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**STER eJournal**



## STER 2024

The STER e-journal is a core output of the STER project, a national higher education initiative that supports education students and graduates to share their dissertation research. STER has shared the work of over 100 students in the past seven years, and has actively contributed to building educators research capacity, by encouraging them to articulate the impact of research on practice and generating discourse which investigate practice.

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 2023/4, it has been a pleasure to work closely with students who recognise the value of partnership for teaching and learning.

This sixth volume of the STER e-journal presents eight articles prepared by education students of MIE, TCD, UCD, SETU, DCU and our first international article from the University of Graz. All articles are based on students' undergraduate or postgraduate dissertation research (to Masters level) and have undergone a double-blind peer review process.

In this issue, articles cover a diversity of themes including religious education, professional development, play therapy, diversity and inclusion, English language teaching and literacy education. 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 publishing journey.



*Dr Aimie Brennan*  
*Founder & Coordinator of STER*

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The STER team would like to thank Marino Institute of Education for providing funding for STER 2024. Individual articles can be downloaded from [www.ster.ie](http://www.ster.ie) Individual articles can be downloaded from [www.ster.ie](http://www.ster.ie)

## Message from the Student Team

This volume of the STER e-journal gave students the opportunity to share and publish their research on relevant and distinctive education topics. The 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 2024 team consisted of 6 student and staff volunteers studying and teaching on various education programmes. STER 2024 gave us the opportunity to work collaboratively with new people, both lecturers other students on a range of different aspects of the STER project. From marketing, social media, strategic planning and organizing the STER 2024 conference, the project provided us with a wonderful opportunity to explore engaging and thought-provoking research topics which further expanded our perspective on education research. Being part of the STER project has also challenged us to develop our communication, research and organization skills and served as a reminder of the powerful impact that education researchers can have.

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. We very much enjoyed reading the articles and being part of the team.

*STER Student Team 2024*

# STER

## *Student Teacher Educational Research e-Journal*

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**Volume 6, 2024**

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“It’s no big deal”. What happens to children opted-out of religious instruction and sacramental preparation in Irish Catholic primary schools? The perspectives and practices of principals. <i>Shane Donoghue, Trinity College Dublin (TCD).</i>	<b>6</b>
An investigation into farmers’ perceptions and experiences of engaging with continued professional development. <i>Roisin Connolly, Marino Institute of Education, Dublin (MIE).</i>	<b>15</b>
Restorative Circles as a Means of Proactive Student Self-Assessment: Integrating the Wellbeing Agenda into the Junior Cycle English Classroom. <i>Karl Gough, University College Dublin (UCD).</i>	<b>28</b>
Effort and Belief Pedagogies in a Post-Primary DEIS context. <i>Jeffrey Egan, University College Dublin (UCD).</i>	<b>37</b>
The Influence of Global English on the Contemporary ELT Classroom: The Case of the Linguistic Landscape. <i>Christina Egger, University of Graz, Austria.</i>	<b>45</b>
Dissecting Diversity: Experiences of migrant and minority student populations. <i>Sandra Nolan, South East Technological University (SETU), Carlow.</i>	<b>54</b>
The Books are Harder: Enhancing the Teaching of Reading Comprehension in The Senior Primary Classes. <i>Aoife Joy Keogh, Dublin City University (DCU).</i>	<b>63</b>
An examination of the benefits of incorporating aspects of play therapy, speech and language therapy and physiotherapy into the classroom for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder to enhance their educational experience. <i>Allanna Cronin, Marino Institute of Education, Dublin (MIE).</i>	<b>76</b>



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“It’s no big deal”. What happens to children opted-out of religious instruction and sacramental preparation in Irish Catholic primary schools? The perspectives and practices of principals.

## Shane Donoghue

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**KEYWORDS:** Primary education, religious instruction, sacramental preparation, inclusion, ‘opt-out’.

### INTRODUCTION

As a newly qualified teacher in my first (Catholic) school, the class contained a number of children whose parents held various religious beliefs and ‘none’. During my first religious instruction lesson, these children (those not of Catholic faith) quietly took out their reading books or homework. Curious, I asked other teachers in the school what happened in their classes during religious instruction lessons. They all had similar responses, the children whose parent’s had ‘opted out’ of religious instruction did the same; some even got to do colouring. It seemed to be accepted, and no one queried it or spoke with any of the children’s parents. This practice seemed exclusionary to me. When I finally spoke with the principal, I asked if we could try to find some way to include these children in the lessons, to allow them to contribute and share their own beliefs, their culture, their traditions and views. But my suggestions were not acted upon. I have encountered similar variations of this response over the years, which translates as almost an ambivalence. This ambivalence, in part, provided the stimulus for this study.

Religious instruction and sacramental preparation are part of every-day school life for most children in Irish primary schools, with almost 90 per cent of schools under the patronage of the Catholic Church (Central Statistics Office, 2020). A report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) showed that Irish primary schools are second only to Israel in the amount of time spent on religious instruction (OECD, 2014). Religious instruction has been ubiquitous in Irish Catholic primary schools almost since the establishment of the national system of education in Ireland in 1831.

Over the past 20 years however, Ireland has experienced a significant growth of inward migration which is reflected in the increasing levels of ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity in schools (Faas, Darmody & Sokolowska, 2015; Hession, 2013; Kitching, 2020). This cultural shift, coupled with the considerable rise in those identifying as having no religion, or identifying as atheist or agnostic (CSO, 2019) has resulted in an increase in the number of parents opting their children out of religious instruction and sacramental preparation lessons in primary schools. To explore these issues, nine principals of Irish Catholic primary schools were interviewed. As there are over 3000 primary schools in the Republic of Ireland, these nine schools were specifically chosen as they could reasonably be expected to reflect other similar-type schools. The schools selected fell into one of three categories:

- (i) predominately ‘Catholic, White and Gaelic’ (Parker-Jenkins & Masterson, 2013)
- (ii) schools with some religious diversity
- (iii) schools with significant religious diversity

A mix of primary school types were also selected; DEIS band I and II, non-DEIS, small, medium and large schools and inner city, urban and rural schools. These interviews were multi-purposeful. For this article the focus will be on two specific areas, they are (a) the percentage of children opted-out of religious instruction and sacramental preparation in their schools, and (b) what their current practices and perspectives were for accommodating children opted out.

## CONTEXT

Those identifying with a minority religion in Ireland has grown significantly over the past decade: Muslim by 29 per cent, Orthodox by 38 per cent and Hindu by 34 per cent (Central Statistics Office, 2016). Furthermore, the number of people identifying as having no religious belief or identifying as atheist or agnostic has risen by 64 per cent since 2011 to almost half a million people in the last census (CSO, 2016). It has been posited that “considering these trends the issue of religion and belief identity is of growing political and educational importance” (Darmody & Smyth, 2017, p. 17).

The right to not attend denominational religious instruction classes in Irish primary schools is enshrined in both the Constitution of Ireland (1937) and the Irish Education Act (1998). Article 44.2.4 of the Irish Constitution states that children do not have to attend religious instruction classes if it is the wish of parents or guardians. Rule 69 – 2(a) of the Rules for National Schools (1965) states that: “No pupil shall receive, or be present at, any religious instruction of which his parents or guardians disapprove.” The terms ‘religious education’ and ‘religious instruction’ are sometimes used interchangeably when describing what takes place during religious lessons in Irish Catholic primary schools. Historically in Ireland, the term ‘religious instruction’ has been used in the Constitution and legal documents and circulars to refer to the educating into a particular religious tradition. Religious education generally aims to adopt a broader approach than religious instruction and seeks to open children to learning about different beliefs in society (Coolahan, 1981). Concerning religious education, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2015) state that the development and implementation of the curriculum in religious education in primary schools is the responsibility of the relevant patron bodies, which as mentioned earlier is overwhelmingly the Catholic Church, at just under 90 per cent.

The current provisions for children opted-out of religious instruction and sacramental preparation in Irish primary schools have been called into question and are considered inadequate on human rights grounds (Kilkelly, 2009; Irish Human Rights Commission, 2011; Mawhinney, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2015) .

Ireland has been widely criticised by national and international human rights groups for the lack of suitable opting-out possibilities in primary schools (Council Of Europe, 2017; IHRC, 2011; United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2016). The IHRC cautioned that “unless religion classes are moved outside of the school day, human rights standards suggest that it is necessary to put in place mechanisms to ensure supervision of children who wish to be exempted” (2011, p. 100). The Minister of Education at the time commented that “Ireland will continue to be the subject of international criticism if it does not move to address the concerns raised by the monitoring committees of the international human rights treaties to which it is a party” (Quinn, 2014, p. 6). Concerns have also been raised that children are not being ensured the right to effectively opt-out of religious classes, in addition to a lack of appropriate alternatives to such classes (UN, 2016). Ireland has been repeatedly called on by the European Convention on Human Rights to promote the establishment of non-denominational and multi-denominational schools to accommodate the growing religious and cultural diversity in Ireland (Jacobs, Whyte & Ovey, 2010).

The Irish State has moved to assure UN Committees that the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion is protected in schools (Mawhinney, 2007). In 2015 in their reports to the UNCRC and the COE, Ireland repeatedly referred to Article 44.2.4 to indicate that a child's freedom of thought, conscience and religion was protected in Irish primary schools (Mawhinney, 2015). As well as the State, both the Catholic Church and the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism (FOPP) have addressed the issue of children opted out of religious instruction and sacramental preparation in primary schools. The FOPP was established by the government in 2011, whose main objective was to ensure that a greater diversity of patronage be available in primary schools. The Programme for Government (2014) committed to achieving a target of at least 400 divested multi-denominational primary schools by 2030 to improve parental choice. As of March 2021 that number stands at 15. The FOPP underlined that provisions in schools remained inappropriate and inadequate on human rights grounds because children who had been opted-out were being deprived of the opportunity to learn about other religions and ethics and to develop knowledge, values and attitudes towards religions (Coolahan, Hussey & Kilfeather, 2012).

