intent is to understand and describe the experience from the participant’s point of view (Mertens 2015, p.247). Considering the dearth of empirical data on the integration of Montessori and *Aistear*, it was important to gain practitioners perspectives on this phenomenon.

Participants were selected using a purposeful sampling technique, which required making theoretical informed decisions as to whom would be included in the research sample (Hardy & Bryman, 2004). As Montessori practices vary, I wanted to gather a range of opinions. Therefore, preschools were grouped into four categories. (1) Preschools registered with the Irish Montessori Education Board (IMEB). (2) Preschools that are part of the Montessori primary school system. (3) Private Montessori preschools. (4) Crèche Montessori preschools (see table 1). It must be acknowledged that this study is limited by the fact that it does not include the voice of inspectors or a representative from the Montessori associations, (American Montessori International (AMI) and St Nicholas Montessori Teachers Association (SNMTA)). The findings provide an insight from a small cohort of participants and should not be generalised to the wider population.

Ten semi structures interviews were carried out over a period of five weeks (two Interviews per week). Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes, and all interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. The data gathered during the interview process was then analysed using a qualitative coding method, which enabled organising and grouping data into categories (Creswell, 2014). For this study a data organising system was created. I immersed myself in the data by transcribing all of the interviews, reading the transcripts, and precoding. Precoding involved highlighting significant quotes and colour coding responses that where similar, different or unusual (Saldaña, 2009). As categories developed, themes related to the study began to emerge. The data was then reviewed alongside the literature review and the research question. The final themes were named for the presentation of the findings when no further themes were being identified (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

| Type of pre-school | Participant | Qualification | Registered with Montessori Association |
|------------------------------|-------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Private sessional Montessori | A1 | Level 6 Montessori Diploma (1992) | No |
| | A2 | Level 6 Montessori (1998) | Yes |
| | A3 | Level 6 Montessori Diploma (2003) | No |
| Crèche/Montessori | B1 | Level 6 Montessori Diploma (2008) | No |
| | B2 | Level 6 Montessori Diploma (2007) | No |
| | B3 | Level 6 Montessori Diploma (1993) | No |

| | | | |
|-------------------------------------------|----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Registered with IMEB | C1 | Level 8 Montessori Diploma (1993) | Yes |
| | C2 | Level 8 Montessori Education (2014) | Yes |
| | C3 | Level 7 Montessori Diploma (1990) | Yes |
| Associated with Montessori Primary School | D1 | Level 7 AMI Montessori Level 8 Montessori (2010) Level 9 Masters in Special Ed (2015) | Yes |

Table 1 - Participant Profile

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings from this study show that factors such as, government funding, inspections, qualifications, and a lack of support from Montessori associations could be having a significant impact on Montessori practices in early years service provision. All participants asserted that there was pressure from inspectors to incorporate *Aistear* play areas into their Montessori classrooms. Five private and crèche Montessori settings disclosed succumbing to pressure, out of fear of losing their funding.

“The inspector wanted the Montessori shelves gone and the materials incorporated beside *Aistear* play stations. I didn’t feel like I had a choice, because don’t we have to for Pobal, to be part of the ECCE scheme” (A3).

This report is concerning because the recommendation appears to be at odds with the research that underpins *Aistear*. Kernan (2007) asserts that *Aistear* supports and acknowledges different pedagogical approaches, and their emphasis on different aspects of organisation. This would suggest that incorporating Montessori materials within *Aistear* play areas is not compulsory. Findings revealed that participants who engaged in this practice found it difficult to follow the structure and order of the Montessori Method. Three participants considered that changing the environment and placing Montessori materials in *Aistear* play areas created confusion and “days when it is just chaotic” (A3; A2; B2). Four participants stated that they mostly focused on implementing *Aistear* and would consider that they are currently *Aistear* play based settings, rather

than Montessori settings. Therefore, embedding Montessori materials within *Aistear* play areas may serve to undermine the Montessori curriculum.

In contrast, IMEB participants considered that changing the Montessori environment would compromise the method. These participants felt that the Montessori curriculum areas provided children with all the same learning experiences as *Aistear*, “so why should they be changed” (D1). For example, the practical life area provides children with home corner and messy play experiences. The sensorial area reflected *Aistear*’s construction play. The culture area reflected *Aistear*’s small world play. The nature table encompassed natural resources, and children had ample opportunities to engage in arts and crafts. IMEB participants did not add *Aistear* play areas into the classroom. Consequently, they considered that they were implementing Montessori and *Aistear* equally. This suggests that Montessori can be integrated with *Aistear*, but not to the extent to which Montessori curriculum areas are replaced by *Aistear* play areas.

It is worth noting, the findings of this study suggest that the integration of Montessori and *Aistear* is impacted by a practitioner’s qualifications, professional knowledge and skills. Participants holding a level 6 qualification indicated that they mostly implemented *Aistear*, and two implemented Montessori and *Aistear* equally, but not simultaneously. In contrast, all participants holding a level 7/8/9 qualification considered they implemented Montessori and *Aistear* equally. This would suggest that professionalising the sector prepares practitioners to better integrate both approaches. Findings indicate that some practitioners, especially those who hold a level 6 Montessori qualification and qualified prior to the introduction of *Aistear*, may benefit from specific Montessori and *Aistear* training.

DISSATISFACTION WITH MONTESSORI ASSOCIATIONS

Cullen (1996) emphasises that merging Montessori with ECCE frameworks requires collaboration and training. However, half of the participants in this study asserted that they were not aware of any specific Montessori and *Aistear* training courses. Surprisingly, the Montessori associations were severely critiqued by participants for not supporting their members, and the wider Montessori community in this way. Nine participants expressed disappointment with both the dearth of Montessori and *Aistear* training courses, and a lack of support regarding DES inspections:

We feel that our association has been really disappointing, they choose to stick their head in the sand and pretend it (*Aistear*) was not going to affect them. They have desperately let us down (C3).

We emailed our Montessori association for their advice, after our inspection, but they weren't interested.....we were so overwhelmed with the changes. So we just gave ourselves over completely to *Aistear*. I'm delighted with how *Aistear* is working. But there is an element of me that feels like something has been lost by losing Montessori (B3).

It is concerning that service providers believed they were working within a contract that offered them "no choice" (A2). The sense of anxiety regarding pending inspections was palpable. It is equally disheartening that the Montessori method is being compromised in some settings and the Montessori associations "choose to stick their head in the sand" (C3), at a time when they most needed to provide support.

CONCERNS REGARDING THE FUTURE OF MONTESSORI IN IRELAND

At the time of this study five participants were Montessori preschool owners and practitioners. Consistent with researchers O'Donoghue-Hynes and Hayes (2011), findings indicate that they all had the responsibility of running their own business but were sometimes excluded from the decision-making processes: "When Pobal came in they effectively took over your business. This is what we want; this is what you have to do" (A2). While participants all agreed that *Aistear* helps raise standards and quality (Freeman, et al. 2016), they were also concerned that the government "just wants a one size fits all" (A2) method of education. Participants working in crèche Montessori settings explained that "A lot of schools are becoming more *Aistear* based because the government are paying them" (B2). Employers are predominantly looking for practitioners with *Aistear* qualifications, as opposed to Montessori, meaning those wishing to pursue a career in ECCE may no longer consider Montessori a viable option.

Concerns that *Aistear* would constrain Montessori practices did not arise during the consultation phase of *Aistear* (NCCA, 2005). However, findings in this study suggest that it should be considered. Participant feedback suggests that there is potential for a monopoly over early years settings by *Aistear* play based services. Should the ECCE scheme be contingent on all services implementing *Aistear*? Moss (2006) argues there should not be one understanding of early childhood education. To have one only serves to limit the choice of children, parents and practitioners. Especially in services where the practitioner holds a major award in Montessori, Froebel, Steiner or HighScope. This is something that the government, inspectorate, and all those invested in early childhood education should bear in mind.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article was to explore whether *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* can or should be integrated with the Montessori method in Irish early years settings. Although this was a small study, it provides some evidence that factors such as, government funding, inspections, and surprisingly, a lack of support from Montessori associations could be undermining the Montessori curriculum.

It would be helpful if the Montessori associations run a series of courses based on integrating and implementing Montessori with *Aistear*. Attending these courses could improve practice and reduce the fear of inspections. In conjunction with the DES, Montessori associations should produce a guide to Montessori and *Aistear*. Such a guide would provide continuity and support practitioners and the inspectorate. A Montessori and *Aistear* co-ordinator should be available to offer support regarding the structure of the Montessori environment, inspections and curriculum content. This would promote best practice in Montessori settings. Equally, it would offer service providers with support regarding inspections.

The research that underpins *Aistear* supports and acknowledges different pedagogical approaches and their emphasis on different aspects of organisation (Kernan, 2007). Therefore, it is recommended that the inspectorate assesses the children's learning experiences within the Montessori environment. If the children are being offered the same experiences, and they are achieving the learning goals and aims of *Aistear*, there should be no pressure to add *Aistear* play areas.

There was anecdotal evidence in this study that the inspectors were "not in favour of Montessori" (B1). There was also anecdotal evidence that practitioners were "told" to incorporate *Aistear* play areas into the classroom. While the data gathered was extremely interesting, not including the voice of inspectors and a representative from the Montessori associations limited the study. Therefore, to gain an insight into the inspection process, it is recommended that a further study encompassing a wider range of Montessori practitioners, and inspectors is required.

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Exploring the Inclusion of LGBTQI+ Information in Relationships and Sexuality Education in Irish Primary Schools

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KEYWORDS: Relationships and Sexuality, Curriculum, Primary Education, Documentary Analysis

INTRODUCTION

This article aims to investigate the relationship between the inclusion of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning and Intersexual (LGBTQI+) information in the Irish Relationships and Sexuality Education programme (RSE) for primary schools using documentary analysis. The purpose of the article, and the broader dissertation is to identify the impact the representation of LGBTQI+ information can have on children's perception of sexuality; to analyse the RSE programme in Irish primary schools, focusing on the inclusion of LGBTQI+ information; and to investigate the impact a school's ethos has on the inclusion of LGBTQI+ information. It was hoped that an analysis of the Irish RSE programme in conjunction with an investigation of its influence on children's awareness and perception of sexualities will identify whether there is a link between the national RSE programme and children's perception of sexuality.

The motivation for choosing this topic for research was because, even though I was lucky to have experienced an education where information regarding my gender and heterosexual inclination were frequently represented and accepted, it is becoming increasingly evident that this is not the

experience of all children in Irish primary schools. My excitement to become a qualified primary teacher is contrasted with the realisation that I will soon have a considerable impact on the way students perceive the world around them. As a teacher, it is my responsibility to educate myself on how to include all children in my class equally. The creation of a new RSE programme for Irish primary schools highlights the need for teachers to educate themselves on the reasons for this development. It is hoped that the research presented in this article will support student teachers and others to learn more about how to support the inclusion of all children in the classroom.

