



The STER e-journal is a core output of the STER project, a national 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 a partnership between staff and student volunteers who are committed to promoting a collaborative, student-led approach to research dissemination. I would like to thank the team of students and staff from Marino Institute of Education who participated in the STER project in 2021, it has been a pleasure to work closely with students and staff who recognise the value of partnership for teaching and learning, and who brought such wonderful energy and enthusiasm to the project this year. I would also like to extend thanks to Marino Institute of Education who provided essential funding for the running of the STER project in 2021.

This fourth volume of the STER e-journal presents fifteen articles prepared by education students and graduates of Marino Institute of Education, Trinity College Dublin, Mary Immaculate College, National College of Ireland, and Dublin City University. All articles are based on students' undergraduate or postgraduate dissertation research and have undergone a double-blind peer review process. In this issue, articles cover a diversity of themes including; outdoor education, adult education, science education, team-teaching, transitions and more. I would like to commend all student authors on the quality of their research articles and their engagement with the dissemination process. We are delighted to give you a platform for your research and to support the first step of your academic publishing journey.

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Individual articles can be downloaded from [www.ster.ie](http://www.ster.ie) and [www.tara.tcd.ie](http://www.tara.tcd.ie)

## Message from the Student Team

The STER 2021 e-journal gave students the opportunity to share and publish their research on relevant and distinctive education topics. The e-journal provides benefits to students, teachers, and educators as it provides peer-reviewed research conducted by students surrounding relevant topics in education. The e-journal also allows for student research to be accessible, acknowledged, and appraised by others.

The STER 2021 team consisted of 14 student and staff volunteers studying and teaching on various education programmes. All students involved in the project worked as peer-reviewers of the articles in this journal and promoted the project. STER gave us the opportunity as students to meet and work collaboratively with new people, both lecturers and other students, on a range of different elements of STER. We had multiple teams who worked on marketing, podcast interviews, strategic planning, and organising the STER 2021 conference. The project provided us with many opportunities to explore intriguing, engaging and thought-provoking research topics which further enhanced and expanded our perspectives on education research.

The individual research articles included in this e-journal draw attention to crucial issues in education. Each of the authors provides insightful findings and effectively explains why their topics are of significance to teaching and learning in Ireland today. We believe that this year's issue of the e-journal highlights important topics in education and may provide students, teachers, and those with an interest in education with engaging sources of information, evidence and up-to-date references which may support their own studies and practice.

*STER Student Team 2021*

# STER

*Student Teacher Educational  
Research e-Journal*

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Dr Tony Hall, General Editor, Irish Educational Studies (IES)

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Researching together to learn from one another in precarious times: The criticality of publishing educational research in an era of global pandemic.

In 2019, Dylan Wiliam wrote that teaching is too situationally complex and nuanced for it to be research-based. In his fascinating paper: *Teaching not a research-based profession*, he concluded: “And that is why I do not think that teaching will ever be a research-based profession. Classrooms are just too complicated for research ever to tell teachers what to do.” Although the article has a polemical title, the author eloquently makes the case for teaching and educational practice to be informed and enhanced by research. Compellingly, Wiliam advocates for a progressive view of professional development, one that refocuses our thinking away from a deficit approach and towards a more formative context where all educators are supported in improving their teaching continuously.

Wiliam’s article was of course written before the emergence of COVID-19, and the wholesale disruption it has wrought on education and schooling. If the current maelstrom, and hopefully the world that is emerging post-pandemic, can teach us anything it is the need for new ideas and solutions to the not-inconsequential challenges we face in our complex world today. It highlights the imperative for education to both guide and be guided by research; what we need is research-led teaching, where we can use research to help us envision and design better educational futures for all, but also *teaching-led research* where our pressing problems of practice as educators help strongly to set the agenda for the research that is done. And this all necessarily entails finding innovative ways to make available (to publish) and share our educational research, to learn from one another as educators and teacher-scholars.

Student Teacher Educational Research (STER) has emerged as a key platform to enable research sharing and expand our capacity in research publication in Ireland. It now forms an integral part of the Irish educational research ecosystem, and particularly in terms of encouraging, supporting and promoting early-career educational professionals, and potential early-stage teacher-researchers, to embark on a lifelong journey of teaching-informed research.

I am therefore delighted to have been invited to provide the foreword to this year's Volume, No. 4 in the series. I applaud and commend Dr Aimie Brennan, the reviewers and contributors this year, and in previous years, because sharing our research - in meaningful ways that are dually informed by and inform education - is so very important. The salience of research being more easily and widely shared is especially notable during this difficult year, particularly research relating to COVID-19 being made readily available online. This is exemplified by prominent journals such as *The Lancet* making its COVID-19 research quickly and openly available, to rapidly aid international efforts to suppress and eliminate the Coronavirus.

The growth of pre-print servers that can make research more immediately available, e.g. <https://edarxiv.org/> in education, and bring research quickly to a wider audience represent important developments in the opening of research and, concomitantly, sharing of research for the enhancement of learning, teaching and education. STER represents an excellent, exemplary case in point in terms of how teachers and teacher-scholars can promote and share their important peer-reviewed work. As well as the preparation of their manuscripts, it is furthermore gratifying to see the contributors to STER also engage in double-blind peer review, a cornerstone of academic publication internationally.

In 1990, Boyer published a seminal paper about what scholarship is and indeed, what it can and should be. In this key paper, he set out to plot a way forward for research, a more "capacious" (p.16) view of scholarship as he wrote at the time. Boyer's more inclusive, expansive view of research encompasses four domains: (1) *Scholarship of Discovery* - what might be termed traditional, basic or pure research, conceptualising new ideas/developing new understandings; (2) *Scholarship of Integration* - making research meaningful - promoting and advancing the intrinsic connectedness of research challenges and questions; (3) *Scholarship of Application* - putting research to use to solve consequential problems in the world; and (4) *Scholarship of Teaching* - critically, making research understandable by others.

Looking at the papers in the STER journal this year, one can see excellent examples of papers embodying Boyer's enlightened re-conceptualisation of research. And of course, the STER Conference and Journal represent innovative and critical contributions to the Scholarship of Teaching in Ireland, utilising Open Access to make available to a wide audience the tremendous research work being undertaken by early career teachers and teacher researchers.

Congratulations to Dr Aimie Brennan, her colleagues and all authors and reviewers this year. The 2021 volume of the journal is most impressive, including research and articles on a diverse, wide range of key issues and questions in education in Ireland, and indeed internationally. STER is a tremendous initiative to publish and share research. We need to share our work, our research, however we choose to label it, be that thinking, critical reflection, innovative practice, in the spirit of the constructive and formative, shared professional development espoused by Wiliam.

The research publication and sharing mediated by STER enables us to make explicit and visible our tacit expertise and educational knowledge as teachers and teacher-researchers. This can only serve to benefit us all to improve as educators and scholars of teaching, helping us in designing better, more inclusive educational futures for all learners.

*Tony Hall*

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## Is Special Education Teaching in Ireland Stressful? Coping with Work-related Stress

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Natalie is a recent graduate from MIE where she completed a Master of Education Studies (Leadership in Christian Education). Since completing an undergraduate degree in Art, Craft and Design Education in 1995, Natalie has continued her academic studies with a Higher Diploma in ICT for Education, a Graduate Diploma in Special Educational Needs and a Graduate Certificate in the Education of Pupils on the Autism Spectrum. Currently a practicing post-primary Special Education Teacher, Natalie is also a part-time associate working with the Level 1/Level 2 Learning Program Team with JCT. Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT) is a continuing professional development (CPD) support service of the Department of Education and Skills. Natalie founded the Facebook group ‘Special Education Teachers Ireland Supporting Each Other’ in 2017 in response to an emerging need for an accessible peer support network helping Irish SET share their extensive knowledge, skills and values as and when needed.

**KEYWORDS:** SET, Stress, Special Education, Work-related, Coping

### INTRODUCTION

This article is based on a larger piece of research conducted for a Masters Dissertation titled “*An exploration of the association of religious faith in coping with work-related stress among special education teachers in Ireland.*” The original piece researched three main elements; work-related stress (WRS) among Irish Special Education Teachers (SET), how they coped with WRS and how those with faith used it as a method to cope with WRS. This article focuses solely on the first aspect and explores the concept of work-related stress, discussing whether Irish SETs relate to the concept and identify possible causes of WRS.

Recent surveys of the teaching population have identified work-related stress as an increasing aspect of teacher professional life in Ireland (ASTI, 2018; Bolton, 2015; Buckley et al., 2017; Darmody & Smyth, 2011; National Principals' Forum, 2019). One participant in this research describes how work-related stress has affected her: 'I had a mini-breakdown - lots of tears - with my principal about this before Christmas. Although he doesn't fully understand, he was sympathetic and took it on board. He told me afterwards he was almost frightened by how stressed I was' (Participant 1, February 15, 2020).

SETs in Ireland provide individualised teaching to students- addressing specific needs, teaching small groups or working as team-teachers with a class teacher (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2017a). They often have extra training and are responsible for the planning and coordination of resources. A significant amount of their time can be spent collaborating with other professionals to create individualised learning plans specifying priority areas and interventions needed.

Stress can occur if perceptions of these duties result in the SET feeling unable to cope. Stress impacts physical and mental health, family life, relationships and workplaces through reduced morale, absenteeism and high job turnover (Russell et al., 2018, p. xii). Conversely, teachers who do not feel stressed are more likely to have effective classroom practices, improve their teaching, positively impact student achievement and are less likely to leave teaching (Cancio et al., 2018, p. 476).

Research concerning stress has been carried out on certain groups within the teacher population, such as principals and post-primary teachers (Buckley et al., 2017; Darmody & Smyth, 2011; Kerr et al., 1998). The population of SETs is rapidly expanding (Donohue, 2020), and it is possible that SETs may be experiencing more work-related stress than the typical mainstream teachers due to the rapid change in special education in Ireland. To date, no study has looked explicitly at identifying work-related stressors among SETs in Ireland's schools.

The aim of this research was to identify if work-related stress exists among SETs, and if it does exist, capture baseline data describing the issue. Using an exploratory mixed-methods approach, qualitative data was collected utilising a guided journaling group who explored personal accounts of WRS from Irish SETs in a range of settings. The resulting data informed an online survey where quantitative data was collected to explore the emerging themes with a larger sample.

## CONTEXT

Fitzgerald and Radford refer to Irish special education as a “rapidly transforming educational landscape” under “constant re-construction” (2017, p. 453). There has been a dramatic increase in the number of students with special educational needs attending mainstream schools, resulting in an expansion of resources such as special needs assistants (SNAs), special classes and SETs (Banks & McCoy, 2017). Having additional teachers does not necessarily mean extra specialised teachers. Currently, teachers employed as SETs do not need specific training - they simply need to be a registered teacher.

The Health and Safety Authority (HSA) defines WRS as “stress caused or made worse by work” and more specifically “when a person perceives the work environment in such a way that his or her reaction involves feelings of an inability to cope. It may be caused by perceived / real pressures / deadlines / threats / anxieties within the working environment” (2016, p. 6). It is important to note the perception of the individual experiencing stress is central to the definition of stress. “It is a state characterised by high levels of arousal and distress and often by feelings of not coping” (Levi, 1999, p. v). Employers in Ireland have a legal duty to ensure the demands placed on their employees at work are reasonable (Health and Safety Authority, 2016, p. 11). Determining what is ‘reasonable’ can be complex as the source of stress on particular teachers will vary depending on their personality, values, skills and circumstances (Kyriacou, 2001). School management teams who wish to keep competent SETs need to encourage and support them in minimising and alleviating stress factors (Cancio et al., 2018).

Stressors are based on “the precise characteristics of national educational systems, the precise circumstances of teachers and schools in those countries and the prevailing attitudes and values regarding teachers and schools held in society as a whole” (Kyriacou, 2001). Kyriacou notes the need for research on teacher stress will constantly be there, as schools undergo periods of change in curriculum content, assessment and teaching methodologies (2001). Kyriacou maintains that research can inform governments and policymakers on the impact educational reforms have on teacher stress (Kyriacou, 2001). This research aims to identify common stressors experienced by Irish SETs with the aim of informing policy makers on current trends.

Used as a noun, ‘stress’ can refer to the physiological response to a stimulus or the stimulus itself. Used as a verb, ‘stress’ can describe the experience of going through a stressful event. Stress is “an emergent process that involves interactions between individual and environmental factors, historical and current events, allostatic states, and psychological and physiological reactivity” (Epel

et al., 2018, p. 146). A ‘stressor’ refers to the cause, trigger, event, or stimulus resulting in a stressful experience (Epel et al., 2018).

Lazarus and Folkman presented a theory of coping and stress in their 1984 seminal text, *Stress, Appraisal and Coping*. Much current research refers back to the staged process, illustrated in Figure 1.

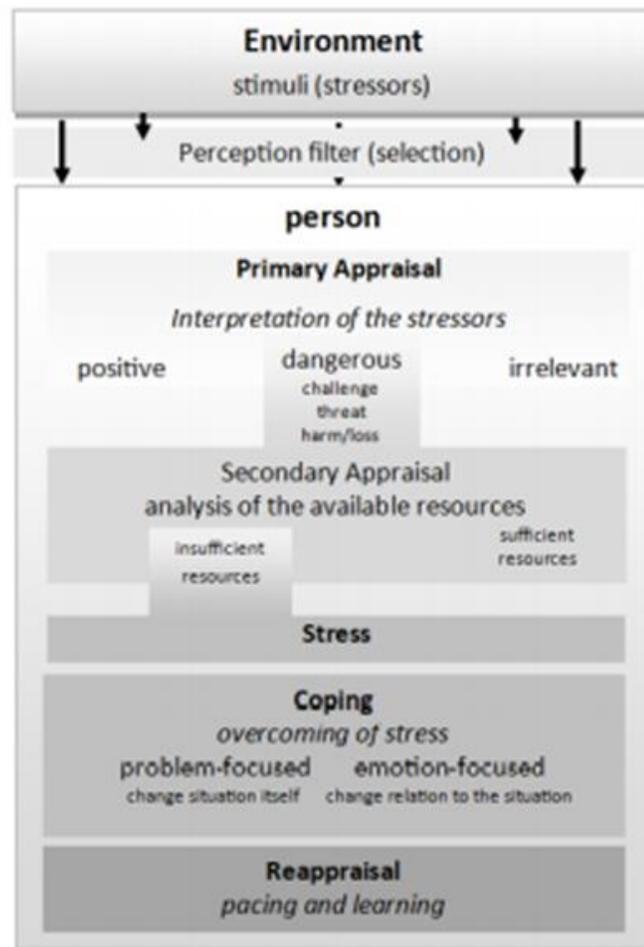


Figure 1 Transactional model of stress and coping, redrawn from *Stress, appraisal and coping*, by Lazarus and Folkman, 1984

The model shows stress as a process; the environment (in the form of stressors) affects a person who experiences the event through their perception filter. The ‘transaction’ happens between the environment and the person, each affecting the other “in a dynamic, mutually reciprocal, bidirectional relationship” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 293). The person interprets the stressor as positive, irrelevant or dangerous. If dangerous, a second appraisal is experienced, where they examine their capacity to deal with the stressor. If they conclude they have insufficient resources to deal with the stressors, stress results.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach (described in Figure 2) using a guided reflective journaling group to gather qualitative data, followed by an online survey (using Microsoft Forms) collecting primarily quantitative data. This mixed-method research allowed for the collection of numbers and stories, the combination of which are often required by policymakers (Creswell, 2012).

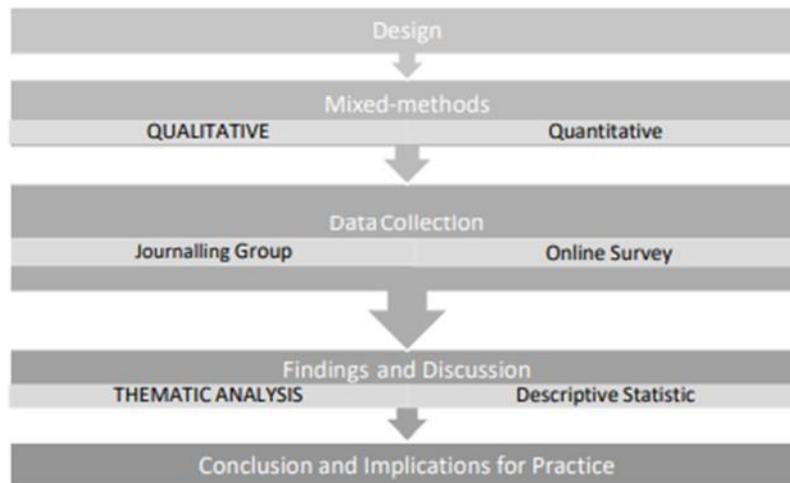


Figure 2 Research design: Exploratory sequential mixed methods.

Participants in the research were invited from the ‘Special Education Teachers Ireland Supporting Each Other’ Facebook group. Members of this group are all members of the sample population and were easily accessible. Eleven (nine female and two male) SETs took part in the reflective journaling group. Two work in special schools, four in Post-primary, five in Primary- one of which works in a special class for students with a diagnosis of ASD. Four hundred and six qualified SETs, registered in Ireland, completed the online survey. In line with STER policy, participants have been numbered to protect their anonymity.

The first phase of data collection occurred over two weeks commencing on February 5, 2020. As the Covid-19 global pandemic has impacted on much research carried out in early 2020, it is worth noting that the first report of an Irish case happened on 28 February 2020 and Irish school buildings closed on 12 March 2020 due to the pandemic (RTÉ, 2020). Online survey data collection for this research started 29 February and was complete by 6 March 2020. No mention of the pandemic was made by participants.

Over the two weeks, links to six forms were emailed to each participant containing journal prompts in the form of questions. The answers were inputted automatically to a spreadsheet, analysis of which informed the prompts in subsequent forms. Data processing started on

submission of the final journal entry in response to each form. A visual examination was conducted of the data, and the data was imported into NVivo 12 regularly where it was auto-coded to quickly elicit themes that needed to be responded to in the creation of subsequent journal prompts.

On completion the online survey data was imported into NVivo also, as it included some qualitative data. The analysis of the combined data sets involved thematic analysis of the responses. The combined files from the journaling group and the open-ended responses from the broader online survey were then coded manually. The final coding framework focused on themes, rather than on individuals; it reflected the group rather than the individual perspectives.

Quantitative data analysis was conducted using SPSS Statistics, a software package used for statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to summarise the data to identify more general trends and to aid comparison of how one score related to another. The main limitation of a mixed-methods approach is that it is typically more time consuming to conduct. This can be a drawback; however, it can also be an opportunity for a novice researcher to experience and learn from both qualitative and quantitative paradigms.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **IRISH SET EXPERIENCES WORK RELATED STRESS**

Across different school settings SETs reported experiencing work-related stress (see Table 1). 48% of the 267 primary SETs who responded to this study reported feeling a moderate or a great deal of stress in this study. 59.4% of 106 post-primary SETs reported a moderate amount or a great deal of stress. 57.6% of 33 special schoolteachers reported feeling a moderate amount or a great deal of stress. Comparing the level of stress with previous studies of similar populations is difficult as there is no standard way of reporting levels of stress from study to study, which makes comparisons of the phenomenon more difficult.

		Setting		
		Primary	Post-primary	Special school
Never	N	1	1	0
	% within Level of Stress	50.0%	50.0%	0.0%
	% within Setting	0.4%	0.9%	0.0%
Rarely	N	23	4	1
	% within Level of Stress	82.1%	14.3%	3.6%
	% within Setting	8.6%	3.8%	3.0%
Occasionally	N	115	38	13
	% within Level of Stress	69.3%	22.9%	7.8%
	% within Setting	43.1%	35.8%	39.4%
A moderate amount	N	80	39	10
	% within Level of Stress	62.0%	30.2%	7.8%
	% within Setting	30.0%	36.8%	30.3%
A great deal	N	48	24	9
	% within Level of Stress	59.3%	29.6%	11.1%
	% within Setting	18.0%	22.6%	27.3%
Total	N	267	106	33
	% within Level of Stress	65.8%	26.1%	8.1%
	% within Setting	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 1 Level of Stress \* Setting Crosstabulation

Table 2 shows the stress levels considering the SET population as a whole. Over 50% of SETs report experiencing WRS 'a moderate amount' or 'a great deal', whereas 0.5% 'never' experience WRS. The data shown above suggest Irish SETs do experience work-related stress.

Level of Stress	N	%
Never	2	0.5%
Rarely	28	6.9%
Occasionally	166	40.9%
A moderate amount	129	31.8%
A great deal	81	20.0%
Total	406	100.0%

Table 2 Summary of Level of Stress

## CAUSES OF WORK RELATED STRESS AMONG IRISH SET

To alleviate WRS, the causes or stressors must be identified. Causes are generally situation dependent, varying from country to country setting to setting and school to school. SET duties, qualifications, supports, paperwork, testing, and curricula vary; for example, in some areas SETs require additional qualifications in the Foundation of Reading whereas in Ireland no additional qualifications are needed. However, some commonalities are to be expected.

Ten potential stressors were ranked by respondents to the online survey: in order from top stressor to bottom stressor and are illustrated in Figure 3. 'Workload' was placed in the top three by 88.2% of respondents. Closely linked to workload, the stressor 'Lack of time' was ranked within the top three by 76.9%. Survey respondents had the opportunity to add additional stressors allowing for new and emerging themes.

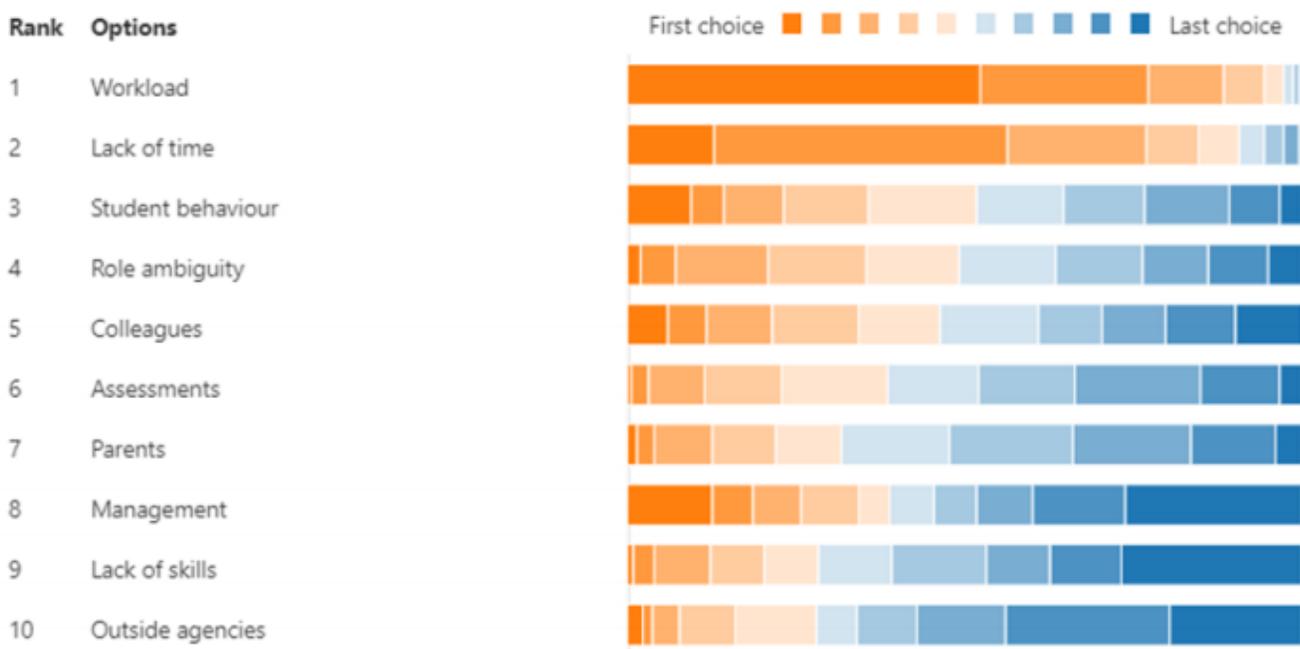


Figure 3 Ranking of 10 potential stressors by online survey group

'Colleagues', 'management', 'resources', 'admin and paperwork' took the top 4 positions for the most coded references within the qualitative data (see Table 3).

	Code	Data sets	References
1	Colleagues	2	97
2	Management	2	77
3	Resources	2	67
4	Admin and paperwork	2	62
5	Outside Agencies	2	61
6	Workload	2	57
7	Time	2	48
8	Student Behaviour	2	46
9	Parents and home	2	45
10	Skills and knowledge	2	44

Table 3 Frequency of stressor themes coded from qualitative data collected.

#### COLLEAGUES AND MANAGEMENT

Close examination of the data shows that although colleagues and management (teachers who are managed and teachers who manage others, e.g., special education teaching principals or SETs working with SNAs) were most referenced, the references included both positive and negative sentiment (See Table 4 and 5). Although they were often the cause of WRS, colleagues and management were also supportive factors in coping with it.

Codes	No. of coding references
Nodes\\Stressor\\Colleagues	97
Nodes\\Stressor\\Colleagues - Mixed	16
Nodes\\Stressor\\Colleagues - Negative	26
Nodes\\Stressor\\Colleagues - Neutral	39
Nodes\\Stressor\\Colleagues - Positive	16

Table 4 Sentiment towards colleagues

Codes	Number of coding references
Nodes\\Stressor\\Management	77
Nodes\\Stressor\\Management - Mixed	12
Nodes\\Stressor\\Management - Negative	19
Nodes\\Stressor\\Management - Neutral	35
Nodes\\Stressor\\Management - Positive	11

Table 5 Sentiment coded towards management.

Positive sentiment towards colleagues used words like support, family, and team. Participant 2 used all those terms when she wrote, *“I’m happy to report that in my setting, my colleagues are a huge support network: we are a team and a family.”* SETs on occasion find collaboration with colleagues and management difficult due to a mismatch between what the SET considered best practice and relaying this knowledge to colleagues and management. Participant 3 believes class teachers think *“that special needs are not part of their remit; that we, SETs, are the only ones that deal with special needs.”* Participant 4 reasons, *“Many teachers feel they don’t have the necessary training to teach the myriad of disabilities in front of them. They try to remove students from their classes to go to learning support when they should be differentiating for the students.”*

Part of the SET role is to work and support class teachers bringing an extra workload. *“If they are having difficulties, they all land looking for advice- that can be nice sometimes as you can share ideas, but sometimes you feel that you just wish they would go away and get on with it,”* says participant 6. Finding time to collaborate can be difficult; *“Corridor nabbing, constant negativity at every door you knock on to collect a child /group /team teaching. Discussing the behaviour of a child you support during lunch break etc. (I sometimes don’t even go into the staff room)”* says one primary school teacher.

Respondents sometimes feel more knowledgeable about special educational needs than management. Participant 1 says she finds management more of a stressor than other colleagues; for example, *“Management hold a monopoly over contact with NEPS, so it’s like a triangle, sometimes the information is incorrectly transferred from management to NEPS and vice versa, as management don’t have SEN experience and have limited understanding”.* Participant 5, working in a primary setting, tries hard *“to ensure that all staff follow best practice as opposed to their own opinion!”* She sometimes feels *“practice was being decided on a whim or an opinion”* and was not

evidence-based, resulting in “the stress of seeing the upset of the kids.” Participant 5 reflects, I knew “the best practice to use but maybe didn’t have the skills to ensure it was followed.”

## RESOURCES

Special education teachers report being pulled from their assigned work to cover for absent colleagues as substitute teachers are not available. “Not being able to find substitute staff or the lack of sub cover provided for leave such as uncertified sick leave or force majeure can cause a lot of stress and extra workload for some teachers if they have to cover colleague’s absence,” says participant 6. One female primary teacher describes the guilt she feels towards missing the students on her caseload; it is “very difficult to promise ‘I’ll do x with you the next day’ as you don’t know if you’ll be able to!”

Participant 2 talks about having to research and create resources from scratch; “It isn’t a case of open your books on page...our books, resources etc. are mainly all researched and handmade - so it’s very time-consuming! It requires a lot of pre-planning, and yes, there is an element of stress associated with that”.

## ADMINISTRATION AND PAPERWORK

Difficulties relating to paperwork refer to the amount of it, ambiguity around what is needed and its impact. Respondents became very descriptive over the amount of paperwork which they described as excessive, pointless, mountainous, endless, and ridiculous. “Endless paperwork which I never seem to be able to get nearly completed; it’s like shovelling snow when it’s snowing.” says one primary teacher. There is “ambiguity around paperwork,” writes one primary school SET and “uncertainty about how much paperwork is needed,” writes another. Participant 3, in post-primary also talks about the uncertainty of what is required; “Endless amount of paperwork without appropriate training to do the same. A lot of guesswork at times.” An efficient structure is not always there to support the completion of paperwork. “Assessments and paperwork have to be kept piling up on the desk until you can get access to the principal’s office. All paperwork relating to students is locked into the principal’s office, which is not always easy to access” writes one post-primary teacher who is a Special Education Needs Coordinator. Despite requiring considerable time to complete the completed paperwork does not necessarily follow the student. “I’ve almost 17 years teaching in special education, and I’ve never been so frustrated,” writes Participant 2, “this pupil, let’s call her Mary, has had many school placements but yet has very little paper trail.”

## CONCLUSION

Over 50% of special education teachers in this study are suffering from moderate to significant work-related stress. The data provide convincing evidence that work-related stress is a significant challenge for SETs in Ireland. Combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to data collection resulted in different and complementary evidence. For example, the qualitative data identified 'colleagues' and 'management' as top contributors to work-related stress. The quantitative data identified 'workload' and 'lack of time' were ranked as top contributors to work-related stress. The use of a qualitative approach was useful in discovering emerging themes within the population which would not be possible using a more prescriptive quantitative approach.

Identifying 'colleagues' and 'management' as stressors can be productive because they can also serve as coping strategies. SETs should consider ways to transform these negative stressors into positive coping strategies. SETs can individually attempt to use their time more effectively to deal with the workload and lack of time, however, the fact that the vast majority of SETs experience the same stressor to a considerable extent would appear to be more telling about the system than the individuals.

Evidence SETs are likely to experience work-related stress has implications for policymakers and school management. Under current Irish health and safety legislation, all "employers should consider any workplace hazard where there is a reasonable probability that it could cause work-related stress" (Health and Safety Authority, 2016, p. 4). Employers are also tasked with having a safety statement which details the risks and the "control measures put in place to eliminate or reduce them" (Health and Safety Authority, 2016, p. 4). With SET ranking workload and time as the top stressors contributing to WRS, employers need to recognise that there is a reasonable probability that SETs may be affected by them. Supports need to be put in place to alleviate these stressors. Time and workload need to be addressed on a system-wide basis.

Paperwork and administration were found to form a large part of the substantial workload. State agencies, such as the National Educational Psychological Service, and the National Council for Special Education, could work together to reduce the level of paperwork needed. A national portal could be developed to hold records of students with additional learning needs, diagnostic assessments, interventions, and other vital information. This would prevent replication of work and provide a more consistent standard of reporting as well as a greater coherence at policy level. Information could be available in real-time to those authorised to access it. This could also assist in the timely deployment of resources to where they are needed.

Comparison of levels of work-related stress across sub-groups of the teaching population is difficult because no common standard of measurement is used to measure the phenomenon. Future research would benefit from identifying or developing a standard instrument that can be used to measure and compare levels of work-related stress within sub-groups.

It is important to recognise that this article focuses on WRS and therefore reveals negative aspects of the SET role. This is not intended to be a complete picture, rather it explores some issues that SETs may experience.

From this research, it was useful to learn how influential my perception of situations can be in alleviating potential WRS. Furthermore, recognising that certain situations are outside of my control is equally important. These situations can be used as learning opportunities for personal growth or an opportunity to advocate for systemic change where needed e.g. advocating for sufficient resources. As an educational leader, understanding a framework of stress and coping can help me provide practical support to others.

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## Watching me, Watching you: The Effects of CCTV on the School Population

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**KEYWORDS:** CCTV, Surveillance, Privacy, GDPR, School Security, CCTV Effects Framework

### INTRODUCTION

Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) and surveillance in general have become ubiquitous in modern life. Schools are adopting surveillance technology at an alarming rate, despite the tension with privacy or potential effects on the school population arising from the use of CCTV by school management. This article is based on a post-graduate dissertation that researched why CCTV is installed in schools and what behavioural, social, and cognitive effects the school population may experience as a consequence of the technology. Although CCTV has its origins in the criminal justice sector, it has been installed in more than 90% of schools in the UK (Hope, 2015). Irish data on this topic is sparse. The lack of Irish research on CCTV in education prompted this research, which is part of a broader dissertation study. This research adopted a meta-ethnography of global data on the topic of CCTV in schools, in addition to a small-scale Irish survey. The dissertation put forward two main findings, one of which will be discussed in this article.