Regarding the options schools can provide to parents when a request to opt-out of religious instruction is made, the Catholic Schools Partnership (CSP) recommended for the child to remain in the classroom, participating in what they described as “an interesting, educationally appropriate and child-friendly activity, where alternative supervision is not feasible” (2015, p. 26). This option was viewed as a satisfactory situation for teachers and parents (CSP, 2015). Coolahan et al. noted however, that “this perspective does not illustrate sufficient understanding of the human rights issues involved and an urgent need for opt-out arrangements to be dealt with more satisfactorily in schools.” (2012, p. 82). Addressing those children in Catholic schools whose parents identify with a minority faith or no religious belief, the CSP highlighted the inclusive nature of schools, stating that all traditions are acknowledged, respected and welcomed (CSP, 2015). The CSP stated that “children from all faith traditions and none are welcome to participate in the religious education programme that the school provides” (2015, p. 25).

## **METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative research method and the interpretivist paradigm were to guide this research.. The research. The interpretive paradigm allows researchers to view the world through the perceptions and experiences of the participants and uses those experiences to construct and interpret their understanding from gathered data (Creswell, 1994; Thanh & Thanh, 2015). The qualitative approach suited the purpose of this study as it sought to gain a more nuanced understanding of the experiences, challenges and perspectives of school



While teachers, parents and children’s experiences were also considered for inclusion in the research, it was determined that principals should be the focus for two reasons; they are the leaders and decision-makers in their respective schools and teachers, children and parents look to them for guidance and instruction (Fullan, 2006). In order to establish how many children were opted-out of religious instruction and sacramental preparation in their schools, principals would need to inspect their enrolment forms and consult with teachers prior to interview. It was therefore decided to forward the list of questions prior to the interview to ensure that principals had the relevant information they needed in order to answer them accurately and that the data collected was valid (Denscombe, 2014). In order to establish current school practices for children who have been opted-out, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the nine principals. To interpret the qualitative data gathered, Denscombe’s (2014) five stages were implemented in the analysis of qualitative data to ensure credibility: preparation of the data, familiarity with the data, interpreting the data, verifying the data and representing the data.

As both deputy principal and primary school teacher in a Catholic school, the term ‘insider researcher’ can be used to describe the author’s role in this study. An insider researcher offers many advantages, as there can be an implicit assumption from participants that the researcher shares their views and experiences and is therefore more disposed towards engaging in dialogue about their experiences (Unluer, 2012). Although there are numerous benefits to research being conducted by an insider, it can raise concerns relating to objectivity and bias (Smyth & Holian, 2008). As a qualitative approach was used, the size and scale of the study is a limitation. Although the research involved nine principals from a diverse school sample it is not appropriate or accurate to extend the findings to represent all primary Catholic schools in Ireland. However, as each school was selected due to their particular diversity, school type and location, the findings should still be of interest to schools not involved in the study as they are likely to mirror their own context in some way.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

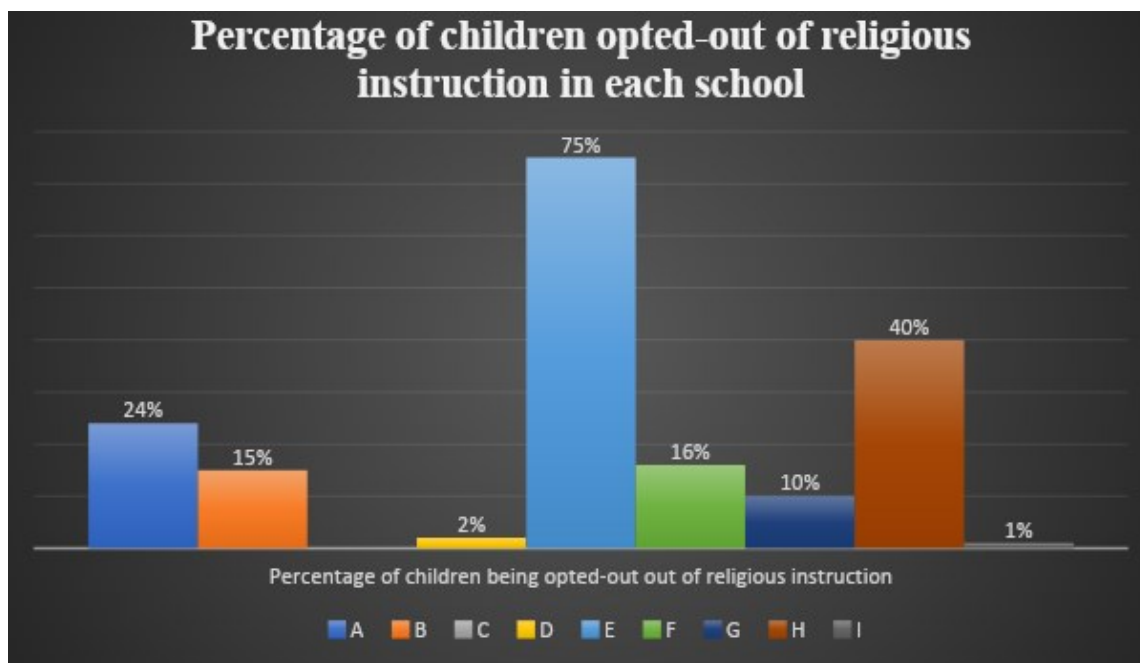


Figure 1: The percentage of children opted-out of religious instruction in each school

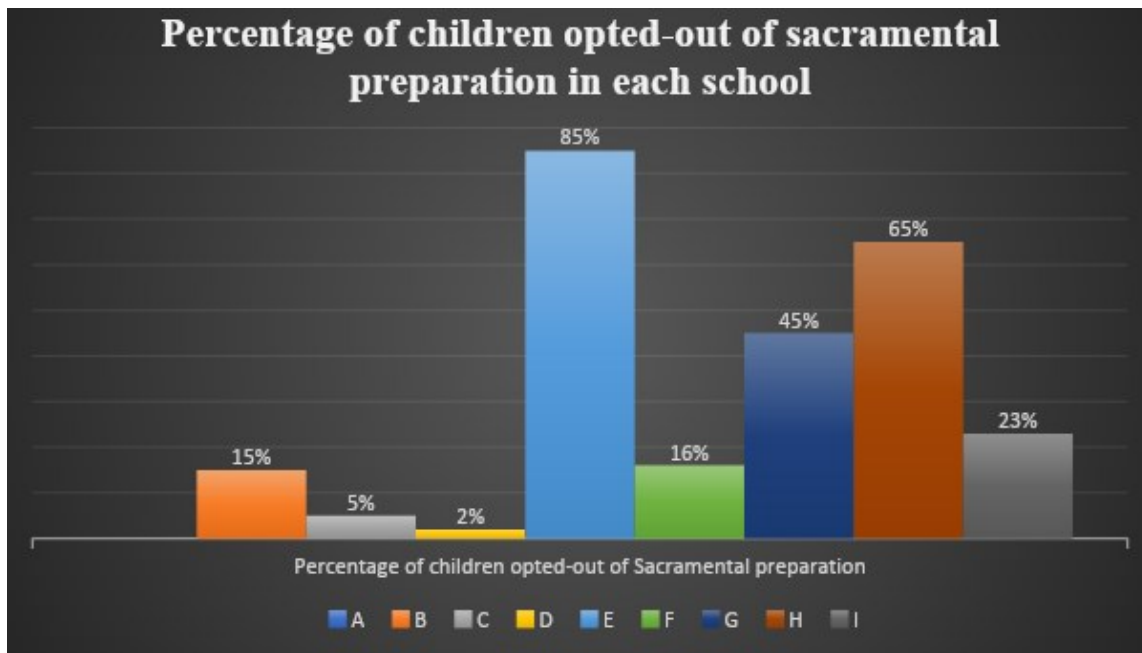


Figure 2: The percentage of children opted-out of sacramental preparation in each school

All percentages are based on the total number of children in each school. School A is omitted from Figure 2 as there is no sacramental preparation in the school as it is a junior school. The data shows that in most of the schools included in the study there are significant numbers of children opted-out of religious instruction and sacramental preparation. For this article five broad themes will be discussed from the interviews:

*Significant numbers of children are being opted-out of religious instruction and sacramental preparation in the schools*

As can be seen in the graphs above, the percentage of children opted-out of religious instruction varies greatly from school to school. School I has just one per cent, school A has 24 per cent while school E currently has 75 per cent of their enrolment opted-out of religious instruction. School C is the only school that currently has no children opted-out of religious instruction that the principal is aware of. In schools B, D and F, the percentage of children opted-out of sacramental preparation is the same as it is for religious instruction. Of the remaining five schools, each one has more children opted-out of sacramental preparation in addition to those already opted-out of religious instruction. Also, in all of the schools those numbers are either remaining relatively the same or increasing. A number of the principals commented that they had experienced an increase in parents opting their children out over the past five to ten years. This can be attributed to both inward migration and Ireland becoming a more secular society. The estimate for net inward migration is 190,333 between 2016 and 2022 (CSO, 2022). According to statistics from the CSO (2016), there has been a seven fold increase in the number of people identifying as having no religious belief since 1991.

*Children opted-out of religious instruction are remaining in the classroom in all schools*

The schools selected differed in many ways in terms of school type, size, geographical location and diversity. However, there was a commonality in their approaches to catering for children opted-out of religious instruction. In all nine schools the children remained in the classroom. Also, no parent had requested for their child to be physically removed from the classroom in any of the schools. What those children did during the religious instruction lessons was also similar; children who had been opted-out remain in the classroom either listening, participating in the lesson or doing work.

It is generally accepted that sacramental preparation takes up more time of the school day than religious instruction lessons (Irish National Teachers Organisation, 2013) and permeates throughout the curriculum. The provisions in the majority of the nine schools for those opted-out of sacramental preparation were generally the same, with the children remaining in the classroom. During church visits for sacramental preparation practice a mixture of children going with the class, or remaining behind with a resource teacher was reported.