CONTEXT

It is well reported that due to the historic influence of Catholicism in Ireland, 89% of Irish primary schools are under the patronage of the Catholic Church (Coolahan & Hussey, 2012). Schools under Catholic patronage are expected to integrate their religious beliefs and values into the education of their students (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2016). This is outlined in the Rules and Regulations for National Schools which state that “a religious spirit should inform and vivify the whole work of the school” (Government of Ireland, 1946, p.38). Considering that historically the Catholic Church openly promoted their view on homosexuality as sinful (Ratzinger, 1986; Kelly, 1987; Wallis & VanEvery, 2000), it is understandable that heterosexuality would be presented as the norm.

In Irish society at large, the inclusion of the LGBTQI+ community has significantly improved. Beginning in 1993 with the decriminalisation of male homosexuality and more recently with the passing of the Gender Recognition Act (2015). According to the Gay and Lesbian Education Network (2016), approximately 11% of Irish primary and post primary children identify as part of the LGBTQI+ community. This study emphasised the need to investigate whether Irish primary schools are providing children with an education environment that encourages them to accept and appreciate the diverse sexualities that exist in the 21st Century. The RSE programme has remained unchanged since its implementation, despite the significant developments regarding sexuality in Ireland, represented in Figure 1 (Government of Ireland, 2000). This has resulted in the proposed development of a new RSE programme (House of Oireachtas, 2018).

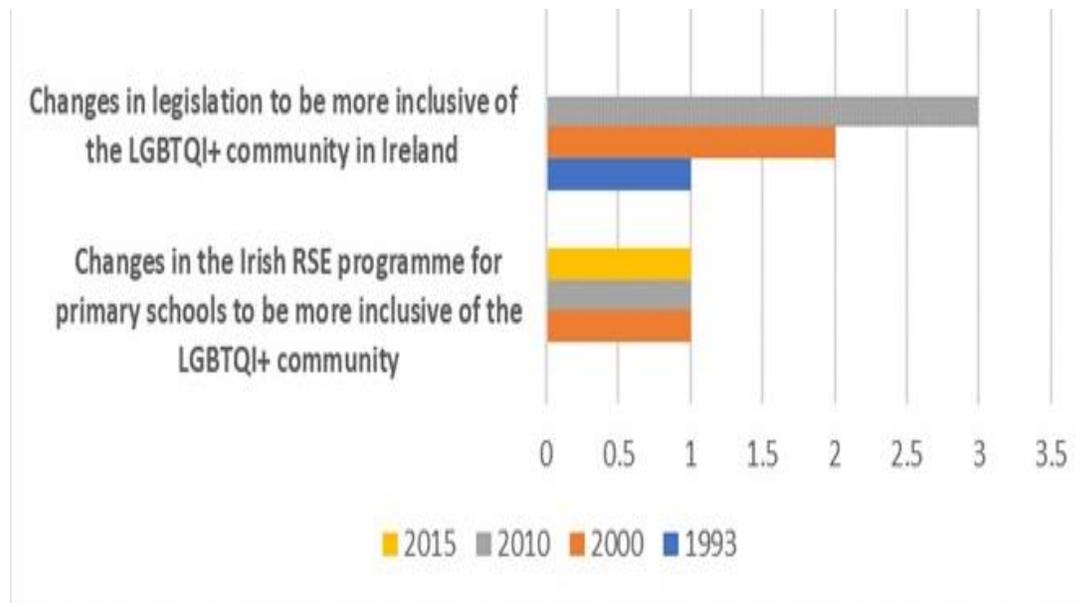


Figure 1. A Comparison of Changes Made to National Legislation and Changes Made to the Irish RSE programme for Primary Schools to be more inclusive of the LGBTQI+ Community (Graph compiled by the author for the purpose of the research)

Although the implementation of RSE is mandatory in Irish primary schools, current legislation allows each school to implement their own RSE policy designed around based on “the core values and ethos of the school” (Government of Ireland, 1995, 2.2(iii)). The governance manual for primary schools published by the DES in 2015, repeats this phrase despite developments in society over the course of twenty years. As a result, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has said that by prioritising the rights of the patron body, The Education Act (1998) has limited what can be achieved through the national curriculum (cited in Mayock, Kitching & Morgan, 2007).

A proposal for a new RSE programme was published online by the NCCA in 2019. The programme was faced with opposition and an apparent lack of awareness surrounding the current programme taught in primary schools. One group of parents created an online petition called “Hands off our kids” which aimed to prevent what they regard as inappropriate information being included in the programme (2019). The group suggested that exposure to the RSE programme would also cause unnecessary gender and sexuality confusion amongst children. An absence of research regarding the impact of primary schools on children’s perception of sexuality contributes to this confusion. LGBT Ireland conducted a study of the LGBTQI+ community, based on over 1,250 students under the age of 20 (Higgins, Barker & Begley, 2016). They identified that levels of anxiety and depression were higher amongst Irish youths identifying as part of the LGBTQI+ community, than amongst their heterosexual peers. These mental health issues were significantly attributed to

the lack of acceptance and understanding surrounding alternative sexualities, emphasising the critical need for more research to be carried out in this field of education.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative documentary analysis was used to conduct the research for this article. Secondary sources including curricula, literature, policy and reports were used to address the research question (Fitzgerald, 2007). This research methodology is most suitable to answer the research question as it is imperative to examine the current RSE programme in Irish primary schools. An investigation of secondary literature regarding children's perception of sexuality and the impact of representation has been used to achieve the aims and objectives.

It is acknowledged that there are limitations to this dissertation. Documentary analysis focuses on secondary sources in isolation (Bohnsack, 2014)], meaning children's perception of sexuality could not be explored. It is challenging to accurately identify children's perceptions of sexuality due to the continued stigma surrounding the discussion of sexuality in Ireland (Kelly, 1997). Often studies are conducted using people that are willing to discuss this controversial topic, resulting in a prevalence of biased information. The researcher acknowledges that the studies included in this dissertation have been conducted by groups supporting the LGBTQI+ community, resulting in potentially biased information.

This is an area which as seen rapid change with limited research studies on sexuality or RSE carried out in Irish primary schools. Therefore, many secondary sources are considered outdated in this frequently changing field of research. This can impact the accuracy and relevance of the information included in this dissertation. Furthermore, as this dissertation is based on both personal and professional motivations, initial researcher bias is inevitable (Chenail, 2011). The researcher aims to identify and challenge these personal biases in order to objectively investigate the relationship between the inclusion of LGBTQI+ information in Irish primary schools and children's perception of sexuality.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The current RSE programme implemented in Irish primary schools was created in 2000, due to the stigmatisation surrounding pregnancy outside of wedlock (Kelly, 1997). This stigma was emphasised after the death of Ann Lovett in 1984. The programme focused on sex as an act between a man and women in a committed relationship, for the sole purpose of conception (GOI,

2000). When the RSE programme was developed, it was illegal for same-sex couples to be married in Ireland (Halpin, 2019). Considering the Catholicism Church's pivotal role in curricular formation (Coolahan & Hussey, 2012), it is unsurprising that the curriculum presented sexual intercourse as something done in a committed relationship, such as marriage. Limited information was included regarding puberty and gender and sexuality are categorised as only male or female, and a one-dimensional description of sex is provided. The content included in the 2000 RSE programme is outlined in Table 1.

| Information included in the programme | Noteworthy absences |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Physical changes males and females experience during puberty in relation to sexual intercourse | References to body parts that are not a necessary part of copulation but may still be involved in intercourse, such as the anus |
| Information regarding heterosexual intercourse for the purpose of creating new life | References to sexual intercourse for pleasure and homosexual intercourse |

Table 1 Information on physical changes included and absent from the Irish RSE programme for primary schools (adapted from the RSE curriculum, 2000)

According to the resource materials for RSE, the programme enables children to “develop the knowledge, attitudes, values, beliefs and practical skills necessary to establish and sustain healthy personal relationships” (Government of Ireland, 2000, p. 7). As these values and beliefs are not explicitly stated, children's sexuality development is dependent on the implicit curriculum outlined by each individual school. In Ireland, 89% of primary schools follow a Catholic ethos (DES, 2016). The implicit curriculum in these primary schools must promote the beliefs and values of their patron. This mirrors Bourdieu describes this as social virtues taught in a school, based on the values and traits that a school promotes (1979). It is clearly stated that the implementation of RSE must follow “the core values and ethos of the school” (GOI, 1995,2.2(iii)). While this does not mean that schools can actively promote anti-LGBTQI+ views, their ethos does enable the omission of any reference to the LGBTQI+ community. Children's perception of how to behave is therefore based on the validation and acceptance of these specific values and traits. The information included in the programme regarding social development is outlined in Table 2.

| Information included in the programme | Noteworthy absences |
|----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| Friends vs Acquaintances where gender is specified | The psychological aspect of sexuality development |
| Traits that are important in a friend | Different family structures |
| Love in terms of parental and heterosexual relationships | Love in terms of homosexual relationships |

Table 2 Information on social and physical changes included and absent from the Irish RSE programme for primary schools (adapted from the RSE curriculum, 2000)

While Table 1 and 2 demonstrate a strong heterosexual slant to the current RSE programme, it would be inaccurate to say that a school's ethos prevents homosexuality being included in RSE. However, the current system prevents teachers from answering questions not included in the national programme, thus preventing individual schools from adapting to the needs of their diverse school community (GOI, 1997).

The invisibility of homosexuality in the Irish RSE programme disregards children who do not identify as heterosexual or are questioning their sexuality. Furthermore, the absence of any reference to the LGBTQI+ community in the RSE programme provides children with an inaccurate and biased view of sexuality, inhibiting their personal development. This absence of information is captured by Atkinson's statement; "we do teach about homosexuality from children's earliest days in school through the absence of its representation" (2002, p. 125).

Supplementary Irish programmes containing LGBTQI+ related information have been developed to support teachers to ensure that the programme is suitable for their educational context such as the *We All Belong* programme (Knox & Gavigan, 2016) and *Different Families, Same Love* (2013). The national RSE programme is due to be amended in order include more diverse information, however, the Rules and Regulations for National Schools (Government of Ireland, 1946) will remain unchanged. Therefore, the increase of LGBTQI+ information in the RSE programme may not be reflected in the programme presented in schools under Catholic patronage.