## CONTEXT

Schools may represent a new and lucrative market for CCTV technology despite or because of the claim that CCTV may only be successful in car parks (Piza, Welsh, Farrington, & Thomas, 2019). The literature points to crime deterrence as the main reason for installing CCTV, both in the wider community (Caplan, Kennedy, & Petrossian, 2011) and in schools (Taylor, 2010). In reality, the reasons are multi-layered and tend to ‘creep’ towards teacher and/or pupil surveillance, a practice known as function creep (Taylor, 2011).

Originally in schools, CCTV was installed to protect the perimeter of the site. There was a clear philosophy to catch the criminals trying to damage school property or harm the school population. This ideology accentuated a clear distinction between ‘them’ the criminals and ‘us’ the good citizens (Taylor, 2011). The narrative shifted, with CCTV moving inside the school building to monitor interior corridors, playgrounds, classrooms, common areas, and in some cases, toilets (Hope, 2010).

The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) regulates the use of CCTV in the European Union (EU). The GDPR was devised to compel institutions to understand what personal data they have access to, what happens to the data and how secure it is (Doe, 2018). The GDPR is applicable to schools that install CCTV and is enforced by the Data Protection Commissioner (DPC) in Ireland. The DPC acknowledges that CCTV may be beneficial around the perimeter of schools, but unambiguously states that CCTV should not be used to monitor staff or students, and should not be installed in classrooms, offices or any area where there is a reasonable expectation of privacy (DPC, 2020). In the EU, CCTV concern is one of the most frequent complaints the European Commission receives since the GDPR came into force (Breitbarth, 2019).

School killings, such as Dunblane, Scotland in 1996 and Columbine school, United States (US) in 1999 (Deakin, Taylor, & Kupchik, 2018), create a disproportionate amount of fear in society and may have assisted CCTV in gaining additional market-share in schools. School management have little choice but to install surveillance cameras in light of increasing anxiety in society (Nemorin, 2017). Schools install CCTV to say that they are doing *something* in terms of security, even if that something is not proven to be effective (Nemorin, 2017). Furthermore, the choice not to install surveillance cameras may be perceived as complacent.

In litigious societies such as the US, UK, and Israel, teachers accept CCTV as a means of protection against accusations in which it is a pupil’s word against theirs (Nemorin, 2017). However, the mere presence of cameras may convey that misbehaviour is expected, and older pupils in particular may live up to this in the form of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Working-class pupils tend to be

more at risk in this respect (McCahill & Finn, 2010). Where teachers accept CCTV for their protection, they inadvertently provide permission for their teaching to be watched anytime. The implication that teachers should have nothing to worry about if they are doing a good job may exert pressure on them to accept surveillance despite privacy concerns (Taylor, 2012). Surveillance may also represent an opportunity for validation with 'good' teachers willingly submitting to surveillance to demonstrate loyalty and competency to school management or to get ahead (Skerritt, 2020).

In this research, the effects of CCTV on the school population were considered under behavioural, social, and cognitive headings. Behavioural effects encompass the behavioural reactions of individuals as a direct consequence of CCTV. Criminals deploy multiple strategies to subvert cameras, such as avoidance (hiding one's face from the camera), repositioning the lens of the camera so that it cannot detect the crime, and displacement (moving the crime to a place without cameras) (Taylor, 2011). These are similar to tactics employed by pupils, in particular post-primary pupils, who wish to evade cameras and/or protect their privacy at school (Hope, 2010, Taylor, 2010).

The social effects of CCTV centre around mistrust, suspicion, and criminalisation. Pupils may be criminalised at school on account of their lesser status as youth and have no choice but to accept CCTV surveillance. This is reflective of Bentham's (1791) Panopticon experiment, in which prisoners' cells were placed in a semi-circle around a central watchtower. Prisoners had no idea if or when they were being watched and therefore had to assume they always were, with the ultimate aim being docility. CCTV in schools may have the same effect, whereby teachers and/or pupils may not be aware if or when they are being watched and must therefore assume they always are. This may be inherently damaging and furthermore impact the basic functions of privacy (Westin, 1967), such as personal autonomy (the right to be oneself), emotional release (by enforcing a double mask, one for the pupils and one for the surveillers), and self-evaluation (affected if one's expertise is continually being assessed) (Taylor, 2010). Some researchers believe the panopticon is no longer relevant in school surveillance, and refer to a post-panopticon, in which the watchtower is no longer static and the surveillers may also be surveilled (Nemrin, 2017) or in which teachers are fully cognisant of who is watching them and when (Skerritt, 2020).

Children and adolescents are less well able to decipher the costs and benefits of their behaviour. Their pre-frontal cortexes; the area of the brain dealing with planning and impulse-control, is not fully developed (Welch & Payne, 2018). Some pupils may not be mature enough to make desired choices, and CCTV may result in harsher discipline with more serious outcomes as a result of more behaviours being deemed 'bad' and the ability to catch 'perpetrators' more easily

(Carlile, 2018). Zero-tolerance policies have resulted in the US and UK in particular, and harsher discipline is both a trigger for these tough policies and an effect of them, generating increased exclusions from school (Welch & Payne, 2018). Minorities and vulnerable groups are disproportionately affected in this regard (Kupchik & Catlaw, 2015).

The majority of pupils and teachers accept that CCTV has a place in modern society and that a balance can be achieved between surveillance and privacy. It appears to be dependent on the location of the cameras, the rationale for installing them and whether or not cameras are monitored continuously (McCahill & Finn, 2010, Taylor, 2011).

## METHODOLOGY

This research comprised two separate methodologies; a meta-ethnography and a small-scale survey with principals in Ireland. A meta-ethnography allowed the researcher to interpret and analyse existing data on CCTV in schools to offer insight into the research question; why do schools install CCTV and what might the effects be on the school population? Qualitative methods were deemed most suitable, as they set out to understand the meanings individuals construct from their social worlds (Cohen, Morrison, & Manion, 2011). Seven qualitative studies met the research criteria and were analysed to understand perceptions, attitudes, and feelings, which were crucial in answering the research question.

For the meta-ethnography, the researcher adopted a constructivist-interpretive approach to attempt to offer a *new* perspective from existing data. The findings from the selected studies that met the research criteria were translated into similar language via coding, in order to compare and contrast the data across studies. Codes included crime deterrence (CD), pressure on management (PM), protection from accusations (A), monitoring behaviour (MB), imagined law (IL) etc. Each study was assigned a colour in order to remember its origins but to allow it to sit alongside data with identical coding from other studies. When the findings did not align, as was the case with effects of CCTV on teachers in Israel and the UK, the reasons for these differences became important to the research.

	Meta-ethnography	Irish Survey
Teachers	n=46	
Principals	n=50	n=9
Primary aged pupils	n=57	
Post-primary aged pupils	n=106	
Totals	n=259	n=9

Table 1: number of participants

A small-scale survey was devised to provide insight into the Irish situation. Although questionnaires are typically quantitative instruments, quantitative analysis was dismissed due to the sample size. Phenomenology was the chosen approach to try to understand the meaning participants attached to their experiences. While the population of principals (primary and post-primary) in Ireland is large (3832), recruitment coincided with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and had to be abandoned. As a result, the sample included nine participants and reliability must be flagged. The survey comprised an online questionnaire, which was mostly multiple-choice to decrease the burden on participants. It was answered anonymously. The survey answers were coded in the same manner as the meta-ethnography, which allowed the researcher to view the data altogether to decipher if findings were consistent.

As this research comprised only seven studies in the meta-ethnography and nine participants in the survey, it represents a small research platform, indicating that it may not be generalisable to other contexts. Each of the participant groups; teachers, primary-level pupils and post-primary pupils are under-represented, as each group only featured in one or two studies.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Principals in both the meta-ethnography and the Irish survey asserted that crime deterrence was the main reason for the installation of CCTV. This research found that despite these claims, the reasons were in-fact multi-layered and may 'creep' towards pupil and/or teacher surveillance. Potential effects of this surveillance were analysed under behavioural, social, and cognitive effects individuals may experience.

British teachers felt largely immune to the presence of CCTV. "I don't really take heed of them now. They're just there...I don't worry about them..." (Taylor, 2011, p.308). In contrast, Israeli teachers may be quite conscious of CCTV cameras and either hide from cameras or play up to them. "I used to give a show in front of the cameras so as not to invite discussion [if I watched the students well]...so that there won't be any question if I was or wasn't there (Perry-Hazan & Birnhack, 2019,

p.198). British teachers report that their head-teachers may not use CCTV to hold them accountable. Thus, British teachers may feel able to ignore CCTV cameras and forget their presence. It should be noted that the British studies in the meta-ethnography are somewhat dated and newer research has indicated that teachers in the UK may be fully cognisant of surveillance and moreover feel threatened by it (Skerritt, 2020). This newer work centres on teachers who taught in Academies in Britain and may indicate an adjustment in some British teachers' perceptions towards surveillance, in line with Israeli teachers who reported feeling continually threatened as a result of CCTV. The homogeneity of British teachers in comparison to Israeli teachers, who may have grown up amidst Arab-Jewish tensions in Israel, may be an important factor as to why the two teacher groups feel, or used to feel, so differently. Furthermore, Israeli teachers may not enjoy an equivalent social status to British teachers, exacerbating negative effects from CCTV.

Similar to Israeli teachers, post-primary pupils conveyed an acute awareness of the cameras. School level emerged as noteworthy in relation to CCTV. The level of a school, and thus the age of the pupils, may be indicative of differences in relation to how CCTV is used and the effects that may ensue. Unlike teachers, the Israeli research reported similar findings to the UK in terms of effects on pupils. In the Irish survey, all of the post-primary principals cited prevention of bullying and/or surveillance of behaviour as additional reasons for installing CCTV. As pupils' opinions and perceptions did not form part of the survey, it is impossible to report if pupils in these Irish schools may feel comparable to pupils in the meta-ethnography.

Social class also emerged as relevant. Pupils at disadvantaged schools may feel more criminalised as a result of CCTV at school. The high-security regimes existing in schools that teach predominantly working-class pupils, may indicate an inherent lack of trust for these pupils. City Comprehensive, for example, had 80 cameras in addition to a full-time staff member to monitor them continually (Taylor, 2011). At Council Estate Comprehensive, a function of CCTV was to keep the pupils *in* the school. This was achieved by gated entrances, CCTV and the "manipulation of space" (McCahill & Finn, 2010, p.274). Pupils were not permitted to move freely around the school. Conversely, a pupil at a private school commented, "I think there's a lot of trust here, because you could easily just walk out the gates at the front, but no one does." (McCahill & Finn, 2010, p.277).

Trust and status may underpin both the decision to install CCTV and how CCTV manifests in behavioural, social, and cognitive effects. Trust and status were both regular themes separately in the meta-ethnography, however this research intersects trust with status and argues that effects from CCTV may depend on one's status *and* trustworthiness within an environment. The research implies that where trust and status are high, the effects of CCTV may be minimal and the individual

barely aware of the technology. Conversely, where trust and status are lacking, individuals may feel vulnerable as a result of surveillance. A CCTV effects framework (Figure 1) was devised from this research to illustrate this intersectionality of trust and status and to portray how effects of CCTV surveillance may manifest in a school population. High levels of trust, combined with a position of status, may protect individuals from effects from CCTV. However, those who enjoy less trust and/or status, may experience larger negative effects. In essence, how CCTV is used and whether discipline arises from its use based on an individual's lower status, may determine whether an individual suffers negative effects from CCTV.

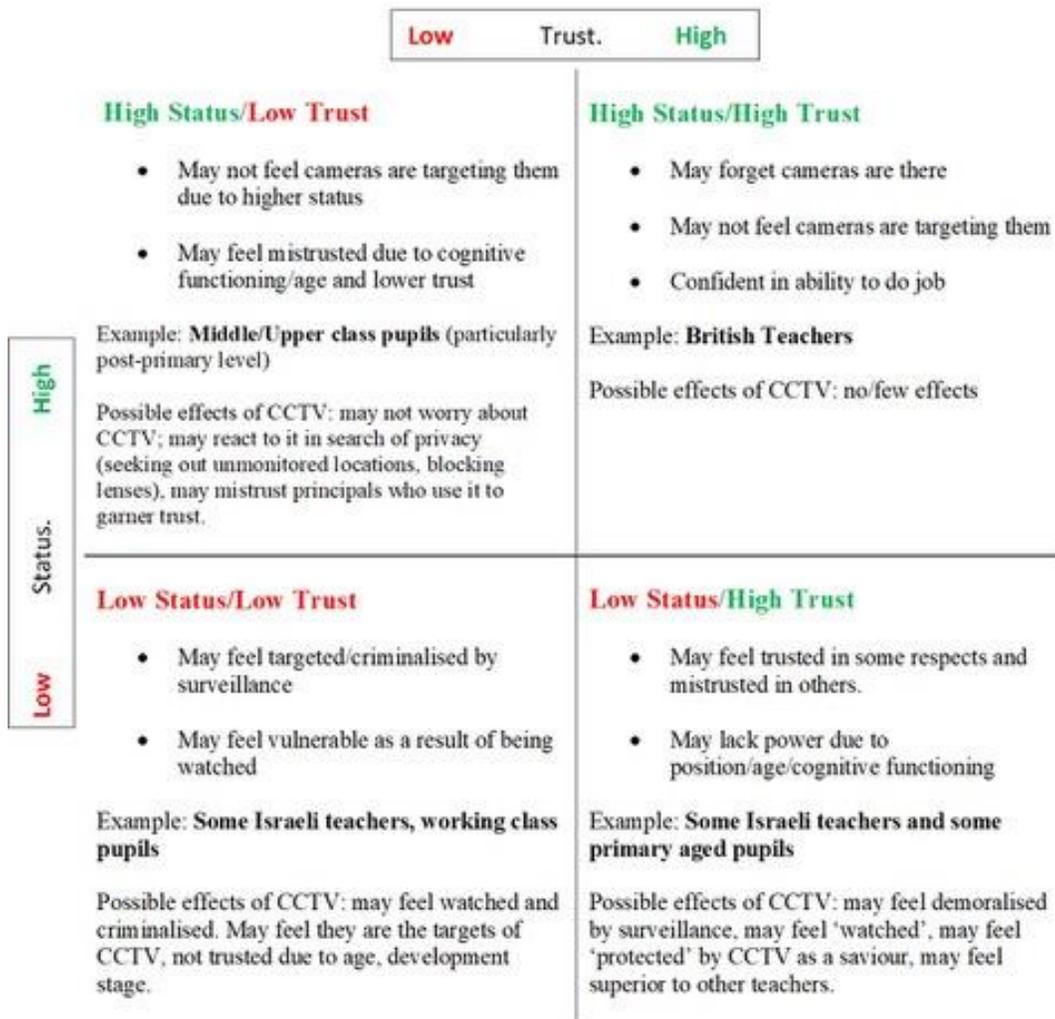


Figure 1: The CCTV Effects Framework

Teachers in Israel revealed a tension with status when they claimed they were not trusted to do their job unsurveilled. "This feeling that you're not trusted...to know that you're constantly under inspection is uncomfortable" (Perry-Hazan & Birnhack, 2019, p.199). A lack of trust may be very personal and was cited as the reason for numerous behavioural and social effects, such as

disillusionment or tampering with cameras. Interestingly, teachers in the British studies did not perceive similar levels of mistrust, and effects from CCTV were mainly absent from their perspective. The majority of participants equated their negative feelings with mistrust. However, trust alone without status may not be enough to negate the negative effects. The best protection from effects of CCTV surveillance may come from enjoying high status *and* high trust. One pupil commented “I think it is an invasion of privacy. I think if you want pupils to act responsibly then you need to show them that they are trusted. You need to treat them like adults...” (Taylor, 2010, p.391).

Of note, principals in the Irish survey felt that pupils *always* forget about the cameras and wouldn't resort to behavioural effects such as tampering/hiding nor feel criminalised. Principals themselves may be in the high status/high trust quadrant of the CCTV effects Framework. Thus, principals may be projecting this attitude onto their pupils in suggesting that pupils *always* forget about the cameras. Their pupils may tell a different story based on their experiences of being in a different quadrant to their principals. Taylor (2011) confirms that “the perception of pupils is often voiced for them” (p.397).

## CONCLUSION

This research carried out a meta-ethnography and a small-scale survey in Ireland to answer the research question – why do schools install CCTV and what may the effects be on the school population? The meta-ethnography collated seven studies on CCTV that originated in the UK or Israel. The main theme to arise from the research relates to the influence of trust and status on how the effects of CCTV surveillance may manifest. This research put forward the CCTV effects framework (Figure 1), in which members of the school community may be placed to assist with determination of the effects of CCTV. Thus, trust, status and how CCTV is used may foreshadow an individual's reaction to CCTV. This framework has not featured in prior research on CCTV in schools. The implication of this research is that school management may wish to consider how status and trust co-exist in the various members of the school population when making decisions regarding the installation of CCTV and how it is to be used thereafter.

There has not been a prior meta-ethnography carried out on CCTV in schools that the researcher is aware of. As such, this research may be of use as a basic platform for further research into CCTV in Irish schools specifically, given the dearth of data on the topic. The main recommendation is that primary Irish data is required. It would be beneficial to gain insight into the attitudes and perceptions of both pupils and teachers on CCTV in schools. Irish schools may be making decisions to install CCTV in the absence of relevant research. The researcher would also

recommend that policy makers in the departments of Justice and Education should consult stakeholders on the purposes of CCTV in schools, bearing in mind that functions may ‘creep’. Clear guidelines for principals and a discussion about best practice is required in addition to the widespread inclusion of children in CCTV discussions, all of which form part of the GDPR recommendations, but which may not be adhered to.

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## Connecting Students with Nature: An Investigation into Outdoor Education

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Kevin currently teaches Science, Biology and Zoology in a post-primary school. After completing his undergraduate degree in University College Dublin in 2009 with a B. Sc. in Zoology, he then completed a Master of Science degree in Biodiversity and Conservation at Trinity College Dublin in 2011. This led to a career in ecology and fieldwork – in particular, ornithological and bat surveying. During this period, Kevin spent vast amounts of time outside in all weather conditions, exploring bogs, woodlands, coastal areas - all of the natural environments that Ireland has to offer. His enthusiasm for the outdoors led him to research outdoor education, noting Ireland’s potential for this teaching method and comparing it to methods used in Scandinavia and the United Kingdom. When teaching returns to normal, he hopes to incorporate more classes outside and develop new strategies to teach science and biology with the use of the natural environment.

**KEYWORDS:** Outdoor Education; Environmental Education; Ireland; Nature Connectedness; Environmental.

### INTRODUCTION

Outdoor Education (OE) as a branch of environmental education has the potential to create connections between students, the natural landscape and the flora and fauna found there. Spending time outdoors is deeply rooted in Scandinavian culture and as such has been integrated into government policy, including school curriculums. Within the United Kingdom (UK), OE programmes are beginning to link in with the national curriculums and Forest Schools are becoming more prevalent. However, issues can arise as some practitioners, who might not fully understand the roots of the outdoor philosophy, *friluftsliv*, which literally translates to ‘free-air-life’ (Sandell et.

al, 2010) do not navigate cultural differences. Forest Schools in the UK run the risk of losing the aspects that help create connections between student and environment. OE is relatively new to Ireland, and the country is in a unique position to take advantage of models and tools developed in countries where the practice is long established. With that in mind, this article endeavours to explore the potentials of OE with regard to developing an environmentally aware generation who practice pro-environmental behaviours and have the confidence and problem-solving skills to tackle local and environmental issues. A review of the literature presents rationale for the benefits of OE and its role in identifying student-environment connections, and why implementation in an Irish context must navigate sociocultural differences to be successful. The main objective of this research is to identify the roles OE has in developing connections to nature and promoting pro-environmental attitudes. The second area of research looks to compare OE strategies in Scandinavia (where theories originated) and the UK (20 years of practice), and identify what would work in an Irish context, where OE programmes are beginning to become adopted. Consequently, a key objective of this study is to identify a model or models that could potentially be adapted for use in an Irish context.

## CONTEXT

Roger Putnam states that “there can be no progress without risk” (as cited in Knight, 2013, p. 40). Progress for a child is about identifying hazards and dealing with them at increasingly complex levels. As the world faces a series of environmental disasters from climate change, pollution, wildfires, biodiversity and habitat loss to name a few, OE can offer young people an opportunity to take risks, build their resilience, and allow for critical thinking and problem solving (Ampuero et al., 2015, Chambers et al., 2014, Knight, 2013). In different countries, OE plays a role of varying importance. It has been integrated with government policy and school curriculum in Scandinavia. Over the past 27 years in the UK, OE has informed policies, reports and curriculums such as *Curriculum for excellence through outdoor learning* (LTS, 2010) in Scotland, *Learning Outside the Classroom Manifesto* (DfES, 2006), the *SCE Policy: Procedures and Guidance for OE and School Off-site Visits* (DfES, 2005) and *OFSTED: Learning Outside the Classroom* (OFSTED, 2008) in England and the *Foundation Phase Curriculum* (Welsh Government, 2015) and *Further Steps Outdoors: making the most of your outdoor spaces* (Welsh Government, 2014) in Wales. Within Ireland, OE has been applied sparingly within the formal education system. In investigating the potential for OE to develop connections between young people and the natural environment, a notable gap in the literature was identified: the application of environmental and OE within an Irish

context. With the recent arrival of Forest Schools to Ireland, this author identifies potential models that could be used in assisting OE pedagogies in an Irish context as well as ways to reach the environmental objectives that can be achieved.

OE can be defined as “an experiential process of learning by doing ... In outdoor education the emphasis for the subject of learning is placed on RELATIONSHIPS, relationships concerning people and natural resources” (Priest, 1986, p. 13). This means that OE is a method for learning, based on experiences which takes place primarily outdoors, incorporating all six senses and the affective, cognitive and motoric domains of learning. It is based upon relationships between people, society and natural resources. Studies have indicated that the links between actively engaging in environmental education in an outdoor setting can develop a greater empathy and sympathy for the natural environment and allow students to begin to develop an appreciation for their local ‘wild areas’ (Ampuero et al., 2015; Chambers et al., 2014; Cheng et al., 2012; Meighan et al., 2018; White et al., 2018). However, few studies have investigated this link in Ireland. OE in Ireland at present is mainly restricted to Forest Schools, set up under the Irish Forest School Association, with few links to primary and post-primary curriculums. The Department of Education and Skills (DES) in Ireland has no policy on OE in primary or post-primary schools and so this is left for the school to implement. OE is linked with several benefits to the student’s development - intellectual, physical and social (Becker, et al., 2017; Bølling, et al., 2019; Knight, 2013; Louv, 2008; Uhls et al., 2014). These beneficial aspects of OE have been studied extensively in recent literature. However, somewhat less researched, particularly in an Irish context, is the ability to create connections to the natural environment through outdoor experiential learning.

Young people today are growing up in a time of ecological crisis. Carbon dioxide levels passed the symbolic threshold of 400 parts per million (ppm) in 2016 (Jones, 2017) and the current concentration now sits at 412 ppm (Buis, 2019). Climate change is driving ocean acidification, melting glaciers and along with pressures such as hunting and habitat loss, the loss of biodiversity at an unprecedented rate. Research on declining species numbers has led to arguments describing a sixth mass extinction (Ceballos et al., 2015; Naggs, 2007). It is imperative that future generations develop empathy rather than apathy towards the natural environment in order to combat the serious threats that humans face as a society. Research has indicated that using nature in OE “as a context for learning and development of ecological awareness will be increasingly essential in the future challenges of education” (Karppinen, 2012, p. 41).

In Ireland, there have been attempts to integrate outdoor and environmental educational programmes into formal education, but these strategies are in conflict with dominant educational

strategies (O'Malley, 2014). The true benefits of these experiential education programmes are not viewed in Ireland as the programmes occur at irregular intervals, with environmental education mainly confined to the indoor classroom (O'Malley, 2014). Students in early-years education, primary and post-primary, mainly learn about their natural environment with limited to no first-hand experience within the natural environment.

It is worth noting that OE has the potential to allow learning to continue in a safer environment during the Covid-19 pandemic. Maintaining social distancing among students is easier in an open environment. This could be a viable option in Ireland during Spring and Autumn and even Winter with the correct clothing. A review of the literature produced three linked research questions for investigation:

1. What, if any, links are there between OE in school and a student's connection with the environment?
2. How effective is environmental education in an outdoor setting in creating these connections?
3. How have OE programmes been implemented in Scandinavian countries and the UK and how might they be implemented in the Irish school system?

## METHODOLOGY

A systematic review was chosen to investigate the literature available in Ireland in relation to the three research questions. The selected literature was then compared to similar school systems in the UK as well as school systems which have OE well integrated into the curriculum, school culture and lifestyle philosophy. Systematic reviews are a literary review that use systematic searches to collect and analyse secondary data in order to assess their quality and answer a defined research question (Armstrong et al., 2011).

The literature review identified three research questions for further investigation. The next stage of the systematic review process determined the inclusion and exclusion criteria in order to remove irrelevant studies from the systematic search and reduce bias (Armstrong et al., 2011). The aim of developing the inclusion criteria is to ensure that all relevant studies are identified and incorporated into the review (Gough, et al, 2012). Studies can be excluded due to their relevance, concerns on the quality of the study or its reliability (Weed, 2005). Studies that did not align with the inclusion criteria were excluded. To avoid misinterpretation or translation issues, studies not in English were also excluded. Both quantitative and qualitative studies were included to ensure that relevant articles were not accidentally excluded. Qualitative studies have been embraced in

systematic reviews within the area of education (Andrews, 2005). The inclusion/exclusion criteria are set out in Table 1 below. The search was limited to between 2000 and the present in order to find recent relevant, literature that aligned with current environmental issues, modern school systems and updated curricula. Geographic ranges were selected to reflect the UK's close proximity to Ireland, as well as similar culture; and the outdoor and nature-based philosophies of the Scandinavian countries. Final articles chosen for an in-depth analysis were selected through a stringent systematic process in four phases, detailed in Figure 1. This process revealed six journal articles. However, due to a lack of published peer-reviewed papers linked to the research questions in Ireland, the decision was made to include grey literature within the search terms. This led to a seventh source being included for analysis, an Irish Doctoral dissertation discovered through Google Scholar.

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Studies focused on the OE and its connection to environmental connectedness and awareness.	Studies investigating the connection between OE and physical and mental wellbeing, behavioural improvements in classroom, social development and improved learning ability.
Studies that focus on the development of empathy and sympathy towards the environment.	Studies that focus on other aspects of outdoor learning as mentioned above.
Studies investigating environmental education in outdoor settings.	Studies investigating environmental education in indoor classrooms.
Studies which are linked with formal education and modern curricula.	Studies on non-formal education facilities and anecdotal outdoor learning.
Studies based on students in Early Years, primary and post-primary schools.	Studies based on students in Higher Education.
Studies based in Ireland, the United Kingdom, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark.	Studies outside of these countries.
Studies focused on real interactions with the natural environment and/or 'wild areas' and wildlife.	Studies with focus on student experiences with pets, captive animals or urban concrete based outdoor spaces.
Peer-reviewed qualitative and quantitative articles published in a peer-reviewed journal or scholarly books.	Articles which have not been peer-reviewed such by private individuals, private companies and local authorities.
Papers published in English.	Papers not published in English.
Papers published between 2000 and 2020.	Papers published before 2000.

Table 1: Inclusion and exclusion criteria developed to identify relevant studies.

It was noted that bias could be introduced by a single researcher, through scanning articles and selecting which are considered to be relevant which has the potential to be subjective. It was therefore important to use reflexivity to identify any potential subjectivity and convert it to an exploration opportunity (Finlay et al., 2003). Inclusion and exclusion criteria were selected well in advance of any database searches, during the development of the research questions (Jørgensen et al., 2006)

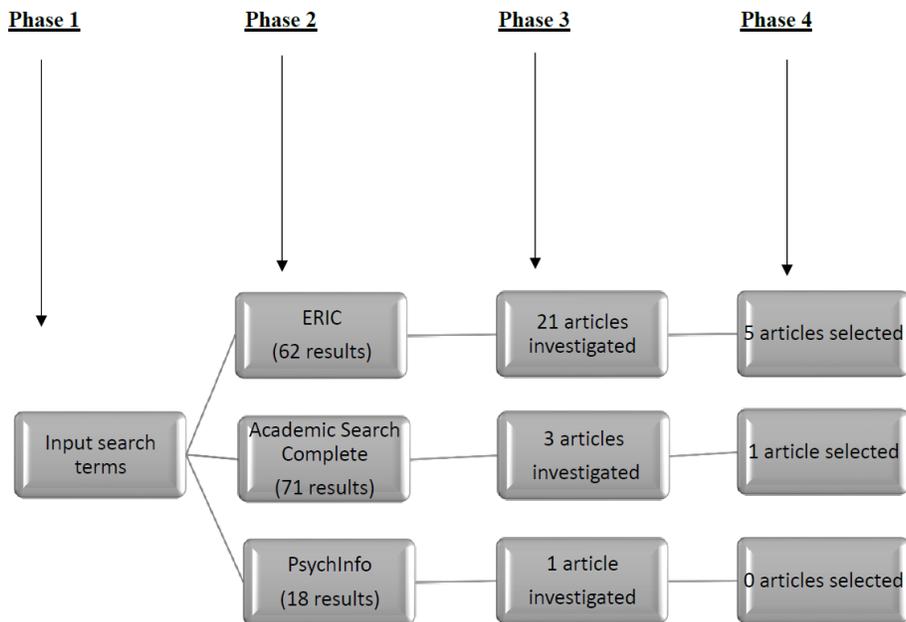


Figure 1: The selection and elimination process (note: many of the 25 articles investigated in phase three overlapped with searches in the three databases; one article selected for analysis was an Irish Doctoral dissertation found through Google Scholar)

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

From the systematic review, six articles were selected due to their close links with the research questions (Table 2). One Doctoral dissertation was also included due to its relevance to the research questions in an Irish context. The objective was to complete an analysis and interpretation of the information collected through the systematic review process in an attempt to answer the main research questions. Additionally, this process set out to enhance 1) an understanding of how OE interlinks with environmental education; 2) the role OE plays in developing connections between students and the natural environment, and 3) the role that society and culture play in introducing and implementing successful OE programmes within school curricula.

Ref.	Author	Year	Brief Description
1	Beery	2013	A quantitative study exploring the relationship of environmental connectedness and the Nordic philosophy of <i>friluftsliv</i> with a focus on Sweden. Participants are included through existing data from the Swedish Outdoor Recreation in Change national survey.
2	Leather	2018	This study is a critique of the Forest School movement in the UK. The author compares Forest Schools in the UK to the originators in Scandinavia and investigates the need for navigating cultural differences between different societies, the pedagogy within Forest School and the institutionalisation and commodification of the brand.
3	O'Malley	2014	This study is a doctoral dissertation on environmental education in Ireland and its ability to (re)connect students with the environment. The author details the history of environmental education globally and within Ireland before detailing the voices on environmental education from environmental educators, school staff, parents and the students themselves through 47 semi-structured interviews.
4	Sandell & Öhman	2010	This study investigates the effect of direct encounters with the natural environment within environmental education. It identifies the risks of potentially losing these encounters and suggests new potentials of encounters with nature.
5	Sandell & Öhman	2013	This study outlines an educational tool which critically investigates the relationships between experience of nature and environmentally friendly attitudes and behaviours while examining the ways in which outdoor education can achieve this.
6	Waite, Bølling & Bentsen	2016	A comparative study reviewing the literature of outdoor learning in English Forest Schools and the Danish nature school, <i>udeskole</i> . The authors discuss a conceptual framework to identify sociocultural differences and ways to navigate these to deliver pedagogies that reflect the culture in which they are embedded.
7	White, Eberstein & Scott	2018	This study investigates the benefits of children interacting with nature through a long term "bird buddies" (bird watching) project in England. The study involved 200 participants (aged 7-10) across eight primary schools.

Table 2: Descriptive characteristics of selected studies

Through a detailed analysis, three observations emerged from the literature in relation to the research questions:

1. Numerous researchers in the area of environmental education and OE work on the presumption that children are more disconnected from the natural environment than previous generations without actually examining this level of disconnectedness. The assumption is that connections can be remade just by bringing a student outdoors, even in the short term. O'Malley (2014) noted that in order for connections with the natural environment to be made and retained, it is crucial for environmental and outdoor education to go hand-in-hand. Surveys of environmental educators in Ireland indicated that they believe that for a nature connection to be made the two must be linked, with environmental education being taught through OE. Research has shown that

knowledge can facilitate a change in behaviour and attitude, “...people care about what they know” (Balmford et al., 2002, as cited in White et al., 2018, p. 16). The idea of environmental and outdoor education working together is exemplified by the long-term “Bird Buddies” programme. This study increased student knowledge of local bird populations using bird watching as a potential tool to combat the “extinction of experience” between urban children and the natural world (White et al., 2018). Direct encounters with nature, be through landscapes or wildlife, OE or visiting the outdoors with family, does have a significant, meaningful relationship with environmental connectedness (Beery, 2013; O'Malley, 2014; Sandell et al., 2010; White et al., 2018). However, repetitive, prolonged exposure to the outdoors is essential in deepening that connection, creating environmental empathy, pro-environmental attitudes and a broader, deeper context for sustainability decisions and debate in adulthood (O'Malley, 2014; Sandell et al., 2010; White et al., 2018).