#### *Principals were ambivalent*

All nine principals, despite some having very high numbers of children opted-out, responded that it wasn't a significant issue or challenge for their schools. Several principals expressed ambivalence or indifference towards the issue. Statements such as "go with the flow" and "it's no big deal" were common.

#### *There is a lack of formal procedures and provisions in the schools for children who have been opted-out and teachers are primarily responsible for the arrangements for children who have been opted-out*

None of the schools currently have formal procedures or provisions for those children opted-out. The principals in all schools deferred the responsibility to classroom teachers to decide on the arrangements. All principals expressed satisfaction with this approach. The new Admissions to School Education Act (2018) has instructed schools to have in place suitable arrangements for those children opted-out. Generally during religious instruction and sacramental preparation lessons, those children opted-out either did specific work or activities assigned by the teacher, or participated and listened in on the lessons. All principals responded that generally, parents, teachers and children were all satisfied with this approach.

#### *Resource/SE teachers are being used to supervise children who have been opted-out*

A common practice emerged from the interviews involving the use of resource/special education teachers. During Church visits, or for children who had been separated for sacramental preparation, these resource/SE teachers supervised the children in many of the schools. This was done despite some principals being unsure whether the children had access to resource hours. This raises concerns about the appropriate use of resource teachers' time and the likelihood that children that have access to resource hours may not be receiving them. According to the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) the role of the resource/SE teacher does not include the supervision of pupils who have been opted out of religious classes.

## **CONCLUSION**

It is clear from this study that the issue of the 'opt-out' clause in Irish primary schools is an extremely complex one. We need only to look at the enormous number of submissions from stakeholders, interest groups and individuals to the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism to get a glimpse of the complexity of the issues surrounding the role of religion and religious education in Irish primary schools.

The findings illustrate that significant numbers of children are opted-out of religious instruction in most of the schools. The numbers of children opted-out also increases again for sacramental preparation in most schools. The provisions and arrangements taken to cater for those children are the same; they all remain in the classroom. Generally, the classroom teacher has primary responsibility for what arrangements are made for those children during this time. The children do other work or activities, or voluntarily listen in and participate with aspects of the lesson. As discussed earlier, this raises several concerns regarding the right of the child to 'not attend' or to be physically removed from the classroom in line with constitutional and human rights law.

Based on the schools involved in this study, this does not appear to be an issue for either the principals or the parents. Parents are generally not raising concerns about their child remaining in the room, or what happens to them during religious instruction lessons.

There have already been several recommendations and suggestions made by the State, the Department of Education, the FOPP and the Catholic Church concerning the future role of religious instruction and sacramental preparation in Irish primary schools. These include sacramental preparation taking place outside of school hours, a new ERB and Ethics curriculum, religious instruction to take place at certain times of the school day, more school divestment and the establishment of multi-denominational and non-denominational schooling alternatives for parents. (FOPP, 2014; CSP, 2015). All of these recommendations have encountered significant challenges to their implementation or have not begun to be implemented at all. This can be attributed to a myriad of factors, including ambivalence on the part of parents and schools as well as a reluctance from the Catholic Church to change the status quo. While it is clear schools are in breach of constitutional and human rights law, it does not appear to be causing concern for either the principals or the parents in the schools included in this study.

Bearing in mind the complexity of the issue, three recommendations are offered from this study:

- A pilot programme to be introduced in schools with significant religious diversity where sacramental preparation moves to a more parish-based approach
- A pilot programme of 'opting-in' to religious instruction in large schools with significant religious diversity
- An ERB and Ethics programme as an *alternative to religious instruction lessons*

There is a clear lack of empirical research on the provision of religious instruction in Irish schools and the implications for minority students. A much deeper investigation of how many children are opted-out and how schools are catering for them is recommended, particularly in major towns, cities and urban areas, where the greatest diversity exists. A more expansive investigation of the perspectives and experiences of principals is also recommended, focusing primarily on inner city and urban areas with high diversity. Further research is needed on the experiences and views of children opted-out of religious instruction by their parents. Their voices are important and should be documented. Research on the views and opinions of parents is also recommended.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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# An investigation into farmers' perceptions and experiences of engaging with continued professional development

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In 2022, I completed my BSc. Education Studies from Marino Institute of Education and currently am in my final year studying my Professional Masters in Education (primary) in Maynooth University [or PME primary] to become a primary school teacher. I completed this research as part of my BSc and wanted to focus on a demographic of people who I am familiar with, but I did not see represented in mainstream education research. This research examines the levels of awareness and access farmers in Ireland have to continued professional development (CPD) and was chosen based on my own experience of growing up on a sheep farm in rural Ireland.

**KEYWORDS:** CPD, Farming, CPD for Farmers, Lifelong learning, Upskilling

## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this research was to investigate the perceptions and experiences of farmers when engaging with continued professional development (CPD) in Ireland. The data was collected through a combination of online questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The main questions seeking to be answered were 'how farmers interact with CPD', 'where farmers access information relating to CPD' and 'are the courses currently being run through organisations relevant to the needs of farmers? The purpose was to understand, from the perspective of farmers, the levels of awareness there is relating to CPD, while also investigating how this may impact on levels of interest.

The objectives of this research were:

1. To explore the experiences of farmers in relation to accessing professional development and new information relating to farming techniques and equipment.
2. To identify the types of resources used by farmers when accessing training and continued education.
3. To gather the views and opinions of farmers relating to awareness and interest in upskilling and CPD.

The importance of continued professional training and development, within the agricultural sector, is recognised and emphasised by the National Skills Strategy 2025 (Teagasc, 2018). It is vital to ensure economic competitiveness and, in terms of agriculture, is essential to help the wider farming population cope with constant and fast paced changes (LIT & BRC, 2019). It is important to note that, a ‘farmer’ in this research refers to any individual who is involved in the operations of a farm on either a frequent basis or in a casual capacity, this can include family members and those managing accounts or otherwise.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Irish farmers and the levels of educational attainment among the community was explored in this research, and the qualifications necessary to become a ‘trained farmer’ in Ireland were examined. Following on from this, it highlights the value and importance of CPD in agriculture justifying the involvement of the farmer’s voice and opinion in the design and development of CPD to ensure relevance and accessibility of the topics covered.

### *Irish farmers and educational achievement*

The education level of individuals, particularly those aged 65 and older in Ireland, is an important factor to be considered impacting on an individual’s ability to engage and participate in CPD. According to the 2016 Census, 30% of farm holders in Ireland were aged 65 and older. It is important to note that in the same year 39.7% of this general population had only received the equivalent of primary level education (CSO, 2016(a)). To elaborate, it is critical to consider the disadvantage at which some individuals who have minimally accessed education may be at while accessing CPD. The National Adult Literacy Agency states that from the OECD Adult Skills Survey in 2012 it was found that 1 in 6 Irish adults, 17.9%, have a literacy level of 1 or below, meaning they may be unable to comprehend basic written information (n.d.). While this data is nine years old it is still relevant and a possible serious barrier facing the older population of Agri-sector workers in Ireland, based off the findings of the 2016 Census.

### *Farming and importance of upskilling*

To ensure economic competitiveness and help cope with fast paced changes, CPD in agriculture is essential, this is emphasised by the National Skills Strategy 2025, who highlighted the importance of CPD (Limerick Institute of Technology & Broadmore Research and Consulting, 2019; Teagasc, 2018).

The Teagasc Education Vision report (2018) stated that the “provision of lifelong learning opportunities and a continuous professional development programme for active farmers will be a key element of Teagasc’s future knowledge exchange activities” (p.49). The key benefits of CPD courses for members of the agricultural community in Ireland have been presented in research completed by Limerick Institute of Technology and Broadmore Research and Consulting (LIT & BRC, 2019). This research suggested that the introduction of a wide range of accredited CPD courses would help farmers to improve their skills and make more informed decision-making in relation to farm economics (LIT & BRC, 2019). It was also proposed that specifically focused CPD courses would lead to an increased awareness among agricultural workers about the details relating to policies, regulations, and scheme requirements necessary for farming success (LIT & BRC, 2019).

Ultimately this research identified that there are numerous benefits to developing accredited CPD course in agriculture, promoting innovation and ensuring that this industry continues to become more knowledgeable as well as have “access to up-to-date advice and information which can be applied to farming activities” (LIT & BRC, 2019, p.18).



The Education Vision report highlighted the role of digital technologies in lifelong learning allowing for more interactive and personalised learning resources to be created (Teagasc, 2018). One of the main goals of this report is to “establish professional development routes for farmers and the wider land sector including an alumni support programme for Teagasc graduates who are taking up farming” (2018, p.63), this shows that as an organisation Teagasc are committed to engaging all members of the agricultural community in CPD and working towards better education and training prospects. They aim to make these opportunities readily available to all members of the community and specifically focus also on new farmers, to support in the development of development of their farms.

#### *Farmer involvement in research*

A common theme which is emphasised throughout research is the exclusion of farmers opinion and inputs in agricultural research. The gap which is then created as a result of a lack of farmer involvement in formal research unintentionally creates mismatched expectations between researchers and farmers, especially in the development of smart technology (Rose et al., 2018). This gap may have a negative impact on the provision of CPD as a result of a lack of student voice in CPD development.

In terms of lifelong learning, Fleming (2013) identifies the student voice as integral to learning and pedagogy. Through the recognition and acknowledgement of student input educators become better equipped to tailor the contents of learning to the needs of the class. Student input can be accommodated through formal and informal methods, including an evaluation and the provision of feedback on educational programmes (Teagasc, 2018). The development of any CPD must be supported by industry and when being designed should include consultation with key stakeholders in order to ensure that the courses are of a benefit to the entire sector not solely focused on individual aims (LIT & BRC, 2019).