CONCLUSION

Recent public campaigns and legislative changes have highlighted increasing acceptance and representation of sexuality in Ireland. Within primary schools, it is important that children are provided with information regarding sexuality. Due to the Rules and Regulations for National Schools (Government of Ireland, 1946) and the Education Act (1998), the ethos of a school can influence the inclusion of LGBTQI+ information. Schools are entitled to promote their values and beliefs, but children's perception of sexuality must also be considered. A balance must be found between respecting the religious beliefs a school promotes, while providing children with equal opportunity to understand and explore both heterosexuality and homosexuality.

The inclusion of LGBTQI+ information in primary schools is a national challenge, significantly influenced by the Department of Education in conjunction with patron bodies and school communities. While the information included in the new RSE programme is out of the control of primary schools and educators, an acceptance of all sexualities can be fostered in many ways. According to Larrabee and Morehead (2010) "Teachers are leaders who influence the children of the world. If we want a society that is acceptable and free, it starts in the classroom" (p. 39). It is important that teachers are aware of what they can do to provide their students with a safe environment to authentically understand sexuality. It will be a gradual and slow process but there is no doubt that it is an important one.

- Teachers could follow a specific policy when dealing with homophobic and transphobic incidents. It is important for children to accept themselves and each other regardless of their gender or sexual orientation. A consistent approach to these incidents is therefore essential to children's perception of sexuality.
- It would be beneficial for schools to provide students with specialised support, as part of the school's broader counselling and well-being service, where they can discuss any questions or challenges, they are facing regarding sexuality.
- Teachers must be provided with appropriate training on the implementation of the new RSE programme. LGBTQI+ focused workshops should also be implemented for existing teachers and principals in order to support staff who are fearful of parental and societal reactions to the new RSE programme.
- By consulting with representatives from the Catholic Church, the Department of Education should develop guidelines for the inclusion of LGBTQI+ information which respects the Catholic ethos by consulting with representatives from the Catholic Church.

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Teachers' Perspectives of Station-teaching in Mathematics in an Irish Primary School

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Eimear O'Connell graduated from the Professional Master of Education (PME) programme at Mary Immaculate College, Co. Limerick in 2019. Eimear completed an undergraduate Bachelor of Science Degree in Physiotherapy in the University of Limerick and worked as a physiotherapist in the public sector prior to her completion of the PME programme. Her interest in team-teaching and a passion for mathematics inspired this work investigating teacher's perspectives of station-teaching in Mathematics in the primary school classroom.

KEYWORDS: Team Teaching, Station-Teaching, Mathematics Education, Primary Education

INTRODUCTION

Co-teaching has been defined as two or more teachers sharing responsibility for teaching some or all of the students in a classroom (Villa, Nevin, & Thousand, 2004). In Ireland, the Department of Education and Science (DES) (2007) and the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) (2019) use the terms co-teaching and team-teaching interchangeably. The DES (2017a) recommend that teachers engage in team-teaching to address children's specific learning needs. Furthermore, Irish research by McCoy (2011) reported that an eight week co-teaching mathematics intervention had positive outcomes for students in one class who had been previously identified as experiencing difficulty in relation to mathematics. Statistically significant improvements were reported in their mathematical attainment and these students reported increased confidence and a more positive attitude towards mathematics following the co-teaching intervention.

The Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) (2018) identify five models of co-teaching:

1. Station Teaching
2. Lead and Support
3. Parallel Teaching
4. Alternative Teaching
5. Teaming.

Irish primary school teachers have the autonomy to select which model they wish to use. Research reports that station teaching is the most common model of team-teaching in Irish primary school classrooms (Casserly & Padden, 2018; Mahon, 2015). In the station-teaching model, children rotate through stations where they receive instruction from the teacher or complete activities independently (Friend, 2016). Station-teaching was specifically advocated as an approach that may be used to target the promotion of language, literacy and numeracy skills in the Guidelines for Primary Schools Supporting Pupils with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools (DES, 2017b). Research by McMahon (2015) and Cull and Travers (2018) focused on the impact of station-teaching in mathematics specifically. Improvements were reported in students' participation levels and students reported enjoying completing their mathematics lessons using the station-teaching model as they found that it was an easier way to learn mathematical skills (McMahon, 2015).

More recently, Cull and Travers (2018) used the station-teaching method in one multi-grade class in a rural Irish primary school and reported that this was an effective intervention for developing key competencies in numeracy. However, a consultation report for the new primary mathematics curriculum reported that schools need support in how to set up and implement team-teaching (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2018). Additionally, the paucity of research available in relation to station-teaching in mathematics, has been identified in educational discourse and further research has been advised to inform educational practice (Dillane, 2016; McMahon, 2015).

This research study sought to investigate station-teaching as a teaching methodology in primary school mathematics in Ireland. The research question for this study was: what are teachers' perspectives of station-teaching as a teaching methodology in primary school mathematics? It is hoped that the findings from this research study may inform teachers who are considering implementing this approach. This research will provide information regarding the benefits and challenges associated with this station teaching and in relation to its implementation in educational

practice. Furthermore, the perspectives of teachers regarding the benefits and challenges of implementing this approach may be beneficial to inform future policymakers when creating policies regarding teaching methodologies in numeracy.

CONTEXT

There has been a significant emphasis on the teaching of literacy and numeracy in Ireland in recent years. Ireland's poor performance in national and international literacy and numeracy assessments (PISA 2009), led to the publication of the National Strategy: Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life 2011 – 2020 (DES, 2011). The national strategy aimed to improve literacy and numeracy among children and young people in Ireland. It recommended that all children should have the opportunity to regularly engage with learning approaches including cooperative learning, active learning, differentiated learning and problem-solving activities. When these approaches are implemented they result in more effective learning and in increased participation and enjoyment (DES, 2011).

Subsequently, it was reported in the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy Interim Review (DES, 2017c) that National Assessments of Mathematics and English Reading (NAMER) revealed the first significant improvements in the performance of primary school children in English reading and mathematics in over thirty years. Improvements have been attributed to the efforts made to reduce the impact of educational disadvantage and to facilitate greater inclusion in the classroom (Clerkin, Perkins, & Chubb, 2017).

Co-teaching is one method of teaching that is proposed to facilitate inclusion. This teaching approach originated in the USA in the 1960s. It was developed in response to legislative changes to include students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in the general education classroom so that they could learn alongside their peers (Friend, 2016; Villa et al., 2004). More recently in Ireland, the Chief Inspector's Report (DES, 2018) encouraged schools to explore models of in-class support rather than relying on withdrawal for children with SEN. This was also supported by Circular No. 0013/2017 (DES, 2017a) and in the Guidelines for Primary Schools Supporting Pupils with SEN in Mainstream Schools (DES, 2017b). The range of teaching methods suggested by these documents include team-teaching, small group teaching and, where deemed necessary, individualised teaching to address specific learning needs. Circular No. 0013/2017 (DES, 2017a) asserts that team-teaching has been shown to provide an appropriate model for the needs of individual pupils in a collective setting in their own classroom and may have the additional benefit of qualifying pupils

receiving more support than traditionally. In addition to facilitating inclusion, educational discourse also reports that co-teaching is of benefit to all class members, not just those with SEN (Villa et al., 2004) and that effective co-teaching can result in the academic improvement and social skill development of all of the children in the classroom (Prizeman, 2015; Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007).

METHODOLOGY

In this research study, qualitative data was collected using a case-study approach. A case-study was selected in order to explore co-teaching from a holistic perspective. It allowed the researcher to explore teachers' perspectives of station-teaching in mathematics in one school setting, while considering the impact of the whole-school environment. Institutional ethical approval for this research study was granted. Non-probability sampling, in the form of both convenience and volunteer sampling, was employed in this case-study in order to identify a potential school and research participants. This case-study focused on one school in Munster that participated in Band 1 of Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS).

Data was collected from a variety of sources. Firstly, examination of relevant school policies in relation to team-teaching and station-teaching specifically were analysed to reflect the school's commitment to this approach. Secondly, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four teachers in the school and the interviews were recorded using a dictaphone. Additional data was gathered from the researcher's own lesson plans and reflective practice portfolios completed in relation to station-teaching in mathematics specifically.

The data in this research study was analysed using an inductive approach. The process of thematic analysis recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to identify, analyse and report themes that emerged from the data. The researcher first familiarised themselves with the data by transcribing the interviews, reading the school policies and reading the researcher's reflections. The data was re-read and then coded; these codes were subsequently collated into potential themes and sub-themes. The themes and sub-themes were reviewed in relation to the whole data set and a thematic map was created. Ongoing analysis was performed to refine each theme. Finally, further analysis was undertaken while writing the research findings to ensure that the analysis related back to the research question and previous educational literature. The generalisability of the findings of the research study are limited by the specificity of the case-study approach, the small sample size and the use of non-probability sampling.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data analysis process are presented in the thematic web below. As this research paper provides a snapshot of a larger body of work, this discussion will focus on one of these themes: the school's whole school approach to team-teaching and more specifically, station-teaching. Educational literature reports that in order for team-teaching to be implemented successfully, a whole-school commitment to its implementation is required (Friend, 2007; Prizeman, 2015). The school that participated in this case-study demonstrated clear evidence of a whole-school approach towards the promotion of team-teaching.

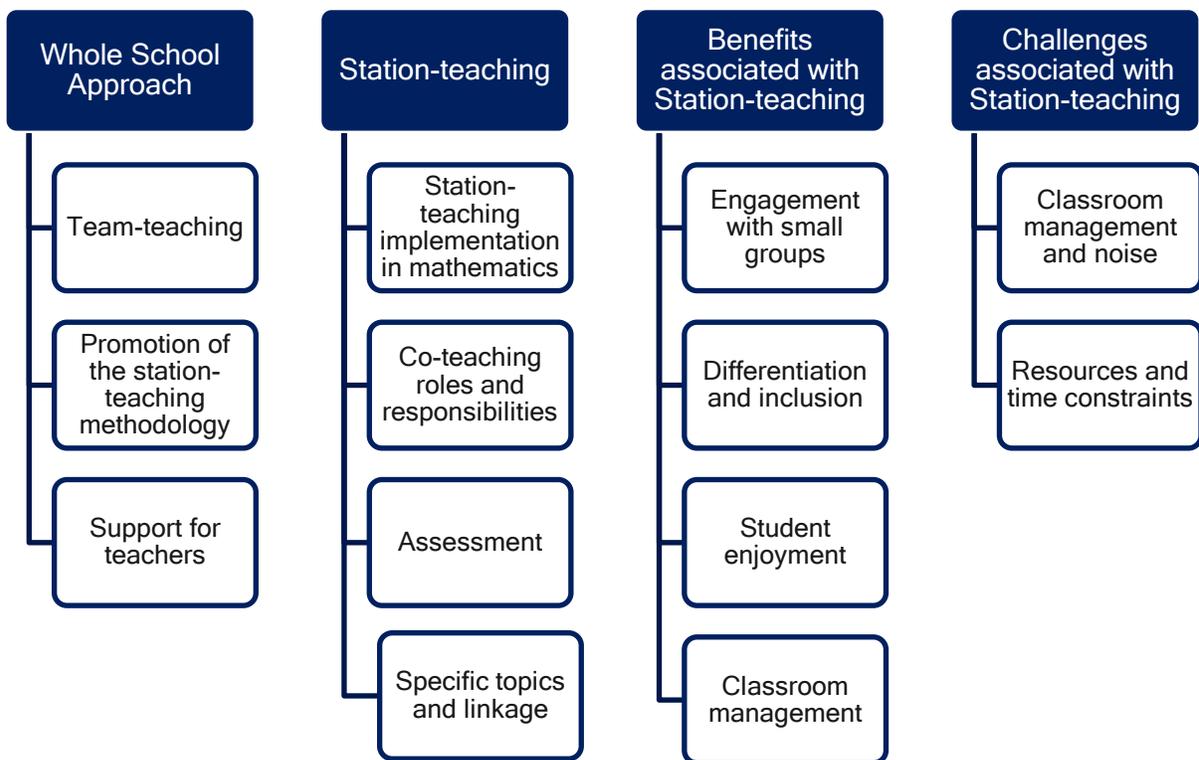


Figure 1 Thematic web showing the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data.