2. Society and culture play a determining role in the effectiveness of outdoor educational programmes and what successfully works in one country will not necessarily work in another. Spending time in the outdoors is deeply connected with the Scandinavian way of life. *Friluftsliv* is an integral part of Scandinavian sociocultural identity and has been integrated into many institutions including the education systems and government policies. Scandinavian countries, in particular Sweden, Norway and Finland, use the abstract idea of *Allemansrätt*, meaning universal access to nature, or freedom to roam. In Sweden, this concept can be traced back as far as the Middle Ages (Beery, 2013) indicating just how deeply rooted it is within their culture. It is a fundamental element of the Nordic relationship with the natural world. In regard to this, the Nordic educational system differs from that of the UK or Ireland. In Denmark, *udeskole* comprises of regular outdoor educational activities for school children aged between 7-16. In response to an increased complexity of global environmental issues, Sweden has seen its education system develop a pluralistic approach with sustainability and environmental issues seen as political problems (Sandell et al., 2010). The aim is to develop students' critical thought on different perspectives and create a desire to engage in democratic discussions. For younger children, the *Skogsmulle* program was developed, whereby a forest being, named *Skogsmulle*, leads the children on outdoor adventures based on their explorative curiosity and love of nature (Beery, 2013). Another OE model ‘*Ur och Skur*’ (rain or shine) is implemented by other schools which teaches the importance of nature in everyday life (Beery, 2013). Sweden and Finland also have free standing Nature Schools which aim to use the natural environment to shape ecological knowledge and engagement with nature. Schools within these Scandinavian countries can link up with Nature Schools for their students to learn about the

natural environment. However, teachers have a high level of autonomy and are trusted in the professional expertise to use personal pedagogies to support the outdoor learning sections of their respective curriculums (Beery, 2013).

The 'Forest School' in the UK has stemmed from Scandinavian philosophies. With the general public becoming more aware of environmental issues and with a recent increased focus on reconnecting children with nature, the Forest School brand in the UK is becoming more popular. The aim of these schools is to follow the Scandinavian model of *friluftsliv* to achieve this reconnection. Unfortunately, the Forest School brand fails to consider the sociocultural differences between the imbedded, interwoven outdoor Scandinavian culture and the culture of schools, teachers and the public of the UK. Researchers note that outdoor learning provides learner-centred education where the social and environmental context play a significant role (Waite et al., 2016). Analysis of Forest Schools have provided underwhelming results with the potential benefits to environmental connections stated clearly but lacking any definition as to why certain activities are undertaken and no system to measure the statements (Leather, 2018; Waite et al., 2016). While links between pedagogies of Forest Schools in the UK and the national curriculum remain unclear, those of Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Norway are discussed in detail in the curriculum focusing on *ad hoc* experiential learning in outdoor and green environments (Waite et al., 2016). Research has shown that as the outdoor environment is not a central feature of British cultural identity, some teachers may find the idea of working outdoors with children distressing and something to loathe (Leather, 2018). Some teachers find it difficult not to interfere with child-initiated play, interrupting consistently and distracting from the child-centred learning (Leather, 2018). OE outside of Forest Schools in the UK is minimal and teachers have less autonomy than their Scandinavian colleagues, adhering closely to the national curriculum with a focus on learning outcomes and exam results.

**3.** The barriers to effective OE in relation to creating an environmentally aware student include external influences such as parental and teacher views and values, government legislation and policy, national curriculum, and society. OE is sparse in the Irish school system. The Department of Education and Skills published *The National Strategy of Education for Sustainable Development in Ireland, 2014-2020*, however, this document fails to identify the potentials of OE as an educational tool for sustainable development (DES, 2014). At present there is no policy on OE set by the Department of Education and Skills. The decision to take classes outdoors rests with the schools and teachers' personal values and teaching strategies. With the exception of the Leaving Certificate Biology and Geography, outdoor classes are near absent in the post-primary curriculum. In primary schools it has been introduced through the development of social, environmental, and

scientific education (SESE) which incorporates environmental education both inside and outside of the classroom. However, a report by the National Council for Curriculum Assessment (NCCA) states that out of 906 schools only five per cent engaged in OE (NCCA, 2008). As the curriculum is saturated with literature, teachers are under pressure to complete the curriculum within the academic year.

## CONCLUSION

Forest Schools in Ireland are relatively new and without careful consideration for culture and pedagogical methods; consequently, Irish Forest Schools could begin to move towards an institutionalised model which loses sight of its roots. The area of OE in Ireland finds itself in a unique position as it can incorporate the research conducted within Scandinavia and the UK and apply the most relevant areas of it to an Irish context. Waite et al. (2016) discusses a conceptual framework for OE which incorporates cultural values and educational models from different nations. It can be argued that such a framework would be massively beneficial for a new model of OE in an Irish context. The development and implementation of a standardised Outdoor and Environmental Education Network would allow researchers and educators to communicate and discuss pedagogical methods and strategies together. This would maximise the multiple benefits of learning in the outdoors while navigating cultural differences which would be invaluable not only to Ireland but to other countries where OE is becoming more popular. Ireland is in a unique position in that there is an absence of any official OE or environmental education policies. Continuous Professional Development for teachers interested in OE should be provided and the primary school curriculum could be updated with new links to environmental and OE, giving teachers new methods of teaching old subjects and the confidence to bring classes outside. For a standardised organisation to work, environmental education and OE would need to have clearly defined aims and objectives with clear links to the concepts of sustainability.

The low number of published articles on OE in Ireland is indicative of how unused this educational resource is. Outdoor learning is a valuable tool in education and should be utilised as such for all previously mentioned benefits. This author would recommend that future investigation into the area of OE as a means of developing connection with the natural environment, pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours, should focus on empirical studies of Forest Schools and schools which have begun to implement forms of OE as part of their regular routine. The investigation of gender differences in the development of environmental empathy and awareness was beyond the scope of this study, however, previous studies have shown significant gender

differences in attitudes towards the environment (Jenkins et al., 2006; Musitu-Ferrer et al., 2019) and this aspect could be explored with greater depth.

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## Exploring Early Years Educators' Psychological and Financial Well-being in Non-Profit and For-Profit ECE Settings in Ireland



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Elaine graduated with a Master of Education Studies in Early Childhood Education (ECE) from MIE in 2020. Prior to this she obtained a Master of Children and Youth Studies from UCD in 2013. As well as having accumulated many years of experience in early years settings in Ireland, Elaine has also spent numerous years working in early years settings abroad, including both Australia and New Zealand. This experience motivated her to explore certain aspects that play a vital role in maintaining high-quality care and education. In particular, her focus is placed on the significance of educator well-being.

**KEYWORDS:** Early Years Educators Well-being, Self-determination Theory, Psychological Well-being, Financial Well-being

### INTRODUCTION

The First 5 strategy describes 0-5 as the most critical years for children's learning and development (DES, 2018). Most important to these years, are the relationships that are formed within them, as these relationships have shown to have a significant impact on both the child's development and their well-being (Hamre & Pianta, 2004). High staff turnover rates in early years settings have shown to negatively impact these relationships and reduce the quality of care and education (Cassidy et al., 2011; Grant, Jeon & Buettner, 2019). The national average rate for staff-turnover in early years settings in Ireland is more than double the national average and even higher in full time early years settings (Pobal, 2019). Even more concerning than this is the recent finding from the Early Years Professional survey, revealing that the majority of educators intend on leaving the sector entirely if

working conditions do not improve (Greer-Murphy, 2019). Moloney (2019) describes the reality of working life for educators as juggling multiple competing expectations, engaging in complex thinking and decision-making processes, and working with various partners to do what's best for young children. The demands and responsibilities of an educator's daily working life far outweigh the professional recognition that is awarded to them by both the Government and society. Hence, the high staff-turnover rates in the early years sector cannot be questioned when the reality of the job requirements and lack of benefits come into perspective.

Research on educator well-being found the term "well-being" to be frequently used without any definition or conceptualisation (Cumming, 2017). Cumming and Wong (2019) therefore, took a multidisciplinary perspective approach, when defining educator well-being, taking Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory into consideration:

A dynamic state, involving the interaction of individual, relational, work-environmental, and socio-cultural political aspects and contexts. Educator's well-being is the responsibility of the individual and the agents of these contexts, requiring ongoing direct and indirect supports, across psychological, physiological and ethical dimensions (p. 276).

Research is increasingly recognising the links between early years educators' well-being and high-quality education and care (Jennings, 2015; Jeon, Buettner & Grant, 2018; King et al., 2016). Research has also suggested that quality is generally higher in non-profit settings (Sosinsky et al., 2007). However, it has also been found that there are significant differences in quality among private early years settings, such as independent private and corporate chain settings (Rush & Downie, 2006). In Ireland, it has been reported that on average, educators working in community services remain in their settings longer than educators working in private settings (Pobal, 2019). This research study aims to investigate the reasons for this and examine how the experiences of educators differ among non-profit and for-profit early years settings. Drawing particularly on Ryan and Deci's (2017) work on self-determination theory (SDT), this study aims to investigate aspects of early years educators' well-being within community, private independent and private chain early years settings and to explore factors that contribute to and benefit early years educator workplace wellbeing.

## CONTEXT

Research has shown that early years educators have on average poorer levels of psychological health in comparison to women with similar demographics working in other professions (Whitaker et al., 2012). Research has also highlighted the potential consequences on quality of care and

education when educator well-being is not experienced (Hall-Kenyon, 2014; Hamre & Pianta, 2004; Jeon, Buettner & Grant, 2018). The concept of psychological well-being is understood through various perspectives across literature. For instance, Ryff and Singer (2008) found it to include aspects of personal development, forming secure relationships, autonomy, competence and self-acceptance. Whereas, Cumming and Wong (2019) found educator well-being to be discussed in terms of psychological distress, such as depression, stress or burnout. Despite concerns over the sectors high staff turnover rate, there is a noticeable lack of research carried out on early years educators' psychological well-being in Ireland. For the purpose of this research study, educators' psychological and financial well-being is explored through Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory. According to self-determination theory, wellbeing is described in terms of thriving rather than simply having a positive outlook (Ryan & Deci, 2017). For an individuals' psychological well-being to thrive, their needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness must be satisfied.

#### COMPETENCE

Ryan & Deci (2017) define competence in SDT as a basic need to feel effectance and mastery. According to SDT, educators who feel more competent should show a higher level of job performance and register a higher degree of psychological well-being. Research has also found higher levels of competence to correlate with greater well-being (Collie et al., 2016). Jeon and colleagues (2018) found that teachers who had higher levels of job competence were less likely to be depressed and stressed. However, competence tends to diminish in environments that are deemed too challenging, such as environments where "negative feedback is pervasive, or feelings of mastery and effectiveness are diminished or undermined by interpersonal factors (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 11). This can be seen in individual settings, within the relationships between management and co-workers, but also seen through the dominant discourses that pervade the sector that situate educators in feeling a lack of recognition by both society and the Government (Greer-Murphy, 2019).

#### AUTONOMY

Autonomy described by Ryan and Deci (2017) is the need to self-regulate one's experiences and actions. When "acting with autonomy, behaviours are engaged whole-heartedly, whereas one experiences incongruence and conflict when doing what is contrary to one's volition" (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 10). Autonomy is therefore aligned with an individual's authentic interests and values. Research has found educators' autonomy in the workplace to contribute significantly to educators' psychological well-being (Royer & Moreau, 2016). Cassidy and colleagues (2017) found educator'

autonomy in the work environment was directly linked to the emotional support provided for the children in their care.

## RELATEDNESS

Ryan and Deci (2017) describe the need for relatedness to concern feelings of being socially connected. Corr and colleagues (2015) found that having good working relationships with co-workers, management, children and their families was associated with better mental health. Thus, workplace relationships show us that well-being is not only an individual response but is interconnected to everyone within the setting (Cumming, 2017). Research also found that the relationships educators have with both their supervisor and management is a strong indicator of their workplace satisfaction (Jeon & Wells, 2018).

Ryan and Deci (2017) state that all three basic needs of SDT are interrelated and equally contribute to high quality relationships and well-being. Ryan & Deci (2017) claim that pay also relates to competence, autonomy and relatedness, in that pay needs to be perceived as equitable. Research has found that educators' financial well-being to be equally as important as their psychological well-being (Grant et al., 2019; Jorde-Bloom, 1988; King et al., 2016). Grant and colleagues (2019) found that educators who perceived better working conditions such as pay, and promotion opportunities showed a decreased likelihood of intending to leave the sector and maintained a greater sense of professional commitment to the field. Hall-Kenyon et al., (2014) on a review of literature, found nearly all studies to conclude that low pay had a negative impact on not only educators' well-being but the entire sector. King et al., (2016) found strong links between educators that had greater financial well-being and their ability to demonstrate greater emotional availability in interactions with children. The early years sector in Ireland is one of the lowest paid professions in Ireland, with an average rate of pay of €11.93 per hour (ECI, 2018). Research carried out by SIPTU found the majority of educators working in Ireland had poor financial health (Greer-Murphy, 2019). Educators reported issues such as, difficulty managing their salaries and being unable to cope with unexpected expenses and almost all educators surveyed believed the sector to be unfairly paid (Greer-Murphy, 2019). Educator financial wellbeing however, is more than just feeling financially secure. Self-determination theory demonstrates the importance of being paid a salary that reflects a feeling of recognition and value, not only from the early years setting itself, but the Government and society too.

## METHODOLOGY

This research is based on a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design. Guetterman and colleagues (2015) states that an explanatory design begins with a quantitative data collection and analysis phase, which informs the follow-up qualitative phase. Similarly, Onwuegbuzie and colleagues (2007) claim that when quantitative and qualitative analytical techniques are utilized through a sequential mixed analysis, the results from the quantitative phase should then inform the qualitative research or vice versa. The information that the researcher obtained from the survey conducted was then used to inform the semi-structured interviews in the qualitative phase.

The research sample targeted early years educators currently working in early years settings in Ireland. The survey questionnaire was a non-probability sample as it involved opportunity sampling, snowball sampling and purposive sampling. The total number of responses for the questionnaire amounted to 277 responses. When filters were applied to only include early years educators, the survey responses resulted in a total of 115 respondents. The focus of the questionnaire was to gain as many perspectives from early years educators on their experiences and opinions in relation their workplace well-being. In drafting the questions for the survey the researcher took into consideration the five facets identified by Jorde-Bloom (1998) as being most important to job satisfaction in the early childhood setting and the three basic needs of self-determination theory, being autonomy, competence and relatedness (Ryan and Deci, 2017). The questionnaire also drew insight from recent research carried out by Jeon and Wells (2018), who devised the Early Childhood Job Attitude Survey (ECJAS).

The interview sample was based on representing the three main early years setting types in Ireland. These include community, private independent and private chain settings. The researcher targeted educators working in all three sub-groups who had varied backgrounds, in both their qualifications and experience. The researcher recruited the participants of the semi-structure interviews through colleagues in the profession and contacting individual services directly. It must be acknowledged that this study is limited from the responses of the participants of the semi-structured interviews. The immediate closure of early childhood settings due to the spread of COVID-19 impacted the data collection process. The researcher felt that proceeding with the remaining two interviews would impact heavily on the data already collected and in turn would affect the validity and reliability of the overall results, given the profound effect of a pandemic on educators' psychological and financial well-being. The researcher, therefore, focused on the four interviews that had been conducted prior to the announcement of the closures of early years services. These four

interviews consisted of two educators working in private independent settings, one educator in a private chain and one in a state funded community setting.

The typology of the semi-structured interviews used in this research was based on a descriptive/corrective approach. This approach particularly focuses on participants whose opinions and experiences are typically absent from research (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). The questions for the semi-structured interviews were informed by the findings of the survey. The themes and topics that emerged the strongest were given priority, however the participants were free to discuss other issues they felt strongly about. Interviews lasted between twenty-five minutes to forty-five minutes and were recorded on an audio recording device.

The quantitative analysis was carried out using online survey development software Survey Monkey™. The qualitative data from the open-ended questions was coded by applying tags using SurveyMonkey™ software. It was then transferred to MAXQDA™ for further analysing. For the qualitative analysis of this study, the researcher followed Braun and Clark's (2006) model for thematic analysis of the data. The themes that were prioritised as most relevant to the study were chosen as they related to theory and were found consistently throughout both data sources. The researcher then re-named the core themes accordingly and found contrasting themes among all three groups. One significant limitation to the research was observed in the lack of survey responses from educators working in private chain settings. Another limitation to this research was the impact of Covid-19 through impacting the quantity of interviews carried out.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

One key finding from this research came from exploring the types of relationships within early years settings. As previously discussed, relatedness is a psychological need that emphasises the importance of being socially connected to others (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Workplace relationships show us that well-being is not only an individual response but is interconnected to everyone within the setting (Cumming, 2017). Thus, relatedness is the foundation for creating a sense of belonging in early years settings, not only for staff but for children and families too.

### **QUANTITATIVE DATA**

One interesting finding came from analysis of the quantitative data when comparing the type of relationship educators had with management. This relationship differed among the sub-groups. Most educators (68%) working in community settings described their relationship with management as informal/relaxed compared to 59% in independent private and 26% in chain settings (Figure 1).

Although a small percentage (8%) of respondents from the survey stated having a formal relationship with management, this type of relationship was directly linked to higher levels of dissatisfaction in the workplace and feeling less valued by management and directly linked to intentions to leave (Figure 2). Further analysis found that informal/relaxed relationships with management directly related to better job satisfaction.

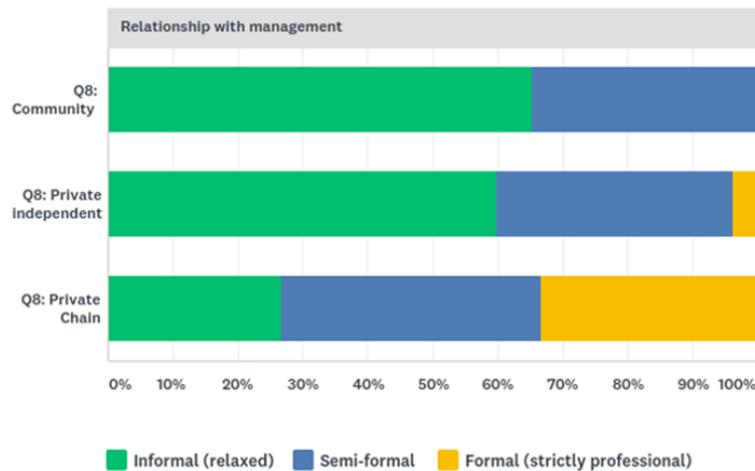


Figure 1. Type of relationship with management

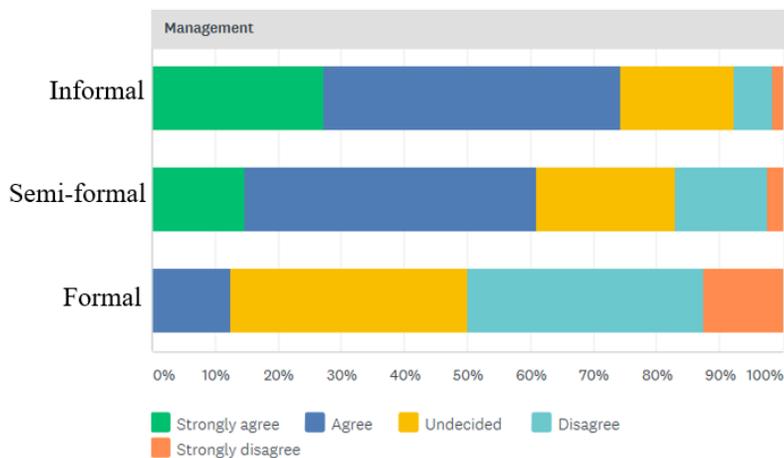


Figure 2. I feel valued by management

This research study also found the type of relationship educators have with management directly relates to the quality of care and education being provided. The majority of educators (88%) that have a formal relationship with management felt there were too many children in their classrooms and only 37% of those educators claimed that ratios were being maintained throughout the day (Figure 3). This variance between the type of relationship educators have with management was evident again when educators were asked on whether ratios were maintained throughout the day (Figure 4). Thus, this research argues that early years settings that are driven by business

(extrinsic) motives through increasing profit might maintain a strictly professional (formal) relationship with their staff.

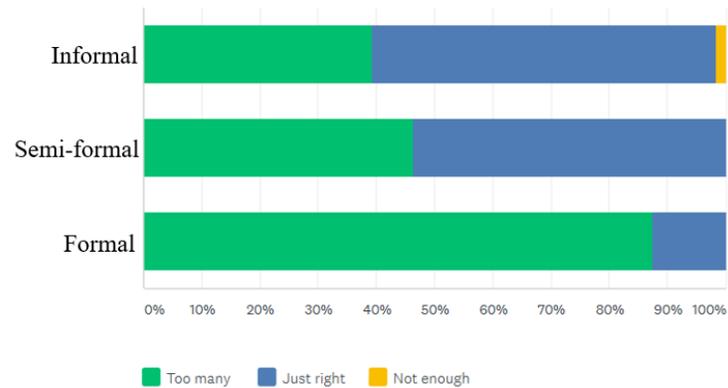


Figure 3 How do you feel about the number of children in you room?

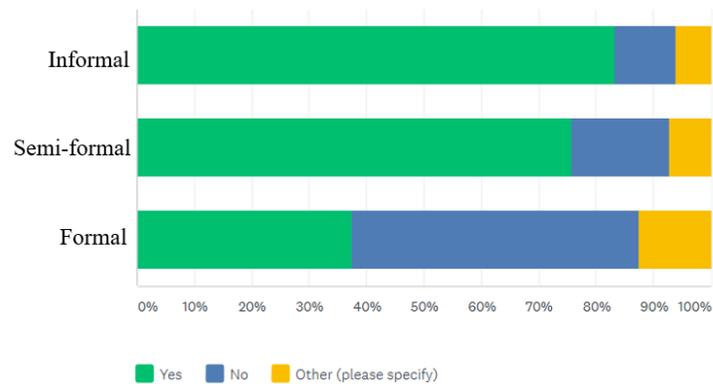


Figure 4. Are ratios maintained throughout the day?

## QUALITATIVE DATA

Both the priorities and values of management was an important theme that emerged from the qualitative data. The variances in these became apparent between the types of early years settings. P04 (private chain) felt management placed financial priorities first: "I was talking to the manager and she said to me 'it's not your problem because this is a business' and I feel it's more a business than a creche and I don't like that". P04 discussed this business ethos employed by management further by referring to how this resulted in a lack of recognition and value:

I mean because it is a big company and I feel we are numbers for them. Because they know that when someone leaves the company, they know they are going to have five or six more people waiting to start. I feel that they don't care if we are happy there or not (P04 – Chain).

Some educators spoke positively about certain priorities and values that their settings had. For example, P01 (Community), P03 (Independent) and P01 (Independent) all discussed the benefits of having the owners and/or managers in their settings who are trained in early years education and that work directly with the children. P03 found this created a relaxed environment where the manager values the educators' opinions and expertise, allowing educators to feel competent in their practice. P01 (Independent) reflected on the fact that the owners in her setting are trained and qualified as being important to why it is one of the best places she has worked:

I think there's a huge difference where there's a place that run as a business and the owners are only financially invested and not necessarily like educationally invested. I think that's a big difference. Because they care more (P01 - Independent).

The concept of owners who are only financially invested is an interesting theme to explore in relation to extrinsic motivation. If owners are only extrinsically motivated by profit, this could entail repercussions for the quality of care and education. As this research has found, educators in community settings have on average better relationships with management than educators in private settings. One possible reason for this could be that management priorities and values are aligned with educators. Recognition and pay were discussed by educators in terms of their connection. Low pay was viewed by educators as a lack of recognition not only from management but from the government too. The quantitative data found that educators working in chain settings received the lowest pay, however the majority of educators across all three sub-groups expressed dissatisfaction with their salary. When discussing reasons for the pay in the sector being low, P01 (Independent) believed the reason for this relates to the caring aspect of the profession: "It's like this idea that they know that this is the kind of profession where you care and as a result, they don't feel like they have to pay us as much because we care so much". It is evident that the need for competence is closely interlinked with recognition and that this diminishes when educators are not given recognition for the emotional labour that is involved in the profession.

It is apparent on analysis of both the quantitative and qualitative data that that there are noticeable differences among the three sub-groups, particularly among the experiences of educators working in private chain settings. It is evident that educators working in community settings have on average, higher job-satisfaction and provide higher quality of care and education than educators working in independent private and private chain settings. Most significant to the findings is the importance of the relationship educators have with management as this has shown to directly relate to job satisfaction and the quality of care and education.

## CONCLUSION

This research study explored aspects relating to educators' psychological and financial well-being in community, independent private and private chain early years settings in Ireland. It also examined factors that contribute and benefit educators' psychological and financial well-being in the workplace. This research argues that an urgent change is needed, to address the significant high-turnover rates in the sector, which have shown to have negative implications on the quality of care and education (Cassidy et al., 2011; Jeon, Buettner & Grant, 2018).

This research study found educators' psychological well-being differed within community, independent private and private chain early years settings. Educators working in community settings described better working conditions, higher job satisfaction and stronger relationships with management than educators in private settings. Educators in private chain settings showed the most dissatisfaction with working conditions and felt the least valued by management. Findings from this study also suggest an important variable in educator well-being is the type of relationship educators have with management, with informal relationships directly corresponding to higher job-satisfaction and quality of care and education. This study further suggests that educators who have informal or relaxed relationships with management may correspond to shared priorities and values.

Findings from this study suggests that management priorities and values in early year settings is a pertinent factor that may influence the working conditions for educators and the quality of care and education it provides for the children. For managements' priorities and values to be in line with educators then they also need to be intrinsically motivated and educationally invested. Therefore, it is recommended that a mandatory higher-level qualification in early years education is obtained by owners and managers. This may improve the relationship management have with their staff as findings from this research study suggest that stronger relationships with management occur when both the educator and management share the same priorities and values. It has been argued that early childhood work environments need to nurture adults as well as children (Cumming & Wong, 2019; Jorde-Bloom, 1988). It is further recommended that policy considers the benefits of a holistic working environment for educators, through prioritising time for relationships, encouraging autonomy and promoting competence.

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## ENABLING TRANSITIONS: Insights from Learners' Transitional Experiences on a Further Education to Higher Education Bridging Programme



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**KEYWORDS:** Further Education/FE, Higher Education/HE, Bridging, Access, Foundation, Widening Participation, Transition/al, Belonging, Learner Identity, Community of Practice (CoP).

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research was to explore the transitional experiences of a group of learners on a unique bridging programme between a further education (FE) and higher education (HE) college. The 'NAVET programme', is a unique initiative which provides an alternative route into HE, and as such has a role to play in the widening participation agenda. The main objective was to examine if this bridging programme enabled a successful transition to HE for these learners. This article

provides a brief insight into a larger study that was conducted as part of a Master of Arts in Learning and Teaching.

The Foundation Programme in Education and Training (also known as Non-Award Visitor in Education and Training) or the 'NAVET programme' is considered a bridging programme because learners attend an FE college and study a full level 5 (EQF 4) Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) award while simultaneously studying two modules leading to a level 8 degree (EQF 6) at a neighbouring university. Learners on the programme come from a variety of backgrounds including urban, rural and DEIS schools. Some are early school leavers and/or mature learners while some have just finished their Leaving Certificate (LC) and struggled to get the required points for their chosen course. Upon successful completion of both courses, they have direct access to the level 8 Bachelor of Science in Education with exemptions in the two modules. It also opens other pathways into teaching at all levels in the Irish education system.

This research will present central elements of 'transitioning' through the formal education process. Practices that support transition, a 'sense of belonging' and learner identity emerged as the main themes which formed the basis for this qualitative research study. The primary method of data collection was semi-structured interviews which was analysed using a deductive reasoning approach which is based on using the possible themes identified in the literature and exploring the raw data provided by participants in relation to these themes. While all participants appreciate the support provided by the FE college, the findings suggest that there are significant differences between the transitional experiences for the mature learners and the school leavers including: their ability to cope with the different approaches to teaching at HE and the effect of being labelled 'level 5 learners' in the HE college.

## CONTEXT

Higher education in Ireland consists of universities, institutes of technology (IoTs) and colleges of education, along with some private colleges (Euroguidance Ireland, 2019). Over the last five years full-time new entrants to undergraduate HE has increased by 5% and now exceeds 43,000 learners (HEA, 2018). Approximately 75% of those undergraduates gain access through the typical matriculation route, the CAO/Leaving Certificate while the other 25% progress through non-typical routes such as further education and access programmes (Denny, 2015).

The White Paper '*Charting our Educational Future*' was one of the first policies that encouraged the universities to develop new progression routes and set targets for widening

participation to “promote equality of access, participation and benefit for all in accordance with their needs and abilities” (DES, 1995). Non-typical progression routes are usually associated with the ‘non-traditional undergraduates’ who are generally categorised as access students, mature students, students with disabilities, international students, travellers and students with external commitments such as parents/carers (TCD, 2018). In other words, those that did not follow the typical progression route.

Several factors have influenced the expansion of these non-typical routes. The Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) Programme was introduced in 1985 and comes under the umbrella of Further Education and Training which is targeted at “those sectors of the population who are otherwise poorly served by mainstream education” (Murray, et al., 2014, p. 1). However, it was the Higher Education Links Scheme (HELs) in 1996 which first facilitated the allocation of places in Institutes of Technologies (IoTs) on ‘selected’ courses based on achieving a full FET award. In 1999 the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act standardised certification under the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) and the Further Education and Training (FET) Awards Council (FETAC) bodies. This provided clear progression paths for FET learners and ‘widened’ the door into HE (Murray, Grummell, & Ryan, 2014). In 2014 the Common Awards System (CAS) expanded this process by standardising the FET/QQI awards to the National Framework of Qualification (NFQ) Levels 1 to 6 (QQI, 2014).

The more recent NAP (2015-2019) has targeted six key groups currently underrepresented in HE who may also be considered ‘non-traditional’. These include those from socio-economic groups with low participation in HE, part-time/flexible students and FE award holders (HEA, 2015, p. 38). The NAVET programme is an example of a college-led collaboration between an FE and a HE college which seeks to provide these ‘non-traditional’ learners with the key skills and ‘bridges’ the gap between the two colleges. It aims to support the transition from school to college or for a lot of the learners the transition back into education. As a teacher on this programme for the last number of years the researcher was interested in knowing if or how this bridging programme assisted the learners in their transition to Higher Education.

The research was framed by a socio-cultural perspective for understanding transition in education. Wenger’s (1998) Communities of Practice (CoPs) identifies learning as encompassed by community, practice, meaning and identity. Wenger suggests that by participating in a community, interacting with members and learning their practices, the participant becomes a competent member of that community, which shapes their identity and gives them a sense of belonging to the community. The research on the NAVET programme therefore focused on these

three concepts which Wenger identified: the practices within the community, a sense of belonging and learner identity. These concepts are interlinked and influenced by the overall experience of the learner during their transition to college.

Learning, according to Wenger (2010), is not just about knowledge and acquiring the necessary skills, it is about becoming a 'knower' within the community and understanding what is expected by the community (p. 181). To become a 'knower', students entering university must get the appropriate level of support to help them acquire the relevant knowledge and develop the necessary skills which in turn supports the development of a positive learner identity (Rocks & Lavender, 2018). Briggs, Clarke and Hall (2012) emphasise the importance of support "on both sides of the transition bridge" to help students adjust to university life while similarly, Fleming (2010) advocates institutional involvement for "creating, supporting and sustaining communities of learners" as an intervention which will support the learner and increase retention (p. 5).

Wenger (1998) emphasises the importance of social participation in the chosen community for learning to occur. He suggests that participation "shapes not only what we do, but also who we are and how we interpret what we do" (p. 4). Becoming a full participant involves recognizing and interpreting a range of practices and actions embedded in the chosen field of study. This helps foster a 'sense of belonging' to the community of peers in their field of study. Rather than thinking of themselves as someone who is studying engineering or philosophy, they see themselves as engineers and philosophers (Hussey & Smith, 2010). Similarly, Thomas (2012) identifies the development of "meaningful interactions between staff and students" alongside "peer relations" and "relevant HE experiences" as key to nurturing a sense of belonging to the HE environment (p. 12-15).