#### *Accessibility to CPD, training and upskilling*

An essential infrastructural issue in farmer education is accessibility. The Merriam-Webster dictionary (n.d.) defines accessible as “being within reach” and “easily used or accessed by people with disabilities” (n.p.). When CPD courses are being designed they must also be assessed to ensure equal access is being made for all. Accessibility issues can relate to levels of literacy, lack of time in schedules, low levels of student engagement or poor access to broadband and internet connections. Farmer involvement throughout the design process of CPD, may be a solution to ensuring that opportunities are accessible to all (Teagasc, 2018). Accessible CPD also means that courses are being run at a times which are suitable to farmers in their schedule. There are multiple approaches to engagement which can be used to ensure accessibility for all when availing CPD, consultation with key stakeholders can have a major positive impact (LIT & BRC, 2019). Examples of creating an accessible environment would include adaptable and flexible working hours, multiple means of engagement, and clear, concise correspondence between the educators and students (LIT & BRC, 2019).

## **METHODOLOGY**

This research followed a mixed methods approach which involved a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methodologies and using both these approaches to analyse data (Creswell, 2017). In this research project, quantitative questionnaires (n=70) and qualitative semi structured interviews (n=2) were introduced at the data collection stage. Data was analysed using thematic analysis, which involved grouping the findings into the major themes of the research.

This project was situated in the pragmatic paradigm meaning the researcher examined data through a practical lens and chooses the methods which were best suited to the research topic and aims (Creswell, 2017). As this was a social research project it was important that participants were able to express opinions as was ensured in both questionnaires and interviews.

A major benefit of using a questionnaire in this research is that it was accessible while also quick and easy to complete, making it convenient for farmers in their stressful climate (Queirós, 2017). Additionally, the number of respondents that can be reached through using a questionnaire can be much greater than with interviews, as was portrayed in this research (Cohen et al., 2007; Queirós, 2017).

The interview questions and questionnaires were designed in parallel with each other, following a concurrent design, with neither influencing the data being collected. This method of data collection and casual conversational flow is constructive as it allows for discussions to form and can often highlight other topic areas which may have been neglected previously (Longhurst, 2003). As this was a social research project and there is such a wide range of variables impacting uptake, availability, and accessibility to courses, semi-structured interviews can have a significant positive influence on the direction of the research.

## **ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**

This section examines the key findings which emerged from questionnaire data and provides a discussion and analysis of these findings in relation to literature. As this research was mainly based on the findings of the questionnaires, data gathered from the interviews was used to support and illuminate the quantitative data.

### *Sources of News and Up to Date Farming Information*

Question 10 of the online questionnaire, asked respondents to choose where they would receive most of their farming news and up to date information, allowing for the selection of multiple sources. With 56 respondents choosing newspapers such as the Irish Farmer's Journal and the Irish Farming Independent it appears that written media is the most popular and convenient source, being a favourite among this questionnaire's participants. The second most popular options chosen was word of mouth, with 42 respondents also relying on other farmers to inform them of up-to-date farming information alongside other sources. Interestingly, an outlier in the sourcing of information found from the questionnaire results was Macra na Feirme. This was surprising considering that this is an organisation which supports young farmers aged 17-35 whom represented over 50% of the respondents in this research.

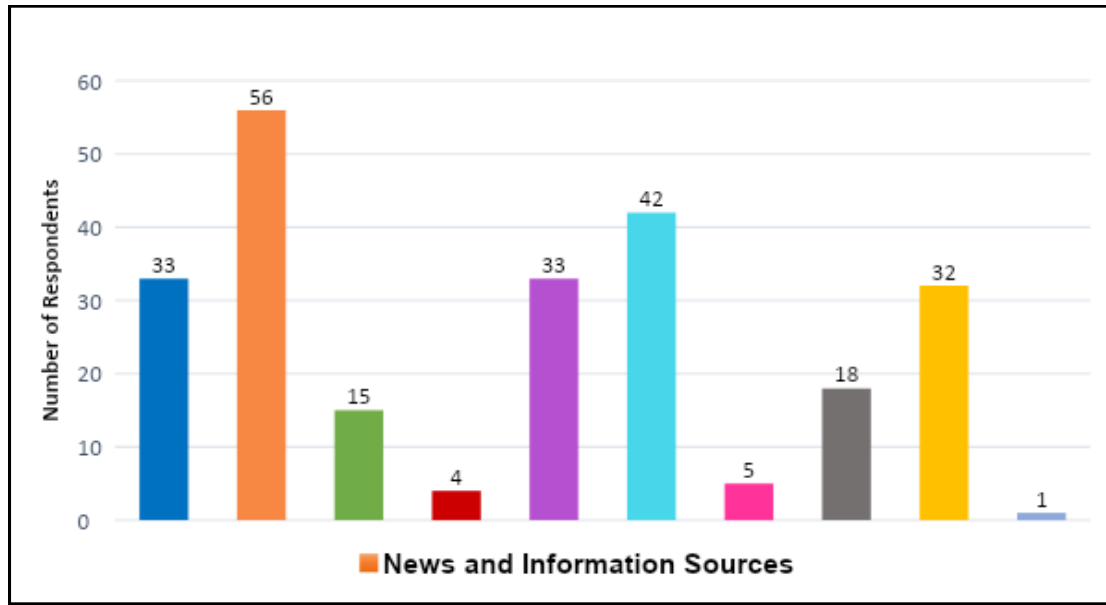


Chart 1: Most commonly used news and information sources

### *Participation in CPD*

Seventy-nine percent of participants (n=55) stated that they do not participate in upskilling and training courses. This leaves 20% (n=14) partaking between 1 to 3 times a year and just 1 respondent stating that they regularly participate in CPD between 4 to 6 times a year. If individuals are not aware of CPD happening due to insufficient advertising, as referenced by James in his interview, or otherwise, this could lead to lower levels of frequent participation. Participation rates may also be negatively impacted as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In his interview, John discussed how often farmers from an older generation may feel intimidated in a classroom environment and this was also mentioned by a questionnaire respondent in relation to factors hindering participation in CPD. John mentioned how “they [the course providers] are coming from a textbook end of it and if they were farming themselves, they’d have a far more practical thing”. The opinion of John was quite clear as he stated that “they [the course providers] haven’t a clue themselves how to do it, they are just reading out of a book”. This was similar to the opinions of James who said that in his view the factors influencing farmers participation was dependent on several elements including, “how topical a course is [and] who will be giving the course.” James continued by describing that if an individual teaching on a course is not someone who they find amiable then they are more likely not to attend.

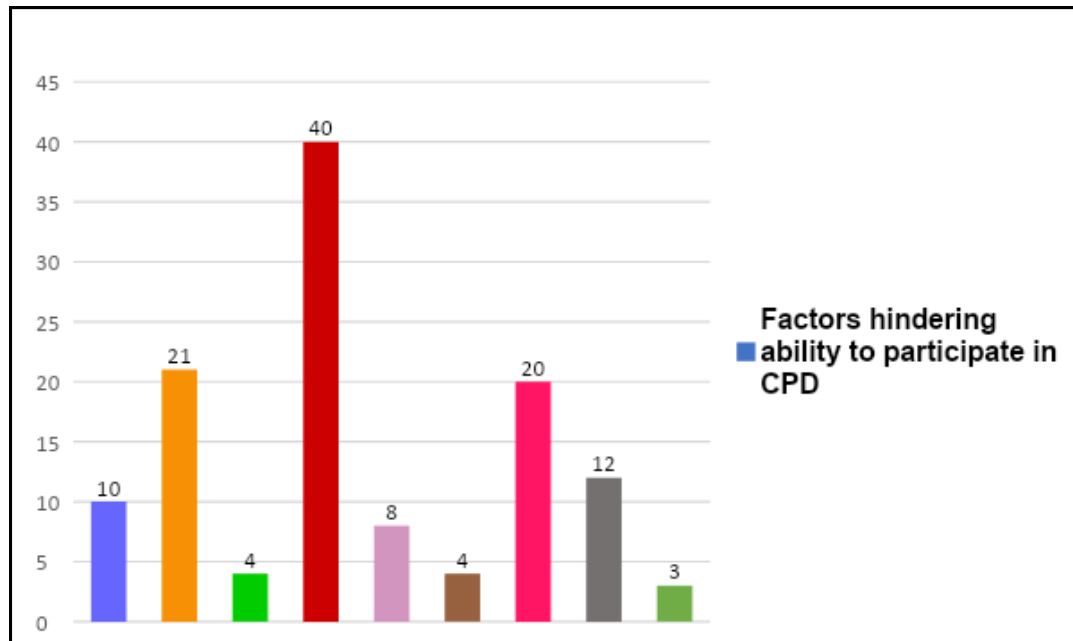


Chart 2: Factors hindering farmer's ability to participate in CPD

### *Lack of awareness*

The issue surrounding a lack of awareness about the provision of CPD courses was linked to advertising in an interview with James, who stated that “if advertising was improved and targeted properly for example by including information about future courses being run when advertising a dance in the local pub, it would improve levels of participation.” By just limiting the advertisement of CPD courses to the internet and websites such as Facebook, James said that this is having a knock-on effect and therefore limiting participation unintentionally. An example of this could be the advertisement of a farm succession information session alongside the advertisement of a local dance as this may be a better way to reach the target demographic. This lack of awareness may also arise from the main sources being used by participants in relation to the latest news and agricultural updates, which have been found to be newspapers and word of mouth from other farmers. It is likely to also be a contributing factor to the low levels of engagement with CPD by participants.