While the case study school did not have a specific policy in relation to team-teaching, analysis of the school's other policies indicated a commitment to team-teaching, specifically in relation to numeracy. For example, one of the actions of their Numeracy Action Plan for 2017-2018 was the "use of team-teaching in Numeracy". Similarly, according to their DEIS 3 Year plan 2016-2019, a target for the 2018-2019 school year was "to continue to monitor methods of team-teaching in numeracy". This is similar to previous research conducted in the Irish context which reported that co-teaching was part of school policy in 82% of schools (Mahon, 2015).

In relation to catering for children with SEN, there was a clear emphasis on in-class support, in the form of team-teaching, in contrast to withdrawal. For example, Teacher 3 (T3) reported *“the children remain in class for literacy and numeracy for the entire week, so they are not withdrawn for that time”* and T2 stated that *“the SET never takes any of them out for maths. Always in the classroom for maths.”* However, it was acknowledged that some children may require a combination of team-teaching and withdrawal to meet their educational learning needs, *“there might be a need to withdraw that child and give them that bit of extra support”* (T1). This is in accordance with Circular No. 0013/2017 which recommended that team-teaching approaches may be combined with withdrawal for intensive teaching based on the individual child’s needs (DES, 2017a).

All teachers described a variety of team-teaching methodologies that they employ as part of their mathematics lessons. These included parallel teaching, one lead and one support and station-teaching. For example, T3 stated that *“we use parallel teaching just to introduce the topic at the start”* and T1 stated that *“there are times it will be teacher-led where I’m just assisting”*. This is similar to previous Irish research which found that teachers who were experienced in co-teaching used a variety of co-teaching approaches to meet the needs of their students (Mahon, 2015).

In relation to the station-teaching model specifically, a review of this school’s policies highlighted the promotion of this model of team-teaching in numeracy. *“To implement station-teaching for numeracy throughout the school”* was stated as both an action of the Numeracy Action Plan for 2017-2018 and as a target of the DEIS 3 Year plan prioritising numeracy for the 2017-2018 school year. Additionally, all interviewees reported using station-teaching in mathematics and demonstrated a very good understanding of this methodology. For example, as stated by T3, *“you’d have the class teacher and the SET at a station each guiding it and you’d have one to two independent stations depending on the levels of abilities in the classes.”* Similarly, T4 commented *“Sometimes the children might move, sometimes the teachers might move, it just kind of depends on the class group and differentiated for each class group.”* The station-teaching approach began in relation to literacy and has now been introduced for numeracy as stated by T1, *“we have station-teaching in English and in maths, now as a school we got the literacy side of things going first.”* This may reflect the findings of the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy Interim review (2017c) which reported that there was a greater focus on literacy in schools initially following the publication of the strategy.

The emphasis on station-teaching in numeracy throughout this school was also apparent when teachers discussed the level of support and training for teachers that is facilitated in relation

to this teaching methodology. While T3 reported no formal training in station-teaching, they stated that *“within Croke Park hours now we have discussed it at length”*. Additionally, T1 reflected that the week before the interview they were *“at a day’s PDST training for team-teaching and station-teaching primarily for maths”*.

Furthermore, the teachers described the role of a Numeracy Co-ordinator who visits the school and supports the teachers to implement new initiatives. Teacher 1 stated *“we are very lucky where we have the initiative teacher coming in.... who is trying to get station-teaching up and running in as many classes as possible.”* In addition to the Numeracy Co-ordinator, T3 commented on the support that is available within the teaching staff, *“various teachers, some have an awful lot of experience of it”*. It is clear that this school provides opportunities for professional development and support in relation to co-teaching, which has been recommended in order to ensure its successful implementation (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010) and may be useful for other schools considering implementing this approach.

CONCLUSION

The following provides a summary of the key findings from this case-study. As mentioned previously, this research paper provides a snapshot of a larger body of work and the discussion focused on one of the themes: the school’s whole school approach to team-teaching and more specifically, station-teaching. Station-teaching was promoted as a teaching methodology to be employed in mathematics throughout the whole-school. Teachers received support for its implementation through training and from interactions with other teachers within the school.

Findings from the other themes explored in the study as a whole demonstrated that teachers implemented station-teaching in mathematics once or twice a week and either two or three teachers were present to deliver this methodology. Most teachers used ability grouping and children were facilitated to work independently or in groups to complete a variety of activities. Teachers reported benefits associated with station-teaching in mathematics in relation to engaging with children in small groups, catering for the diverse needs of the children in the classroom, classroom management and student enjoyment. Challenges associated with station-teaching were classroom management issues, noise and constraints with time and resources. The majority of teachers reported that it was an appropriate methodology to use for all of the strands of the mathematics curriculum. Additionally, it was identified that station-teaching was particularly useful to facilitate linkage between strands in numeracy.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE, POLICY AND FUTURE RESEARCH

- In relation to educational practice, it was clear that the implementation of station-teaching as a teaching methodology in mathematics benefited from a whole-school approach. This philosophy could also be replicated in other Irish primary schools in order to realise the positive impact of this methodology in mathematics teaching.
- This research identifies that schools require a significant amount of resources, support and training in order to implement station-teaching. Future educational policy should consider the provision of staff and training to alleviate the challenges associated with station-teaching, in order to ensure that this approach may be a feasible methodology in mathematics in Irish primary schools.
- As this research study was limited to the perspectives of teachers regarding station-teaching, future research should also consider the opinions of other stakeholders such as the children, principals and parents on a larger scale and in a variety of schools.
- A longitudinal research study could also seek to identify the most effective ways to implement station-teaching in mathematics to support the academic and social skill development of all children in the Irish primary school classroom.

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Competence and Confidence of Newly Qualified Teachers in Supporting Children with Special Educational Needs in School Settings



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I am a final year student on Bachelor of Education programme in Marino Institute of Education (MIE). My choice of topic for my research was Special Education because it is an area that I feel strongly about researching. At the outset, I felt that as a final year student going out as an NQT in September 2020, I wasn't competent and confidence in supporting children with SEN to the highest degree, especially in SEN settings such as an ASD unit. This research and topic have provided me with a huge insight and many answers to my research question.

KEYWORDS: Inclusion, Special Educational Needs, Newly Qualified Teachers, Documentary Analysis

INTRODUCTION

This article uses documentary analysis to outline the journey of inclusion on an international platform and how that has influenced our educational landscape in Ireland. The research explores the experiences and challenges faced by pre-service teachers and newly qualified teachers (NQTs) when supporting children with SEN. In particular, the researcher sought to identify whether or NQTs are equipped with sufficient knowledge, strategies and experience for them to educate children with (SEN) confidently and competently whether it be in a mainstream class or a SEN setting. The documents that were studied include literature which outlined survey results on student experiences of inclusive education and SEN modules, and experiences of SEN placements. The literature identified SEN skill gaps as noted by pre-service teachers. This article is a snapshot of a broader

dissertation which explored initial teacher education (ITE) programmes in Ireland, briefly outlining and examining inclusive education modules and their delivery in ITE.

CONTEXT

The approach to children with SEN in education policy has progressed significantly over the last four decades. The review of literature from the 1970s to current day reveals that there has been a move towards the inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream school internationally. The catalyst for the changing approach towards the education of children with SEN began in the UK in the 1970s with the publication of the Warnock Report (1978) which advocated for the facilitation of integration and expansion of special needs services. The influence of the Warnock report can be seen in the landmark report published by the Special Education Review Committee (1993) on provision for children with SEN; and was further emphasised by the Salamanca Statement (1994) calling for children with SEN to be educated in mainstream schools.

In Ireland, the Education Act (1998) made significant progress in the educational provision for children with SEN. Setting out the objectives and principles underpinning the Irish education system, the Act made provision in the interests of the common good for the education of every person in the state, including any person with a disability or who has other special educational needs. In 2004, the introduction of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act underlined the importance of mainstream schooling for children with SEN in Ireland. It also introduced the implementation of Individual Educational Plans (IEPs) to support the individual needs of children. Policy set out by the Department of Education (DES) since 2017 consolidates the inclusion of children in mainstream classes by equipping schools with Special Education Teachers (SETs) to further support teaching and learning (DES, 2017). The most recent development has been the ratification of Article 24 of the United Nations convention on the rights of Persons with Disabilities that stipulates that all children should be educated in general education settings (United Nations, 2019). While there is general consensus that mainstream education has benefits for all children, it brings with it certain challenges for teachers, particularly pre-service teachers and NQTs with little practical experience. These challenges and experiences are the focus of this study.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted using documentary analysis. The majority of the documentary analysis consisted of literature from Ireland, however there was a certain amount of international literature analysed also. Academic literature, policies and reports were reviewed and examined in order to ascertain whether preservice teachers and NQTs feel confident and competent supporting students with SEN in the classroom. The literature analysed was specific to education and SEN. There were limitations to presenting the data, the author could have discussed a myriad of findings, however, the restriction of word count limited the number of findings and a dearth of literature pertaining to the competence and confidence of NQTs in supporting children with SEN prevented in-depth exploration of certain themes. Themes that emerged from the findings were: *The Inclusive School* – the study found how schools developed from segregated medical model to the current all-inclusive educational model of schooling (NCSE, 2020). This was shaped over four decades of international and national policy and legislation from the Warnock Report in 1978, Education Act 1998 in Ireland, EPSEN, 2004, to the current debate on an all-inclusive school (NCSE, 2020).