Bliuc, Ellis and Goodyear (2011) argue that how "students perceive themselves in the context of learning" and their 'social identity' as a university student has an impact on how they learn. A positive student social identity indicates deeper approaches to learning which results in higher academic achievement and a greater sense of belonging (p. 421). Similarly, Huon and Sankey (2002) suggest that students need to "reorganise the way they think about themselves, as learners, and as social beings" and found that a positive learner or student identity contributed substantially to the successful transition for a student (p. 1).

The research shows how these three concepts are interlinked. The experiences of each learner as they start out in college will influence the sense of belonging they have to the college and their learner identity as a student. A strong sense of belonging and a positive learner identity will result in a successful transition to higher education and college life.

## METHODOLOGY

The main concern of this research was to ‘hear’ the voices of the NAVET learners. This objective determined the methodological approach adopted in the study which was a qualitative approach based on the post-positivist interpretative paradigm. The method selected was a semi-structured one-to-one interview approach. This method was based on maximising opportunities to listen and record the respondents, in relation to their experiences in both the FE and HE colleges. This enabled participants to tell their stories, to “discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live”, the world on the NAVET programme, and to ‘voice’ their experiences from their own point of view (Cohen, et al., 2007, p. 368).

The next part of the process was to consider the ethical and integrity of the research. Approval was sought and received from the institution’s Ethics Committee. The researcher was a teacher on the programme and as such was in a ‘position of power’ over the participants, therefore, a gatekeeper was used to approach the learners. Providing transparency and ensuring any interpretations of data were not impacted by personal opinions and experiences was of key importance to ensure credibility for the research. To ensure reliability all aspects of the research was documented and referenced. The available time and the low response rate from past learners limited the scope of the research which may also impact the generalizability of the study.

The selection criteria was that each participant had to be currently studying on the NAVET programme or to have studied on the course in the last two years. All current learners and two past learners volunteered to participate in the study. Stratified sampling was used based on; gender and mature/school leavers (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 113). The final sample consisted of nine learners, four of whom were school leavers (3 female, 1 male) and five mature students (1 female, 4 male). The school leavers were all 18 years old and coming directly from completing the Leaving Certificate. The mature students were anyone over 21 in FE (Hardiman, 2012) and all of them had additional educational experiences either in an IoT, a HE college or specific training programmes for employment.

The interview questions were based on the key concepts outlined in the secondary research and as such a deductive reasoning approach was chosen to thematically analyse the data. Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase thematic analysis approach as outlined in Table 1 below was employed (p. 16-24).

Phase One	Getting to know the data – immersion by repeatedly reading and listening, identifying items for further analysis
Phase Two	Identifying initial codes - systematically working through each data set to 'identify interesting aspects' and 'repeated patterns' to assist the organisation of the data into meaningful groups.
Phase Three	Searching for themes - examining the relationships between the codes to see if they could be combined into a smaller set of main or 'candidate' themes or sub-themes, identify 'outliers' and theme as miscellaneous
Phase Four	Reviewing themes - ensuring the transcript extract was themed correctly based on the question, the context and the response and deciding on an appropriate name for the theme, creating a thematic map
Phase Five	Defining and naming themes - organising the items in such a way so they would form a 'coherent' account relative to the theme and including an appropriate narrative, produce a detailed written analysis relating to each theme.
Phase Six	Producing the report - within the 'story' each theme should include enough supporting transcript extracts to validate the existence of that theme throughout the data set.

*Table 1 - Braun and Clarke (2006, p16-24) - 6 Phase Thematic Analysis*

This six-phase approach ensured dependability and credibility in the research as each data item was taken in context and used to tell the story accurately.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The main study found several notable points that are relevant for learners transitioning to HE. This article will focus on two key findings that highlight how different practices impacted the learners' sense of belonging and their learner identity. These findings: the support provided in FE and the impact of being labelled as 'level 5 learners' will examine how the different cohorts of learners; school leavers and mature learners were impacted in different ways by these practices.

For the purposes of the analysis Table 2 identifies the participants, cohort, gender, age and their reasons for choosing the NAVET bridging programme. This is to facilitate the reader's understanding of the analysis.

Participant	Mature/ School Leaver	Gender	Age	Reason for joining bridging programme
<b>Current Students</b>				
Participant 1	School leaver	Female	18	“steppingstone” – too young for college
Participant 2	School leaver	Female	18	Failed Maths in LC - “bitter” about having to do the bridging programme
Participant 3	School leaver	Male	18	Missed out on place through CAO – saw it as the “best option”
Participant 4	School leaver	Female	18	Missed out on place through CAO – always expected to do PLC course.
Participant 5	Mature	Male	28	Saw it as “first step on my road into teaching” but was “really, really afraid” that would not see it through
Participant 6	Mature	Male	27	“Negative” feelings about the course - wanted to go “straight to level 8”.
Participant 7	Mature	Male	22	“I want to teach”. The chance to go to HE was the “cherry on the cake”.
<b>Past Students</b>				
Participant 8	Mature	Female	36	Saw the course as a “steppingstone into education”
Participant 9	Mature	Male	26	“Terrified to come back after dropping out twice” and afraid that he would not be able to see it through.

Table 2 - Biography of Participants

## SCAFFOLDING THE LEARNERS

The key finding from all participants was that they felt supported in the FE college and this support was necessary for their successful transition to HE. Participant 5 identified this as the “scaffolding” for building his new career in education which reflects Vygotsky’s (1934) and Bruner’s (1978) learning theory. Of the nine participants, six started the programme feeling anxious about their ability to succeed on the course and being able for university. Three of the school leavers felt they might have “run out” (Participant 1), “dropped out” (Participant 4) and would not “have survived” (Participant 2) had it not been for the support of their peers and staff in FE.

Participants compared the different teaching and learning styles employed by FE teachers and some lecturers in the HE college. Several of the school leavers highlighted the “do your own thing approach” in HE and identified the ‘two extremes’ between FE where it’s ‘really supportive’ and HE where it is ‘sink or swim’. The different approach to teaching in HE is something that has been identified in various studies as challenging for new learners transitioning to HE (Palmer et al., 2009; Yorke & Longden, 2008). Other studies (Fleming, 2010; Briggs et al., 2012; Rocks &

Lavender, 2018) have identified the importance of the appropriate level of support for learners as they start in college.

Responses from the school leavers suggest they were most affected. Perhaps this is because they were still maturing as learners and had also just completed the Leaving Certificate. They may be used to the rote learning and ‘teaching to the exam’ that is prevalent in the senior cycle. Hyland (2011) identified the ongoing criticisms of the Leaving Certificate in her paper and suggests it “left students ill-equipped to meet the challenges of third level”.

In contrast the mature learners, while appreciating the extra support in FE, did not appear unduly affected which may be due to their previous experience in college or employment. They were also more likely to seek professional support in the HE college and this support helped them in their transition. They attended the library regularly and various workshops such as essay writing skills which they found beneficial:

...it's definitely worth my while going there...a real practical approach to actually writing essays...you can bring your essays to them and you can get, you know, a lot of feedback and help (Participant 5)

The support provided by the FE college helped all the learners' confidence however for the school leavers it was essential for their successful transition to Higher Education.

#### LABELLING – THE LEVEL 5 LEARNERS

A key formative event for participants was the first lecture in HE when they were singled out and labelled ‘level 5 learners’ by the lecturer. During this lecture the class were asked “where are the FE level 5 students?” (Participant 5) and requested to raise their hands. Participant 2 described the scene: ‘...we were all sitting in the back like with our hands up and everyone turning around and looking at us and it was a real feeling of like us and them’. This incidental remark caused significant problems for the group, both academically and socially, but also to the learners individually. From an academic perspective, the practice of singling out the FE group meant they felt alienated in the class which prevented them from engaging with the traditional undergraduates:

One of the weeks after that we had to kind of like engage with other people, they weren't really having any of it because they were like ‘Oh they're the FE people at the back, leave them to them’. (Participant 1)

Wenger (2010) suggests that the trajectory of each individual student incorporates the “memories, competencies, key formative events, stories, and relationships to people and places” and this will influence how they participate and how they learn (p. 5). The stigma of being a ‘level 5’ learner is mentioned by all the school leavers and for most this appeared to have a significant impact on their

academic and social integration and the development of their identity as HE learners. They did not join any clubs or societies in the HE college and relied heavily on the ‘net’ (Participant 4) of support from their FE colleagues.

Mallman and Lee (2016) contend that “school leavers have an unwritten but widely shared mode of participation in the classroom”. When the school leavers from the FE college entered the HE college they may have expected to merge with the traditional undergraduates and participate in the same way. They may not have seen themselves as ‘non-traditional’ learners so when they were asked to raise their hands ‘if you are a level 5 student’ they were ‘embarrassed’ and upset with being singled out. Mallman and Lee suggest this stigmatisation serves “to label, explain and socially position the offending individual” which in this case was to suggest the participants were not real undergraduates. Fleming and Finnegan (2011) identified the “impact of careless words and deeds” in their study of ‘non-traditional’ learners which reflects what happened in this case (p. 12).

In contrast, the mature learners did not seem to be similarly affected, with Participant 5 suggesting he would have said it “*in casual conversation to someone anyway*”. Other mature learners did not appear to be aware of the divide with Participant 6 saying he felt he had also integrated well: “*...it feels pretty natural, and I do all my studying on my extra assignment work in [HE college] library so I feel pretty comfortable there at this stage...*”.

All mature learners reporting a sense of belonging to the HE college. This may have been aided by their participation in both social and academic events such as societies and workshops. This sense of belonging is reflected in the mature learners’ enthusiasm and confidence going forward into their studies. Participant 5 identified the NAVET programme as having “*skin in the game*” because it has helped him get into the “mindset of becoming a teacher” and making it a “*real thing*”. Participant 6, who had switched careers after two years studying Business, also showed a positive attitude: “*... I'm studying what I want to study and I'm good at what I want to study as well, so like it's not about should I be there? it's I want to be there...I just want to be in HE next year...*”

The school leavers felt they had “*grown a lot in this year*” (Participant 1) and were “*far more determined*” (Participant 2). They were quite positive overall having felt they had progressed academically and were more prepared for higher education. They were “*hopeful*” (Participants 3 and 4) about getting the course they wanted next year. The practices outlined above and covered in more detail in the full study show the importance of providing support and opportunities for integration and inclusion for new learners in HE. There was a significant difference as to how the school leavers and the mature students reacted to some of the practices within HE that may have impacted their sense of belonging to the college and their learner identity as HE students.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to investigate the transitional experiences of a group of learners on a unique bridging programme between an FE and HE college. FE courses and bridging programmes like the NAVET programme have a role to play in the widening participation agenda. They provide an alternative route into HE for a diverse range of learners including mature learners and those who do not have the formal entry requirements for their chosen undergraduate degree course.

The study found that all participants valued the support provided in FE and felt it provided them with the ‘foundation’ for HE and a better understanding of what was expected in university. While the school leavers struggled with the more independent teaching and learning styles in HE and relied more heavily on the support in FE, the mature learners sought professional support when needed in HE and this aided their transition to university.

A significant difference between the two cohorts was the effect of being labelled as ‘level 5 learners’ in the HE college. While the school leavers were upset and annoyed, it appeared to have had less of an impact on the mature learners. This upset may have contributed to the school leavers’ decision not to join any clubs or societies and to not seek support which ultimately may have impacted their sense of belonging and learner identity.

As identified in this research, practices that scaffold learners as they transition to higher education still need to be addressed to “create fully inclusive and genuinely open third level institutions” (Fleming & Finnegan, 2011). A critical self-examination by both colleges would help identify the practices that enable or constrain learners and how they engage with the programme.

The findings suggest that school leavers experience the transition from FE to HE differently to mature learners possibly because they do not see themselves as ‘non-traditional’ learners. While there is an abundance of research available on ‘non-traditional’ learners (Christie et al., 2008; Fleming & Finnegan, 2011; MacFarlane, 2018 are some examples) there is a dearth of literature which focuses specifically on school leaver access students such as those participating in the NAVET programme. This warrants further study given that further education is now a viable route into higher education.

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## Post-Primary Teachers' Perspectives on the Effects of Homework for Student Learning

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Stephanie has recently completed a Bachelor of Arts degree in Education, Gaeilge and Business Studies. Since completing an undergraduate degree, she has gained experience in the Post-Primary Sector. Her choice of topic for research was Students' Learning and if Homework benefits learning. Stephanie hoped, as a final year student, completing this research would provide her with an insight into a common practice within Irish secondary schools and provide answers to her research questions.

**KEYWORDS:** Homework, Learning, Assessment, Feedback, Junior Cycle

### INTRODUCTION

The primary objective of this study was to explore current post-primary school teachers' perspectives on the effects of homework for student learning. This article is a snapshot of a comprehensive piece of research which was conducted for the purpose of a dissertation, where a sample of post-primary teachers were interviewed to gain an understanding of their opinions and views regarding homework and its benefits for student learning. The motivation for this research stemmed from the researcher's interest in the topic and the volume of conflicting research available on homework. International research has shown that there is a divide in opinions on the practice of homework, with Professor Harris Cooper stating that 'homework substantially raises high school students' achievement' (Black et al., 1996, p.139-148), however Pfeiffer contradicted this idea in 2018 after conducting a study which found that 'no homework has left a more positive effect on learners' (Pfeiffer, 2018, p.1). As a teacher in preparation, the researcher was interested in how homework would affect the preparation and assessment of and for students' learning in the classroom. This

research will show that homework is an important part of a student's learning process and will present some of the limitations attached to homework.

## CONTEXT

The overarching theme that formed the basis of this dissertation was 'homework' and whether or not it is a useful strategy in post-primary school. 'Homework' at its most basic level can be defined as 'any work or activities which pupils are asked to do outside school time, either on their own or with parents or carers' (Kidwell, 2004, p.6). Homework can also be defined as a form of assessment that is used by teachers as 'the process of generating, gathering, recording, interpreting, using and reporting evidence of learning in individuals, groups or systems...' which 'provides information about progress in learning' (NCCA, 2019).

While the overarching theme was homework, the researcher was also concerned with how homework impacted student learning. As previously mentioned, homework can be described as a form of assessment. Assessment of learning and assessment for learning (AFL) were both researched in relation to this. Assessment of learning is defined as 'summative, intended to certify learning and report to parents and students about their progress in school' (Earl, 2013, p.29). Assessment for learning is defined as 'the identification of clear Learning Outcomes which describe what a learner should know, understand and be able to do as a result of learning and Success Criteria which indicate to both the student and teacher if the Learning Outcomes have been achieved to the best of the student's ability' (PDST, 2019). Homework, due to its regular nature, can be classed as formative assessment because; 'The purpose of formative assessment is to provide feedback on an ongoing basis to improve student learning' (Burke, 2010, p.3). Homework is assigned on a regular basis for the majority of post-primary school students. Teachers can use homework to assess if students have understood material that was covered in class, 'research homework can support implementation of AFL' (Newby & Winterbottom, 2011, p.275-290). Research homework has become a common type of homework for post-primary school students in Ireland since Junior Cycle reform as it aims to allow a more 'rounded assessment' (DES, 2015, p.7).

In 2015 the Department of Education and Skills (DES), Ireland, introduced a new framework called the 'Junior Cycle' to replace the 'Junior Certificate'. The most significant change from the Junior Certificate was the manner of how students were being assessed; a 'dual approach to assessment' was introduced (Department of Education and Skills, 2015, p.7). It is hoped that teachers will assign work for students in line with this change to allow for an 'appropriate balance between preparing students for examinations and also facilitating creative thinking, engaged

learning and better outcomes for students' (Department of Education and Skills, 2015, p.35). The idea of assigning homework to facilitate this balance is in line with the opinions of many advocates for homework, who suggest that moving towards individual homework or homework that is assigned based on the students' needs is 'Effective homework' and 'benefits students by taking into account their individual differences' (Sallee & Rigler, 2008, p. 46-51).

The research highlighted some benefits and limitations of homework for student learning. The benefits of homework which emerged from this research included both academic and social benefits. According to Cooper the effects of homework included 'Better retention of factual knowledge, Increased understanding...Learning encouraged during leisure time, Improved attitude towards school, Better study habits and skills, Greater self-direction, Greater self-discipline...more independent problem solving' (1994, p1-2). In 2019, Dawson concurred that homework helps children develop skills such as time management, problem solving and organisation which will 'contribute to effective functioning in the adult world of work and families' (Dawson, 2019).

While the limitations of homework include 'Stress for Children', 'Less time for other activities' and 'Family Conflict' they did not directly relate to the academic progress of a child (Kohn, 2006). Instead, the limitations identified were in relation to leisure time for children, where they could develop skills through activities (Cooper & Valentine, 2010). Similarly, Bennett and Kalish argue that homework 'robs children of the sleep, play, and exercise time they need for proper physical, emotional, and neurological development, and it is a hidden cause of the childhood obesity epidemic, creating a nation of 'homework potatoes' (2007, p.91). These limitations, while not directly related to student learning within the classroom, can affect student learning outside of the classroom.

## **METHODOLOGY**

For this research it was imperative to gain perspectives of post-primary school teachers who were currently teaching in Irish classrooms. Taking a qualitative approach to research, this study used interviews to examine current post-primary school teachers' rationale for assigning homework. A qualitative method was deemed most suitable for this research project because interviews allow the researcher to 'explore their (respondents) perspective on a particular idea, programme or situation' (Boyce & Neale, 2006). This approach had many advantages in this research because it allowed the researcher control over questioning and gave them time to explore opinions of participants in more depth where needed (Creswell, 2009). The researcher decided to conduct semi-structured face-to-face interviews. Interviews used open ended questions to allow participants to

offer their own opinions and experiences. Open ended questions were also used so as to not constrain participant's responses (Shelly & Rosenbaltt, 2010).

Six teachers from three different geographical areas in Ireland were interviewed. The researcher wanted the perspective of experienced teachers so all participants had a minimum of 5 years teaching experience in a post-primary setting and participants were teaching a variety of subjects. Each interview lasted approximately twenty minutes and was audio recorded. Each interview followed the same schedule to allow for consistency and validity. The interview schedule included student learning, types of homework participants assigned, and feedback participants gave on homework completed. After the interview, the audio recordings were transcribed so they could be accurately analysed by the researcher and information could be gathered. Thematic analysis was used to understand the data collected in these interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Dawson (2002) thematic analysis is 'inductive, that is, the themes emerge from the data and are not imposed upon it by the researcher (p.115).

Participant	Role	Subjects	Number of Years Teaching
Participant 1	Teacher	Business Studies, TY Enterprise, LCVP.	12 Years
Participant 2	Teacher	English, Irish, S.P.H.E, C.S.P.E.	20 Years
Participant 3	Teacher	Home Economics, Irish, Learning Support, Resource.	8 Years
Participant 4	Teacher	Home Economics, Business Studies, Link modules.	6 Years
Participant 5	Teacher	Science, Biology, Maths	25 years
Participant 6	Teacher	Irish, English	30 years

Table 1: Profile of Participants Interviewed

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data collected from the six semi-structured face to face interviews carried out with post-primary school teachers was interpreted using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Emergent recurring themes were identified, and a comparative method was used to analyse these themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The following themes are some of the most prominent throughout the data analysis process;

1. Homework is an important part of student learning.

2. Feedback on Completed Homework.
3. The effect of the Junior Cycle reform on homework.

#### HOMEWORK IS AN IMPORTANT PART OF STUDENT LEARNING

All six participants agreed that homework contributes to students learning. Participant 5 acknowledged that homework can be used as a reinforcement tool, with participant 3 believing it is important for students to go back over material they have covered to consolidate their learning. This, however, is in contrast to Dr David Carey's ideology, who stated in an article published by The Irish Times 'The research seems to indicate it [homework] doesn't really consolidate learning' (McMahon, 2018). While all participants agreed that homework contributes to student learning, they all indicated that the homework given must have a clear purpose. The consensus among participants was that there is no benefit to assigning homework as a task that needs to be completed. Participant 2 explained that when assigning homework there should be a goal in mind. This is consistent with Rademacher, Deshler, Schumaker and Lenz (1998) who argue that teachers need to consider the purpose of the homework they are assigning.

Four out of six participants agreed that homework can help students develop and improve a variety of skills. Participant 6 said that homework helps students to '*practice their skills, their writing skills, the skills that they require along with investigating skills*'. Similarly, participant 2 states '*I would say it's about making sure that they build consistent habits that they are working consistently, that they are constantly improving and learning and developing their skills*'. Other skills identified by participants 1, 2, 3 and 6 include the ability to speak in front of a group, reflecting on one's work, technological skills and self-editing. These findings reiterate the findings of Cooper (1994), Dawson (2019) and Cooper & Valentine (2010) that homework can aid student's development of lifelong skills.

#### FEEDBACK ON COMPLETED HOMEWORK

Every participant that was interviewed believed that feedback on homework is a core component of setting homework tasks. Participant 3 stated that '*I think your feedback itself has to be effective, as in when you are correcting homework you can't just give it a tick*'. Participant 5 concurs that '*in theory if they are actually wanting to learn and keep track of their own progress they should be getting the feedback that should be informing them*.' These findings are consistent with the Framework for Junior Cycle, 2015 that was published by the DES which stated that 'the greatest

benefits for students' learning occur when teachers provide effective feedback to students that helps them to understand how their learning can be improved' (DES, 2015, p.35).

Participants in this study also unanimously agreed that feedback on homework should be given *'as soon as possible'* (Participant 6) after the task has been completed. Participants 2, 3, and 4 believed that feedback on completed homework should be given back within 2-3 days, *'if not the next day I would always try to have them back within two or three days as I do think if it goes on too long that they have nearly forgotten what they were doing'* (Participant 2). Similarly, participant 3 stated that *'feedback given within that specific time has helped them because they are actually involved in the learning process'*. While participants 1, 5 and 6 did agree feedback should be given as soon as possible they also commented that the length of time it took to give feedback was contingent on the type of task that was being corrected, *'it depends on the nature of the work, if it's something like project work they are very tolerant because they have invested a great deal in it, if you can wait a week before you give it back they are okay with that, they will remember what they did'* (Participant 5).

All participants in this study agreed that effective feedback can aid student learning if it is given back in a timely fashion. Participant 6 indicates that *'if you do give them feedback pretty much straight away that they will benefit from it because they see well that homework was worthwhile'*. Participants 1, 4 and 5 concur that feedback on homework can be used as a guide for students to identify the mistakes that they are making *'I'll mark what ones they need to improve on and then bring them up in the next class and go through them'* (participant 4). This concurs with the advice given in the Framework for Junior Cycle 2015 (DES, 2015). Overall participants felt that students benefit from timely feedback on homework as they remember what they have done, and the feedback is relevant to what they are learning at that time. In conclusion participants felt that time taken to correct homework and give feedback should be timely but also reflective of the time and effort taken by students to complete.

#### THE EFFECT OF JUNIOR CYCLE REFORM ON HOMEWORK

Five out of six participants cited that the reform of the Junior Cycle as having an impact on the type of homework teachers are now assigning to students. Participants noted that research homework was becoming more beneficial for student learning with the recent changes to the assessment process at Junior Cycle level. The new Framework will allow for a more *'rounded assessment of the education of each young person'* (DES, 2015). This will provide teachers with an opportunity to understand each student's level of progress and learning. When asked about Junior Cycle and its

impact on homework, participant 1 stated that; *'The new aim of the Junior Cycle is to get away from rote learning and I think research homework is becoming more important for the juniors particularly'*, while participant 6 said *'with the new Junior Cert now you have a lot of research skills, independent learning so you're approaching things slightly differently'*.

The data indicate that participants believe that a more self-directed style of learning can be beneficial to students learning, building on and creating new skills. One example included oral presentations. Three participants teach a language and noted that oral presentations have become an important part of how students are assessed in the current curriculum, *'the new Junior Cert is more independent learning, teaching them different types of skills, research, investigation, breaking tasks down, also there is a lot more presentation work and I suppose building up their confidence in their communication skills'* (Participant 6). Participant 2 agrees *'at Junior Cert up to now it would have been more written based work or learning based work whereas now there is that oral element to it'*. This is all concurrent with Dawson, 2019, who talks about homework helping students develop skills for life as an adult.

## CONCLUSION

This research aimed to explore post-primary teachers' perspectives on the benefits of homework for student learning'. This research found that homework contributes to student learning despite its limitations (Bennett & Kalish, 2007). Feedback is necessary to ensuring that homework is effective for student learning. This study has made the researcher aware, as a future practicing post-primary school teacher, of areas of potential change in the assignment of homework and the need for improvement of feedback on homework. This research will help the researcher identify any future gaps in homework practices. This study ignited the researcher's awareness of the benefits of homework as it creates a strong link between home and school for student learning.

This research was carried out using a limited number of participants, six qualified post-primary school teachers who teach a variety of subjects in different schools. Due to the limited number of participants in this research it is not possible to relate this to the whole population as it is not a true representation of all teachers in post-primary schools in Ireland. Despite the limitations of this study the following are some recommendations the researcher proposes based on the findings. These include:

1. The researcher recommends that professional development be made available to post-primary school teachers on how to effectively provide students with feedback on work that they have completed in order to benefit their learning.

2. Continuous professional development is also recommended by the researcher for best practices relating to the designing and assigning of homework in line with Junior Cycle reform aims for a more rounded assessment of students (DES, 2015).

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## Exploring Prison Educators' Perspectives on what Strategies they deem Effective when Supporting Prisoners as Learners

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**KEYWORDS:** Prison, andragogy, educator perspectives, prior knowledge, teaching & learning

### INTRODUCTION

Prisons have supported prisoners through education for the last two hundred years (Morin, 1981). The number of Irish prisoners accessing education during their sentence is rising. Both the purpose of education and how prisoners are taught has changed dramatically over time (Gehring & Eggleston, 2007), from a purpose based on confinement and punishment to one based on the rehabilitation of inmates (Crewe, 2012). Many factors can impact teaching and learning in Irish prisons and how prisoners are supported through education. Factors like sentencing, substance abuse and the prior knowledge of each prisoner plays a huge role in how the prison population are supported through teaching and learning (Costelloe & Warner, 2008). This article is part of a larger study that explored the strategies' educators use to support prisoners as learners, and the context-specific considerations that influence teaching and learning in Irish prisons.

This topic was chosen out of personal interest in prison education. Having completed a placement in a large Irish prison, the researcher wanted to explore this area of education in more depth. It is an underrepresented area of education which the researcher felt deserved attention. The overall aim of the study was to examine prison educators' perspectives on prison

education and what teaching strategies they use and deem effective when supporting prisoners as learners. In particular, the study examined teaching and learning in prisons through an extensive literature review, investigating the impact the physical environment of a prison has on supporting prisoners, to examine educators' experiences teaching in Irish prisons and what strategies they use to support inmates as learners.

## CONTEXT

It wasn't until 1950 when prison education was documented (Carrigan, 2013). Prison education is a unique form of education with many context-specific factors that the literature fails to highlight, this study sought to gain an insight into how these context-specific considerations impact on the teaching and learning within Irish prisons. This research study gives an insight into the Irish prison curriculum and policies surrounding prison education both nationally and internationally. The purpose of prison education and education within prisons has changed greatly over time and with that came a number of curriculum and policy changes also (O'Donnell, 2013). From a change in purpose of what was once based on confinement and punishment of prisoners to one based on the rehabilitation of inmates (Crewe, 2012), both the curriculum and policies have changed and adapted to facilitate significant shift in purpose over the years.

In Ireland, the specific origin of prison education is uncertain. Gehring and Eggleston (2007) suggest an origin dating back to the early 1920s but Osborough (1975) would argue that the first signs of education in prisons can date back to as far as 1906 in what he describes as Irish Borstals. A borstal was an institution for young offenders, which began in England and made its way to Ireland in 1906. During this time the curriculum was based on punishment and policies meant that education within Irish prisons was compulsory (Behan, 2008). This paper highlights empirical data surrounding prison education and how Irish prisoners are supported as learners from seminal texts to anecdotes by prison educators. This research will add to the already existing body of knowledge surrounding prison education giving an in-depth insight into the Irish prison system highlighting the importance of prison educators and their role in supporting prisoners as learners. It became clear to the researcher that there is limited empirical data available surrounding Irish educators' views and opinions on how best to support prisoners as learners. Although research has been conducted on prison education, it does not focus on what methods educators deem as being most effective when supporting prisoners through education (Warner, 2002).

## METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was taken as this study seeks to understand prison educators' perspectives on how to support inmates as learners in the form of a basic interpretivist study. This research is grounded in an interpretivist or social constructivist paradigm as it is a small - scale study and the research seeks to gain an understanding into prison education. Purposeful sampling also known as criterion sampling was used (Merriam, 2009). The nature of the exploratory research question guiding this project meant that participants were asked to give a rationale for strategies they use when supporting prisoners as learners, it was decided that semi-structured interviews would be the best approach for acquiring data. According to Kvale (2007) interviews are flexible research tools which can be used to gather a range of different types of information and data including, views, opinions, factual data and personal narratives which makes them useful as a means of data collection especially for this research as it seeks to gain an understanding into prison education, encouraging insightful views as well as factual data.

Meetings with seven prison educators were arranged in their organisation where the semi-structured interviews took place and if that was not possible interviews were conducted over the phone. Before each interview was conducted the participants were made aware of their rights and a consent form was signed. All interviews were recorded on a voice recording app on a mobile phone and were stored on the researcher's password secured laptop, Once the interviews were conducted, the transcription process began. Documents, names of participants and organisations were all anonymised during this process. Each interview lasted around 30 minutes. Many open-ended questions were used to encourage participants to talk and give their views as well as factual data. Presumptions and the researcher's bias about the topic were not disclosed within the interview process.

Once the interviews and transcribing process was complete, data analysis began. Data analysis began with careful reading of the seven transcripts. Ideas and concepts that appeared to be relevant were then written down to try and make links and to see if they could be grouped together in any way. This process is known as the defragmenting of the text to try and establish categories (O'Leary, 2014).

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine strategies and methods used by educators to support prisoners as learners. Five clear themes emerged from the interviews; the purpose of prison education, prison pedagogy, the role of the educator, the physical environment and context-specific

considerations. As this is a snapshot article presenting key findings from a larger dissertation, this article will explore just one of the themes outlined here; context-specific considerations drawing on empirical data from the prison educators.

## CONTEXT-SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

### SENTENCING

There are a number of external factors that are out of the control of prison educators which effects how they can support the prison population as learners, one of which being sentencing. Participant C explains how the inmates in their prison are offered a *“broad curriculum like they can have access to many different subjects and opportunities”* but this is not the case for everyone. Participant A highlights the fact that *“we are probably one of the only schools in Ireland where you could have someone for over fifteen years in your class”*. Participant E explains how she had a student for a number of years in her class, *“he was in my class for 10 years that’s another thing actually you could have the same student for ten plus years, that is something which is very unique to prison education”*. The broad-based curriculum can become very narrow for someone attending prison education for fifteen or more years. *“The opportunities become very limiting for someone you’ve had for over ten years”* explains participant G. *“The curriculum for somebody like that becomes very narrow because like after nine, ten years what else can they do? They started at the bottom and there’s nothing more they can do at the top”* outlines participant A, who feels like the curriculum is actually quite restricted for someone serving a life sentence. The literature sees prison education as offering a wide curriculum to inmates (Burnett & Maruna, 2006) but they fail to mention how limiting it can be for *“lifers”* who are trying to be supported as learners.

Another issue raised with sentencing in regard to teaching and learning for inmates was around the concept of being stuck to a time – bound curriculum. Due to sentencing, a prisoner might have to serve two years or ten, this in turn affects what courses they can do and how they can be supported through education. Participant D discusses how they support prisoners around this concept of a time – bound curriculum, *“you have to try and deliver as much education to them and give them as many opportunities based around how long you have them for really”*. The length of a prisoners’ sentence is out of control of the educator (Hughes, 2009) but can have a significant impact on their daily teaching and learning work.

### SUBSTANCE ABUSE

The level of drug use within prisons is something which can cause challenges for educators when supporting inmates as learners. The high levels of drug usage are something unique to prison

education. The use of drugs in Irish prisons is a massive problem with over 70% of the prison population having drug addiction problems (Reilly, 2008). Participant B explains that often inmates can be *“more chaotic with drug use”*. Participant D outlines that *“no matter what any of us do, drugs always get into the prison, it’s a huge problem”*. Reilly (2008) highlighted in his report, that the use of drugs in Irish prisons is high regardless of how hard staff work to reduce the internal drug flow.