### *Lack of interest*

Findings highlighted a lack of interest among farmers as a major factor hindering participation. This may be a significant concern, considering the importance of CPD which is continuously highlighted in published literature (Teagasc, 2018; LIT & BRC, 2019). It is essential to ensuring farmers are equipped to cope with the fast-paced changes in agriculture and that they are able to continue to be economically viable and competitive repeatedly (LIT & BRC, 2019). Additionally, the significance of CPD was also highlighted by respondents in this research. Many stated that they believe there is a need for CPD in agriculture, finding it to be “important to keep skills up and develop the farm” as well as “being aware of change”. Perhaps, it is more a perceived lack to interest among farmers in CPD as it has been indicated the topic areas which they would preference are in line with that offered by organisations. To elaborate, misdirected advertising has been linked as a possible reason for the high ‘lack of awareness’ in this research, therefore if farmers are not aware of CPD opportunities, then how can they be interested? Currently, CPD courses which are available to farmers place a heavy emphasis on farm safety, spraying and in more recent times farm management (Teagasc, 2018). From the data collected in this research, these topics are relevant to the wants and needs of the farming community, with 84% of participants either ‘interested’ or ‘very interested’ in farm management and business as the topic of a

CPD course. Other areas, such as technology, the environment and sustainable farming and farm safety all had over 55% or more respondents ‘interested’ or ‘very interested’ in the topic.

An outlier topic identified as a possible topic in CPD brought forward by a participant in the ‘other’ section was work-life balance coaching. This is interesting as the practice and inclusion of mindfulness is often standard in the training of other professions, and yet according to participants appears to be overlooked in agriculture. A profession such as farming has been identified by Mental Health Ireland as one which requires strong resilience, with high levels of stress and anxiety common among farmers (Mental Health Ireland, 2020). In 2020, in partnership with Teagasc and the IFA, Mental Health Ireland launched the ‘Farming Resilience’ page, aiming to provide supports to farmers throughout COVID-19 and beyond (Mental Health Ireland, 2020).

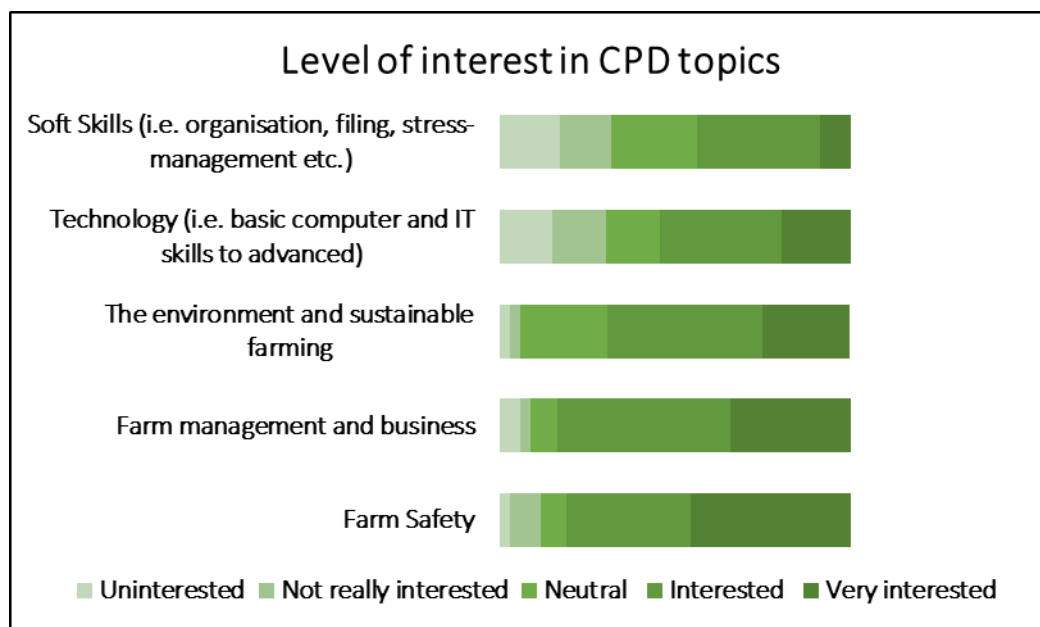


Chart 3: Levels of interest in CPD topics

### *Other barriers to participation*

An interesting finding was that one respondent highlighted that a classroom scenario was too intimidating and therefore impacted on their ability to participate in CPD. This highlights the importance of farmer inclusion when developing CPD programmes to ensure that it is offered through a variety of access routes in order to appeal to all farmers, and to meet their needs. As stated in the literature review, 30% of Ireland's farm holders are aged 65 or older according to the 2016 Census and from this in the general public, of this 39.7% had only received the equivalent of a primary education (CSO, 2016(a)). If an individual falls into this category it is possible that they have not returned to a classroom scenario since, and therefore as was brought forward in this data, it can be ‘too intimidating’ a situation. In order to prevent this from occurring, organisations such as Teagasc and FRS offer courses delivered through a variety of means such as online and a blended approach to learning. This also highlights that, providers of CPD for farmers should work to ensure that farmers have opportunities to develop the skills required for learning, including self-confidence and learner self-efficacy, to ensure that psychological elements of learning are not barriers for farmers, and to help some overcome difficult educational histories.

### Factors facilitating the provision of CPD

Participants also highlighted the factors they believe facilitate or encourage their participation in CPD and continued learning. A total of 44 respondents chose financial incentives, such as an increase in grant money or a reduced cost of CPD as a possible facilitating factor to encourage their participation. The second most chosen answer was weekend provision, followed by the accreditation of training courses.

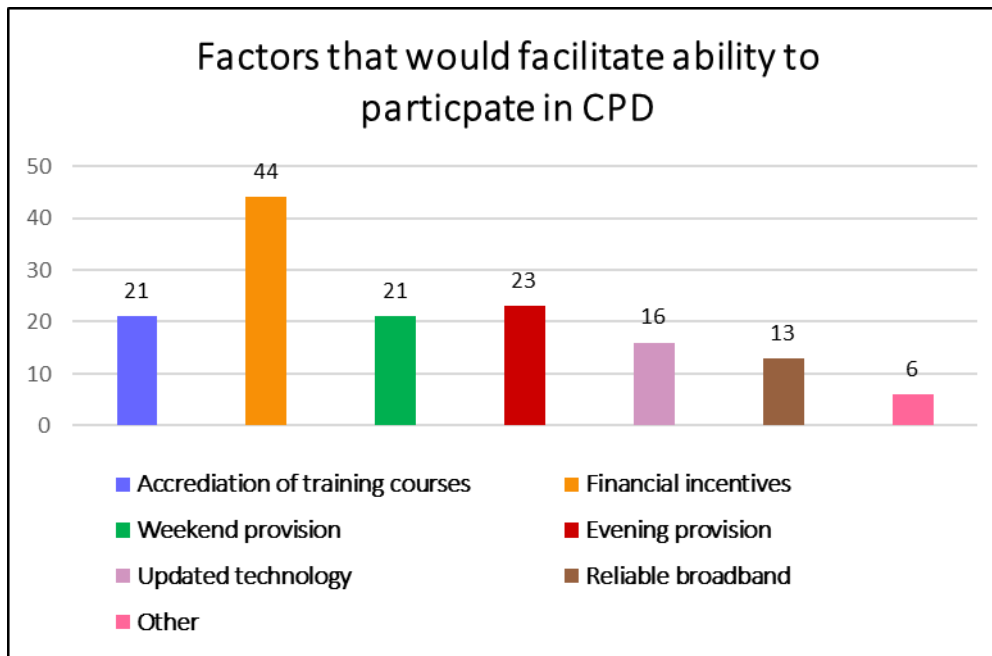


Chart 4: Factors facilitating farmer's ability to participate in CPD

### Linking learning to financial incentives

The linking of financial incentives to CPD was the most common factor chosen by respondents as a facilitator in their participation. GLAS (Green, low-carbon, Agri-environment scheme) is an agri-environmental scheme, overseen by Teagasc, under the Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 (Teagasc, 2017 (a)), which links financial incentives and training with sustainable farming.

While the GLAS scheme is more complex than just paying farmers to complete CPD, there is a financial incentive aspect to draw farmers into participating in this environmental work. During their interview, James stated that he "[didn't] think you should be paid to do this" based on past experiences. He described that he had found if people were attending CPD to receive an end goal of grant money or otherwise that often "they had no interest, and they'd want to hold all the course down" by asking irrelevant questions. He went on to say that he did not think it was fair on others who spent money to attend and progress further. He did however express that if partially subsidising CPD may be a solution to this as it would mean that individuals "are still investing" but also it is not as expensive to complete. One respondent of the questionnaire said that "if it was stated that it was necessary to receive financial interest, I would take part. In other words, if I had to, do CPD I would do it". This reinforces the point made by James that providing financial incentives to farmers just to complete CPD without personal investment may negatively impact on others registered in a course.

It could be argued that rather than acting as a facilitator to engage farmers in CPD, financial incentives are possibly a motivation. The subsidising of grants means that while farmers are not paying full price to complete CPD, they are still personally investing and therefore it is likely they are really interested in being there.

### Preferred methods of delivery

Weekend and evening provision were also common ‘facilitators’ chosen by respondents and these both relate to the methods used to deliver CPD. The methods used to deliver the content of CPD courses is important in ensuring that the programmes created are productive and meaningful, not seen as a box-ticking activity. Day and Sachs (2005) noted that matching the topic of CPD programmes with the professional needs of the participants is an essential element in ensuring the effectiveness of CPD.