NQTs: Training, Experience and Outcomes – what was deduced from this theme was that despite the changes to ITE and the increased the number and range of school placements offered to students, which contributes substantially to their range of experiences, it does not address a significant variability in the capacity of schools and cooperating teachers to promote more inclusive practices (NCSE, 2018). Additionally, in regard to competence and confidence of NQTs, Travers et al, (2010) outlined in their report that a number of studies point to the fact that many teachers lack the preparation and experience in dealing with students with SEN and those from minority ethnic and /or minority language groups, in inclusive settings (Avramidis, Bayliss & Burden, 2000; Burke & Sutherland, 2004; Winter, 2006). However, with all schools now participating in the Droichead process which support the professional learning of NQTs during the induction phase, thus laying the foundations for subsequent professional growth and learning for the next phase of their career (Teaching Council, 2018/2019), perhaps NQTs will feel more equipped and prepared in educating children with SEN confidently and competently whether it be in a mainstream class or a SEN setting.

Finally, *Factors to Support NQTs for Effective Inclusion* were addressed through school contexts, CPD and collaboration. What emerged from the school context was the importance of leadership, King (2017) and how it should be introduced to teachers should be at preservice level. The finding showed how leadership is an integral part of the school context to further promote good practice and influence on NQTs.

The collaborative relationship between the teacher and the SNA was analysed and it shows that in ITE in Ireland, there is no mandatory modules or placement that places emphasis on learning how to collaborate alongside an SNA in the classroom. Lastly, CPD emerged as an important tool for NQTs in terms of developing their competence and confidence with SEN, especially with the The Teaching Council developing Cosán, the National framework for teachers' learning (The Teaching Council, 2016). Perhaps CPD through the frameworks provided by Cosán and The Teaching Council, NQT's can ensure they develop and implement inclusive practices in the classroom and SEN settings, where ITE may be short of providing.

When reviewing literature for the purpose of this dissertation, an important element on analysis of this research was that interviews were conducted to final year student teachers exploring in more depth their perceptions of their experience of ITE, including the intended impact on outcomes for students with SEN (NCSE, 2018). Therefore, on analysis of the NCSE (2018) in particular, it offers reputable and relevant findings regarding teachers feeling ill-equipped in supporting children with SEN, thus presenting a correlation over the last fifteen years of a lack of confidence and competence for student teachers and NQTs in the provision of inclusive education. It must be noted however, this research relied significantly on the NCSE *Initial Teacher Education for Inclusion* report, (2018). However, it would have further supported the study if there was additional data from other sources where final year student teachers and/or NQTs interviewed in relation to their experiences of ITE and how prepared they feel with regard to supporting students with SEN.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Over the last two decades there have been concerns from both pre-service teachers and NQTs about feeling unprepared to provide for the inclusion of children with SEN in their classrooms. In an Inspectorate report '*Beginning to Teach*' (2005), some NQTs expressed concerns about their lack of preparedness for managing the learning and behavioural needs of a wide range of pupils. Pre-service teachers were concerned that their initial teacher education course did not equip them to differentiate their teaching, to prepare them for working in disadvantaged areas, or to provide for pupils with SEN (DES, 2005).

More recent literature also points to gaps in the provision of inclusive education. According to a report published by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in 2018, while pre-service teachers now report feeling well prepared for inclusive teaching in terms of developing appropriate values and attitudes, they still felt relatively under-prepared in terms of confidence in their

knowledge and skills to implement inclusive practices in school contexts. This is in line with much of the literature on confidence and competence in SEN. Travers, et al. (2010) note that many teachers lack the preparation and experience in dealing with students with SEN in inclusive settings. Similarly, Drury and Kinsella (2009), report the insufficient numbers of teachers who possess the expertise in special needs education.

For pre-service teachers, the main sources of learning about inclusive education is personal experience, college modules and placement learning in ITE. College modules dedicated to inclusive education and SEN significantly contributed to pre-service teachers' learning. The report found that modules impacted student's understanding of inclusivity as a concept; their practical pedagogic knowledge; and how prepared they felt in terms of general inclusivity in the classroom. However, students indicated that there was a need for more dedicated SEN modules, and the delivery of workshops rather than lectures would be more beneficial.

A skill gap was identified by students in the area of teaching and learning for children with SEN. Students stated how they felt ill-equipped for teaching children with special needs, not feeling confident teaching children with ASD, and a general lack of input around various SEN resulted in negative experiences on placement. In the NCSE (2018) report, students noted the important role the SNA plays and suggested that more information on how to work with an SNA would be beneficial as part of the SEN module. The students' perspectives are reflected in literature pertaining to SNA support which reports the tensions between theory and practice (Casserly et al, 2018) and the undefined role of SNA support. King (2017), addresses the importance of leadership for inclusion where social learning processes through collaborative practice are key (Ainscow & Sandhill, 2010).

"The recognition of the role of leadership in supporting inclusive learning for students and for teachers new to teaching or to the school is an important dimension of the Irish educational landscape" (Donnelly, Murchú, & Thies, 2016). This suggests that leadership is one of the key factors in supporting NQTs in their experiences of working with children with SEN. Nevertheless, there is a gap in ITE in preparing student teachers in expanding their views to see best practices through the lens of teacher leadership, which can be shaped through an expansion of their knowledge of themselves as leaders, others in the school community, schools as organizations, and teaching through sharing strategies (Bond, 2011). Bond suggests that ITE programmes could have a discrete module on leadership from the very beginning. Teacher leaders need to have a positive disposition, be trustworthy and reliable and be confident in their abilities, resilient and above all, possess a sense of humour (Bond 2011, cited in King, 2017).

CONCLUSION

This study sought to explore the competence and confidence of NQTs in supporting children with special educational needs (SEN) in school settings. Following documentary analysis of literature, policy and reports on the topic, it was found that the inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream settings has become a core element of education provision in Ireland and internationally. Legislation from the Warnock Report, 1978 up to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2019 depicted a mandated framework to support children with SEN in mainstream settings.

Despite the huge leap in progression over the last forty years, it is clear that there is still a gap in the provision of adequate training, particularly at a pre-service level to ensure the competence and confidence of NQTs in supporting children with SEN in their classrooms. Literature reviewed highlighted how lack of expertise and experience can impact the experiences and outcomes of pre-service teachers while on placement, but also when newly qualified. There are many factors that support pre-service and newly qualified teachers for inclusive practice, including the school context, collaboration, continuous professional development, SEN based placements and dedicated SEN modules. These supports need to be utilised to ensure pre-service and newly qualified teachers increase their confidence and competence levels in order to appropriately support children with SEN in school settings.

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Article 7, April 2020

An Investigation into Parents' and Children's Understandings of Early Writing

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Originally from Co. Donegal, I have been working as a primary school teacher in Dublin for eleven years, most recently as a mainstream teacher in infant classes. My experiences during these years have given me a true passion for early childhood education. I have experience working with children with English as an Additional Language (EAL) and working with parents who are involved in their young children's education. Literacy learning, especially oral language, is so important in infant classrooms and there is little support for teachers in emergent writing. This was the focus of my research in my Master of Education dissertation in MIE.

KEYWORDS: Early Literacy, Emergent Writing, Early Childhood Education, Qualitative Research

INTRODUCTION

One of the main functions of primary schools in Ireland is to support children in the attainment of effective writing skills; so that they can participate in contemporary society, express their voice and communicate with others over space and time (De Smedt & Van Keer, 2013; O'Toole, 2016; Purcell-Gates, as cited in Riley, 2006). However, no child lives in a vacuum (Hayes, O'Toole, & Halpenny, 2017) and when children begin primary school, they bring with them knowledge and experiences of the written language that they have gained from their family members.

Literature reveals that although there is extensive research into the development of oral language and reading for young children, there is a gap in research on early writing development (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2009; Puranik, Al Otaiba, Sidler, & Grelich, 2014; Rowe & Neitzel, 2010). Puranik, Philips, Lonigan and Gibson' (2018) call for further study on the relationship between emergent writing and writing-related practices in the home.

Subsequently, this study aimed to illuminate the essential nature of writing, assenting that children's first experiences of the written language are in the home.

This research recognised that parent perceptions on early writing needed to be examined so that future school practices, curricula, interventions and policies can be guided by these understandings. This study was underpinned by Street's theoretical framework of Literacy as a Social Practice (1984, 2003a, 2003b, 2012, 2016) and specifically explored the following research questions:

- Do parents' and children's understandings of early writing, reflect an emergent writing perspective?
- How do family literacy practices influence the development of early writing?

CONTEXT

Literacy learning in the infant classes, in primary schools are guided by two curricula, the first is *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curricular Framework* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2009), and the Primary Language Curriculum (Department of Education and Skills [DES]/NCCA, 2015). Both curricula support an emergent literacy perspective; Aistear (NCCA, 2009) states that emergent literacy is the "foundation for reading and writing" (NCCA, 2009, p. 54). Although, the Primary Language Curriculum doesn't use the term 'emergent literacy', it acknowledges that children "come to school with different language experiences" (2015, p. 12).

The emergent writing approach identifies that children delve into writing before they have any understanding of the alphabetic principle. It is the combination of scribbles, shapes, drawing, talk and gesture, letter-like symbols and invented spelling, used by a young child to express meaning in written form before they can write and spell conventionally (Byington & Kim, 2017; Gentry, 2000; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998; Williams & Hufnagel, 2005; Yaden, Rowe & MacGillivray, 1995). The acquisition of emergent literacy skills is a powerful predictor of later reading and writing achievement (NELP, 2008; Purcell-Gates, as cited in Riley, 2006; Sulzby & Teale, 1991).

Supporting curricula in Ireland, a National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy was launched by the DES in 2011. This strategy states that parental support is essential for children's educational success (DES, 2011). It documents that a key strategy for raising the literacy levels of children, is to increase parental involvement in education particularly during early education. The involvement of parents in education is not a new notion, as the role of the family has been long established in Ireland (Bunreacht na hÉireann, 1937, Article 42.1). This research re-emphasises the

family's role in education and recognises that literacy consists of both traditional technologies (such as the use of pencil and paper) and contemporary technologies (such as emails, text messages etc).