Participant A gives a brief insight into the use of drugs at her workplace, *“we have a medical unit which is a place they are sent to, to begin a detoxing programme for drug use”*. *“Education is provided in the unit and often the lads can be quite erratic and distracted over there”* explains participant A. Participant G highlights that *“they have grown up with addiction problems and when they come in here it’s no different, trying to teach them while they are high can prove very difficult.”* Drug use is a huge problem when educating prisoners as they can be unpredictable, erratic, uncooperative and distracted (Warner & Costelloe, 2008). Participant E recognises that *“their addiction isn’t their fault, so we still give them the same opportunity and chance to gain an education and hopefully beat their addiction.”* It is obvious that drug use is a major factor in prison education, but as participant E said regardless of drug use, prisoners are still given the upmost support to by all of the educators to gain an education.

#### THE PRISONER’S PRIOR KNOWLEDGE

Along with sentencing and substance abuse, the prisoner's prior knowledge and educational experiences need to be taken into account when supporting the prison population as learners. All interviewees suggested that respecting prisoner's prior knowledge is a crucial element of supporting them as learners. Participant G outlines that *“they come with a lot of knowledge, it might not be academic knowledge, but they are very intelligent and that type of knowledge needs to be acknowledged as well.”* Participant B explains that *“it’s about identifying the existing skills and go from there.”* Hughes (2009) suggests that criminals can be very ego – centric so it is important to acknowledge and appreciate their prior experiences and knowledge.

Their prior knowledge might include having little or no education, having done their Leaving Cert or even going to college. Unfortunately, most of the Irish prison population have low or poor literacy levels. Participant F highlights that *“almost everybody we work with would have a literacy issue.”* Participant C explains how *“I bring in literacy wherever I can to try and improve the such low levels they have.”* All participants identified literacy issues within the prisons they work in. This has been an ongoing issue for a number of years. Morgan and Kett (2003), state that over 53% of the Irish prison population were on literacy level one or less regarding the National Literacy Levels. This can prove a difficulty when supporting prisoners as learners.

As stated above, prisoners could have low literacy levels or have sat their Leaving Cert and these two students could be in the same class so when educating the inmates educators need to be aware of the mixed ability levels within their classes. Participant D acknowledges these differences, *“in any given class you have vastly different educational needs and prior knowledge, some lads can’t read or write.”* Participant E echoes this by saying that *“you will get all mixed abilities in your class from those who are unable to read, to a person who has done their Leaving, this is hard but both have to be accommodated for.”* Participant C explains how this level of mixed ability is accommodated for, *“well I basically plan for each individual in each lesson because they are all at different stages in their learning, so differentiation is central to my teaching and to supporting them.”* A level of differentiation is used to support prisoners through their learning in a mixed ability class. Each group of students has a wide range of abilities from learners who have sat their Leaving Certificate to those who cannot read or write (Warner & Costelloe, 2008). Differentiation is a big element of prison education, catering to all the needs of the learners (Coyle, 2008). The prisoner's prior knowledge is something which needs to be acknowledged and understood when supporting them as learners within the classroom. Low literacy levels and mixed ability classes need to be accounted for when educating Irish inmates.

Prison educators work in an environment in which there are context specific considerations which influence how educators approach teaching and learning: sentencing, substance abuse and prisoners' prior knowledge. These considerations are unique to prison education and educators must be flexible and adaptable professionals to support prisoners as learners.

## CONCLUSION

Sentencing, substance abuse and the prisoner's prior knowledge as well as the physical environment need to be taken into account when educating prisoners. All participants explicitly mentioned the impact context specific considerations have on supporting inmates as learners. Prison education is a unique form of education which needs to be explored and this study will add to the already existing body of literature, highlighting educators' views on what strategies they deem effective and how prepared they feel supporting prisoners as learners. Five interviews had to be conducted over the phone due to the location of Irish prisons, this made the process of transcribing more difficult. This research is a small qualitative study so the data being analysed could be interpreted differently by different people and in turn cannot be generalised.

The researcher recommends that further research surrounding the educators' perspectives should be carried out. This study focused on the opinions of educators on what methods they deem effective, it would be recommended that prisoners voices are heard, and further research be

conducted focusing on prisoners' views on education, what strategies works best for them when being supported as a learner. As well as this, a comparative study should be conducted in the future comparing the impacts of the physical environment in different Irish prisons as according to the findings presented, some prisons have access to different resources. A final recommendation from the researcher would be to re-introduce direct training for educators working in the prison system. Training for future prison educators and even current ones would be of huge benefit to both educators and prisoners. This article has shone a light into prison education in Ireland and highlighted the methods educators deem effective when supporting prisoners as learners in a physical environment, an environment described by participant A as “a rose in a bed of thorns”.

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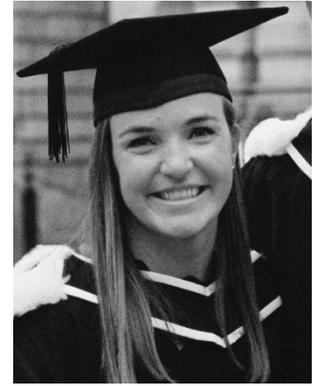
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## Investigating the Effect of Games on the Learning Experience in the Science Classroom

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Clodagh is a science and biology teacher. In 2018 she completed a general science degree, specialising in physiology in Trinity College Dublin, and then completed a professional master's in education in Trinity and qualified as a secondary school teacher. Clodagh is interested in getting students excited about science and learning about themselves and the world around them through the eyes of science. She believes that education should be engaging, collaborative and that it can be fun, and has a keen interest in games in education to promote a more positive and effective learning environment.

**KEYWORDS:** Gamification, game-based learning, science classroom, secondary education.

### INTRODUCTION

Students often lose interest in science when they get to post-primary school (Murphy, Mullaghy, & D'Arcy, 2016) and games can be useful in engaging and motivating students. This article is part of a larger study which aimed to investigate the use of games as a pedagogical tool; specifically, to see if games can promote a more effective learning environment than more traditional teaching methodologies in the science classroom. There are two terms frequently used in relation to using games as a pedagogical tool; game-based learning and educational gamification. Game-based learning is a teaching method where students gain and apply knowledge through game play, whereas gamification of education is the application of game elements in learning to motivate students (Al-Azawi, Al-Faliti & Al-Blushi, 2016). These terms will be used as a lens to investigate the effect of games on learning.

The objective of this research was to find out if games have an effect on student engagement levels, and also what impact games have on the achievement of learning outcomes, particularly in science. These objectives led to the formulation of the research questions. The research questions that were investigated are:

1. How do active learning methodologies such as games affect student engagement in science?
2. What impact does game-based learning or gamification have on the achievement of learning outcomes in science?

The methodological approach taken was that of a systematic literature review. Research papers were found using the education database Education Resource Information Centre (ERIC), and were reviewed and analysed in relation to the research questions. These papers were all peer reviewed research articles that implemented a game intervention in the science classroom internationally.

## CONTEXT

In a speech to the *Royal Society of Arts* in London in 2008, Ken Robinson, the world-renowned educationalist, discussed the need to change the paradigm of education. In this speech, he discussed how the current education system that we have was thought of and built for an entirely different age. He then went on to argue that our students are living in the most intensively stimulating period of time on earth. Students are constantly bombarded with highly stimulating technologies. It must come as no surprise then that students can find it difficult to concentrate in class when their attention is constantly being diverted or re-directed. Robinson went on in this speech to suggest that lessons need to come alive to compete with outside distractions to get our students' attention (*Changing Education Paradigms: Sir Ken Robinson, 2008*). One way to do this is by using games in the classroom.

Games have been used in education for many years as a way to entice and engage learning. Educational games should combine elements of fun with educational concepts to promote a positive learning environment (Al-Azawi et al., 2016). Nowadays games play a large role in young peoples' lives, especially digital games (Chang, Chen & Yeh, 2016\*). It is thought that the constant use of more traditional teaching methods which result in more passive learning is not meeting the needs of our ever-evolving times (Broadfoot, 2000).

The use of games can help to promote a positive learning environment which should help promote better learning outcomes. Games or game elements can be useful for motivating students to learn as well as providing a common experience base for the students. They also can allow for

ideas or concepts that can be complicated or abstract to be demonstrated (Chow, Howard & Lambe, 2008). This can be particularly prevalent in the science classroom as students can at times struggle to conceptualise different ideas in science due to the abstract nature of it (Lay & Osman 2018\*).

There are different ways to incorporate games into education, such as game-based learning and educational gamification. Game-based learning uses games to enhance the learning process (Kim, Park & Baek, 2009) and gamification uses game elements such as points or levels to make the learning experience more game-like (Çeker & Özdamlı, 2017).

The more traditional method of teaching where teachers talk and students passively absorb information can seem quite dull in today's fast paced society. Csikszentmihalyi is a psychologist who coined the concept of 'flow'. Flow is experienced when a person is willing to undertake an activity for its own sake with little worry or concern for what they will get out of the activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). This experience of flow is an optimal state of immersed concentration. To attain flow a task must pose enough of a challenge for students depending on the skill level that they have. If the task is too easy for their skill level it could cause boredom, and if the task is too difficult it could cause anxiety. Distraction and outside stimuli can have a negative impact on this experience of flow. The intrinsic satisfaction of flow is not always provided by passive, teacher led learning but could be facilitated by student-centred active learning (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009).

Active learning is a term that describes a broad range of models of instruction. In basic terms, active learning is where students are held responsible for their own learning. Some examples of active learning methodologies are experiential learning, problem-based learning, participative learning and co-operative learning (Michel, Carter & Varela, 2009). With a student-centred approach students can build a better capacity for solving problems and reasoning. When a student finds the solution by themselves, even with guidance, it is likely to be more meaningful and the student is more likely to remember it than if they were a passive recipient of the knowledge (Gillies & Haynes, 2010).

While theory would suggest that games should be useful in helping students to achieve better learning outcomes, the aim of this research was to investigate and see if research finds that games affect engagement in science classrooms and does this in course have an effect on the achievement of learning outcomes in the science classroom.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology chosen for this thesis is that of a systematic literature review. The database used to search for literature in this systematic review was Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC). Search terms were selected and put into this database. A protocol was carried out to select suitable papers in relation to the research questions.

A systematic literature review can be defined as “a review of a clearly formulated question that uses systematic and explicit methods to identify, select, and critically appraise relevant research, and to collect and analyse data from the studies that are included in the review” (“Glossary | Cochrane Community”, 2020). A systematic review starts with a research question, then identifies all relevant studies, and finally, using a scientific methodology, summarises the results (O’Brien & McGuckin, 2016).

The overall aim of the systematic review is to give coherent targeted answers to specific questions. The systematic review has particular methods so that reliable and valid results can be produced (Hemsley-Brown & Sharp, 2003). These methods help in making sense of large bodies of information (O’Brien & McGuckin 2016). The systematic review approach does this by analysing evidence from empirical studies that are of a high standard and have appropriate design (Hemsley-Brown & Sharp, 2003). The protocol for selecting suitable papers to analyse are listed below:

- Step one: Input search terms to assigned Database
- Step two: Apply inclusion and exclusion criteria
- Step three: Read titles and abstracts retaining any articles that are relevant to the research.
- Step four: Make preliminary selections by re-reading abstracts, scanning content and retaining articles that are of most relevance to research questions
- Step five: Final selection of documents for critical analysis.

To select the final papers, the finalised inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied.

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
All research should be peer reviewed	No use of a pre and post test
Game intervention implemented	
Focused on science education	No control or comparison groups
Focused in secondary school settings	

Table 1: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Using this criterion there were five papers chosen to be further analysed. These five papers all gathered data or discussed areas surrounding the effect the games had on the level of engagement of students as well as the learning outcomes.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Using the protocol and the inclusion and exclusion criteria set out in table, five papers were chosen for an in-depth analysis. These papers were all peer reviewed and involved a classroom intervention of a game (Bunch, Robinson, Edwards & Antonenko, 2014\*; Chang, Chen & Yeh, 2016\*; Khan, Ahmad & Malik, 2017\*; Lay & Osman 2018\*; Ye, Hsiao & Sun, 2018\*). These papers that were included in the analysis were signified with an Asterix. These papers were then analysed to answer the research questions.

### RESEARCH QUESTION ONE: “HOW DO ACTIVE LEARNING METHODOLOGIES SUCH AS GAMES AFFECT STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN SCIENCE?”

Student engagement was measured in a wide variety of different ways. Out of the five papers included in this analysis, four gathered and analysed data directly related to student engagement (Chang, Chen & Yeh, 2016\*; Khan, Ahmad & Malik, 2017\*; Lay & Osman 2018\*; Ye, Hsiao & Sun, 2018\*). One of the studies did not measure the engagement of students directly but did stress the importance of games in engaging students in science (Bunch, Robinson, Edwards & Antonenko, 2014\*). Out of the four papers which did measure the students’ engagement in class and outside of class in the topic of interest, three papers found that there was an increase in engagement in the students who took part in the game intervention compared to students who had more traditional teacher-led class.

It is thought that active learning through game-based learning or gamification induces increased levels of engagement from students. Games are inherently interactive and this works well in grabbing and holding students’ attention. Interactivity is a game element that was used by all the game interventions in the studies included in this analysis. In one paper, boys had a lower level of engagement than girls in the intervention group and it is thought that the reason for the lower engagement levels in the boys is that the game was not interactive enough (Khan, Ahmad & Malik, 2017\*).

The games used in these studies often immersed students in real life situations (Bunch, Robinson, Edwards & Antonenko, 2014\*; Khan, Ahmad & Malik, 2017\*; Lay & Osman 2018\*). This allowed students to make connections in science with everyday life. This can help students to

visualise different situations and concepts. This immersion can help to clear up any misconceptions that students may have due to the abstract nature of certain topics in science. Students can get frustrated and disengaged when they find they cannot visualise a certain topic. By immersing students in a topic or situation using a game this frustration can be eased and engagement increased.

One aspect of games that was seen to increase student engagement was the entertainment factor of games. Many of the games used in the studies were fun to play and enticed students to play voluntarily. Students found enjoyment from playing the games and from this emotional engagement was seen to increase (Khan, Ahmad & Malik, 2017\*). It has been pointed out that learning should not merely be the acquisition of knowledge but it should also be fun so that students participate voluntarily (Lay & Osman 2018\*; Ye, Hsiao & Sun, 2018\*). It is important to note however that engagement is only part of the learning experience and that the level of achievement of learning outcomes also needs to be explored.

#### RESEARCH QUESTION TWO: WHAT IMPACT DOES GAME-BASED LEARNING OR GAMIFICATION HAVE ON THE ACHIEVEMENT OF LEARNING OUTCOMES IN SCIENCE?

In the papers included in this analysis only two of the studies saw an improvement in student learning outcomes in students who took part in the game intervention compared to those who participated in more conventional teacher-led learning (Lay & Osman 2018\*; Ye, Hsiao & Sun, 2018\*). In the other three papers there was no significant difference between groups in their achievement of the learning outcomes (Bunch, Robinson, Edwards & Antonenko, 2014\*; Chang, Chen & Yeh, 2016\*; Khan, Ahmad & Malik, 2017\*), in these studies both the intervention and control group achieved the learning outcomes to similar levels.

In all of these studies the interventions were carried out in a single school. In each of these studies the intervention groups had slightly higher average scores, but not enough to reach a statistical significance. It is possible that the numbers of students that they were examining was not big enough to reach a statistical significance. If each of the interventions were carried out in multiple schools or over a longer period of time this may have resulted in different outcomes.

It was noted that while students in the game intervention groups did not improve in the achievement of learning goals, they also did not diminish the level of achievement the student reached compared to those who had more conventional teaching (Bunch, Robinson, Edwards & Antonenko, 2014\*; Khan, Ahmad & Malik, 2017\*). Games were found to be equally as effective as traditional teaching in terms of reaching learning outcomes. It was thus recommended that

games should be used in the classroom without fear that they will diminish learning (Bunch, Robinson, Edwards & Antonenko, 2014\*).

This means that while they did not improve on the learning outcomes compared to the control group, the interventions still had beneficial components that helped the students to reach the learning goals. The beneficial components of these interventions that were commonly discussed are motivation due to game elements, collaborative learning, learning by inquiry and the repeated mastery that games allow. Games, when implemented properly can have the effect of increasing students' motivation to do work. There are aspects of games that can make students want to achieve.

Two of the studies that showed improvements in learning outcomes in their intervention groups compared to the control groups used collaborative learning in their interventions either directly through the game play or through group discussion after the game play (Lay & Osman 2018\*; Ye, Hsiao & Sun, 2018\*). It is suggested that peer learning can promote better understandings and clear up misconceptions. Peers can input ideas that cause cognitive conflict and this can lead to existing ideas being reconstructed and thus a deeper level of understanding (Lay & Osman 2018\*).

Students acting as a game designer promotes higher order thinking with creating being on the top of Bloom's Taxonomy. This would aid in promoting better learning outcomes as the higher you go in blooms taxonomy the deeper the level of understanding (Plass, Homer & Kinzer, 2015). Overall games can be seen to improve students' engagement in science while also maintaining the same level of achievement of learning outcomes that can be seen with more conventional teaching methods.

## CONCLUSION

In the general literature the idea that active learning may be more beneficial than passive learning was discussed as well as the psychology behind using games in education and the different ways in which games are used in education. A general literature review led to the formulation of the two research questions. Five papers were chosen to be analysed with the two research questions in mind.

The impact that games have on students' engagement levels was generally positive. The papers showed that, for the most part students in the game intervention groups were more enthusiastic about taking part in the lessons compared to the control groups. (Chang, Chen & Yeh, 2016\*; Khan, Ahmad & Malik, 2017\*; Lay & Osman 2018\*; Ye, Hsiao & Sun, 2018\*) The one paper that did not show an increase in student engagement stated that this was due to the game

being too easy and so students quickly became disinterested (Chang, Chen & Yeh, 2016\*). The common reasons for the increase seen in engagement levels across the board was the interactivity of game, the entertainment that games can provide and the student-centred nature of the interventions. The games enhance the students experience of flow, where they participate in the task voluntarily, but only if it is giving the students enough of a challenge (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009).

While games were generally seen to increase engagement levels, the next research question was seeking to find out if students' level of achievement of the learning outcomes would be affected by the use of games or game elements. One might think that an increase in engagement levels would ultimately lead to an increase in the level of achievement in the learning outcomes, but this was not always the case. In the five papers included in the analysis, only two of them saw an improvement in the learning outcomes of the students who were part of the intervention group compared to the control group (Lay & Osman 2018\*; Ye, Hsiao & Sun, 2018). It was noted in the other three papers however that there was no significant difference in the learning outcomes between the intervention and control groups (Bunchet al., 2014\*; Chang et al., 2016\*; Khan, Ahmad & Malik, 2017\*). This means that the use of games was just as effective as the more conventional teaching methods in terms of reaching the learning goals. There were several suggestions in the papers as how games aid student to reach these learning goals. Some of the common reasons given in the papers were increased motivation due to game elements, collaborative learning, learning by inquiry and the repeated mastery that games allow.

In general, the papers were positive about the use of games in the classroom and encouraged teachers to utilise games in their practise. The games had beneficial effects on engagement levels when implemented properly. They also did not diminish the quality of learning that took place.

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## Irish Primary Teachers' use of Social Media in Visual Arts Education

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Amy Lawrence qualified as a primary school teacher from The Church of Ireland College of Education in 2013 and she currently teaches in South Dublin. Amy has had a life-long interest in art, and she enjoys making art in her spare time. Having chosen Visual Art as the topic for her undergraduate dissertation, as well as undergoing regular professional development in teaching Visual Art, Amy then decided to pursue postgraduate study in this area. She completed her Master of Education Studies (Visual Arts) in Marino Institute of Education in 2020. Amy noticed an increase of teacher and education accounts on social media in recent years and this was the starting point for the research project she completed for her master's degree.

**KEYWORDS:** Social Media, Visual Arts, Pinterest, Instagram, Art Education

### INTRODUCTION

Social media has become an integral part of modern life. In recent years, primary teachers' use of technology has evolved. There has been an increase in the number of teachers using social media to communicate with other professionals and search for lesson ideas and resources (Carpenter, Cassady & Monti, 2018; Huber & Bates, 2016; Schroeder, Curcio & Lundgren, 2019).

This article will provide an overview of a broader Master's dissertation study consisting of 20,000 words that examined the use of social media by Irish primary teachers. The study focused on how teachers' social media use affected their teaching of the Visual arts curriculum, by asking the research question, '*How are Irish primary teachers using social media to influence their visual arts education practice?*' There has been no previous research originating from Ireland that addresses this issue. This article will discuss how primary teachers in Ireland use social media for

professional reasons and which social media platforms are most widely used. This article will also discuss teachers' reasons for using social media in their teaching.

## CONTEXT

In a 2005 Department of Education report, *'An Evaluation of Curriculum Implementation in Primary Schools,'* the implementation of the 1999 Visual Arts curriculum was reviewed. It was stated that that class sizes, inadequate classroom space and time limitations were the greatest challenges for Irish primary teachers. It was also noted that teachers spent more time teaching particular strands, such as drawing and paint and colour than they did the other strands. Inspectors noted in the report that there was some evidence of teachers over-relying on teacher-directed activities. (DES, 2005). Ní Bhroin (2012) also highlighted that many of those entering teacher training courses had little prior art experience, resulting in a low level of confidence teaching the subject. Barnes (2015) described how teachers, challenged by a myriad of issues, tended to teach art lessons that they hoped would produce an attractive display. He argued that this leads to teaching art that is overly product-orientated (2015, p.12).

Other international research mentions the various challenges teachers face whilst implementing art curricula; including time constraints, large class sizes, a lack of resources and pressures to teach for standardised tests (Hunter-Doniger, 2018; Irwin, 2018; Mishook & Kornhaber, 2006; Smilan & Marzilli Miraglia, 2009).

For many teachers, social media sites are a place to connect with other professionals and plan for lessons. Much of the existing research on teachers' use of social media has focused on teachers' use of Twitter (Carpenter & Krutka, 2014; Carpenter & Krutka, 2015; Carpenter & Morrison, 2018) Facebook (Ranieri, Manca & Fini, 2012), and Pinterest (Carpenter, Cassaday & Monti, 2018). One of the main ways Pinterest is used by teachers is to collect and save teaching ideas for future use (Huber & Bates, 2016; Shroeder, Curcio & Lundgren, 2019). A significantly large amount of content on Pinterest has been categorised under 'Education' (Mittal, Gupta, Dewan & Kumaraguru, 2013) and Pinterest was reported to be widely used by educators in existing research (Carpenter, Abrams & Dunphy, 2016; Gallagher, Swalwell & Bellows, 2019; Schroeder, Curcio & Lundgren, 2019).

Carpenter, Morrison, Craft and Lee (2019) studied teachers' use of Instagram. Despite Instagram's popularity with teachers, there is a dearth of research about their use of it. Research carried out by Carpenter et al. (2019) showed that many of their respondents used their account for both personal and professional use. Over 87% of respondents stated their main reason for using

Instagram professionally was to gather ideas shared by other teachers. In this piece of research, the most popular social media sites used by teachers in the current literature were explored in an Irish context. Pinterest and Instagram were two sites of particular significance. As the majority of content on these two sites are image-based, the visual nature of these two social media sites appealed to teachers preparing art lessons, given art's visual nature.

## METHODOLOGY

A mixed-methods approach was deemed most appropriate in this study, as both quantitative and qualitative data were required to effectively answer the research question. A short questionnaire informed the researcher's formation of the semi-structured interview questions by using the procedure for explanatory design as outlined by Creswell (2011, p. 84). The use of a questionnaire as part of a two-phase research design efficiently gathered quantitative data such as specific information pertaining to teachers' social media use. Information regarding the length of participants' teaching careers, their opinions about teaching visual art, their frequency of social media use and the names of specific platforms they used were also collected. This quantitative data was important for the stratification of user types in the study (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006; Silverman, 2013).

The participants' questionnaire answers were explored further throughout the interview process, by using more specific questions to elicit richer data from the participants during semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2011). In this study, six interviews were conducted face-to-face and two were conducted online via the Skype video call platform.

Participant	Gender	Years teaching	Class level	Profile on any currently teaching social media?
Participant A	Female	1-4 years	4 <sup>th</sup> class	Yes
Participant B	Male	5-9 years	5 <sup>th</sup> & 6 <sup>th</sup> class	Yes
Participant C	Female	5-9 years	6 <sup>th</sup> class	Yes
Participant D	Female	10-15 years	6 <sup>th</sup> class	Yes
Participant E	Female	5-9 years	6 <sup>th</sup> class	Yes
Participant F	Female	20+ years	3 <sup>rd</sup> class	Yes
Participant G	Female	5-9 years	3 <sup>rd</sup> class	Yes
Participant H	Male	1-4 years	5 <sup>th</sup> class	Yes

Table 1: Summary details of participants

Purposive sampling (Creswell & Plano Clarke, 2011; Denscombe, 2017) was employed by the researcher to recruit participants. The researcher interviewed eight primary teachers who are currently teaching in a variety of mainstream classroom settings, as teachers who currently teach in a special education setting do not teach visual arts as part of their teaching role. Therefore, those currently in mainstream positions were interviewed in order to gain a richer insight into their past and current visual arts teaching practice and thus having a direct experience of the phenomena being researched (Creswell & Plano Clarke, 2011).

Due to the limited timeframe of this piece of research, it was beyond the remit of the study to carry out a larger study that would be representative of wider group of primary teachers. Consequently, while it provides an insight into a small amount of teachers' experiences, it may not be possible to generalise the findings to a larger group of teachers.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

During the study, thematic data analysis was carried out on the qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2013) and three main themes emerged along with subsequent subthemes. For the purpose of this article, two of the main themes that emerged will be briefly discussed: how teachers use social media and their motivations for using it. This article will also discuss some implications of these findings in the conclusion.

### HOW TEACHERS USE SOCIAL MEDIA FOR VISUAL ARTS EDUCATION

While every participant (n=8) reported daily use of some form of social media, they all reported having used social media to view educational content as well. In this study, 'Pinterest' and 'Instagram' were discussed most often by the participants. Instagram was reported to be the most frequently used social media site by participants; this reflects a study by Carpenter et al. (2019) that found over 70% of teachers in the study used it daily. Three participants also indicated that they followed teacher pages on Facebook and joined teacher Facebook groups. However, throughout the research process, just two participants referenced a general use of Twitter, with both categorising their use as infrequent compared to their use of Instagram or Pinterest.

It seems that the visual nature of these two platforms appealed to the participants while searching for visual content and art lesson ideas. Participant F stated that, "*I would use Pinterest quite a bit and hugely for art ideas [...] I really would say 95% if I'm using social media for schoolwork, it will be for art.*" The participants' behaviour on social media reflects a study by

Carpenter, Cassaday and Monti (2018) which asserted that Pinterest's visual nature appeals to teachers looking for lesson and teaching ideas.

Six participants explained their specific approaches to storing the ideas they found on social media, using it as a reference tool for future planning. These methods consisted of using features on platforms such as Instagram and Pinterest to save Instagram images into folders, or 'pin' content onto specifically created 'pinboards,' as well as taking screenshots of ideas to store in a folder on their phone. Participant A described a combination of ways that they save lesson ideas: *"On Instagram I have my own bookmark for school. On Pinterest, a pinboard. If I come across things on Facebook, I do save them, but mostly I screenshot them."* Many of the participants categorised the content saved by subject, theme or special occasion and some participants categorised art lesson ideas under specific strand units. Participant G described how her thematic use of saved folders on Instagram are then used for her long-term planning for art and stated that, *"I have them split into like fabric and fibre, clay [...] when it comes around to that topic next year for planning [...] then I suppose you'd have a catalogue to pick from."* Several participants mentioned how they keep similar folders on their social media accounts to peruse when drawing up long term art plans, or in the short term if they are quickly looking for an art lesson idea. Social media has become embedded in these participants' teaching and planning processes. This finding aligns with similar studies by Schroeder, Curcio and Lundgren (2019) and Chapman, Wright and Pascoe (2018), which also found that teachers used Pinterest to store ideas which could be revisited for future planning.

Once the participants have carried out a search and have subsequently stored art lesson ideas for future planning, several participants described how they use images from social media directly as examples, or stimuli for the children at the beginning of an art lesson. Participant C described teaching an art lesson found on social media: *"I didn't teach them how to do it. I literally showed them the picture."* Participant F also acknowledged how they used images from social media as a starting point for lessons, *"I'll probably look it up, see it, think, 'yep, that's going to work.' I literally put Pinterest up on the whiteboard, show the children this is what the aim is and work through it with them."*

In terms of criticality of such lesson ideas, most participants were concerned with the level of difficulty of the lesson, or how long the lesson would take to complete as well as the availability of art materials, as opposed to the origins of the lesson or the accuracy of its content.

#### TEACHERS' MOTIVATIONS TO USE SOCIAL MEDIA FOR VISUAL ARTS EDUCATION

The participants cited various reasons for using social media for teaching purposes, such as looking for inspiration and teaching resources or classroom décor ideas. Participant H explained

that they used social media for a variety of reasons, including for classroom organisation ideas and to find art ideas, and stated, *“even if it’s like how to organise things in the classroom, sometimes I see what other teachers are doing and putting up, [...] especially in art.”* Participant E expressed how social media provided her with inspiration and stated that, *“I think I have so many more great lesson ideas that I don’t think I’d have if I didn’t follow these accounts [...] I think it inspires you.”*

While there is much research regarding the use of social media as online communities of practice (Hur & Brush, 2009; Krutka, Carpenter & Trust, 2017; Prestridge, Tondeur & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2019; Wenger 2005; Whelihan, 2015), the data that emerged from this study did not introduce this concept in any significant way. Five of the participants did not cite communication with other teachers as a reason for using social media in their teaching. One participant mentioned joining a Facebook teacher group but did not state this was the primary reason for using social media as a teacher.

Several participants cited perceived ease of use of social media as a reason for using social media platforms for teaching. Four participants mentioned how they were less likely to refer to published resources such as art books for teachers due to the efficiency of an online search tool. Participant B stated that *“if I was to spend twenty minutes looking through a book that you can’t search for anything in... sometimes it’s time consuming. Whereas I can put in something quite specific, like three words in a search.”* On the other hand, Participant C explained that they would prefer to use a book over an online source, and stated, *“I just feel with social media, there is always a competitive angle. Whereas that book is specifically created for teachers [...] why wouldn’t I use it?”*

Many of the respondents did agree that they were artistic, but some commented that they rarely came up with art lesson ideas of their own. In the questionnaire, two participants felt they disagreed with the statement ‘I am good at coming up with art lesson ideas,’ while three participants neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. This attitude towards teaching art was a motivation for using social media; seven participants spoke of how they now use social media for most of their art lesson planning, in conjunction with existing school plans. Participant F identified themselves as creative, but explained how it was a challenge to come up with new lesson ideas: *“I love art. It’s probably my favourite subject to teach. I am quite creative, I think [...] but I have no imagination. So, I go onto Pinterest.”* Participant E stated that they now used art ideas exclusively from social media and cited their confidence in their own ability as a factor in that practice: *“now, 100% of my ideas are coming from online [...] I don’t know if I’ve ever created my own art lesson [...] it’s just not something I probably feel confident doing.”*

Another participant questioned their over-reliance on social media in their art planning. Participant B stated that *“sometimes, I rely a little more than I should on the likes of social media for ideas [...] maybe I am better at coming up with ideas than I realise.”* Specific strands of the Visual arts curriculum were also another challenge faced by participants who felt their own skillset was not adequate in those strand areas. Fabric and Fibre was the most commonly mentioned strand by participants. Participant E explained that, *“I find it really hard to find ideas for fabric and fibre, like, I’ve often found myself typing in, like ‘fabric art’ or something like that into Pinterest.”*

Throughout the interviews, participants often mentioned how having an art display at the end of a lesson was an objective in their art lesson preparation. For Participant G, art lessons could be chosen based on what the end result will look like and said that, *“I think a lot of it is to do with, ‘will I be able to display this in a class, will the parents like it, will it look good on the school website?’”* Despite participants’ own reported pressures to produce attractive art displays, participants were also cognisant of the importance of the process of art making in quality visual arts education. Participant D asserted that, *“it’s more of a process, so if you don’t end up with a pretty display at the end that maybe they actually learned more from the process.”*

However, despite participants expressing a pressure to create attractive display, some participants were aware of the fact that much of the content on social media is curated. Participant E stated that, *“we see all these amazing lessons on Instagram, which I feel like are probably, like, just one a week or one a day in the actual classroom.”* Participant C argued that other teachers on social media would only share successful lessons online: *“on social media, you’re not going to write, this didn’t work [...] they’re not reflecting if they are showing a snapshot of something. Realistically, it’s going to look nice in the picture.”*

## CONCLUSION

This study has shed a light on an aspect of Irish primary education that had not been previously studied. Similar to a study by Ní Bhroin (2012), Irish primary teachers in this study mentioned their own perceived lack of confidence teaching and creating art lessons. As a result, teachers used social media platforms to inform teaching plans and prepare for art lessons as well to find inspiration from other teachers. While there was some evidence that participants were cognisant of the importance of emphasising the process of art making over the product, many still felt pressurised to produce ‘display worthy art,’ by choosing lessons sourced on social media that would produce attractive results. Further support in art education for teachers during their initial

teacher training could improve teachers' lack of confidence teaching the subject. Regarding in-service training, support for teachers navigating these social media platforms and their use for lesson planning could also be beneficial.