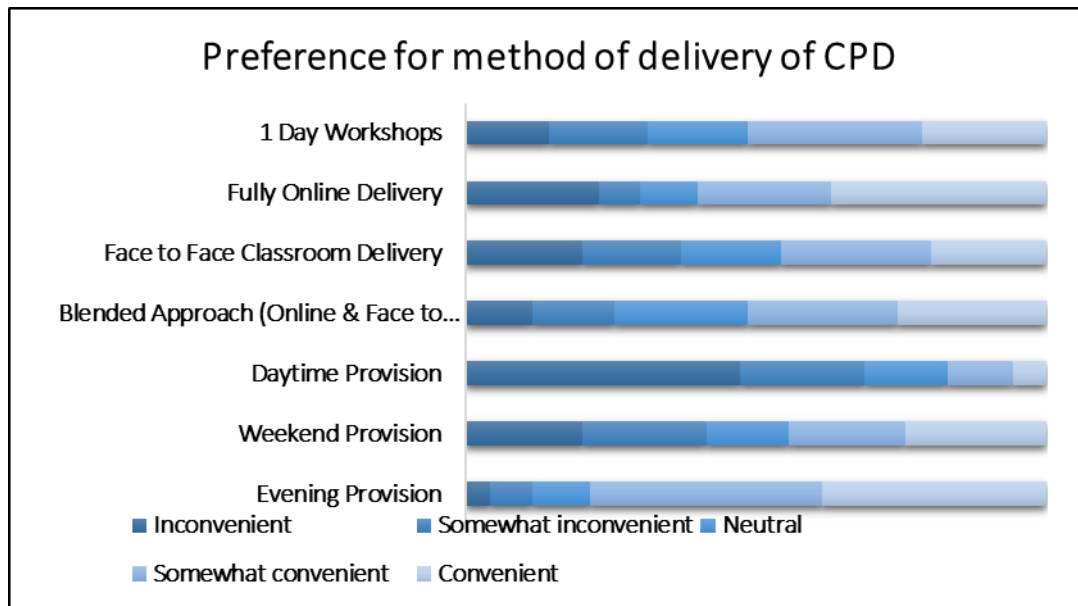


Chart 5: Preference of delivery methods for CPD

### Opinions on the need for CPD in agriculture

Seventy-six percent (n=53) of all respondents agreed that there is a need for CPD in agriculture, with most citing the importance of remaining up to date with advancements and creating a sustainable business model as a reason. This was supported with some anonymous participants stating, “the sector is evolving; farmers need to refine their farms to remain profitable” and that CPD is necessary “to keep up to date with new research and skills”.

This is a large contrast to a previous finding of this data where a ‘lack of interest’ was stated a factor hindering participation in CPD by 20 respondents. Although, it has been suggested this ‘lack of interest’ stem from the high lack of awareness there is surrounding the provision of CPD. Similarly, other participants agreed that CPD is important in agriculture as it increases the chance of ‘off-farm’ employment and provides farmers with good practices relating to farm safety, particularly highlighting the use of machinery.

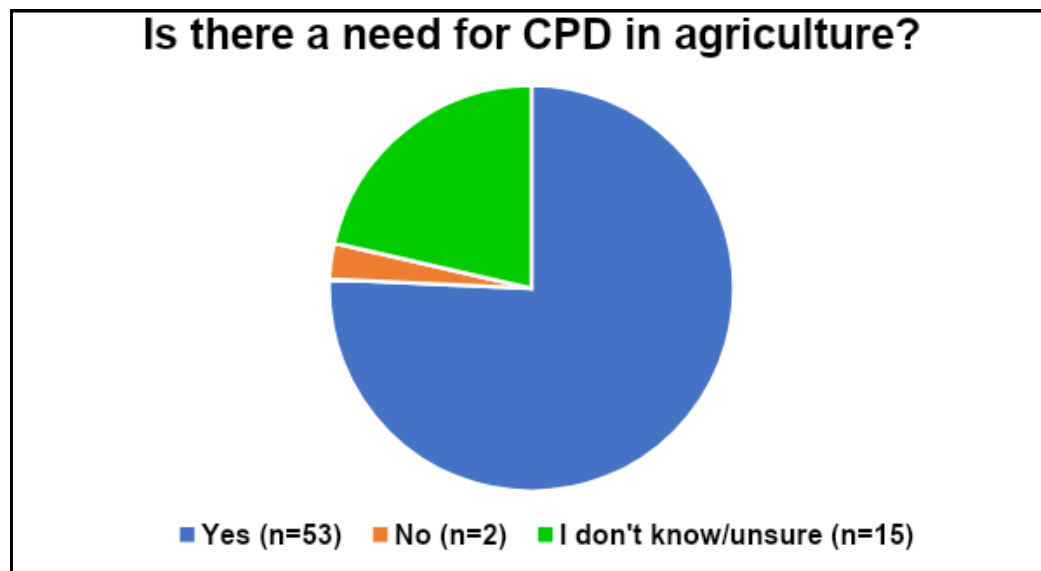


Chart 6: Is there a need for CPD in agriculture?

In conclusion, it was found that the lack of interest and awareness relating to agricultural CPD brought forward in this research may be linked to insufficient targeted advertising by organisations. In addition, while financial incentives appear to be the most popular factor highlighted that would facilitate or motivate an individual's participation in CPD, the negative side of this was also emphasised and opinions about the impact that could be had on other farmers as a result were explained. Also, from responses gathered there was a keen enthusiasm for the availability of alternative agriculture courses and training to help farmers ensure that their farms remain sustainable and able to generate profit. Participants in this research do believe that there is a need for CPD in agriculture particularly, placing a focus on how to create a sustainable business model and ensure a farm remains profitable in the future.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The rationale of this project was to produce research that incorporated the opinions and views of farmers relating to CPD in agriculture. The lack of published research in this area meant that organisations which were advertising CPD courses and information sessions were lacking awareness about the best methods which could be used to reach the intended target audience. This project added to current research by examining the perspectives of farmers from a small sample size.

### *Key findings*

1. Lack of awareness is a barrier to participation—Farmers feel that there is a significant lack of awareness relating to CPD, about where and when it happens but also about what is involved in the process. This lack of awareness makes it difficult to source CPD, therefore hindering participation and creating a barrier to access. This lack of awareness may be linked to the advertising methods being used by organisations when promoting CPD courses
2. Misaligned advertising is creating a perceived lack of interest in CPD —This data suggested that the lack of interest in participating in CPD stems from a lack of awareness. If farmers are not targeted correctly when CPD is being advertised, they will lack the knowledge surrounding what is involved and the opportunities available to complete CPD.



2. Financial incentives act as a motivator to encourage participation—This research suggested that a large proportion of farmers would be more willing to participate in CPD if it was linked to financial incentives such as grant increases or CPD being subsidised. Therefore, it was established that the provision of financial incentives acts more as motivation to participate rather than facilitation.

### *Recommendations of research*

These recommendations are supported by the key findings of this research, aiming to inform the future development of CPD in agriculture.

1. Increase targeted advertising of CPD for farmers—This study recommends that providers of CPD for farmers increase the use of targeted advertising campaigns to increase awareness offerings, and that these are advertised in the places where most farmers readily obtain their news and information. This recommendation is based on that data collected in this research suggesting that newspapers such as the Irish Farming Independent and the Irish Farmer's Journal are the main sources used by participants to access news and up to date farming information.
2. Increase advertising at times concurrent to agriculture—Research suggested that TV programmes are a strong information source for farmers. Following this pattern, organisations should aim to publicise CPD events during advertisement breaks of agriculture shows such as Ear to the Ground or otherwise, thus increasing passive engagement with adverts.
3. Increase the partial subsidisation of CPD - This research suggests that financial incentives motivate farmers to participate in CPD and thus through providing partially subsidising CPD courses, there should be an increased engagement. This ensures that there would still be a personal investment in this training as farmers are not just participating to earn money but rather from genuine interest.

### *Outcomes*

This research was conducted through consultation with farmers, exploring their personal experiences and perceptions of engaging with CPD. There is a want for CPD among farmers. However, improving the scope of advertising and working in co-operation with farmers to ensure the relevance and wide availability of courses would be necessary in the future. The recommendations formed based on the data collected are aimed at informing and improving practice in relation to agricultural CPD.

To summarise, in this research participants raised concerns about barriers to accessing CPD being the lack of awareness, interest and intimidation of classroom settings. To improve these, increased targeted advertising and working in co-operation with farmers to design and develop CPD is recommended. Financial incentives were noted as a major pull to increase participation in CPD but with this it was recognised that to prevent these being exploited, subsidising CPD may be an alternative.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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# Restorative Circles as a Means of Proactive Student Self-Assessment: Integrating the Wellbeing Agenda into the Junior Cycle English Classroom



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Restorative practices have been an interest of mine ever since I took part in an online CPD programme entitled 'Restorative Practices for Classrooms and School Communities'. During this workshop, the facilitators drew from a strategy known as a 'Restorative Circle' and used it to frame the beginning and end of each day. When engaging in the circle, I experienced its propensity to support the formation of relationships with and among my peers in a learning environment and this formed the basis for this investigation.

**KEYWORDS:** Restorative Practice, Restorative Circles, Student Wellbeing, Junior Cycle, English

## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to investigate if using 'Restorative Circles' in the Junior Cycle English classroom can foster the conditions needed to promote a sense of belonging at school. It seeks to address how a strategy associated with Restorative Practices can allow teachers and students to communicate in ways which encourage both parties to assess their behaviour and learning in the classroom. Such is key to the fostering of positive interpersonal relationships between teachers and students and is integral to the conditions needed to strengthen the sense of belonging at school for students. This brings us to the research question: 'How can Restorative Circles support the development of well-being in the English classroom? The subject of English holds great potential in this as many of its curricular aims are centred on engendering learning dispositions which can enable students to become critical and compassionate learners.

This is a synopsis of a longer piece of research from a professional dissertation which presents evidence which finds that teachers also occupy an important role in fostering the learning dispositions of students at school. It is imperative then that they remain aware of their role in mediating the school-going experience for students as well as cognisant of their responsibility to teach them in class. In preparing children and young people with what they need to create a better world for the future, teachers must actively seek out new ways of facilitating positive relationships with and among their students at school. In doing so, the school can promote a practice of teaching that fosters the well-being of its students.

## CONTEXT

A recent report from Nolan and Smyth (2021) of the Economic and Social Research Institute focuses on the mental health and well-being of children and young people in Ireland and speaks of the decline in student sense of belonging at school. It confirms the decreasing trend in student well-being across all OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation Development) countries (OECD, 2019) and correlates in ways with the latest Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results in Ireland (McKeown, 2019). Such studies highlight how student well-being has become a priority for education in Ireland in recent years. They also serve to highlight the importance of relationships in the lives of children and young people and the role they play in the development of their positive mental health. In this way, they are indicative of the current future trends shaping education globally and reaffirm the continued need of education to contribute to the learning and well-being of its students (OECD, 2022).