METHODOLOGY

Underpinned by a qualitative approach, this research gathered data using a combination of complementary methods including journals, image-based documents, participating in semi-structured interviews and focus groups (see table 1). Six parents and seven children participated in the research. Parents kept journals that recorded details on the literacy events that occurred in the home. Parents then discussed their journals in semi-structured interviews. Children (of the parents interviewed) participated in focus groups which were structured using a study by Bradford and Wyse (2013), in which a puppet called 'Jackson the Frog' was used as a stimulus for discussion. Image-based documents, consisting of examples of the children's writing were examined in the study to support claims made by the participants.

| | Journals | Semi-Structured Interviews | Focus Groups | Image-based Documents | Totals |
|---------------|----------|----------------------------|--------------|-----------------------|--------|
| Participant 1 | ✓ | ✓ | | | 2 |
| Participant 2 | ✓ | ✓ | | | 2 |
| Participant 3 | ✓ | ✓ | | | 2 |
| Participant 4 | ✓ | ✓ | | | 2 |
| Participant 5 | ✓ | ✓ | | | 2 |
| Participant 6 | ✓ | ✓ | | | 2 |
| Focus Group A | | | ✓ | ✓ | 2 |
| Focus Group B | | | ✓ | ✓ | 2 |
| Total | 6 | 6 | 2 | 2 | 16 |

Table 1: Description of data

Participants in this study were accessed through one school using volunteer sampling. To achieve anonymity, pseudonyms are used throughout. As with any study, there were specific limitations. Firstly, this was a small-scale study limited to thirteen individuals with experience of a single setting and teachers' perceptions of emergent writing were not examined. This presents limitations in terms of the generalisability of the study (Denscombe 2007), therefore, findings in this study are not made as general claims. Secondly, the vast majority of the participants in this study had English as their second language. The credibility of this study was enhanced through the use of data triangulation (Yin, 2003). The data was analysed clearly using the six-phase process of thematic

analysis, to ensure that logical findings were contrived (Braun & Clarke, 2013). To create confirmability, the researcher made it clear to the participants that a copy of the final work would be made available to them (Basit, 2010).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings presented in the following section represent a snapshot of a larger study on children's emergent writing.

PARENTS DON'T ALWAYS UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF EMERGENT WRITING

All the participants in this study agreed that writing was a crucial, lifelong skill. They determined that it was important for education, for creativity, for communication and for reflecting upon, organising and expressing one's own thoughts. However, the findings suggested that parents may not fully understand the emergent approach to writing. Only two of the six parents, acknowledged that scribbles, mark-making, drawing and invented spellings were their children's "*own way of writing*". On the contrary, two parents had a traditional understanding of writing, perceiving that young children are unable to write independently and that their children could not yet be identified as writers. In their opinions, in order to create a piece of writing, correct spelling and punctuation is required.

Participant 4 stated that "*the news is all about reading to kids. So we knew, but writing, it is less*" This suggests that the lack of public discourse on the importance of early writing development contributed to her traditional view of writing. This participant added that the first information she received on early writing development was when her child attended primary school. Participant 4 felt that her initial understandings towards early writing, which was that writing must be conventional, may have contributed to her son's lack of confidence and lack of interest in writing. "*I didn't know that such small kids should write... I didn't know I have to allow him for many mistakes... I wanted him to write correctly... and then it was hard for him to suddenly, write with mistakes (Participant 4).*"

UNDERSTANDINGS OF EARLY WRITING IN THE HOME LANGUAGE.

In this study, five of the parent participants spoke a language other than English as their home language. Parent's understandings of early writing development in the home language heavily reflected a traditional approach. Surprisingly, the parents' whose attitudes reflected an emergent

literacy perspective with regards to early writing in English, did not have the same attitude to early writing in the home language. Parents stated that learning to write in the home language was a formal activity, which had to be learnt in a strict environment. In addition, they suggested that children would be better equipped to learn how to write in the home language, after they had mastered how to read and write in the English language. *“I want him to focus on English and once he will be very good in English then I want to... you have to master one and then you go for something else (Participant 5).* In contrast, all of the children’s understandings of writing coincided with an emergent literacy perspective. Three children perceived that they could already write in their home languages. It is noteworthy that these children had never received any formal instruction in writing, in their home languages.

INFORMAL LITERACY PRACTICES IN THE HOME MAY BE UNDERVALUED

As explained by Bradford and Wyse (2013), parent’s perceptions of writing are likely to affect the writing activities that they provide for their children. This concurs with the findings in this study which suggest that natural, informal literacy events occurring in the home may be underappreciated and underutilised as opportunities for learning. Parents felt that writing is a formal activity, and thus, ascertained that it is more difficult to support their children with writing, than with reading. Participant 2 described that *“writing is much less these days... reading is more handy, you can just read anywhere, in any room. For writing, you especially have to sit down and have things to write. You have to make a proper environment.”* This concurs with the findings from the child participants, who articulated that writing is a skill-based and schooled artefact.

One parent explained that events such as reading recipes, writing emails and filling in forms occur *“on a daily basis”* in the home, but she had *“never realised that this could be counted as a literacy event”* (Participant 2). Another parent stated that writing only occurred at homework time and that they didn’t *“do anything else”* (Participant 5), in terms of writing in the home. However, it was later established, that the family engaged in a wide range of writing events such as emails, messages, word games, shopping lists, drawings, personal lists, cards, invites, completion of forms, study and the use of search engines. It is essential that informal literacy events occurring daily in homes should be valued and appreciated by parents as important learning opportunities, as children will only become empowered to write when they observe purposeful and functional writing (NAEYC, 2009).

CONCLUSION

Writing development begins from birth (Hall, White, Guo & Emerson, 2017), therefore it is crucial that parents have access to information on writing development in the early years long before their children reach school age. Those involved in writing policies need to promote the concept of emergent writing so that it becomes foregrounded in the discourse on early years literacy.

It is recommended that an alternative intervention approach based on alliances between teachers and parents, is promoted in schools. This approach was developed by Jackson and Doell (2017), wherein the role of the school is to inform parents of specific approaches to literacy. In turn, the parents' role is to inform the teacher of family literacy practices. Together, they identify and implement targeted support, relating to natural practices within the home for the young children.

Similar to Hall et al. (2017), this study, found that the perceptions of adults do not have a significant impact on children's own perceptions of themselves as writers. As stipulated by Hall et al. (2017), it would be interesting to investigate whether this changes as children develop into conventional writers, and if so, the factors involved in this change. It is recommended that a longitudinal, larger scale study be conducted to investigate children, parents and teachers' perspectives on emergent writing in early years.

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Article 8, April 2020

An Action Research Project using the Dialogic Story Reading Approach with Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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I teach in a small, school in North County Dublin. Like many schools in the area, there are many children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) integrated into mainstream classes. My interest in ASD and play-based learning sparked my Masters' journey in Early Education at the Marino Institute Education. The course gave me opportunities to reflect on my teaching and learning. It helped me to see what practice was working and what was not working in my classroom. My thesis focuses on using a particular story reading method to enhance oral language and relationships' in children with ASD.

KEYWORDS: Dialogic Story Reading, Language Development, Joint Attention, ASD

INTRODUCTION

In 2018, the World Health Organisation estimated that one child in 160 has an Autism Spectrum Disorder. In Ireland, an estimated prevalence rate of 1-1.5% is used for the purpose of planning policy and services (DOH, 2019). Changing diagnostics and education policy has resulted in more inclusive approaches to education, resulting in more children with ASD now being taught in mainstream classes (DES, 2017, 2018; NCSE, 2016; NHS, 2016). This is a welcomed and positive advance but has implications for teachers and students alike. The many challenges of working with children with autism, obtaining diagnosis and indeed raising a daughter with ASD inspired this research.

Murdoch and Wilson (2008), suggest that all investigation or enquiry is driven by a tension or imbalance within the researcher. In this study, the tension was “*how can teachers in mainstream classes ensure that children with ASD are reaching their full potential?*” As a teacher, is it possible

in a busy, sometimes overcrowded classroom, to form an adequate bond with children with ASD? This question led to an exploration of the dialogic story reading method with children with ASD. Research has shown that this method is an effective literacy intervention for children who are typically developing, and also for children with ASD (Whalon et al., 2013).

Dialogic story reading, where the adult helps the child to become the storyteller of the story, has shown to be the most effective method to increase oral language rates (Kiely, 2017; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Developing oral language skills is critical for children with ASD (Whalon, Delano, & Hanline, 2013). Furthermore, the dialogic story reading approach has shown to deepen bonds between typically developing children and their adult reader (Kiely, 2017; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1988) and similar findings were found with children with ASD (Golloher, 2017; Kim et al., 2011). This article highlights some of the key findings of trialling this approach, which are not generalisable but may be of interest to other teachers supporting students with ASD.

CONTEXT

Children with ASD vary in their behaviour, but communication and language skills along with social skill deficits, are considered to be the most significant concerns. Children with ASD face challenges with joint attention (JA) (Delbruck, Yang, Yassine, & Grossman, 2019). Joint attention is where the adult and child learn together in a reciprocal relationship (Hayes, 2007; NCSE, 2017; Trautman, 2009) attending focus on a particular task, in this case dialogic story reading. The dialogic story reading approach allows parents and teachers to provide support for developing joint attention, social interactions and communication skills (Kim & Rispoli, 2018; Plattos, 2012).

The behavioural difficulties associated with children with ASD and encountered by the researcher are well documented in the literature (Kelly, Carey, McCarthy & Coyle, 2007; Lindsay et al., 2013; McTiernan et al., 2011; Westling, 2010). In a classroom setting, and in this particular research, children with ASD present with various difficulties such as emotional regulation, joint attention, social communication, social imagination, social interaction and sensory processing. Taking turns, listening, communicating and moving on from tasks were the main behavioral challenges during this research.

THE ADAPTED DIALOGIC STORY METHOD

Dialogic story reading uses specific prompts to allow the child to immerse themselves in the story. The aim is that the child will take over the story and insert his/her own ideas, storyline, opinions and

creative imaginings, thus increasing oral language development. When using the dialogic story method in practice, the teacher can use several approaches:

- (a) The adult prompts responses from the child. This is called the **PEER** sequence (**P**rompt, **E**valuate, **E**xpand, **R**epeat).
- (b) The adult uses more extended language prompts using the **CROWD** method (**C**ompletion prompts, **R**ecall prompts, **O**pen-ended prompts, **d**istancing prompts) (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998); (Kiely, 2017).

The dialogic storytelling method has been adapted several times. In 2013, a modified form of the dialogic story reading approach for children with ASD was developed in the USA. The approach was called '*Reading to Engage Children with Autism in Language and Learning*' (RECALL). It draws on the dialogic story reading approach by paying particular attention to directing questions to enhance oral language in children with autism. RECALL incorporates questions that focus the child on joint attention, social reciprocity, and language/communication skills. These are the skills children with ASD need to develop to enhance future opportunities for learning and success in school (Justice, Logan, Isitan & Sackes, 2016; Whalon et al., 2013). When using the RECALL method with children with ASD, the teacher can use the above approaches, and additional instructional prompts and props where appropriate. These acronyms and adaptations outlined below, were very useful for planning the lessons for this research.