In terms of criticality, the participants did not indicate that they would research the source of the lesson idea or whether they would check the accuracy of resources. It would be worthwhile to further explore how teachers implement, critique and assess teaching ideas and resources found online, similar to the framework outlined by Gallagher, Swalwell, and Bellows (2019). Chapman, Wright and Pascoe (2018) argued that teachers' engagement with content on social media could become more critical, while Carpenter and Harvey (2019) suggested criticality of online content could be a component in teacher training.

There are potential opportunities for Irish primary teachers and pre-service teachers to explore their own social media use to promote the provision of quality visual arts education. Teachers can use these social media platforms to their advantage, by using discernment and a critical lens when preparing for visual arts lessons. This will ensure pupils are provided with a visual arts education that allows for inclusion, expression, meaning-making, risk-taking and individuality.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## The Perceptions of a Student Teacher on Implementing Active Learning with Junior Cycle Students

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Sandra Dunne recently completed a Bachelor of Arts in Education (Business Studies and Accounting) in Mary Immaculate College. Prior to this she spent many years working within leading Financial Institutions, in both Ireland and Australia. During this time, she developed a passion for teaching and returned to full-time study as a mature student in 2016. Active learning is not only highly topical currently, but a field which Sandra is deeply passionate about. With the student at the heart of this research, Sandra aspires to see regular implementation of active learning across the curriculum, in a bid to create a more fulfilling educational experience for all.

**KEYWORDS:** Active Learning, Junior Cycle Reform, Motivation

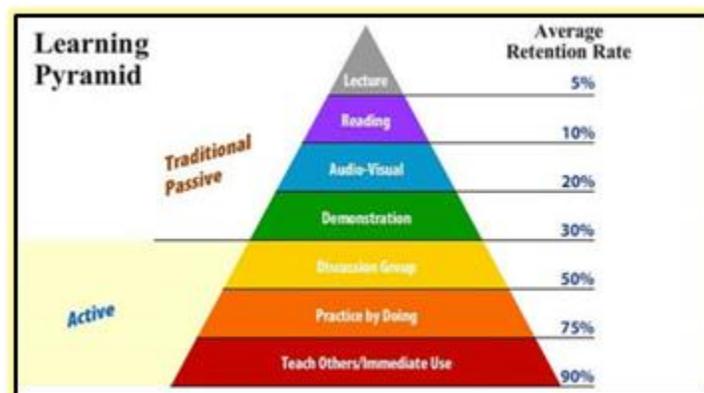
### INTRODUCTION

The recently Reformed Junior Cycle places core focus on key skills, combined with new emphasis placed on learning, assessment and reporting, through active and more meaningful approaches. Evidence of this is documented in the balance between knowledge and skills in the framework for Junior Cycle 2015, “These curriculum and assessment arrangements will promote a focus on active and collaborative learning” (Ireland, Department of Education and Skills 2015, p.7). Research highlights that active learning implementation provides a more idyllic classroom experience. Gibbs stated that the perfect educational experience, is where students come to class, readily prepared to actively capture the content, as opposed to passive absorption (1992). Therefore, it is imperative that post primary teachers implement active learning with their students.

This article is a reflective analysis of one active learning methodology (i.e. a table quiz), and is part of a larger study. The motivating force for this study arose from the researcher's desire to gauge a deeper understanding of the process, to improve their own practice. The background informing the researcher stemmed from observations of classes during teaching placement. Most classes observed, contained little or no evidence of active learning. This led to contemplation as to why the lack of a practice, that is widely encouraged by leaders in the field? Furthermore, there is limited research on teachers' self-reflective studies of implementing active learning. Thereby, this study explores the following research questions:

- What challenges does a student teacher of Junior Cycle classes envisage during implementation of active learning?
- How does active learning impact teaching and learning of first year students in a co-educational classroom?
- What are the most effective active learning methods to use with first year students in a co-educational classroom?

This article is an extract from a detailed dissertation completed as part of a Bachelor of Education degree programme in 2020.



NTL Institute, 2020

## CONTEXT

Theories of the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which are the work of Lev Vygotsky (1934), underpin the active learning evolution. According to Vygotsky's theories (1978), social interaction plays a vital role in cognitive development. The MKO theory involves interactive learning from another who has higher capabilities in or is more knowledgeable about the topic. Therefore, this method similarly applies through active peer or

educator learning. This concept is closely linked to the ZPD theory. The ZPD theory demonstrates what a child can achieve alone versus what they can achieve from another skilled individual who guides and encourages them (McLeod 2018). According to McLeod, Vygotsky's notion is that teachers put in place collaborative classroom methodologies where children with less proficiency can advance with the help of their more competent peers. Freund (1990) conducted a study which provides more recent evidence in support of Vygotsky's theory of ZPD. This research concluded that within the ZPD, increased knowledge through guidance led to an increase in performance levels as opposed to working individually (cited in McLeod 2018).

Recent policy implementation in Ireland has resulted in the Junior Cycle Reform (Ireland, Department of Education and Skills 2015) This has involved an overhaul to the structure of the Junior Cycle programme. As a result, a greater emphasis is now being placed on the active learning process. This approach involves a wide variation of method and instruction. Students are actively partaking in classroom activities, rather than sitting motionless receiving information in a passive form. Active learning is an intriguing pedagogy whereby students avoid passive knowledge absorption from teachers, as they become involved in the classroom activities through various methods such as discussion and evaluation (Agbatogun 2014; Prince 2004; and Watanapokakul 2011, cited in Saiphet 2018). Furthermore, Brophy (2010) states that the key to worthwhile learning experiences involves inclusion of various methods such as discussion and activities within programs, in order to accomplish important goals. Motivation plays an important part in the process, as active learning results in student motivation increasing. Through collaborative work student motivation increases (Agbatogun 2014; Bonwell and Eison 1991; Fink 2003; and Khamung 2016 cited in Saiphet 2018).

Contemporary evidence portrays that active learning brings about many challenges. "Encouraging active learning can be a challenge for both educators and students, particularly in large, lecture-based classes" (Buckley *et al.* 2004). Despite multiple evidence supporting the success of active learning as a teaching method, a journal article by Finelli *et al.* (2018) says that student resistance provides a notable challenge to the implementation and effectiveness of active learning. From an instructional angle, further barriers to active learning implementation such as efficacy of techniques, preparation time and ability to cover the syllabus have also been highlighted by Finelli *et al.* (2018). In a popular study, Bloomer Green *et al.* (2018, p.191) state the following: "Teachers, for example, may be concerned about the extra preparation time active lessons can require, apprehensive about the class time taken up by active learning, and not convinced that they should change if they are already a good lecturer". Based on these findings, it

is evident that these writers also support the fact that active learning implementation has its challenges. It is evident from evaluated research that active learning is fundamental in educational context presently. Furthermore, previous researchers have highlighted that there are various outcomes to implementing active learning. Therefore, it seems prudent to explore the response to its implementation in the classroom. The challenges and experiences faced by the teacher through active learning implementation are the core focus of this study.

## METHODOLOGY

The study design used was a self-reflective analysis. The primary approach used to collect data was a reflective journal, recorded by the writer, following each class. This data source was supplemented by lesson plans, teaching resources and observations. Reflective journals are an effective way to obtain information about a person's feelings (Cohen et al. 2007). Observations as a supplemental data collection method is suitable in this regard as "they afford the researcher the opportunity to gather 'live' data from 'live' situations" (Cohen et al. 2000, p.305). Research carried out aimed to produce valid and reliable knowledge in an ethical manner. Considering openness and transparency, a letter outlining the study was given to the principal of the school involved in the study at the onset of the research period. This reflexivity research method does not require consent forms to be completed.

The study was carried out over a 2-month period, in a small rural, post-primary school. The focus was on a first-year business studies class of 19 students (9 girls and 10 boys). These students range in age from 12 to 14. The researcher met this group for 4 forty-minute classes per week. Repeating some active learning strategies with the same class group, whilst implementing some minor tweaks, gave the researcher a clearer picture to format conclusions. By coincidence the gender numbers were almost equal male to female ratio in the class, which could provide a good balance of outcomes.

The research method chosen for this study was a 'reflective self-study' based on a qualitative analysis of the writer's personal experiences of active learning implemented in the classroom (i.e. a table quiz'), which was conducted as a collaborative approach to assessment. This method generated data through composition of a journal and critical reflection of the writer. Cohen et al. (2000) believe that research of a qualitative nature places the researcher at the core of the experiences of the first-person, and data analysis usually begins whilst collecting the data. The current study consisted of the researcher following the guidelines as advised by Braun & Clarke (2006). This involved taking a wide focal point and reflecting on the data as the situations emerged.

Materials required for the quiz included pre-prepared questions, answer sheets, assigned teams, table numbers and a timer. The quiz was implemented by distributing six rounds of questions at separate intervals. Each round was given a specific time to complete. Answers were collected after each round and corrections were completed before the following class.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Many comprehensive themes and contributory themes were deducted from the data, and these were used in a bid to demonstrate a student teacher's perceptions of implementing active learning with Junior Cycle students. A common theme appearing was how students appeared to grasp a better understanding of the content, where relative to life, more meaningful approaches were taken. An example of this is where images of local hurling teams were used, to discuss business sponsorship of sports teams, as a marketing strategy. Another theme which emerged was the student preference of a collaborative approach to assessment. The third core theme which emerged depicted that competitive elements increase student engagement. The three active learning methodologies which the writer focused on are 'Blue Sky Thinking', 'Table Quiz' and 'Trashcan Basketball'. This article will discuss the findings which emerged from the use of a 'Table Quiz', as a collaborative approach to assessment.

An 'end of topic assessment' was held through co-ordination and hosting of a 'Table Quiz'. The class was split into six groups with four groups consisting of three members and two groups with two members. There were three students absent on the day which led to two groups having reduced member numbers. Each group consisted of students with varying abilities, with a teacher effort made to place higher and lower ability students together. This method of grouping was used in line with prior research based on Vygotsky's MKO theory, as mentioned earlier, which highlighted that compared to individual work, student collaboration in the classroom shows improved academic performance over students who are taught through individual methods (Johnson *et al* 1998).

The quiz itself consisted of six rounds. The rounds were named 'multiple choice', 'one correct answer', 'speed round', 'picture round', 'sport round' and 'random mix'. The number of questions varied for each round. Questions consisted of a variation of direct topic questions and images (in the case of the picture round) but also had some non-topic questions which had been discussed in class at some point and linked to the topic. Examples of these questions were: who is the current highest-paid soccer player in the world and, who is the all-time leading scorer in NBA basketball? These individuals had been discussed in class in connection with their wealth and 'savings and investment' options. The process of linking relevant life interests to the topic, which emerged as a

contributor to learning enhancement with use of the 'Blue Sky Thinking' methodology, was repeated in this activity.

The initial noticeable outcome from the writer's observations was the expression of relief across all students, followed by excitement, when they realised they were not being individually assessed but rather had the support of their peers in this instance. Prior to the assessment, all students had been informed there would be a test but were not advised it would occur in a group scenario. The teacher had personally felt a lesser effort to prepare for the test could occur if students were aware in advance that a group test was taking place. This noticeable lift of anxiety and subsequent elation aligns with findings of Preville (2018) who states that group situations improve eagerness as students realise they are supported in their learning.

Another instance that was prominent to the researcher emerged from a question in the 'sport round'. Many of you play for local hurling clubs, Team 1, Team 2 and Team 3. Name the player from one of these clubs who also plays senior county hurling and whose first name rhymes with AIB? This question, whilst touching on the topic by containing reference to an Irish financial institution, was specifically designed to create interest through reference to a local sport which most students have an immense interest. In fact, following the class, students were intrigued to know the outcome of this question. The researcher held off on the answer and co-ordinated it with assigned homework for that night. Later in the day, the researcher overheard student discussion during lunch break around this question and how it derived from its linkage to personal banking and what the potential answer could be? This suggests that a meaningful approach invoking relevant to life examples can take learning beyond the classroom.

This methodology required a little more planning and organising to implement. However, nothing overly extensive or exhaustive. The additional being, extra questions were required given there were six rounds in the quiz. Also, teams had to be pre-prepared and rules set out at the beginning. A standard individual assessment would have also required rule setting. Corrections required for a 'Table Quiz' involved six rounds to be corrected for six teams which equalled 36 rounds in total versus 19 individual assessments in a non-group scenario. The comparison here shows some additional marking time required but once again not an exhausting amount (see chart 1). Timing and organisation are a notable factor as six rounds of the quiz needed to be distributed and collected very efficiently to achieve completion by class end. The margin for error or delay was very small. This caused a small amount of anxiety in the implementor's mind as they strived to reach success criteria prior to class end. This finding is synonymous with an earlier mention of Bloomer

Green *et al.* (2018) who stated that preparation time for active lessons and adequate time to reach success criteria are teacher concerns.

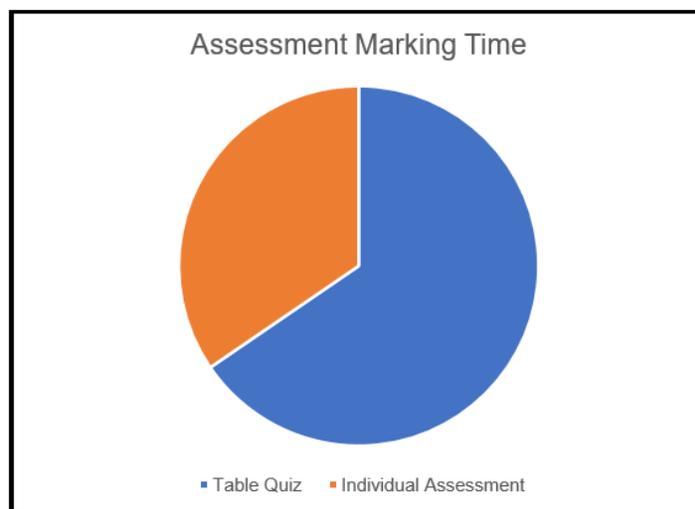


Chart 1. Correction time of 'Table Quiz' versus Individual assessment

A competitive element was evident during this table quiz activity. Each group was given a name linked to the topic such as 'American Dollars' and 'Brexit'. Students were overheard chiming "come on the Brexiteers" and appeared to be highly engaged with completing the task at hand in a bid to surpass their peers. This portrayed an increase in the attempt rate by all group members to collaborate and succeed. This instance suggests that active learning alone is one element to consider in teaching but active learning with an overarching competitive element can create a whole other denotation to outcomes. Literature correlates with findings of this study that a well-organised competition challenges its participants to give their best, and thus it enhances student motivation and learning (Verhoeff 1997; Lawrence 2004).

## CONCLUSION

The conclusions drawn from this active learning implementation study highlight that a higher level of planning and organisation is required but nothing exhaustive. A challenge came about when 'Blue Sky Thinking' evolved into a debate which proved challenging to ensure inclusion of less vocal students. The other concern relates to increasing noise levels and possible disruption to other classes. Active learning had a mostly positive impact on both teaching and learning. Evidence of extremely effective learning outcomes were portrayed and from an instructional viewpoint, the teacher observed much success during classes. Active learning with a competitive element, provided the most successful outcomes. This was evident during and following the table quiz.

Positive social interaction was evident, students were highly engaged throughout and worked collaboratively to defeat their peers in the event. All students appeared to enjoy the class immensely and recap carried out during the following class, demonstrated retained learning.

As a researcher, I benefited from this study in many ways. The findings highlighted benefits and problems which can arise during active based learning implementation at Junior Cycle level. This provides a safeguard for me going forward as I can foresee potential difficulties which may occur and have a strategy to minimise disruption if necessary. My findings demonstrated successes with certain methodologies. This supports me with planning strategies to optimise success rates. I will now benefit by being pre-informed as to the most suitable methodologies to use, to meet both student and curriculum needs. I now have the potential to achieve the required outcomes in a more efficient manner. This allows me to be a greater leader, who conducts more meaningful and enjoyable classes for their students. Student engagement should increase as a result, leading to whole class and individual success.

The key outcomes were mostly positive ones and can be used to inform practice going forward. These significant findings can also benefit other educators. Evidence based research provides a concrete basis for teachers to confidently progress with a specific form of instruction and lesson design (Taber 2013). Research supports teachers, as they are confident from past evidence, that by implementing certain strategies they can achieve certain outcomes. Research can act as a source of motivation for teachers as statistics may show evidence of higher achievement levels amongst students following active based learning use. This subsequently encourages teachers to follow a similar approach, due to knowledge of potential successful outcomes for their students.

Some key recommendations are outlined below to assist with future policy implementation, educator practice and academic research.

1. A central role of the teacher in providing quality education should allow for active learning methodology that is relative and meaningful.
2. Productive forward planning should permit adequate time to achieve success criteria in classes with active learning methodologies.
3. Introduce competitive elements to active learning methodologies on occasion as this produces enthusiastic participation and high engagement.

The limitations restricting this study include the sampling used (convenience), focus on a first-year class only, time, small-scale and financial constraint. Convenience sampling can create bias and lacks whole-population representation (Convenience sampling 2009).

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## How our Bodies can Support the 'Weight' of Cognition: The Role of the Body in the Second Language Classroom

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My name is Alex Murphy. I am a newly qualified French and English teacher currently working in Lucan, Co. Dublin. My undergraduate degree in Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies in NUIG was the springboard for my keen interest in the use of the body in the classroom. Our bodies create meaning through interpreting the world around us; thus, meaning ceases to exist without them. Aside from second language acquisition, my other interests lie in the areas of sociology of education and guidance. I am very interested in the idea of conducting further research in any of the above fields. Thank you to STER for this wonderful opportunity to share my research!

**KEYWORDS:** Language, The Body, Body-centric, Second Language Learning, Kinaesthetic

### INTRODUCTION

This paper will discuss the role of the body in the second language classroom. This short article is part of a larger study that examined *What role the body holds, if any, in the second language classroom?* The main aims of this research were as follows:

- Explore existing literature pertaining to body-centric classroom techniques;
- Interpret and analyse literature from a perspective that considers how we use our bodies to acquire a second language;
- Critique and challenge existing norms surrounding standard classroom practice and discuss potential outcomes of a body-centric practice, where possible.

The rationale for this paper stems from the role of the body in modern society becoming more prevalent. It appears that from the end of the twentieth century leading into the start of the twenty-first, sociologists have become interested in the physical body for a variety of reasons. These include “the influence of feminism, debates over control of the body, the growth of consumer culture and an apparent increase in reflexivity about the body contemporary society” (Horne, 2000, p.73). Considering the body’s importance in society as a whole, it is necessary to examine what role it plays in one of society’s longest-standing institutions: the school. An examination of the body in the classroom draws attention to questions of “regulation”, such as “how the movement and habits of human bodies have been confronted, challenged, accommodated, and re-formed in educational institutions and settings” (Rousmaniere & Sobe, 2017, p.1).

This paper developed from my own personal interest and engagement with the kinaesthetic aspects of language learning. I was exposed to these techniques under the instruction of Dr Erika Piazzoli, Dr Carmel O’Sullivan and Dr Ann Devitt during my PME. The application of some of these techniques to my own teaching practice, particularly within the confines of the new Junior Cycle specifications, illuminated a passion for movement within my own classroom. I saw this study as an opportunity to conduct further research into areas such as embodied cognition, gesture and the physical manipulation of objects and to consider how impactful these can be within the realm of second-language acquisition.

## CONTEXT

The field of embodied cognition, put simply, refers to a “learning experience grounded in the mind, senses, body, imagination, reflection and social sphere” (Piazzoli, 2018, p.25). Duffy, states that a basic premise within theatre is that ‘drama is doing’, with embodiment being the study of how that doing influences and enhances the actual learning (2014, as cited in Piazzoli, 2018). Embodied cognition has been defined elsewhere as a multimodal playful process that requires the involvement of the human body in the cognitive process (Folgia & Wilson, 2013;). Unlike a great deal of cognitive activities associated with schooling, learners are placed at the centre of their learning through embodiment, as it provides opportunities for tangible, physical interactions with the content of the lesson (Ayala, Mendívil, Salinas & Rios, 2013). This is exemplified by simple human processes, such as breathing, that form an integral part of the embodiment process. Piazzoli (2018) argues that in educational contexts where “learning is equated with the mind only”, that fundamental aspects of speech, such as breathing, “can become completely overlooked” (p.30). Nguyen and Larson (2015) nuance this argument further in saying that being physically aware is essential to the embodiment

process but that this alone does not “constitute embodied learning consciousness” (p.338). They conclude that mindful action should form part of the process, but that reflection is the key ingredient in refining “ensuing mindful action” (p.338), a belief shared by Piazzoli (2018). It is not enough to get students up playing a game which involves passing a ball and conjugating the verbs as the ball is passed, for example. The students should subsequently engage in a discussion as to why and how this was beneficial to their learning. The teacher can prompt reflection in an oral or written format, before allowing learners to apply their knowledge subsequently to a more ‘concrete’ exercise e.g. filling out a verb table. Essentially, individuals can only operate internally through having first operated externally, as all of our mental processing is a derivative of our external reality (Ellis, 2008). What is most interesting about embodied cognition is its boldness in challenging educational norms and seeking an amalgamation of various teaching styles. It does not look to move away from what already functions, but instead invites us to assess our pre-existing ideas about learning through engaging in, for example, “unexpected physical/manual exercises” or using “objects and learning space arrangements from other disciplines” (Nguyen & Larson, 2015). Embodiment can be viewed, essentially, as a theory that grants the body its rightful role within the learning process.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The literature review provided a broad overview of the available literature surrounding theories that link the physical body to language learning. This was carried out not only to familiarise the reader with the background necessary but also to provide the researcher with sufficient information to undertake a novel study and not to replicate the work of others.

Following on from this, the steps of the SLR were laid out and explained clearly. Using Siddaway’s (2014) five-step process, an SLR was carried out to yield a set of results that would address the Research Question. The literature was scoped, meaning that a wide search was carried out to determine what search terms would be used. It was decided, based on this wide search, that ‘embodiment’ and ‘second language learning’ (and their synonyms/composites, included in the Boolean phrase) were the two most appropriate terms. It was at this point that the research questions were reduced from the original three to one.

Based on the scoping, the Research Question was set out, which is as follows: What role does the body hold, if any, in the second language classroom? The change in Research Question happened for a variety of reasons, including the fact that the word ‘body’ was yielding too many irrelevant papers while the idea of conducting a study centred on ‘Modern Foreign Languages’ was simply too limiting. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were then generated in relation to the findings of the scoping process and were also based on Ryan’s (2010) proposed guidelines. Based on the Boolean phrase generated, there were a total of 199 results from the two databases selected (BEI and ERIC). These were screened based on the title, abstract and by then reading the full text if necessary. Having completed the screening process, the study was left with 14 articles for consideration in the analysis and interpretation chapter.

Author(s)	Title
Hald, de Noojer, van Gog & Bekkering (2015)	Optimizing Word Learning Via Links to Perceptual and Motoric Experience
Macedonia & Knösche (2011)	Body in Mind: How Gestures Empower Foreign Language Learning
Holme (2012)	Cognitive Linguistics and the Second Language Classroom
Li, Chen, Cheng, Tsai (2016)	The Design of Immersive English Learning Environment Using Augmented Reality
Tomczak & Ewert (2015)	Real and Fictive Motion Processing in Polish L2 Users of English and Monolinguals: Evidence for Different Conceptual Representations
Shiang (2018)	Embodied EFL reading activity: Let’s produce comics
Toumpaniari, Loyens, Mavilidi & Paas (2015)	Preschool Children’s Foreign Language Vocabulary Learning by Embodying Words Through Physical Activity and Gesturing
Lan, Fan, Hsiao & Chen (2018)	Real body versus 3D avatar: the effects of different embodied learning types on EFL listening comprehension
Cannon (2016)	When Statues Come Alive: Teaching and Learning Academic Vocabulary Through Drama in Schools
Saéz (2015)	Enhancing the Role of Meaning in the L2 Classroom: A Cognitive Linguistics Perspective
Atkinson (2015)	Extended, Embodied Cognition and Second-Language Acquisition
Gorham, Jubaed, Sanyal, Starr (2019)	Assessing the efficacy of VR for foreign language learning using multimodal learning analytics
Huang & Huang (2015)	A scaffolding strategy to develop handheld sensor-based vocabulary games for improving students’ learning motivation and performance
Si (2015)	A Virtual Space for Children to Meet and Practice Chinese

Within the research pertaining to the body's role in the classroom in general, there is a noteworthy absence of post-primary level students. This moved the study in a different direction when it was uncovered that little to no research exists that links 'Modern Foreign Languages' to 'Secondary Education'. If this gap was addressed by researchers, post-primary teachers would have more theoretical background in which they could ground teaching and learning practices that make explicit use of the body. It is also worth mentioning that there was a disconnect between some of the bodily-related practices and that there is a need for more empirical and evidence-based international research. The effectiveness of explicit use of the body and its immediacy to teaching and learning is difficult to dispute but requires further research and development.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

For the purpose of this article, four of the findings will be presented and discussed to shine some light on what role, if any, the body holds in the second-language classroom. The first central theme emerging from the research was the concept of 'cognitive load' (referred explicitly in 42% of the 12 articles consulted), which pertains to the amount of effort required for a learner to assimilate a topic successfully. Researchers argue that the way in which information is presented to the learner can impact the cognitive load of the task and that methodologies making explicit use of the body can sometimes overwork a student. For example, relay races are popular among language teachers. These ask students to race and retrieve information to fill in the blanks of a text, moving from one end of the room to the other and recalling chunks of text. This is only helpful if the students if the vocabulary has been pre-taught or the students are exposed to it repeatedly before use, otherwise it poses too much of a load on their working memory.

The most interesting example comes from Gorham, Jubaed, Sanyal and Starr (2019), who analysed the efficacy of multimodal learning to assess students' acquisition of Japanese script. While the participant group was arguably too small and too narrow to produce a fully comprehensive set of results (3 educated women in their 20s), an interesting conclusion was suggested by the researchers. In their results, the woman who acted as the control participant (i.e. did not learn Japanese script using interactive technologies) actually scored best on the recall test. They attributed this in part to the fact that the test mimicked her learning conditions while it stood in contrast to those of the other two learners. However, the more important suggestion was that the two test participants were distracted by other features of their interactive learning environment such as the sounds, images and background provided in the game. While the control participant performed better because she was working in a 'true' physical environment (i.e. using her hands

and eyes to interact with the real material in front of her), Lan, Fang, Hsiao and Chen (2018) contradict this point in a separate study, by saying that working with a screen can prove to be less distracting than manipulating real-life objects. The main issue facing the body in the language classroom in relation to 'cognitive load' seems to be the idea of processing the right information, at the right time (Hald, de Noojer, van Gog & Bekkering, 2015). Following this logic, it is not necessarily the amount of times a student is exposed to information that helps them to retain it, but rather the type of information they are exposed to and how they are exposed to it.

What is also briefly considered in some of the papers is how cognitive load affects higher and lower ability students. Speaking generally of students in the classroom, it is made clear that those with a higher working memory will perform better, thus producing better outcomes overall (Sanchez & Wiley 2006, as cited in Lan, Fang, Hsiao & Chen, 2018). However, through a deeper analysis of the works, it can be seen that this is a somewhat sweeping statement, and that students' performance is also affected by the techniques employed. For example, Rowe et al. (2013) write that the use of gestures in the classroom, and specifically the effectiveness of their usage, should be considered in relation to the characteristics of the learners involved (as cited in Hald, de Noojer, van Gog & Bekkering, 2015). One paper argues that while practices such as hand-held games may enhance vocabulary ability, it does not have a proven effect on retention of vocabulary (Huang & Huang, 2015).

It can be seen in Shiang's (2018) work that low-ability students are given more consideration in general when it comes to body-related practices, as they write that weaker students could benefit from being exposed to concepts such as situation models. However, there is no mention of how these styles of learning could benefit high-achievers (p.124). The distinction between 'high' and 'low' ability in these instances merely lies in the individual student's ability to retain and re-use vocabulary and structures over an extended period. Oftentimes, body-centric activities are normally geared at students with a reduced lexical range, to allow them to build confidence in the basics of the language. This could be a simple exercise such as matching pairs physically with sheets of paper or identifying images stuck around a classroom wall. It is more challenging to curate kinaesthetic activities that suit students who are attempting to, perhaps, build sentences independently or work with more complex grammatical structures. Students who are at this stage could feel frustrated by tasks that do not meet the stage at which they are in the language. Given the body's somewhat unstable stance within second-language learning, it is important that it can cater to a wide demographic rather than a subsection of the classroom if it wishes to establish itself within an already saturated field of practical pedagogy. Cognitive load is an essential aspect of teaching and

learning and should be considered by practitioners and researchers alike when contemplating the explicit use of the body in the classroom to avoid overworking, or perhaps underworking, learners.

The body is inextricable from learning and should be used as a companion tool to regular teaching and learning practices. For example, Shapiro and Leopold (2012) share that drama should be used to “promote” the acquisition of vocabulary structures as well as more spontaneous use of language (as cited in Cannon, 2016, p.387). The verb ‘promote’ is an interesting choice here, as it does not necessarily commit to the process being effective for all students, but rather proposes that it could create a differentiated path to learning. Lightbown and Spada (2013) say that embodied practices improve motivation and attitudes, which in turn “may” improve learning outcomes (as cited in Gorham, Jubaed, Sanyal & Starr, 2019, p.12). Again, they are not making concrete promises to educators that this will be universally effective, but instead encourage them to consider alternative options. Activities explicitly involving the body may also be used to attract students’ attention, which in itself is positive, as this can have an effect on their short-term memorisation of vocabulary (Huang & Huang, 2015). This notably small outcome or change could benefit weaker students, but it is not at any point suggested as a process that has to replace ‘regular’ teaching and learning.

## CONCLUSION

In light of this research, second language policy makers and teacher could consider making the body a more integral part of the learning process. By first basing their practice on student age, proficiency and interests, teachers could then exploit the wealth of knowledge the body holds in a variety of ways. Students would in turn, create highly personalised, individual work that they take pride in, while developing a sincere and authentic engagement with the subject matter in question. Instead of vaguely acknowledging its existence in curriculum outlines, it should instead be considered as a vital asset to both the teacher and student toolkit. This study has highlighted that the body is very much a fundamental component in the acquisition of a second language, as well as other processes, and should be treated as such by policy makers, practitioners and students alike.

Notably, in the context of the Coronavirus pandemic, it has been difficult to apply these findings to classroom life. One element that has worked well however is dividing work between what is physically in front of students (i.e. the book/iPad on their desk) and what is displayed on the screen. This dual display of information involves their bodies, as they move between two visuals to build on their learning. This is used regularly in our ‘Bingo’ activities. The students have the French words in front of them, while the French and English of each word is projected onto the board. The

teacher then calls out the words in English, providing multiple modes of entry for the language, allowing for repetition and translation of key vocabulary.

The research indicated that the body's role in the classroom is in fact ever-present in learning but can be exploited by practitioners and students alike through thoughtfully planned lessons and a more open perspective towards movement and working with the body. At no point within the studies did any researcher suggest a divide being drawn between the mind and body but instead continuously recommended that we consider them as entities that operate in tandem within the realm of Second Language Acquisition.

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## An Exploration into the Experiences of LGBTQ+ Primary School Teachers in Ireland

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Fiona O'Reilly, from Dublin, recently graduated from the Bachelor of Science in Education Studies at Marino Institute of Education in December 2020. She has been a Programme Facilitator with Trinity Access since 2019 and has a passion for the inclusion and celebration of LGBTQ+ identities in education.

**KEYWORDS:** Gender, Identity, LGBTQ+, Primary Teaching, School Culture

### INTRODUCTION

Even though some research has been conducted on LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer Plus) identities in Ireland, legislation and societal opinions are ever changing, and so it is important to update and add to discourse. LGBTQ+ identities shape different individual experiences, which should be included in research for it to be truly representative. The research that exists surrounding LGBTQ+ primary school teachers in Ireland is lacking in transgender and non-binary identities and the level of LGBTQ+ inclusion in Irish primary schools is constantly changing. This article is based on a broader study that explored the experiences of LGBTQ+ teachers in Irish primary schools. The purpose of the study was to critically analyse how school culture affects primary school teachers in Ireland who are members of the LGBTQ+ community and identify ways in which LGBTQ+ issues can be addressed in schools. It also examined how LGBTQ+ teachers' own educational experiences in the past have affected their current practice as teachers.