The Junior Cycle Framework (NCCA, 2012) speaks of the importance of promoting school going experiences which facilitate the positive mental health and well-being of students. For teachers, such an understanding must inform how they understand their own practice and the ways in which they approach teaching their subjects. In identifying the demands students are exposed to in their initial years in secondary school, the Junior Cycle Curriculum notes how ‘all students engage in important learning about well-being through key curriculum areas’ (NCCA, 2017, p.44). This focus on student well-being has sparked interest regarding the different philosophies that can be adopted and implemented for teaching and learning in a classroom context. One such philosophy: ‘Restorative Practice’ has been gaining considerable recognition in recent years.

Restorative Practice is defined as,

“an approach to building and maintaining interpersonal relationships, preventing and resolving conflict and responding to harm where it occurs” (O, Dwyer, 8, 2021).

Emerging from the judicial system as Restorative Justice, Restorative Practices or RP as it is often referred to, is concerned primarily with the nurturing of interpersonal relationships between people in the aftermath of harm. In recent years, it has come to refer to a key number of values and strategies aimed at fostering relationships between people. One such strategy: ‘Restorative Circles’ can be used as a means of promoting positive interactions with and among people in a range of different settings (Dwyer, 2014). Figure 1.0 outlines how each circle invites those who have volunteered to take part, the opportunity to check-in and register the level of their energy/mood according to the numbers 1-10, and to share information about themselves.



Figure 1.0 Outline of a Restorative Circle

Restorative Circles offer those who volunteer to participate the opportunity to communicate with and among each other. In creating the conditions that support positive interactions between people, restorative circles can provide opportunities for people to talk about themselves in the context of the information they address (The Childhood Development Initiative, 2014). At this rate, any discussion involving Restorative Circles in schools should be concerned with how they can be used as a means of enabling both teachers and students to assess their own behaviour and learning in the classroom. Furthermore, in promoting students' oral communication skills, Restorative Circles can also develop their capacity for self-reflection. In this way, students can learn according to the study of English at Junior Cycle.

The Junior Cycle English Specification (NCCA, 2015) extrapolates on the importance of learning outcomes that are grouped together according to the three stands of communication: oral language, reading and writing. These culminate in classrooms which "contribute directly to the physical, mental and social well-being" (NCCA, 2015, p.5) of students. In greatly improving the day-to-day experience of school for students, such learning can foster the conditions which help to promote a sense of belonging at school (NCCA, 2018). Encouraging these kinds of interactions between teachers and students can promote positive habits in other areas of learning at school by providing people with the opportunity to communicate how they are doing with regards to their learning and behaviour in the classroom (Parker & Bickmore, 2020). Consequently, Restorative Circles can encourage proactive self-assessment on behalf of each of its participants (Reimer, 2020).

## **METHODOLOGY**

How Restorative Circles can be used to support students to form relationships with and among their peers in ways which lead to the creation of classroom environment that promotes a sense of belonging was investigated. The methodology employed drew on the analysis of a learning journal kept by the teacher as a means of reflecting on their practice and is informed by insights of the teacher as well as feedback received from the students (Wood, 2017). Through observing the actions of the participants being studied, qualitative research involves researchers using their senses "in a systematic and meaningful way" (McKechnie, 2008, p.573) to gather successful data. As such, it implicated the teacher and their students as the point of research and foregrounds the importance of obtaining findings through interpretative as well as observable data. In doing so, this study assisted the teacher in researching an aspect of their practice as a means of better informing how to meet the needs of their students when teaching English.

This small-scale qualitative study assesses the design and implementation of Restorative Circles in a single-sex voluntary secondary school in Dublin. In focusing on a cohort of approximately 25 first year students, Restorative Circles were included in class at the start and end of every school month. In providing students with the opportunity to participate in both an 'opening' and 'closing' circle each month, students were encouraged to check-in as part of a group, share their thoughts and opinions regarding whichever statement was included in the circle at the time, and identify something they would like or have done differently when working in English. Moreover, in adapting a strategy associated with Restorative Practices for teaching in the Junior Cycle English classroom, each circle was composed in the context of the Key Skills (2012) and sought to address the Oral Communication strand of the Specification (2015). Restorative Circles were used in this way to assess students' oral communication skills as a means of developing their capacity for self-reflection.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

What will follow is a review of my teaching practice through the lens of my literature review. Using Braun and Clarke's (2020) reflexive thematic analysis framework, the themes identified from analysis of my own reflections and the reflections of students include: *opportunities for relationship building and opportunities for self-assessment*. In discussing each of these areas, the following sections will explore what was unique about students who experienced engaging in Restorative Circles. I will indicate the tension between the underlying philosophy of Restorative Circles and their use as a methodology in the English classroom as a teacher.

### *Opportunities for relationship building*

Through their use in the English classroom, I have noticed the capacity of Restorative Circles to create and maintain relationships with and among students. Engagement with the entire circle process can contribute to its relationship-building capacity by foregrounding an engaging, consistent, and relevant means of assessment in the classroom. In creating the space for teachers and students to interact in this way, I have observed Restorative Circles as contributing to the building and maintenance of interpersonal relationships in ways which resonate with the work of Stowe (2016). The use of circles in the classroom diverges from traditional teaching and learning in fostering opportunities for both the teacher and students to speak and be heard. As such, the focus must be on the type of information participants are encouraged to communicate about when participating with them.

### *Opportunities for self-assessment*

Through their responses in the English classroom, I have noticed the propensity of Restorative Circles to encourage the teacher and students to assess their own behaviour and learning. This can be seen in figure 2.0 which outlines a selection of circles that I both created and used in class across the year and in figure 2.1 which lists just some of the responses of different students, all aged between 12 and 13 years old, who chose to participate with them. Inviting students to respond to questions concerning the Junior Cycle Key Skills of 'Managing Myself, Working with Others, and Communicating' as seen in the student responses contained in figure 2.1 was used to familiar students understanding of some of the key concepts underpinning the Junior Cycle curriculum. In allowing students to identify and reflect on their own individual learning or behavioural goal as it related to the different key skill being addressed each month, Restorative Circles encouraged students to take responsibility for their own learning in ways which correspond with the work of Morrison (2005). This is instanced by the proactive focus of many of the response of students in figure 2.1. In this way, Restorative Circles can provide opportunities for both teachers and students to communicate about how to improve their own learning and behaviour at school.






<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Opening Circle</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/>Energy/Moods Levels 1-10 (1 being low, 10 being high)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/>My most special memory is of...</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/>One thing you can do differently this month when working in English class</p> 	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Opening Circle</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/>Energy/Moods Levels 1-10 (1 being low, 10 being high)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/>The best time of day for me is ...</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/>One thing I can do differently when working with others in English class</p> 	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Opening Circle</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/>Energy/Moods Levels 1-10 (1 being low, 10 being high)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/>I love the weather when it is...</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/>One thing I can do differently when communicating in English class</p> 
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Closing Circle</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/>Energy/Moods Levels 1-10 (1 being low, 10 being high)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/>The best present I could get is ...</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/>One thing you did do differently this month when working in English class</p> 	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Closing Circle</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/>Energy/Moods Levels 1-10 (1 being low, 10 being high)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/>I won a prize for ...</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/>One thing I did do differently when working with others in English class</p> 	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Closing Circle</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/>Energy/Moods Levels 1-10 (1 being low, 10 being high)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/>My favourite kind of food is...</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/>One thing I did do differently when communicating in English class</p> 

Figure 2.0 Selection of Restorative Circles

- ***“To not leave doing my homework until the last minute”***
- ***“To ask more questions during class”***
- ***“To say something when I don’t understand”***
- ***“To contribute more during interactions with my peers”***
- ***“To contribute less during interactions with my peers”***
- ***“To work with others rather than the same people again and again”***
- ***“To think before I speak”***
- ***“To take more notes when my peers are sharing”***
- ***“To check that my peers understand what I say after I say it”***

Figure 2.1 Selection of Students’ Responses



### *Summary of findings and how they have shaped my thinking*

In this dissertation I set out to investigate “Restorative circles as a means of proactive student self-assessment” while simultaneously creating a link between well-being and restorative practices through Junior Cycle English by using restorative circles in the classroom. The overarching finding of this study have shown that a learning environment that fosters a sense of belonging, so important for well-being, can be created using Restorative Circles in the classroom. In creating the conditions which invite both teachers and students to assess their own behaviour and learning in the classroom, teachers can foster positive interpersonal relationships with and among students. While merely talking won’t necessarily mean that such relationships will be created or such issues will be addressed, providing both teachers and students with the opportunity to communicate with one another in a structured way may help to encourage both to take place. Such findings have challenged my thinking regarding the integration of well-being into the curriculum.

In believing such an endeavour requires more than just following policy, this research has invited me to ask are we truly doing well-being by bringing restorative practices into the classroom? In corresponding with the work of Farrell & Mahon (2022), I am encouraged to see the ways student well-being can elude the outcomes associated with the curriculum. In stressing the importance of “meaningful and sustained relationships” (Farrell & Mahon, 2022, p.3) a different understanding is needed when considering the ways in which teachers can foster the positive mental health and well-being of their students. In this way, English supports the investigation of Restorative Practices in an educational setting and students’ contributions fostered a sense of belonging as they engaged with one another in Restorative Circles in the English classroom. Moving forward, it may be equally as useful for teachers to use restorative circles as a means of fostering communication between students through their reading and writing skills. Doing so could shine a light on the important role these other literacy skills undoubtedly play in fostering a sense of belonging at school as well as allow for other ways that restorative practices could help underpin the teaching of English in the classroom.