- (c) The modified **RECALL** method for children with ASD uses additional instructional prompts, props, visuals and appropriate wait time. The acronym used is **PEEP**, meaning **P**rompt, **E**valuate, **E**xpand, and **P**raise (Whalon, et al., 2013).

METHODOLOGY

An action research approach guided this research study. Action research begins with values (McNiff, 2017). Action research empowers educators to improve their practice by offering as a gift the knowledge they generate in the process thus contributing to the creation of a profession of educators (Whitehead, 2018; Whitehead & Huxtable, 2016). The value of teacher-as-lifelong- learner is at the heart of this study, along with the belief that all children deserve the best possible education available. Among others, the values of inclusion, the importance of the child's autonomy, and the concept of teaching through a relational pedagogy have motivated this study.

The research trialled the dialogic story reading approach in 12 sessions across three learning cycles with two children with ASD. Six hours of recorded data were collected and transcribed. Reflection is at the heart of action research and consolidates practical theories and practices (Noffke & Zeichner, 1987; Palak, 2013). For that reason, the researcher's reflective journals and revision cast recordings, along with children's work samples were used as data.

The research demanded a reflective approach, and the revising of questions and forming new lines of inquiry were essential elements of the research process (Agee, 2009). Consent was received from the study participant's parents and the children before each practice session. To ensure that the data was gathered and analysed appropriately, a validation group was also set up to discuss the process and challenges with the researcher. Validation groups are groups of professionals or colleagues who seek to collaborate an all phases of the cycles (McNiff, 2017). A validation group is described as self-critical communities with the aim of critically reviewing the action research (Kemmis & Taggart, 1998; McNiff, 2017). These professionals helped, advised and listened throughout the research process.

Generalisability is a limitation of this particular research because it is a small-scale study and each child's diagnosis and experience of ASD is unique, the researcher cannot say that these methods will work for all children with ASD. Furthermore, the learning derived from the study is personal to the researcher, who's learning journey cannot be replicated. While this can be considered a limitation, researching education is not about studying something static. The truth of this particular research is dependent on a social dynamic between the researcher and participants. Action researchers embrace this social dynamic (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; McNiff, 1988; 2017) this social interaction and in-depth understanding of individual children's experiences is what made this worthwhile.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This research found that the dialogic story reading approach is an effective intervention to use with children with ASD. The method enhances expressive language, especially de-contextualised language and communication. When using the dialogic story reading approach, participants communicated more with the researcher and used the full continuum of expressive engagement, from talking back about the story to taking over the story (Sipe, 2002). Using Sipe's (2002) typology of expressive engagement (figure 1), the researcher monitored the types of responses that storybook reading elicited from the child participants. This study highlighted where the two participants fell on the continuum of expressive engagement. This varied depending on the book, the mood of the child,

and how dramatic the teacher read it!

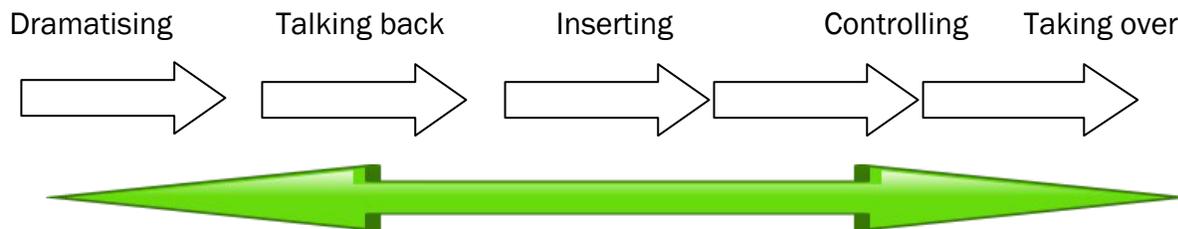


Figure 1: A typology of expressive engagement (Sipe, 2002).

This research found that the dialogic story approach helped the children use de-contextualised language. That is, they demonstrated that they were thinking about what a character might be thinking or feeling (Kiely, 2017). Asking questions and pointing to pictures of the characters in the story aided de-contextualised language. For example, “How do you think the boy/girl is feeling here?” “What do you think he/she is feeling or might say next?” This higher order thinking can be challenging for some children. The necessity for appropriate teacher, “*Wait Time*” for responses, was evident in the study.

The study highlighted the challenge of maintaining joint attention with children with ASD. The more severe the level of autism, the more challenging it is to maintain joint attention. Autism affects each child differently, and thus requires an individualised approach for best results. In this study the researcher found that using action rhymes, songs and props allowed one of the participants engage more in the story. The other child enjoyed drawing characters from the stories, creating puppets and making them “talk”.

The approach deepened student-teacher bonds and interactions. For example, the researcher documents many times when the children interacted positively and expressed enjoyment. The increase in the children’s communication with the researcher was evident. At the beginning of the study the participants did not interact with the researcher, whereas at the end of the 12 sessions, the children had built up a good repore with the researcher. Input from the children’s SNAs and parents was essential in helping the researcher understand the positive impact the sessions were having on the children. These findings were recorded in the reflective journals and post session recordings.

Successfully implementing a dialogic storytelling approach within a group setting is extremely challenging. Whalon et al., (2013), completed their adapted dialogic RECALL method in a small group

of children with ASD and found positive outcomes for language and communication. This particular research demonstrates that language and communication did not improve as much in a group setting when compared to using the approach in the one-to-one sessions.

The living theory approach to action research requires evidence to validate that there was an improvement of practice and enhancement of educational leadership for the good of others (McNiff & Whitehead, 2009; Barry, 2018). This action research documented the researcher's professional development in terms of change and transformation of current practice and understanding of children with ASD. Transformation is evident in the enhancement of relationships with the participants, the validation group, parents and staff of the school. The data demonstrates the teacher acting as a reflective practitioner. For example, in reflective journal 9, *Teacher-Student bonds*, the researcher recorded that one of the participants wanted to stay longer and read more stories after the session, because "he was having fun". The researcher recorded that "It was nice to see him enjoying himself and having fun" (Research Journal, 9, 2019).

McTiernan et al., (2011) and Westling (2010) have demonstrated that deficits in supports for teachers can cause stress, fatigue and burn-out. This small-scale research project did acknowledge the teacher's learning and challenges of working closely with children with ASD. The fatigue felt by the researcher in terms of endeavoring to maintain joint attention, manage challenging behaviours and maintaining a dramatic reading style, was evident in cycles one and two and documented in the reflection journals. An advantage of keeping a reflection journal as an action researcher is that it creates a connection between theory and practice and serves as an instrument for the improvement of learning (Perkins, 1996; McNiff, 2017). These findings outline the need for continuous support and training for teachers working with children with ASD.

CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that the dialogic story reading approach elicited better results in a one-to-one setting with children with ASD. There is evidence suggesting that the more severe the ASD, the more challenging the behaviour and educational difficulties (Justice et al., 2016; Whalon et al., 2013). Working on a language intervention such as the dialogic story reading should be done alongside other integration approaches that encourage children with ASD to participate in activities with their typically developing peers. Strategies such as LEAP programme, Stay, Play and Talk Floor Time, and the TEACCH approach are effective interventions for children with ASD that encourage peer integration.

The claims to knowledge generated in this study will form the basis of future practice and

planning in the school. The dialogic story reading approach will be used as a method to enhance language and communication with children with ASD and also typically developing children in this school in the future. The consensus from the validation group was that this approach would be continued as part of the children's resource hours, on a one-to-one basis, which is how it worked best. Future recommendations for practice would be to continue the dialogic story reading approach and to introduce play-based interventions to children with ASD. Finally, it is important that mainstream teachers have opportunities to work one-to-one with ASD children that are in their classes. This allows for the enhancement of teacher-student bonds and overall learning.

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'An Inclusive Education for All': Challenges Facing Teachers in Supporting Children with SEN in a Multi-Grade Mainstream Classroom

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Amy Quirke graduated from the PME (Primary) in Marino Institute of Education in December 2019. Prior to her time in MIE, she graduated with a BCL (with History) from University College Dublin. Having attended her local 3 teacher multi-grade primary school, it was a natural progression to conduct research in this context. She has an interest in the role research plays in the modern Irish classroom and the area of inclusive education, especially given the changing landscape of the Irish education system. Amy hopes to continue her postgraduate studies in the future. She is currently teaching 5th Class in a primary school in Co. Westmeath.

KEYWORDS: Inclusion, Special Education Needs, Primary Education

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study was to examine how multi-grade teachers create an inclusive educational experience for all children in their class, with a specific focus on special educational needs (SEN). The primary objective was to gain a knowledge of the teacher's lived experience of the provision of an inclusive education, and the value that is placed on this. In Ireland, research has shown that while teachers are conscious of the importance of inclusion for children with SEN, they struggle to provide it (Tiernan, Casserly, & Maguire, 2018). Issues such as time, training and resources have been identified as challenges for teachers (Banks, Frawley, & McCoy, 2015), yet there is limited research available in relation to multi-grade schools. This article draws upon findings of a broader

study that looked at the barriers, professional development and challenges perceived by multi-grade teachers and addressed the following research questions:

1. What practices do multi-grade teachers consider to be inclusive?
2. What barriers to inclusion do multi-grade teachers face?
3. What are teacher's opinions regarding the education and training they received regarding inclusive practice?

CONTEXT

There has been an increased prevalence of multi-grade classrooms in Ireland. Last year, one quarter of all primary school children were educated in a multi-grade setting (Department of Education & Skills, 2018). This is an area worthy of study, but to date little has been written about the experience of Irish multi-grade teachers.

Simultaneously, there have been trends towards inclusive education both nationally and internationally. The Salamanca Statement (1994), of which the Irish Government is a signatory, is framed by a rights-based perspective on education. It sets out the importance and value of an inclusive education for children with SEN, and places inclusion in a wider social policy context encompassing health, social welfare and employment.

In Ireland, the Salamanca Statement (1994) was followed by the Education for Persons with a Special Educational Need (EPSEN) Act in Ireland in 2004. The aim of the EPSEN Act (2004) was to equip children with SEN with the resources they need in order to lead a fulfilling life, while participating in society on completing their education. The Act states that an inclusive education will provide children with the "skills necessary to participate, to the level of their capacity, in an inclusive way in the social and economic activities of society and to live independent and fulfilled lives" (Education for Persons with a Special Educational Need Act, 2004).