## CONTEXT

In 2019, 90% of primary schools in Ireland were under the patronage of the Catholic Church (Walsh, 2011; O'Brien, 2019). Because the Catholic Church have tangible power in decision-making regarding Irish education and employment law (Neary, 2013), many LGBTQ+ primary school teachers have experienced fear and anxiety about disclosing their identity in their schools (Gowran, 2004). Before December 2015, Section 37.1 of the Employment Equality Act perpetuated LGBTQ+ discrimination to maintain the religious ethos of schools (Neary, 2013; Heinz et al., 2017). As most primary schools in Ireland have a religious ethos (O'Brien, 2019), Section 37.1 created a chilling effect for LGBTQ+ primary school teachers (Gowran, 2004; Neary, 2013).

According to Heinz et al., (2017), Section 37.1 was a paradoxical exception to equality and a concrete manifestation of the control and influence of the Catholic Church. The work and activism carried out by the INTO LGBT+ Teachers' Group was central to the amendment of Section 37.1 (Fahie, 2016; Neary, 2013) which was officially implemented in December 2015, months after Ireland's marriage equality referendum (Fischer, 2016). However, while the number of multid denominational schools in Ireland are slowly increasing, they still only account for 6% of the total (O'Brien, 2019).

There are no initiatives that explicitly address LGBTQ+ issues on the current primary school curriculum (Heinz et al., 2017; Neary, 2013; Mayock et al., 2009). Some teachers feel reluctant to discuss issues regarding LGBTQ+ identities in their classrooms due to the ambiguity around what is and is not appropriate for discussion (Neary, 2013). In a study of 788 LGBTQ+ second level students, 45% reported that staff did not intervene if present when discriminatory remarks were made (Pizmony-Levy & BeLonG To Youth Services, 2019). A common reason for teachers failing to intervene in these scenarios is their lack of LGBTQ+ knowledge, preventing them from intervening confidently (Higgins et al., 2016). The vagueness of school policies leaves teachers feeling unsure and unwilling to act (Neary, 2013). For LGBTQ+ pre-service teachers, the prior association they have with marginalisation, discrimination and potentially harassment in their past school environments may add to the multifaceted challenges of a practicing teacher (Heinz et al., 2016). Creating an open dialogue amongst all pre-service teachers will promote a more inclusive college environment for their LGBTQ+ peers (Kearns et al., 2014).

The dominance of heterosexuality also stands as a barrier to the recognition of LGBTQ+ identities in education (Gowran, 2004). Heterosexism is an assumption made by societal and institutional structures that all people are heterosexual and gender identity is considered stable and uncontested (Higgins et al., 2016; Barron et al., 2018; Pizmony-Levy & BeLonG To Youth Services,

2019; Fahie, 2016). It places heterosexuality as superior in society, leaving other identities to be seen as inferior (Pizmony-Levy & BeLonG To Youth Services, 2019; Gowran, 2004).

Neary (2013) and Fahie (2016) argue that schools are a consciously heterosexualised space and reinforce a binary model of sexuality and gender identity. This reaffirmation of heterosexism is policed and reproduced in school policies and daily practices through silence, non-recognition and misrepresentation (Gowran, 2004; Kearns et al., 2014). Heteronormative teaching practices, gender-specific uniforms and activities, and LGBTQ+ bullying not being addressed are just some of the ways in which heterosexism exists in daily school life (Kearns et al., 2014; Mayock et al., 2009). As a result of an absence of fact-based LGBTQ+ education and open dialogue, many pupils learn about sexual orientation and gender identity through the lens of discriminatory slurs (Dunne & Turraoin, 2015; Lindsey, 2013; Heinz et al., 2017).

Many teachers have grown up in this heteronormative system and it is likely that they have unintentionally embodied the silence that surrounds LGBTQ+ identities through their teaching practice (Gowran, 2004). Lack of recognition is a form of oppression (Gowran, 2004). However, trying to challenge this oppression in schools can be difficult because they are shaped by a culture and history of heteronormativity (Kearns et al., 2014; Gowran, 2004). Instead of responding to individual instances of LGBTQ+ discrimination, schools need to interrupt the heteronormative system as it exists by recognising and respecting diversity and challenging dangerous stereotypes and misrepresentations (Lindsey, 2013; Neary, 2013).

## **METHODOLOGY**

The design of this study was centred around an interpretivist paradigm (Bryman, 2001; Creswell, 2009). A qualitative approach to research was adopted to provide deep scope within the data (Bryman, 2001). A basic interpretive study was used to accurately document all participants' experiences.

Purposeful sampling was used to ensure an equal representation of LGBTQ+ identities were included (Flick, 2007; Maxwell, 2013). All five participants of this study were members of the LGBTQ+ community. Four out of five participants were primary school teachers, and one participant was a prospective primary teacher. All participants were under the age of 40 and began teaching after the year 2000. All participants currently work in urban based schools. This may influence the data collected as their experiences may differ from LGBTQ+ teachers with more years of experience or from those working in rural settings or prior to the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1993 (Office of the Attorney General, 1993).

Table 1

*Sexual Orientation of Participants*

Sexual Orientation	Queer/Bisexual	Lesbian	Gay
Number of Participants	2	2	1

Table 2

*Gender Identity of Participants*

Gender Identity & Pronouns	Male, He/Him	Female, She/Her	Non-Binary, They/Them
Number of Participants	2	2	1

Table 3

*Type of School Currently Working in*

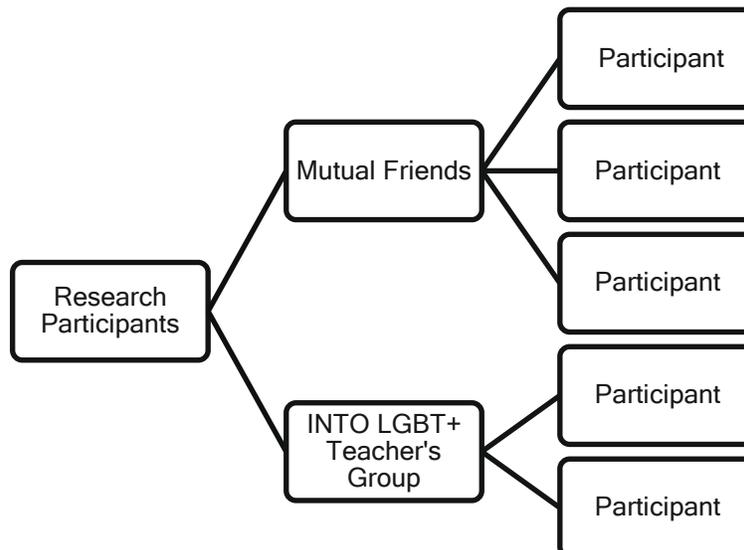
Type of School	Non-Denominational	Catholic	Catholic Gaelscoil
Number of Participants	2	2	1

Table 4

*Years Practicing as a Teacher*

Years Teaching	0-3	4-9	10-19
Number of Participants	3	1	1

Interviews were adopted as a means of gathering data since they draw from conversational skills, which are already acquired by researchers (Denscombe, 2010). Participants were asked questions about their experiences as teachers who are LGBTQ+. Participants were sought from the INTO LGBT+ Teachers' Group and mutual friends. This process is documented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: *Process of Purposeful Sampling*

Each interested individual was sent an email with a Google Form attached. The objectives of the research were clearly stated in the email along with the ethical guidelines. Each participant worked in different types of schools; three from Catholic schools and two from non-denominational schools. The data was transcribed, coded and analysed to identify emerging themes (Merriam, 2009). In the context of this study, there was a limited amount of time to carry out and analyse the research. This study was confined to a low level of scope due to a small sample of participants. All participants were white, Irish, and based in an urban centre. The sexual and gender identities of the five participants interviewed do not represent all identities under the LGBTQ+ umbrella. Because of this, the findings may not be generalisable.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL CULTURE

The impact of school culture on LGBTQ+ identities in education was a prominent finding in the research. Participant 5 said, *“it definitely has such a huge impact for LGBT staff.”* Participant 5 followed up by explaining, *“the environment added to my worries immensely.”* Participant 2 expressed similar feelings *“I didn’t even realise how miserable I was at the time”*. Some participants spoke about how they would act to adapt in the environment. Participant 1 said, *“the vitriol and the negative stuff I heard slowed how fast I came out.”* Likewise, Participant 3 mentioned *“I used to try and act straight or just put in little things into conversations that would make the teachers think I was straight.”* Each participant noted the impact of school culture. Struggles with school culture can affect how LGBTQ+ teachers engage with their own identities in the workplace (Neary, 2013).

Most participants spoke about the impact of school ethos. Participant 4 noted *“the ethos is a big thing as well. You can still be fired for undermining the religious ethos of the school.”* Participant 1 spoke on the popularity of Catholic schools *“There’s a massive emphasis on Catholic schools in the country. Most teachers work in a Catholic school”* Participant 5 captured Catholic schools in a positive light *“there are Catholic schools who do their best to promote inclusivity and use their ethos to create a culture of kindness”*. Whereas Participant 4 explained some *“LGBT+ people who were brought up Catholic in Ireland have turned away from the Church.”* When talking about the ethos of non-denominational schools, Participant 5 stated, *“The ethos is centred around inclusivity and it shows.”* Participant 4 explained *“If I worked in an [non-denominational] school, I would feel totally comfortable teaching about LGBT identities. I would be totally comfortable being as inclusive as I could.”* While it is important to acknowledge the inclusive practices operating in many schools with a denominational ethos, teachers who work in multi-

denominational schools have a considerable amount of freedom in the manifestation of their sexual and gender identities in schools (Fahie, 2016).

Bullying and discrimination towards LGBTQ+ identities were identified as a result of school culture. Looking back on their own educational experiences, Participant 3 stated, *“They found it funny to pick on somebody who was different.”* Participant 5 explained how witnessing LGBTQ+ bullying affected her *“I knew some kids who were out and got a hard time because of it. Seeing that made coming out an unappealing option.”* Some participants explained how their own experiences of bullying in school have affected their teaching practice. Participant 3 said, *“I don't want any other child to ever feel like I felt in school.”* Participant 5 stated similar *“I never want any child I teach to feel the way I felt.”* Verbal and physical harassment is often experienced by LGBTQ+ individuals in school settings. In a study of 788 LGBTQ+ second level students, 68% had heard homophobic remarks from other students and 77% were verbally harassed based on their sexual or gender identity (Pizmony-Levy & BeLong To Youth Services, 2019).

Most participants spoke about the effect school culture has on pupils. Participant 5 said, *“everyone would use the word gay as a derogatory term.”* Participant 1 said, *“A lot of students use gay as a pejorative. It's just become a word for things like ‘stupid’ or, ‘I don't like that’”.* Participant 3 said, *“It was used as a slur.”* Participant 2 explained *“maybe they're hearing stuff at home or maybe they have older siblings where that language was said.”* Participant 1 stated similar *“at primary school level, they're probably just parroting words they've heard before.”* Participant 5 expressed feelings of disappointment *“It is disheartening to think that the same language I heard in school growing up is still being used years and years later.”* Participant 1 said, *“I would worry for younger [LGBTQ+] people who might overhear stuff because they're at a much more vulnerable stage in their development.”* In some cases, schools reflect the values and attitudes of society by reproducing the social and heterosexual hierarchies of society, instilling heterosexuality as the norm and marking any other sexual or gender identity as deviant or inferior (Gowran, 2004; Pennell, 2015).

#### LGBTQ+ EDUCATION AND INTERVENTIONS IN TEACHER TRAINING INSTITUTIONS

The need for LGBTQ+ education for pre-service teachers was identified by all participants as there is currently a lack of LGBTQ+ knowledge and awareness amongst their colleagues. Participant 1 said, *“I'd like to see more explicit inclusion.”* Participant 5 said, *“They didn't have the education or tools to actually combat slurs and derogatory language.”* Participant 4 explained *“they wouldn't feel fully comfortable handling it or they might think that they'd say the wrong thing. I actually think they*

might say the wrong thing if it was to come up in the classroom.” Participant 3 said, “They were words I had heard obviously from my own research but that nobody else had heard.” Because of the dominance of heterosexuality, teachers often view themselves as powerless to address LGBTQ+ issues (Gowran, 2004; Lindsey, 2013).

Most participants spoke about the lack of representation of LGBTQ+ identities in education. Participant 5 said, “I feel like it’s important to have representation in education.” Participant 1 said, “It would be great if there were more perspectives in schools as teachers.” Participant 3 said, “I haven’t been in a school where there’s another LGBT teacher.” Some participants speculated why there is a lack of LGBTQ+ representation amongst teachers and educators. Participant 5 explained “the idea of the job isn’t necessarily appealing to many queer people, mainly due to some of the negative experiences we had in school.” Participant 4 said, “I feel like still having the religion part in 37.1 of the Employment Equality Act shouldn’t be there because I feel like a lot of LGBT+ teachers are not religious.” Participant 2 mentioned “When I was filling out my CAO I was deeply closeted and thought ‘Nobody’s ever going to know, it’s not going to be anyone’s business.’” Having more diversity amongst teaching staff will prepare the children they teach for life in a society based on dignity and respect for all (Heinz et al., 2016).

Participants 1 and 3 had received education about LGBTQ+ identities while in college. Participant 1 mentioned “I know from lectures”. Participant 3 explained; “It brought everyone together to talk about these really important topics and vocabulary. He had given us a massive amount of resources with gay story books, stories about gay relationships, children growing up as gay.” Participant 4 spoke about the impact of role models in college “I remember thinking, ‘Oh, my God, she’s a lesbian and she works in this college. That’s mad because this is such a religious college.’” Participant 2 mentioned “I did like college. But there wasn’t that feeling of community.” If all teachers are equipped with the tools and knowledge necessary to combat LGBTQ+ discrimination in schools, they will be able to create a supportive environment and transform the heteronormativity that exists in the school system (Kearns et al., 2014).

Each participant spoke on the effect LGBTQ+ education and representation can have on teachers and pupils. Participant 3 said, “People speaking openly about it was completely new to me. No one had ever spoken about it openly to me before.” Participant 5 explained “I went through school as a queer kid and I know the importance of doing that for the kids I teach.” Participant 1 said, “someone like me in a school could be good for a child that’s like me or will be like me once they realise their own sexual [or gender] identity.” Participant 2 mentioned “I’m able to personify and humanise things maybe a little more.” Participant 4 stated, “It doesn’t make sense when people

*question whether talking about LGBT+ people is undermining the religious ethos. Because no, of course it isn't. You're making sure everyone is represented and included."* Participant 5 said, *"the children we teach are going to be at the forefront of society in years to come."* Providing the opportunity for pre-service to understand how to engage with anti-oppressive teaching practices is a key part of transforming schooling and education. Helping teachers to explicitly reflect on their experiences, attitudes and questions will create an open dialogue amongst all educators and promote a more inclusive and safe school environment for LGBTQ+ youth and families (Kearns et al., 2014).

## CONCLUSION

The injustices experienced by LGBTQ+ teachers in Ireland needs to be recognised by both policy makers and teachers (Heinz et al., 2016). The lack of transgender and non-binary identities in Irish research continues to exist. Transgender identities must be considered and incorporated into education policies (Dunne & Turraoin, 2015). Inclusive practice should be adopted by all teachers to create a safer educational environment for LGBTQ+ identities. Teachers need to become active LGBTQ+ allies through understanding, engaging, and transforming educational institutions (Heinz et al., 2016; DePalma, 2017). Consideration should be made by policy makers to monitor inclusive practice.

Research that gives LGBTQ+ identities a voice in Irish education should be increased. As transgender identities are lacking in Irish research, there should be a conscious effort to amplify their voices. This study examined the experiences of five LGBTQ+ primary school teachers in Ireland through the means of single, one-on-one interviews. Future research could include follow up interviews from participants, focus groups with a range of LGBTQ+ identities, or an ethnographic study.

The inclusion of LGBTQ+ identities in classrooms should be prioritised by teachers across the country. As participants mentioned in the interviews, using resources that currently exist, such as LGBTQ+ storybooks, can be an effective way of promoting inclusive practice. Schools should develop and implement effective LGBTQ+ inclusive policies and strategies. The current reformation of the RSE curriculum and Primary School Curriculum is an opportunity to explicitly include LGBTQ+ education. LGBTQ+ identities exist everywhere. Our teachers deserve the inclusion of their identities and the celebration of their diversity, experiences, and lives (Pizmony-Levy & BeLonG To Youth Services, 2019).

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## A Self-Reflective Study of Team-Teaching in the Post-Primary Mainstream Classroom

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I graduated from Mary Immaculate College in 2020 with a first-class honours degree in Education, Business and Gaeilge. While I certainly have a deep-rooted passion for inclusive education on a personal level, it was during a week of observation in a primary school, that I first became aware of issues surrounding support methods that involved withdrawal from the mainstream classroom. During my studies, team-teaching was introduced as a method of supporting students, while allowing them to learn alongside their peers. As a result, I was motivated to study how my interaction with team-teaching could affect inclusive learning in lessons I teach.

**KEYWORDS:** Post-Primary Teaching, Team teaching, Special Education, SEN, Inclusive Learning

### INTRODUCTION

This article stems from a self-study that examines how I, the researcher, can utilise team-teaching to promote inclusive learning in the mainstream post-primary classroom. It was during a week of observation in a primary school, that I first became aware of issues surrounding support methods that involved withdrawal from the mainstream classroom. As I observed lessons, I noticed that while receiving individual support from a resource teacher, students would fall behind on what was being taught by their class teacher. This point is solidified by Ó Murchú and Conway (2017) who discuss an acknowledgement by both teachers and principals that the withdrawal model from mainstream classes often results in compromised communication between the class teacher and support teacher and, therefore, a lack of cohesive action between the two professionals.

The Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2017) suggest that team-teaching should be considered as a first step to supporting students with special educational needs (SEN) within the

mainstream classroom. Relying too heavily on withdrawal from the classroom is advised against, as positive outcomes for students with SEN have been reported with the utilisation of team-teaching (DES, 2017). To ignore ‘withdrawal from the mainstream classroom’ as a sometimes necessary intervention, removes focus from what is best for the individual student (Ó Murchú, 2011). The use of one-to-one teaching is recommended only as a temporary measure “for intensive teaching of specific skills, based on level of need” (DES, 2017, p.18). By recommending the utilisation of team-teaching as the initial support method, over the use of classroom withdrawal, the DES recognise that this allows individual students to receive more support than the withdrawal method of teaching can offer.

While the article discusses the benefits of team-teaching, the most significant finding discussed is the importance of relationships on the success of team-teaching. These relationships include, but are not limited to, the teacher-student relationship, the teacher-teacher relationship and, possibly the most surprising, the relationship I have with myself and how I view myself as an educator. Positioning Theory provides the context for this finding.

## CONTEXT

Team-teaching, or co-teaching as it is also known, is often interpreted differently from country to country. For the purpose of this article, described by Cook and Friend (1996, cited in Welch et al., 1999), team-teaching is considered as “two or more professionals delivering substantive instruction to a diverse, or blended group of students in a single space” (p.37). Ó Murchú and Conway (2017) add that these two professionals should be two qualified teachers as opposed to any other duo, for example, one teacher and one special needs assistant. Team-teaching, though used for many years worldwide with significant evidence of effectiveness gathered in America (Ó Murchú and Conway, 2017), is relatively new to the Irish classroom.

The purpose of team-teaching is to “make it possible for students with disabilities to access the general curriculum while at the same time benefiting from specialized instructional strategies necessary to nurture their learning” (Friend et al., 2010, p.11). It is important for the teachers involved to vary their approach to reach as many students in the class as possible. It is also important to change tactics regularly so not to draw attention to any student’s SEN. To do this could render team-teaching to have the same potentially negative effect on the self-esteem of vulnerable students as the classroom withdrawal method can often have.

Hattie (2009) argues that the lack of research into the effects of team-teaching on student achievement means that it is often overlooked and even disputed as a potentially effective solution to many of the issues of modern classrooms. Friend et al. (2010) also discuss dangers associated with over reliance upon a second teacher within the class to support students with SEN. It must be recognised that team-teaching is viewed as an additional support for students as opposed to a reason for excluding students with SEN when a second teacher is not timetabled. Effective teaching and learning must always be the main priority of the classroom (Friend et al., 2010; Griffin and Shevlin, 2007; Ó Murchú and Conway, 2017).

#### POSITIONING THEORY AND TEAM-TEACHING

The concept of positioning theory was first introduced to the area of social science by Hollway (1984) to discuss men's and women's subjectivities. Men and women take positions based on how both genders are viewed in all discourse. The belief that the social world stems from conversations (Harré and Van Langenhove, 1999) adds to the argument made by Hollway (1984) that 'Discourses make available positions for subjects to take up' (p.233). Barnes (2004) states that people 'can be thought of as presenting themselves as actors in a drama, with different parts or "positions" assigned to the various participants' (p.1).

The concept is more fluid than that of 'roles', such as the role of a teacher or of a student. It is akin to the explanation given by Fenton-O'Creevy et al. (2015) of identity. Every community one participates in provides an opportunity to negotiate a new identity. Harré et al. (2009) state that the theory offers answers to questions about why a person may think a certain thought or act in a certain way, given the circumstances.

Harré et al. (2009) discuss the rights and duties associated with positionings. Examples of rights provided by Barnes (2004) include 'the right to be heard, the right to be taken seriously, the right to be helped, or the right to be looked after' (p.2). In addition to rights and duties, Barnes (2004) discusses the constraints and obligations that accompany positionings. Each actor is not only assigned their part in the 'drama' discussed above, they are constrained by the expectations that accompany the part. So while people are expected to behave in certain ways, they are also often prevented from acting outside of the expectations of their position. Ó Murchú (2011) argues that this perspective is significant in understanding inclusive practice within the classroom.

## METHODOLOGY

This article presents a snapshot of a self-study action research project. The data analysed were gathered through a self-reflective journal. After each team-taught lesson, I documented how I acted during the lesson and how I felt as the lesson was taking place. Data from nine team-taught lessons were gathered. Once the data were gathered, I conducted a theory-driven thematic analysis. Extracted data were then coded and the themes that were generated from this process discussed. As the focus of the study was team-teaching, there were other teachers involved. The anonymity of both teachers throughout this study was ensured by excluding their names and referring to them as Teacher A and Teacher B.

It must be acknowledged that this study has been conducted on a small scale within a limited timeframe. The research was to be conducted during a twelve-week school placement. Unfortunately, due to Covid-19, placement finished abruptly after nine weeks, resulting in less data to analyse than was originally planned. I took part in nine team-taught lessons in total, six lessons with Teacher A and three lessons with Teacher B. The study itself has undoubtedly informed my practice but an opportunity to recreate the study with more professionals, and for a longer time frame, would have provided a more significant insight into my use of team-teaching as a tool for inclusive learning.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF TEAM-TEACHING

Studies by Friend et al. (2010) highlight some of the many benefits of team-teaching, including: increased interaction between teachers and students; increased literacy and numeracy skills; increased student self-efficacy; increased student retention and, a decrease in behaviour-related classroom disruptions. Despite these findings, however, whether team-teaching benefits students remains a much-debated topic. Evidence from Hattie (2012) shows that team-teaching has a less than average effect on student achievement. While team-teaching can have a minimal effect on students' learning, it stands to reason that it may not be team-teaching as a tool that is less than effective, rather how the tool is utilised. The question of how well Irish schools engage in team-teaching is notable. The Teaching and Learning International Survey report (OECD, 2009) shows that only 13.6% of Irish teachers engage in team-teaching on a weekly or monthly basis. Any findings questioning its efficacy, then, must be met with the understanding that many teachers have not engaged in a sufficient amount of team-teaching to support such a claim.

This study found that having an extra teacher in the room meant that students were simply heard more often. Students were able to ask either teacher questions more easily. While I drifted, the teacher was free to continue with the lesson. This has potential to benefit all students in the class. Correspondingly, Ó Murchú (2011) states that a clear benefit of team-teaching is the increased opportunity for dialogue and feedback. Though I was unable to venture far beyond 'one lead, one support' style of team-teaching, this configuration undoubtedly allowed students to make enquiries quietly to me that they may not have made publicly to the class teacher. *'The students sitting close to us today asked me questions instead of the class teacher.'* (Journal Entry 3, 2020). The quiet manner in which questions were often asked by students who were not generally outspoken in class allowed me to see the benefit of a supporting teacher for students who may otherwise go unnoticed as experiencing difficulties.

Benefits of team-teaching include simple differences to the mainstream classroom such as more effective use of both teachers' time. Performing simple acts, such as taking over the duty of writing on the whiteboard, outlining learning intentions and ensuring all students had written their homework in their diary, allowed Teacher A to continue with the lesson. Without as many interruptions or time constraints, all students benefited from a more suitably paced lesson. Similarly, with Teacher B, a noted benefit of team-teaching that arose was the ability to teach students who have been absent, while continuing to teach the larger group: *'Today I spend time teaching the students who were absent the elements of the accounts they had missed.'* (Journal Entry 9, 2020)

Malcolm et al. (2003) discuss the added pressure faced by teachers who often have to help students 'catch up' after being absent from previous lessons. Also discussed, is the negative effect of absenteeism on the other students in the class. Higher instances of disruption have been reported by teachers of students who are regularly absent (Malcolm et al., 2013). This not only affects the learning of the entire group but can cause resentment towards the disruptive student, thus affecting peer relationships (Malcolm et al., 2013). Thornton et al. (2013) note a link between learning difficulties and absenteeism, across all school-going age groups, and argue that students who reported a positive experience in school were less likely to be absent. This adds strength to the argument made by Ó Murchú (2011), that team-teaching can reduce the incidence of classroom disruption and aid in student retention. All students can benefit then, from the utilisation of a configuration of team-teaching that allows for students who have been absent to learn, without undue interruption of the planned lesson.

While there are many benefits to team-teaching, I found that planning time quickly became evident as an issue when conducting this study. As I depended upon the goodwill of established teachers to conduct this research, I didn't feel that I could take from the limited time of already very busy teachers to plan for upcoming lessons e.g. *'Because teachers are so busy, it's not been possible, so far, to meet separately to plan classes.'* (Journal Entry 6, 2020).

For planning to occur outside of the classroom, it would have had to happen during the teachers' free time. While I feel that these teachers would have accommodated such a request, it was not something I was prepared to impose upon them. Further, as reported in TALIS (OECD, 2009), given that teachers spend an average of fourteen hours a week outside of allocated classroom hours working, 'free time' during the school working hours is something teachers simply don't have.

## RELATIONSHIPS

Central to the success of team-teaching is the relationship between all participants. Students need to trust the teachers involved to benefit from them (Hattie, 2012). This was noted in how students did not immediately seem comfortable calling upon me for help when teaching with Teacher A. Teacher A had been establishing a relationship with the group since the beginning of the academic year. This meant that when students needed help, they did not call upon me until lesson three e.g. *'The students in this class are already used to me so they were quick to call on me for assistance'* (Journal Entry 7, 2020). While teaching with Teacher B, as I had been teaching the class group in question for a number of weeks, they immediately accepted me as their second teacher. Students were quick to seek clarification from me and trusted my opinion when it was offered to them.

While the relationship between students and teachers is of utmost importance, the relationship of the teachers involved cannot be underestimated (Friend et al., 2010). I found that *'I didn't feel confident enough in my knowledge to say...'* (Journal Entry 4, 2020), and *'It is also nerve-racking to be working alongside such a well-established teacher'* (Journal Entry 4, 2020), and again, *'I'm still not confident enough to make suggestions to such a good teacher'* (Journal Entry 5, 2020). I was aware early in the study of the openness of the teacher A. If I had been confident to voice concerns, those concerns would most likely have been met with compassion and a willingness to listen. The issues I faced then, had more to do with my perceived ability and where I had positioned myself in the partnership. It was expected that the focus of this study would be on how to best utilise team-teaching to promote inclusive learning in the classroom. What resulted, however, was the sharp realisation that this wasn't possible if, even on a subconscious level, I do not view myself as in a position knowledgeable enough to influence the education of others. It was only with

reflection on the imbalance of power that I had created that I experienced the importance of parity in the relationship between team-teachers. Both teachers need to be positioned to make equal contribution to the planning and teaching of lessons (Friend et al., 2010).

Basso and McCoy (2016) discuss the importance of the initial meeting between teachers about to embark upon teaching together. This is a crucial step in outlining teacher values before the process begins. To create a plan that both teachers are happy with implementing, how each teacher views their rights and duties as an educator must be discussed and explored. Teachers planning to embark on team-teaching should use a set of pre-prepared questions to structure their initial meeting (Basso and McCoy, 2016). By doing this, the conversation can be steered and structured so the most important questions can be answered. Both teachers bring with them differing personalities, backgrounds, and teaching philosophies. By coming together before embarking on team-teaching, teachers can discuss the thought process behind their views and decide where they may be willing to compromise in the future. While this may only be the first step, any issues that arise while engaging in future team-taught classes can be navigated with the understanding each teacher already has of the other's point of view and values.

## CONCLUSION

Team-teaching has the potential to benefit all students in the classroom. While two teachers are teaching in the same space, students are set to benefit from, for example, less behaviour-related interruptions and more frequent opportunities for dialogue with teachers (Ó Murchú, 2011). With increased interaction, teachers are able to identify areas that students both struggle and excel in. Students benefit from having their individual questions answered more often. These are factors that would benefit students, whether they have identified SEN. Team-teaching is not without challenges, however. The most significant challenge while conducting this self-study was the lack of time available to plan effectively for lessons with Teacher A and Teacher B.

Ó Murchú and Conway (2017) express caution in suggesting that students who are currently solely supported through withdrawal methods should all be supported through team-teaching instead. As advocates for team-teaching, they acknowledge that it may not be suitable for all students as the only support they receive. Thus, a combination of support methods is suggested to begin the journey of inclusive learning. The question is asked: "is there merit in beginning with team-teaching, and availing of withdrawal where necessary but only after team-teaching configurations have been exhausted?" (Ó Murchú and Conway, 2017, p.62). In this way, students can be given the best possible opportunity for inclusion before being withdrawn. Withdrawal should only ever be a

temporary measure, with the end goal always being successful reintegration into the mainstream class.

Positioning theory provides insight into the many relationships involved in team-teaching. The importance of these relationships cannot be stressed enough. Students benefit from positioning both teachers as people who can help them succeed in learning. With different opinions on education and, more simply, with different vantage points in the classroom, the input of both professionals should be perceived as valid and equal. Collaborating, welcoming and trialling the ideas of both teachers is how positive outcomes may be achieved.

Finally, the view each participant has of themselves is of utmost importance. Both teachers must perceive themselves and position themselves as valuable members of the team. It is therefore recommended that each partnership be entered into willingly, with the view that the other teacher is as knowledgeable and capable of suggesting meaningful and positive learning strategies.

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## ‘Are Mindfulness Techniques Practised in the Early Years Setting?’: A Study of the Use of Mindfulness in the Early Years

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Edel Palmer graduated from Marino Institute of Education with a first-class honours with a degree in B.Sc. in Early Childhood Education. From engaging with children with various needs while on placement over the last four years, she was always very interested in using mindfulness techniques to encourage self-regulation in young children.

**KEYWORDS:** Early Childhood Education, Mindfulness, Effects, Benefits

### INTRODUCTION

This article is based on a more extensive dissertation carried out as part of a Bachelor of Science in Early Childhood Education degree in 2020. This research sought to investigate the use of mindfulness practices by educators in early years settings in Ireland. The research aimed to gain insight into early years educators’ understanding of mindfulness and experience, as well as their perceptions regarding its practice with young children.

The research question asked: “Are mindfulness techniques practised in early years settings? I wanted to set out to explore whether there was a relationship between the use of mindfulness techniques and how it may affect young children’s emotions and behaviours. The study was conducted across a sample group taken from four early years settings, with varying services and socio-economic backgrounds. The rationale for this study is based upon a gap identified in research into the use of mindfulness techniques during the early years in Ireland. This distinct lack of investigation and supporting literature, into mindfulness practice for young children (2-6 years) as led to this study being conducted. As there is limited evidence proving the benefits of mindfulness for young children, it is not currently defined in Irish early years curricula. While Aistear, the National

Early Years Framework (2009), includes wellbeing among its themes, mindfulness is not specifically identified or recommended as part of that practice. Practice is therefore wholly dependent on the educator's own motivation and commitment to implementation within the setting. Baer (2003, p.125) defines mindfulness as "the non-judgemental observation of the ongoing system of internal, and external stimuli as they arise". Similarly, Kabat Zinn (1994) defines mindfulness as the awareness that arises through "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgementally" (p. 4). Dodge, Daly, Huyton and Sanders (2012) argue that wellbeing is very difficult to define explicitly, however they claim that wellbeing is linked to positive and negative effects, quality of life, personal growth, self-acceptance and positive relationships in life. This research study explores the following questions:

- (1) Does mindfulness have positive effects for children? What are these effects?
- (2) Does mindfulness play a role in behavioural and emotional regulation?
- (3) What are the benefits of regulation to children through the use of mindfulness?

## CONTEXT

Dr Jon Kabat-Zinn is known as the 'founder of modern mindfulness'. He undertook the study of mindfulness and was influenced by Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk who taught him about the fundamental beliefs and practice of mindfulness. He used his knowledge acquired to develop his own programme in the 1970's and called it 'Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction' (MBSR).

Gallen (2017; 2018), who references the work of leading theorists and experts in her books for teachers, details how the theories of mindfulness can be practiced in the classroom with children. Employing a variety of methods, educators can use basic concepts of mindfulness providing children with everyday practices to help with self-regulation and techniques to manage their emotions and feelings. These techniques can be practiced under a range of categories. These include, Mindful Senses (eating, seeing and breathing), Mindful Movement/Body Awareness, Mindful Feelings and Emotions and Mindful Thinking/Gratitude.

Mindful Senses deals with the five senses and advancing the ability to isolate a particular sense and use it to increase awareness of one's current surroundings and the present moment. Mindful Movement/Body Awareness brings awareness to body movements that are usually automatic in nature and can help children build a better understanding of their own body's capabilities. It can highlight how to control their bodies and understand the positive effects of movement. Saltzman and Goldin suggest an effective way of explaining awareness of one's thoughts

and emotions to children: “children may be told that thoughts pass through the mind like floats pass by in a parade; some of the floats (thoughts) may grab their attention more than others but just as they would not jump onto a float at a parade, they simply observe their thoughts as they occur” (2008, p. 150).

Mindful Thinking nurtures the ability to maintain non-judgement by using a heightened sense of awareness of one’s thoughts on an ongoing basis. One’s perception of positive and negative experiences encountered become clear. It helps children to consider their own thoughts and feelings, and those of others in social interactions with their families, peers and educators. The child can be aware of their thoughts before speaking and the criticism that may arise thereafter (Keng, Smoski & Robins, 2011). It is my belief that mindfulness is a powerful tool to support and guide people of all ages through challenging scenarios and life experiences through self-awareness and focused, mindful reflection. Through my research and personal practice of mindfulness I have become a passionate advocate for this Middle Eastern technique and firmly believe in its benefits and the positive contributions it makes to a person's wellbeing and ability to develop their coping skills and self-acceptance.

The benefits of mindfulness have been well documented. According to Gallen (2017; 2018), increased ability to self-reflect and self-regulate (the child’s capacity to control, for example, their emotions and behaviours) rank among the many benefits associated with using mindfulness practices with children. Research studies reviewed by Nieminen & Sajaniemi (2016) into mindful awareness in early childhood education support Gallen’s viewpoint. They say mindfulness practices improve impulse control, enhanced attention and concentration skills helping children stay focused and engaged. According to Rempel (2012), for mindfulness to be practiced to maximum effect, educators need to be committed to the theories of mindfulness and have a personal interest in, understanding of, and appreciation for the practices. It is essential for educators to keep an ‘open, compassionate and accepting attitude’ toward mindfulness practices (Germer, 2005, p. 7). They must be receptive to new ideas and techniques they can implement for best practice and welcome these opportunities for improvement. This will be very beneficial to children as they begin to open up about their personal experiences and heightened emotions. Children will feel more comfortable and keen to participate in this new learning experience if educators take a motivated approach (Gallen, 2018).

## METHODOLOGY

This study aimed to explore the practice of mindfulness in early years' settings and determine its benefits for young children in Ireland. All methodological approaches were considered and a quantitative approach to data collection was chosen as most relevant for this research and is best suited to answering the research question 'are mindfulness techniques practised in early years' settings?'.

A twelve-question written survey comprising of open-ended and closed questions was designed. In addition, respondents could formulate their answers and further express their opinions with a comment box. Four early years' settings were selected to participate in this study. These settings were chosen for their diversity, which allowed for a broad and balanced range of opinions and perspectives to be gathered on mindfulness practices.

As this is a quantitative study, simple frequencies, descriptive statistical analysis and inferential statistics were applied to interpret and synthesise the data (Lewin, 2005; Cohen et al., 2007). Numerical data is collated and used to measure frequencies and identify links between variables. This can be further explored to determine whether it supports or refutes theories (Cohen, et al., 2007, p. 206). Once this data is evaluated, common patterns begin to emerge, and become evident. This was then analysed using the previously discussed quantitative method. These findings will be presented and interpreted in the following chapter.

This study was conducted in a limited group of four early years' settings only. Most settings were selected based on proximity to the researcher to facilitate collection of the data within the timeframe allocated. The study would benefit from a more comprehensive, nationwide scale of research to establish a broader sampling to determine if mindfulness techniques are practised in early years' settings. Another challenge encountered was the lack of opportunity to carry out follow up interviews, allowing respondents to elaborate on their comments and insights already stated in the questionnaire.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings presented here are part of a wider study exploring ECE use of mindfulness techniques. This section will focus on two findings as they provide a better understanding of both mindfulness practice, understanding and the value placed on mindfulness by early years educators.

## POSITIVE EFFECTS OF MINDFULNESS FOR CHILDREN

An overwhelming number of the educators surveyed indicated a belief that mindfulness is beneficial for children (93%). 0% of respondents answered 'No'. 7% selected 'don't know' but did not elaborate. In order to gather more detailed insights, a comment box was provided for further described positive effects.

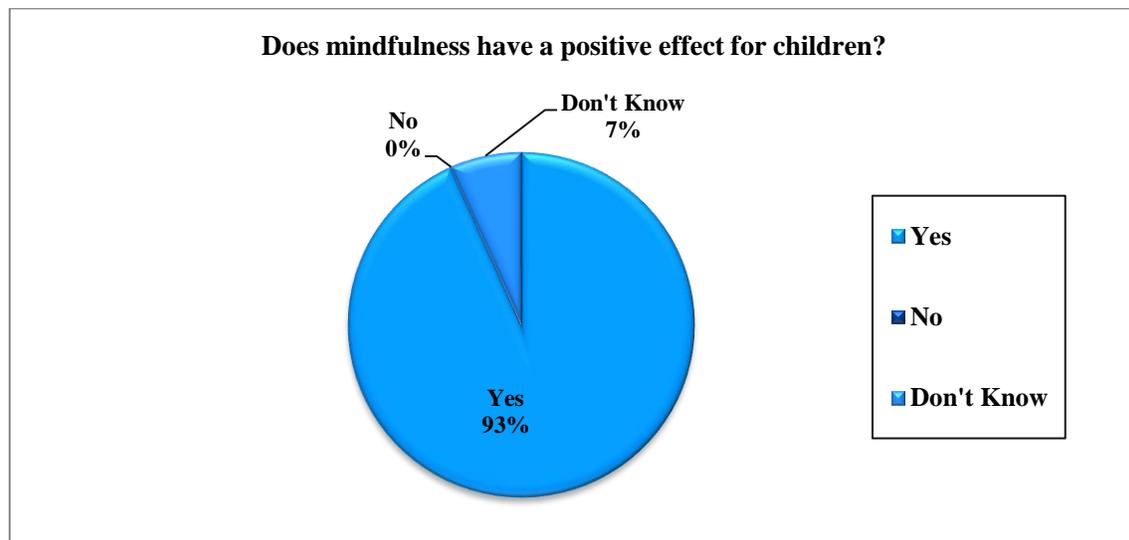


Figure 1. Respondents were asked their opinion if mindfulness practices have positive effects for children.

The results indicated in Figure 2. below demonstrate a number of benefits to using mindfulness, as expressed by respondents. From their comments, four prominent benefits appear: 'Relaxation and Calming Effect', 'Self-Regulation', 'Presence and Awareness' and 'Focus and Thoughts'. More than half noted relaxation and calming as a significant positive outcome (Figure 2 (54.8%)). For example, respondent 20 stated: *"Calms children down, helps them to learn to regulate their emotions"*. A high percentage of respondents (48.3%) also see 'Self-Regulation' having a significant positive effect when mindfulness practices are used (Figure 2). Respondent 13 explains their understanding of self-regulation. *"Helping a child to name an emotion and 'be with' that feeling is a big step towards self-regulation, and that all feelings are safe and can be shared"*. Similarly, respondent 17 noted *"I really feel it helps in self-regulation as it gives children the awareness and tools to know they can lean into these uneasy or upsetting feelings and learn to calm themselves"*. Another benefit reported is 'Presence and Awareness' at 32.2%. *"It encourages self and body awareness"* (Respondent 15). *"Help children to relax and unwind and become more aware of themselves and their bodies, emotions etc."* (Respondent 29). 'Focus and Thoughts' was also

outlined as a positive effect with 22.5% of respondents noting it in their answers. Respondent 19 says it *“Helps them think before they do. Keeps them in the moment.”*

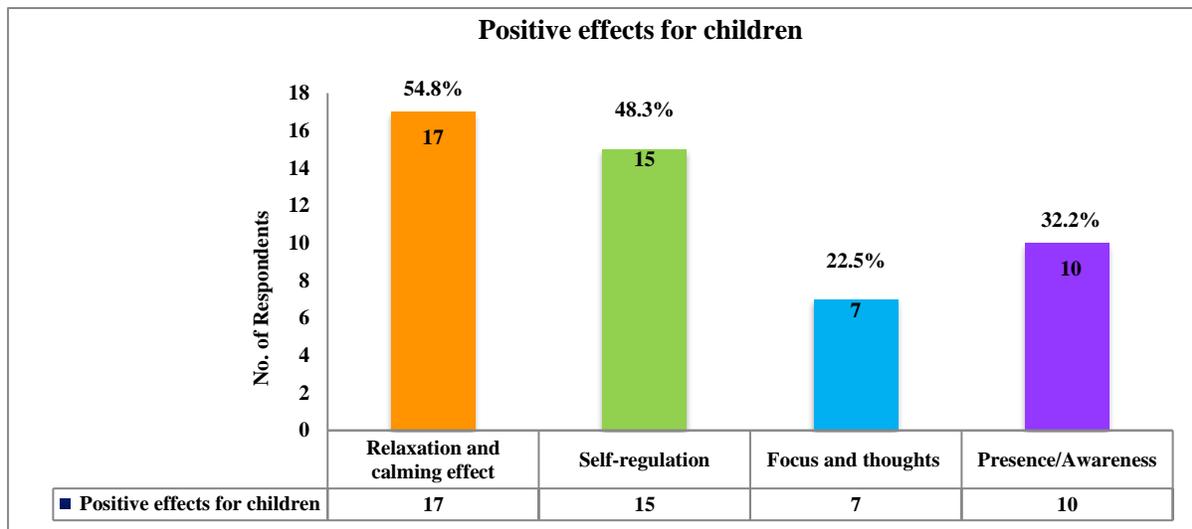


Figure 2. Respondents were asked to elaborate. The most commonly occurring positive effects

The results in Figure 1 confirm that a clear majority of respondents believe mindfulness offers positive effects for children. This supports the work of Saltzman and Goldin (2008) who recognise mindfulness practice with young children can alleviate stress and results in the development of coping skills, better focus and improved social skills. Figure 2 shows respondents believe ‘calming effects’ to be one of the main benefits to practicing mindfulness techniques with young children. Crescentini et al. (2016) support this finding in their research demonstrating young children struggling to self-regulate can learn to become calm independently over time in a setting where mindfulness is practiced. Self-Regulation is another significant positive outcome for children and through engaging in activities like meditation and yoga, songs and games, children can practise connecting with their feelings and emotions. It helps them be present and reduces anxieties and worries (Weare, 2012). Hanh and Hyland recognise the importance of “paying attention to the present moment” and “accepts everything without judging or reacting” as key to effective mindfulness practice (1999, p. 64; 2011, p. 171). Similarly, Kabat-Zinn (2003) also acknowledges that mindfulness accomplishes heightened awareness. Improvements in children’s ability to Focus and pay attention to their thoughts was also acknowledged by respondents. Napoli et al. (2005) carried out a study with children and reported results showed participants were more focused and demonstrating heightened attention skills.

## THE ROLE OF MINDFULNESS IN BEHAVIOURAL AND EMOTIONAL REGULATION



Figure 3. Results of respondents' answers when asked their opinions on the question.

A question posed to respondents queried the role mindfulness plays in helping regulate children's emotions and behaviours. Three of the sample group gave no answer, therefore the results displayed in Figure 3 represent answers given by 28 respondents. 96% said 'yes', 0% said 'no' and 4% answered 'don't know'. The sample group were then invited to elaborate through an open question on the role mindfulness has in helping children regulate their behaviours or emotions. They were free to formulate their own opinion, providing insight into their thoughts and practices. Figure 4 below displays the answers offered. Respondents were asked to elaborate on their answer, if they chose 'yes'. Common responses recurred throughout the sampling, and four key benefits emerged in the role of mindfulness practices in regulation.

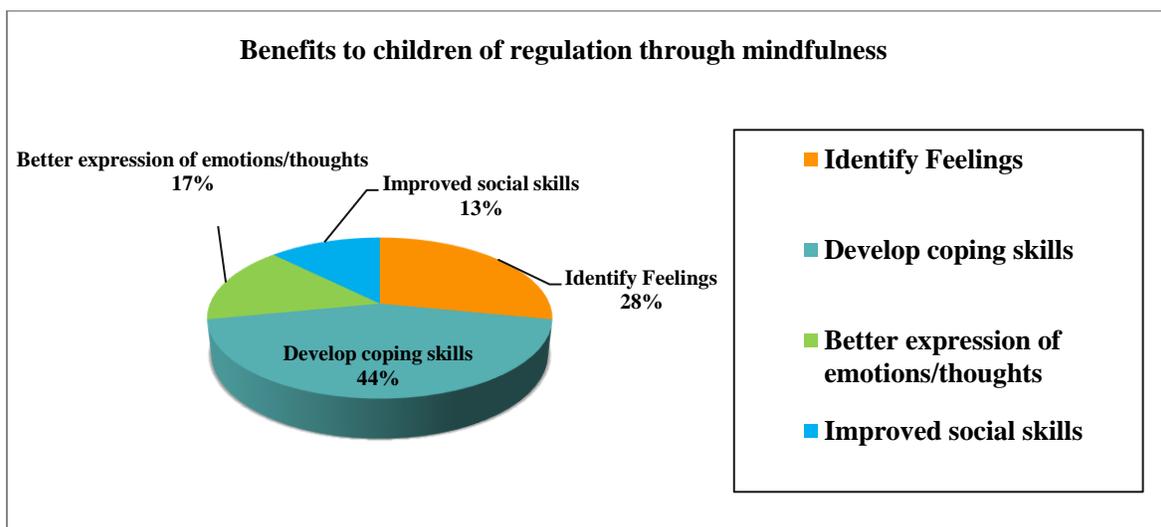


Figure 4. Respondents' answers when asked the role of mindfulness in regulation.

A significant number of respondents (44%) identified the development of ‘coping skills’ as a key benefit. Respondent 7 demonstrated this saying *“learning different techniques to cope with their emotions and how to cope when they are frustrated or angry...breathing exercises, taking time out for themselves”*. The second most commonly occurring attribute mentioned by the group was “Identify feelings” which was acknowledged by 28%. This is illustrated in respondent 13’s answer saying; *“Being able to name and share a feeling makes that feeling feel safe and strengthens the relationship”*. ‘Better expression of emotions and thoughts’ was another significant regulatory factor for children with 17% of respondents noting it as a benefit to practice. Respondent 8 illustrates this in their comment: *“I think it allows the children to express their emotions more openly when it’s talked about”*. The fourth attribute recognised at 13% was ‘better social skills’ *“It helps them develop empathy and sympathy...helps them feel [sic] from another perspective”* (Respondent 26). These findings confirm that respondents have identified four key areas where they have witnessed improvement and shared their views on how mindfulness practice has a positive impact on emotions and behaviours. By allowing children opportunities for openness and expression, they develop better self-esteem, enhanced resilience, a stronger sense of identity and self-confidence (Siegel, 2007). It can be concluded from this study’s findings and supporting research that mindfulness plays a significant role in better outcomes for their behavioural and emotional regulation and improved social skills and interactions.

## CONCLUSION

This study researched early years educators’ understanding of mindfulness and their perspectives on its implementation in early years settings. The findings reveal openness to practice among educators, and there is strong evidence suggesting their belief in many positive implications for young children. However, some challenges to practice arose and will be addressed through suggestions below.

The findings indicate these educators have a reasonable understanding of the concept of mindfulness. According to educators’ own experiences and observations, connections exist between practising mindfulness with children and positive outcomes. Kabat-Zinn (2003) places specific focus on ‘paying attention to the present moment’ and many respondents supported this, noting it as a key feature. Some reported benefits include better self-regulation skills, a relaxing and calming effect on children and increased awareness and presence.

This study encountered a distinct lack of Irish research and supporting literature on the topic. Irish studies found were more focused on adult and adolescent mindfulness practices. The researcher

experienced hesitant participation in some instances due to recent investigations carried out into malpractice in some early years settings conducted by RTÉ. Allocation of time was revealed as a barrier. Low staffing levels can restrict educators' time and opportunities to run mindfulness activities. In addition, they are under constraints to implement recognised curriculum sessions and have no structured time allocated for mindful activities.

From this study, there is evidence that more in-depth investigation into mindfulness-based practices for early years in Ireland is needed to prove its benefits. This would involve a larger scale study, with a broader sample size, conducted over a longer time period. Settings could dedicate specific time to mindful activities as this would encourage regular practice. The findings suggest short, effective sessions between 2 to 5 minutes are best when working with young children, as they have limited capacity to remain focused.

For practice to be most effective, educators could be offered sufficient training by way of mindfulness courses. This would offer opportunity to explore the concept, design, and implementation of mindfulness techniques. Educators would gain the necessary skills, and raised levels of confidence, to encourage practice with young children. It is important to develop social and emotional skills for personal wellbeing. Young children can acquire these skills through the practice of mindfulness, becoming more resilient to life's stresses and challenges. This study answered the question that mindfulness is indeed practiced in early years settings. Newly emerging international research, relating to integration of mindfulness techniques in educational settings, are currently producing positive results. However, for practice to be fully embraced, further research, training and education on the topic is recommended. As educators, we have a responsibility to nurture children's environmental, emotional, social, and physical well-being, and mindfulness can help fulfil this duty. Quoting Kofi Annan to conclude, "We were all children once. We all share the desire for the well-being of our children, which has always been and will continue to be the most universally cherished aspiration of humankind".

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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this journal published. Lastly, I would like to thank my family, who supported me to remain motivated through my dream in becoming an educator.

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## Finding a Voice and Fostering Independence. The Role of the SNA in Supporting Children with ASD in Mainstream Schools

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Niamh Molloy graduated from the Bachelor of Education (BEd) programme at Marino Institute of Education in 2020. Her interest in SEN stems from her experience on school placement throughout her years studying at MIE, and her passion to foster independence for children with ASD in mainstream primary schools. Niamh's experience working with SNAs, and observing their work, sparked her interest in research.

**KEYWORDS:** Inclusion, Special Education Assistants, ASD, Primary Education

### INTRODUCTION

This article uses documentary analysis to examine how a Special Needs Assistant (SNA) can support children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in accessing a holistic education in mainstream primary schools. The research examines children with ASD, focusing primarily on communication and social difficulties in primary school, and how the role of the SNA is key to supporting these needs by utilizing appropriate interventions. Such interventions that will be discussed in this study will be the use of social stories to support social difficulties, and the picture exchange communication system (PECS) to support individuals with communication difficulties.

### CONTEXT

The approach to children with special educational needs 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 Irish mainstream

schools. This move towards inclusion of children with SEN has been influenced both nationally and internationally through policy.

In 1978, the Warnock report acknowledged the importance of equality for children with special educational needs and the right of the child to an education within this context, this was revolutionary in terms of acknowledging how children with SEN were excluded in society (Warnock, 1978). The Warnock Report (1978) massively influenced the 1993 publication for the report by Special Education Review Committee (SERC) in Ireland, which outlined flaws in the national system for children with SEN and the need for adequate resources to ensure appropriate provision of education for these children. These reports were further emphasised in the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), stating that children should never be entirely educated in a segregated environment. Furthermore in 1998, the Education Act was introduced in Ireland, and stated that provisions will be made available to all state residents, including person with disabilities and SEN, quality of education appropriate to meeting the needs and ability of said person. This underlined the equality of access for children with SEN to educational settings. The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act further advocated the inclusion of children in mainstream settings clearly stating that children with SEN 'shall be educated in an inclusive environment with children who do not have such needs' unless such inclusive education is inconsistent with the best interest of the child with SEN or the 'effective provision of education for persons with whom the child is to be educated' (EPSEN, 2004, p.7).

The role of the SNA dates back to 1979 with the introduction of the Child Care Assistant Scheme which was designed to provide non-teaching assistants to class teachers in special schools (DES, 1979). Non-teaching duties of the child-care assistants, include but are not limited to; preparation and tidy of the classroom, supervision of students during assembly and recreational times, helping a child who requires special assistance, and aiding with feeding, toileting and clothing (DES, 1979, cited in DES 2011, p.122).

The shift towards inclusive education provision for children with SEN highlighted the growing need for additional support within mainstream schools for children with SEN. The SERC recommended the provision of Special Needs Assistants in 1991 to any child who required support (SERC, 1993).

Circular 07/02 was the first significant policy statement outlining the role and duties of the SNA in Ireland. It stated that the recruitment of SNAs were specifically to 'assist in the care of pupils with disabilities' (DES, 2002, p.1). SNAs were allocated to both mainstream and special school settings. The assistance of the SNA was 'of a non-teaching nature' (p.4) and specific duties included

toileting, typing or scribing, feeding, clothing, preparation and cleaning of the classroom in which the children with assisted was taught, temporary withdrawal of child(ren) from the classroom, boarding and disembarking transport to school, and observing child with SEN during assembly, yard, and dispersal times.

Circular 24/03 further emphasised the SNA's duties as providing care to children with 'significant medical needs, a significant impairment of physical or sensory function or where their behaviour is a danger to themselves or to other pupils' (DES, 2003, p.3). This circular reminded schools that the role of the SNA is non-teaching in nature.

Circular 0030/14 outlined that the role of the SNA in Ireland is to address the primary care needs of children arising from disabilities. This role includes duties of non-teaching nature (DES, 2002), and is similar to the 1970's childcare assistants that were recruited in special schools for children who required physical care (Ireland, 1976). SNA support aims to facilitate the attendance of pupils with SEN in school, and to minimize disruptions to classroom teaching. SNAs are employed to encourage and enable inclusion in mainstream school setting, with the focus on developing independent living skills for children with SEN (DES, 2014). Circular 0030/14 specifically mentions the SNAs requirements in terms of training for children with communication difficulties. It states that SNAs working with children with hearing and communication impairments 'staff are required to be trained to provide Sign Language or specialist training (Braille, Lámh, Sign Language, Augmentive/Alternative Interventions) to assist in the provision of support for children with a specific sensory impairment' (DES, 2014, p.13). Furthermore circular 0030/14 indicates that various interventions must be implemented in schools to aid children with social difficulties. Basic communication and social skills are paramount in order to live an independent life. Communication and social difficulties have a huge affect on one another, if a child struggles to communicate their thoughts and emotions, they have great difficulty with navigating social interactions. It is through the work of the SNA in the classroom that children with communication and social difficulties can access a holistic education in mainstream primary schools.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Documentary research is the sole methodology used throughout this research paper. Briggs & Coleman state that 'documentary research is a form of interpretive research that requires researchers to collect, collate, and analyse empirical data in order to produce a theoretical account that either describes, interprets or explains what has occurred' (2007, p.281). Both primary and secondary documentary sources are used throughout this research paper including newspaper

articles, journal articles, books and legislation. It is imperative that documents used are reliable and credible; therefore, the researcher must evaluate each document used.

The researcher acknowledges that there are several limitations associated with this research paper. There was a time constraint of three months for this piece of research, thus limiting the author to the amount of research that can be done within that time frame. This time frame also limited this research project to solely documentary research, as primary data collection was not possible. This narrows the data collection to secondary data, which was limited in Irish contexts.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **SNA DUTIES ARE NON-TEACHING IN NATURE**

In 2002, Logan conducted some research in which parents, pupils and SNAs were interviewed regarding the duties carried out by the SNA. It was noted that in practice, such duties were teaching and non-teaching in nature (Logan, 2006). Parents who were interviewed stated that 'SNAs offered support for learning, behaviour and social interaction with peers' (p.95), to children with SEN. 'Escorting children on school buses and/or assisting children to board and alight from school buses' was the lowest ranking duty that was carried out, with a mere 28% of SNAs completing this duty daily.

Over 85% of SNAs, teachers and principals indicated that educational duties such as; assisting pupils engaging in education activities, supervising and assisting small groups, clarifying instruction, and giving encouragement to students (Logan, 2006, p.96) were carried out by SNAs. Overall SNAs, teachers and principals stated that the duties carried out by the SNA were more educational than care duties, and 57% of teachers vocalised the need for a shared understanding of the role of the SNA. It is worth noting that the data found through this research was primarily a representation of the duties carried out by full time SNAs, assigned to one child in a Dublin school whose class teacher had less than two years' experience working with an SNA. Therefore, the case study findings cannot be considered representative of Irish primary schools.

According to Keating & O'Connor, SNA's are assigned to children with SEN who require specialised assistance due to medical needs, physical disabilities, sensory impairments, and where a child's behaviour is a danger to themselves or to other children (2012). Keating & O'Connor found that there were contrasting perspectives of the role of the SNA in Ireland. Although policy outlines that the role of the SNA is non-teaching in nature, there is a major inconsistency in practice and expectations of the SNA within different schools. It is important to note that this journal was

published in 2012, just two years prior to circular 0030/14 which specifically outlined the duties of the SNA in the classroom.

Similar findings were drawn between Keating & O'Connor (2012) and Logan (2006). Keating & O'Connor's study found that over 80% of both SNAs and teachers agreed that SNAs engaged in educational duties such as; clarifying instructions for pupils, helping students to concentrate and finish work, and giving encouragement to students (p536). It is interesting to note that studies carried out a decade apart showed very similar findings despite being undertaken in different parts of the country and in a significantly different number of schools.

#### CONFLICTING POLICY AND PRACTICE

Both Logan (2006), and Keating & O'Connor's (2012) findings were based on self-reporting questionnaires by respondents which is a major limitation of these case studies as the respondents may provide answers that they feel are more socially acceptable, and/or they may not have the ability to assess themselves accurately. Observations of the work of SNAs would have strengthened the findings in each of these studies and provided a range of methodologies to data collection.

In 2015, a similar quantitative study was carried out in a total of 282 schools (Kerins & McDonagh, 2015). The case study examined current duties of the SNA following circular 0030/14, and possible future training needs. However, similar results were found between Logan's (2006) case study in 2002, and Kerins & McDonagh's work (2015). Both studies showed that a limited number of SNAs assisted children with SEN in feeding, toileting, clothing and general hygiene. Over 80% of SNAs reported engaging with pedagogical duties throughout the school day, despite this study following the circular 0030/14. An enormous 96.3% of SNAs reported repeating instructions for children with SEN, and 95.1% reported assisting these students to stay on task. Despite the limitations of this study focusing on SNAs in post primary schools, it is evident that the practicing duties of the SNA does not correlate policy.

Policies such as circular 07/02 and 0030/14 specifically outline the duties of the SNA as non-teaching in nature. It is evident that policy and practice do not directly correlate. Studies have shown that in reality, SNAs engage in a number of duties that are teaching in nature such as; repeating instruction, assisting with educational activities, and providing encouragement.

#### SNA'S ROLE IN FOSTERING INDEPENDENCE

Two interventions explored how to support children with ASD in relation to their communication and social difficulties, and to promote independence. These are social stories and picture exchange communication system (PECS). The role of the SNA is of supreme importance here in practically

supporting children with ASD in terms of social and communication difficulties. Circular 0030/14 outlines (DES, 2014) 'assistance with severe communication difficulties' (p.6), and assistance enabling a pupil to access 'psycho-educational programmes' (p.7), as key aspects of support from the SNA.

In a study carried out by Charlop Christy *et al.* (2002), three children with ASD were observed to examine the effects that using PECS had on their spontaneous speech and imitation. This sample size should be considered a limitation of this study however the results of all three children present a positive correlation between the use of PECS and children speech. After PECS training, each child displayed spontaneous speech over 65% of the time during trials, and imitation over 70% of the time. Each child displayed a high level of both spontaneous speech (90%) and imitation (80%) during free play time. SNAs are responsible for the complex communication needs arising from ASD and are provided specialised training to deliver such support to children (NCSE, 2108). Communication skills are amongst the life skills to be developed by SNAs, which supports independence of children with ASD. Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) interventions such as PECS provide a 'voice' to children with ASD who are non-verbal. These AAC interventions also facilitates the initiation of interactions by an individual who is non-verbal, with a verbally communicative individual.

Social stories provide assistance, to children with ASD in dealing with scenarios that are common in their everyday life. Familiar situations such as sharing, collaborating with other individuals, and turn taking (Briody & McGarry, 2005). In a study carried out by Scattone *et al.* (2006), three boys with ASD aged between 8-13 years old were chosen for this study as neither previously initiated nor responded to social interactions during free play. In the case of each three children, an individualised social story was constructed to demonstrate appropriate social initiations and responses that were relevant to their personal free time social encounters. Scattone *et al.* specifically outlines that for the purpose of this study 'an *appropriate social interaction* was defined as a verbal, physical, or gestural initiation or response to a peer' (Scattone *et al.*, 2006, p.214). Results showed that following the introduction of social stories, each child's appropriate social interactions increased with the highest increase of 32%.

The sample size of this study is extremely small therefore the data found does not provide an accurate representation of the use of social stories on a wide scale. It is interesting to note that this study solely focuses on boys with ASD, however this could be a reflection of the profile of children with ASD as experts have stated that ASD is more prominent in boys (Halladay *et al.*, 2015). This is an international case study that was undertaken in the United States, thus does not depict the benefits of social stories in the Irish primary school context.

The NCSE (2018) states that the SNA is responsible for the social competence of students by developing their social skills and social interaction needs through psycho-educational programmes. It is evident that AAC and psycho-educational programmes such as PECS and social stories are advantages for the development of a child with ASD's social and communication skills. Such skills enable children with ASD to lead a more independent life. It is the responsibility of the SNA to develop children's life skill set and assist children in acquiring skills to aid independence.

## CONCLUSION

This research has highlighted the central importance of the SNA in supporting children with ASD in accessing a holistic education in mainstream primary schools. The aim of this dissertation is to examine the role of the SNA as an inclusive factor in supporting children with communication and social difficulties in primary schools. At the outset, circular 0030/14 (DES, 2014) was interrogated to present an understanding of the role of the SNA. What may be concluded from this circular is that SNA support is concerned with the care needs of the child and is a non-teaching role. While the ideology of inclusive legislation seeks SNA support as a care role, this study has shown that there is a conflict between policy and practice of the role of the SNA, as over 80% SNAs are still engaging in educational activities with children with ASD (Kerins & McDonagh, 2015). Arguably, there is still some uncertainty or as NCSE (2018) states, there is a need for formal training to consolidate the understanding of the role of the SNA.

The role of the SNA must be explicitly outlined to pre-service teachers and NQTs in order to establish a healthy classroom environment. Such knowledge enables class teachers to understand the duties of the SNA as non-educational in nature, thus facilitating direction given. Teachers need to receive training regarding the role of the SNA in the classroom. The school, and or professionals should give this training to ensure that there is a universally clear understanding of their duties in relation to children with SEN. Such training will ensure that there is a healthy classroom environment where teachers can provide direction. A mutual understanding in relation to the work of the SNA will facilitate an inclusive mainstream classroom environment.

It would be beneficial for continuous professional development (CPD) to be made available to all SNAs. Such CPD should involve training in relation to implementation of interventions for children with communication and social difficulties. As recommended in the policy advice paper (NCSE, 2018) schools should 'have the professional capacity necessary to meet students' additional care needs, where possible and appropriate, including those arising from significant medical, physical, emotional/behavioural, sensory/communication and other significant difficulties engaging in learning".

More research is needed surrounding communication attainment with use of interventions. Future research should be conducted to investigate the effects of interventions on acquisition of complex skills, and the attainment of such communication skills. Research must look beyond the acquisition of such communication skills and focus on best interventions for communication attainment. Such research is urgently needed in improving independence for children with complex communication difficulties.

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