Policy change has resulted in a drop in the enrolment of children in special schools, and a rise in the number of children with a range of different needs attending a mainstream school (Banks & McCoy, 2017). While these figures are welcomed, issues remain regarding the provision of an inclusive education. Today, there is no one definition of inclusive education that is accepted by all stakeholders, and some academics consider an inclusive education to be multi-faceted, consisting of a range of different factors, including physical, geographical and social inclusion (Shevlin, Kenny, & Loxley, 2008; O'Riordan, 2017).

METHODOLOGY

This research used a qualitative research design to address the overarching research question. Semi-structured interviews were used to gain perspectives from practicing teachers regarding their attitudes towards inclusion, training and any challenges that may exist. Interviews were the most suitable method for data collection as they allowed the researcher to explore a variety of personal experiences and perceptions (Tiernan, Casserly & Maguire, 2018). As with all methods of data collection, there were disadvantages in that interviews are time-consuming, and there was potential for inconsistency (Brown, 2001).

Interviews were conducted with eight practicing teachers, transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically. Participating teachers were recruited personally by the researcher. Nine participants were approached by the researcher, who taught in five different rural schools and were asked to participate. Snowball sampling was utilised in one school, and all teachers approached agreed to be interviewed. Interviews ranged in duration from 25 minutes to an hour. An interview schedule was used for all participants and there were no questions that the participants did not wish to answer. Some interviewees were personally known to the researcher, complicating the dynamic between the researcher and the interviewees and adding a power dynamic (Hopkins, 2007), of which the researcher was aware.

Methodological rigour was increased by taking field notes to record points of emphasis during the interview, including participant's tone of voice and body language during the interview (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2017). Field notes were used for immersion purposes during thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As a small-scale project with just eight participants, it is not possible to draw generalisations from this study. The value of this research is in better understanding the experiences of individual teachers and this brief article provides some insight into those experiences.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Following a process of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), three main themes were identified, and codes subsequently generated. The themes listed below will be briefly introduced in the following section:

1. Teacher as a facilitator of an inclusive education
2. Challenges facing teachers
3. Provision of SNA support

TEACHER AS A FACILITATOR OF AN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Participants were asked to define inclusive education, and interestingly all participants' definitions differed. Participant 2 regarded it as "providing an education to the best of your ability with the resources that you have, for each and every child in front of you". Participant 5 outlined that "inclusive for me, is ... making sure that the children don't feel different to anybody else, that they are always involved, be it ability based, or racially". These definitions all centre around the concept of equality and include all kinds of diversity, not just SEN. But as identified in other research (Banks, Frawley, & McCoy, 2015), it is very difficult to define what exactly an inclusive education is in practice. It does seem to be a "conceptual muddle" (Florian, 2014) and a very subjective term.

There was also a divergence of views in relation to supporting children with SEN in the classroom. In line with research by Tiernan, Casserly and Maguire (2018) two participants in this study acknowledged that withdrawal of children from the mainstream class is not seen as best practice, mentioning the perceived stigma around withdrawal. However, in their view, children need one to one support outside the classroom to consolidate their learning. In this study, three teachers had full classes withdrawn for mathematics, and all acknowledged that while it wasn't ideal, it was necessary.

In the UK, Norwich and Kelly (2004) found that 40% of the children interviewed preferred withdrawal to in-class support for a multitude of reasons; most commonly cited was less noise, less distraction and better work. It is interesting that despite a national policy moving towards in class support, one wonders if children have been consulted. Children's voice in as a factor in policy making that has been examined by in an Irish context, with one study (Prunty, Dupont, & McDaid, 2012) highlighting that in Ireland, "children's views are neither consistently nor reliably incorporated into educational decision making". Tiernan, Casserly and Maguire (2018) also outlined that co-teaching was highlighted in their research as a key approach to facilitating an inclusive education. In this study, no participant mentioned team teaching as something they engaged with in the classroom.

CHALLENGES FACING MULTI-GRADE TEACHERS OF CHILDREN WITH SEN

The importance of evidence-based education has been emphasised by the research (Davies, 1999), and Davies considers teachers' ability to source and implement findings from research as being key to future developments in educational thinking and practice. When asked about consulting academic journals for information to support their teaching practices, seven out of the eight participants replied that they would not refer to academic journals. Two participants regarded

academic journals as a resource to engage with during third level study, with one saying she would consult literature if she “was to do a Masters or something” (Participant 1).

The lack of referral to evidence-based research has been explored in previous research, which has shown that a lack of time and access to academic sources has proven to be a barrier to teachers consulting and using research information (Williams & Coles, 2007). Although the Teaching Council of Ireland give their members access to academic journals, no participant in this research mentioned this which may suggest a lack of awareness among practitioners. Other research has suggested that there must be link between research and practice during a teacher’s ITE, creating a capacity to research during the teacher’s professional career (Willemse & Boei, 2013). One Irish study noted that CPD take-up was found to relate to the specific children in a teacher’s class (Banks & Smyth, 2011) and that teachers working in multi-grade schools had a higher uptake of CPD than those in single grade classes, perhaps highlighting teachers’ awareness of the challenges in multi-grades classrooms and their desire to improve practice.

When exploring participants views on outside supports and agencies, long waiting lists dominated all participants views. Participants discussed waiting lists to see an educational psychologist, often who’s report is contingent on the child accessing other services. Participant 6 highlighted the need for prioritising children with the most severe needs in schools to be seen for assessment, to the detriment of a child with less severe needs. She also mentioned the need to gently encourage certain parents to get a private assessment, despite the cost, conscious of the fact that certain children who need an assessment would not get it during their time in primary school. Inequalities in the system were highlighted, “it’s those that shout the loudest that get the most” (Participant 2), and that teachers often have to help advocate for pupils; “You’re asking parents to rattle cans ... Principals rattle cans, politicians rattle cans, sometimes we have to contact them as well. I hate to say it but sometimes it works ... probably less now, but in the past it has” (Participant 2).

PROVISION OF SNA SUPPORT

All participants in the study reported that without special needs assistants (SNAs) in their schools and classroom, they would be unable to provide the inclusive education that currently exists. Participant 2 said, “if we haven’t SNAs, I don’t think we will be able to provide the level of inclusive education that we are”. This concurs with findings arising from project IRIS, which was carried out on behalf of the NCSE, where SNA support was highly valued by all stakeholders (Rose, Shevlin, Winter, & O’Raw, 2015). Participant 6 highlighted that SNA support must be focused on the child’s

independence, with the ultimate aim of eventually dispensing with the SNA support. She spoke about the delicate working relationship that must exist between the teacher and SNA, saying “the SNA’s can be fantastic, but ... we do need to let the kids off by themselves, to stand back a little bit”. Children with SEN have a desire to work independently (Prunty, Dupont, & McDaid, 2012), and independence is valued by both teachers and children. There has not been a significant amount of international research carried out on the work of SNAs, but this is something that is lacking in Ireland.

When asked whether they perceive the role of an SNA as being a barrier to inclusion, Participant 1 replied that it “depends on the SNA, of course”. Participant 5, while acknowledging she had not experienced SNA support in an Irish context, explained that her experience teaching in the UK exposed her to TA support in that context. Placing her current class of 4th, 5th and 6th Class into this context of support staff in the classroom, she agreed that from a child’s perspective, SNAs did represent a barrier to inclusion. Participant 2 and 6 did not agree that SNAs were a barrier to inclusion, but both mentioned the need for progression in terms of the child’s independence throughout the year. Both participants were clear that all parties must agree about the exact parameters of the role of the SNA. The ‘Deployment and Impact of Support Staff’ (DISS) study, the largest study of its kind, collected data on TA’s and support staff in the UK over a five year period (Webster, et al., 2010). While the study recognised the value of TA support for children, it also highlighted the negative effects of TA support on student’s progress. The authors highlighted the inequity of support for students, with students of the highest level of pedagogical need working with those least qualified.

In Ireland, the DES has been very clear about the duties of the SNA and has consistently outlined their care-giving role (Logan, 2006). However, research has consistently suggested that SNAs are often acting beyond their official remit in a teaching and learning capacity (Logan, 2006; Rose, Shevlin, Winter, & O’Raw, 2015; Keating & O’Connor, 2012; Griffin & Shevlin, 2007). This has been recognised by the DES (Department of Education and Skills, 2011) however this situation is unchanged as of research carried out in 2015 (Rose, Shevlin, Winter, & O’Raw, 2015). While Irish principals have acknowledged the role SNA’s play in facilitating group work, particularly in English and Mathematics (Keating & O’Connor, 2012), the authors of the DISS project in the UK emphasize the need for a re-evaluation of this practice (Webster, et al., 2010). From a child’s perspective, Irish literature shows that some children are frustrated by SNA support, especially during peer interactions (Logan, 2006). Peer interaction, both in and out of the classroom for children with SEN

is recognised in research as being an aspect of school inclusion (Nordstrom, 2011), that is vital for a truly inclusive education.

CONCLUSION

This small-scale research revealed some interesting findings. The lack of a strict definition of inclusive education is something to be considered by both future research and policymakers. While the EPSEN Act (2004) provides the statutory framework for the provision of an inclusive education, a clear definition of inclusion is lacking; inclusion is referenced, but not defined. The participants in this study were not clear on what provisions are essential, and each used their own professional judgement when making decisions regarding inclusive practices in their classrooms. Multi-grade teachers feel challenged, and the provision of specific CPD is something that policymakers should consider. While no participant regarded using their professional judgement to ensure inclusion as negative, participants were not confident imparting their definitions of inclusion. When asked to define an inclusive education, Participant 1 asked if the researcher meant “with special needs or without?” for clarification. More CPD with specific inclusion practice instruction should be offered with substitute cover provided for all teachers, as this was mentioned in the research as a barrier to multi-grade teachers accessing CPD.

The lack of teacher engagement with academic publications and research was noteworthy. While participants regarded CPD as an essential part of their practice, they did not view academic research as being a component of CPD. Future research should examine the perceived barriers in accessing academic work by practicing teachers. While this research project focused on teacher’s perspectives, future research may consider investigating children’s perceptions on inclusive education. Children lack of voice in research (Prunty, Dupont, & McDaid, 2012), has been mentioned previously in this research, warrants further study in this area.

The provision of SNA support is an aspect of inclusion in Irish schools that requires research. The existing Irish research outlines that SNAs are often acting outside of their official remit but fails to consider the implications of this. The UK DISS study (2010) has suggested that there are serious negative implications for children who are receiving support from TAs both academically and socially. Future research is needed to assess the role of SNAs in Irish schools and how this role can be threaded into the provision of an inclusive education for all children while reducing the negative implications on social inclusion and/or academic progress.

Teaching, regardless of single grade or multi-grade, is a complex, multi-faceted practice and teachers must be facilitated in accessing research for it to be implemented in practice.

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