### *Significance of findings*

The English Junior Cycle Specification allows for teachers to interpret well-being agenda according to their own pedagogical practice. As such, there is no singular approach to teaching well-being. This investigation was an attempt to merge restorative practices with students’ English course using Restorative Circles in the classroom. Through engaging with Restorative Circles in the classroom and the process of communicating with their teacher and peers, “interactions among students and between students and teachers are very respectful and positive, and conducive to well-being” (DES, 2016, p.13). Such responses can easily be linked with the learning outcomes across the Junior Cycle English specification.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

My engagement with restorative circles as part of a CPD course in Restorative Practices encouraged me to reflect on my behaviour and learning in ways that were “relevant to students’ learning” (DES, 2016, p.17). For me, it foregrounded the creation of a learning environment that spoke of the factors impacting on the positive mental health and well-being of students today and indicated the role Restorative Practices can play in helping to foster a sense of belonging at school. This highlights the continued need for both teachers as well as those enrolled in initial teacher education to explore opportunities for continuous professional development across the practice of teaching.

## CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to address what has been perceived as a decrease in student sense of belonging at school. It has borrowed a strategy from Restorative Practices and adapted it as a means of assessment for the Junior Cycle English classroom. In this way, it has tried to support the development of student well-being by providing them with the opportunity to self-assess their own behaviour and learning. Through Restorative Circles, it has encouraged students to build relationships with one another as a means of fostering a sense of belonging in the classroom. In doing so, it has highlighted the important role that teachers play in affecting the well-being of their students.

The Teaching Council (2020) suggests that research conducted during placement “can align with the needs of the school, the learning needs of pupils, and the HEI-based research elements of the programme” (Teaching Council, 2020. P19). As such, I believe in the importance of practitioner research to initial teacher education as it enables the teacher to reflect upon their own practice and apply their reflections to improve their professional pedagogy (la Velle, 2019). While I am aware of the limitations of this study, I believe that I have gained very useful insights into how to improve my own teaching practice as well as the teaching of my colleagues in the English subject department.

In conclusion, the findings of this study may act as a catalyst for a broader understanding of the relevance of restorative circles to the area of initial teacher education in ways which correspond to the CROÍ framework (Teaching Council, 2016). Furthermore, it also validates continuous professional development (CPD). In this way, this research could also help to shape school policy and support school improvement in ways which correspond to the improvement of students teaching and learning (DES, 2016). In conclusion, to restore a sense of belonging across the teaching, learning and assessment of any subject at Junior Cycle, initial teacher education, collaboration, reflection, and research must be available and continuous professional development needs to be supported through teachers’ professional careers

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## Effort and Belief Pedagogies in a Post-Primary DEIS context

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Jeffrey Egan is a Newly Qualified Teacher, who recently graduated from UCD in 2022. His recent experiences in the post primary classroom motivated him to research wellbeing as an enabler of student learning and the holistic challenges this poses in education. He is passionate about catering for the wellbeing of students and understanding the pedagogical tools that can empower them to take control of their wellbeing despite adverse circumstances. The research was thought provoking and provided him with the experience to explore aspects of wellbeing that play a vital role in the education of young people.

**KEYWORDS:** Growth Mindset, Self Efficacy, Meaning in Life, PISA

### INTRODUCTION

This article aims to highlight teacher awareness about wellbeing pedagogies that consider the PISA 2018 wellbeing metrics, related to a DEIS setting. PISA 2018 investigated growth mindset, self-efficacy and meaning in life when considering student wellbeing. The motivation for choosing this topic to research was my own lack of awareness about student wellbeing and its impact on learning.

Drawing on a combination of pedagogical theories and my own lived experience in the DEIS classroom, I developed a wellbeing pedagogical framework to help anchor my reflections. This article will provide teachers and educators with information to consider how growth mindset theory, students self-efficacy and sense of purpose, embedded with an attitude of grit can contribute to positive wellbeing. Two attitudes which are linked across all these concepts are 'belief' and 'effort'. Frequently, in discussion about wellbeing, as educators, we can overcompensate our awareness levels of student's anxieties and difficulties, and sometimes can be slower to take corrective action to build up character traits in students which can help them cope with difficulties.

This article is a snapshot of a broader dissertation, which examined how student wellbeing is impacted by their circumstances in life, considering a trauma informed approach and how the student-teacher relationship creates an environment of compassion to aid student wellbeing while investigating how PISA related

This article is a snapshot of a broader dissertation, which examined how student wellbeing is impacted by their circumstances in life, considering a trauma informed approach and how the student-teacher relationship creates an environment of compassion to aid student wellbeing while investigating how PISA related pedagogies can enable learning.

## CONTEXT

In recent years, the education system has focused on the implementation of wellbeing across the curriculum, taking a more holistic approach to supporting students which refers to their social, emotional, and cognitive development. At the same time, there has been advances in educational policy acknowledging student wellbeing as both an outcome and an enabler of learning (DES, 2016). As part of the school self-evaluation (SSE) tool, an internal school review underpinned by the Department of Education's quality framework for post-primary schools, all are required by 2023 to review and implement a wellbeing promotion programme. These policy initiatives are to be welcomed in times where we are encountering students who experience depression, anxiety and anger both in and outside the classroom with the longer-term effects of the Covid pandemic also raising questions about student wellbeing.

Within the post primary education system, clear differences emerge in the DEIS and non-DEIS school settings. The delivering equality of opportunity in schools (DEIS) programme launched in 2005 to help tackle educational disadvantage. It aims to improve the path of educational opportunity for disadvantage students and give additional support to schools who have a high concentration of disadvantage (DES, 2017). Schools with a higher concentration of socially disadvantaged students have lower achievement levels of academic success compared to more socially advantaged schools (Nelis et al., 2021). Likewise, DEIS students experience lower levels of overall wellbeing compared to non-DEIS students (Smyth, 2020) whereby education researchers are exploring the degree to which academic success is connected to wellbeing rather than social status and how this will impact wellbeing policy in the future.

Considering the Irish data in PISA 2018, Nelis et al. (2021) show that three-fifths of students in DEIS schools came from socio-economically disadvantaged homes whereas in non-DEIS school it was one-fifth. DEIS schools had higher levels of unauthorised student absences, classrooms experienced more behavioural disruption, there were higher percentiles of students presenting with special learning needs and DEIS principals reported higher levels of concern about students not being attentive in class (Nelis et al. 2021). This research explored, the degree to which lower levels of wellbeing are connected to these common difficulties encountered in DEIS school environments?

Additionally, the national longitudinal study of children (GUI) shows that students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds have lower life satisfaction scores at seventeen and eighteen and were more likely to have a higher number of emotional and behavioural difficulties than students from more advantaged backgrounds (Growing Up in Ireland Study Team, 2016). The same study also suggested that socially disadvantaged students have lower life satisfaction scores than students from more advantaged backgrounds.

Figure 1 provides an overview of how the PISA 2018 study measured wellbeing. PISA recognised that wellbeing is a multi-dimensional construct, not simply evaluating students' feelings about themselves. The psychological functioning concerning meaning in life is the more debated aspect of the wellbeing measurement scale given that the subjective measurement of it can be hard to capture in data. It has been an important study as the only large-scale assessment of students' well-being currently available to researchers.

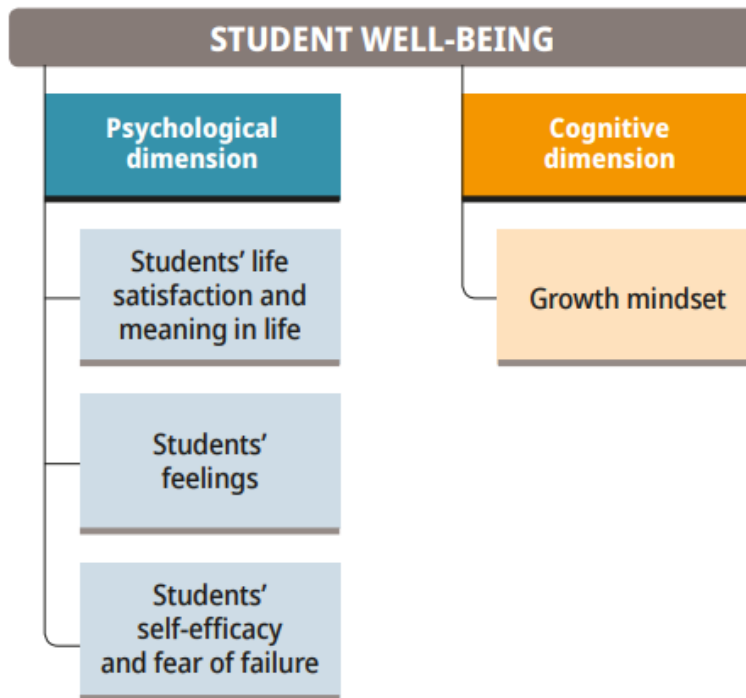


Figure 1. Wellbeing as measured in PISA (OECD, 2020, p.41)

Overall, from a national and international policy level, there has been strong encouragement for educators to develop students' cognitive abilities, social skills, and healthy attitudes in enhancing wellbeing. These policy documents are creating an awareness that students can learn more effectively if they are happy, have meaning in their life and feel supported in their learning environment in promoting positive wellbeing steps.

## METHODOLOGY

Recognising that education is an applied discipline, the methodology employed in this project is of a qualitative nature. Within the Croí framework, the Teaching Council in Ireland recommends the practice of practitioner research, that is, research carried out by practitioners, in this case teachers, to advance their own pedagogical practices (McLeod, 1999). A small-scale qualitative study involved collecting data using my own reflections to create systematic and meaningful observations (McKechnie, 2008). Although limitations emerge in generalising theories in a small-scale study (Maxwell, 2005), within these generalisations, Bassy (2001) argues there is scope to apply them in contexts beyond the study itself. The practitioner research approach allows teachers to reflect on their teaching experiences and apply the lessons learned in their practice. In this way, the study's findings from one teacher's experiences and reflections may act as a trigger for a broader understanding of the application of wellbeing pedagogy.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This article focuses on the findings of how effort and belief pedagogies can enhance student wellbeing. The framework below is beneficial in recognising how the PISA wellbeing measurements can be viewed from an effort and belief pedagogical setting. An awareness of these findings for teachers and educators can contribute to enhancing overall student wellbeing.



Figure 2. Towards a Wellbeing Pedagogical Framework (Author)

### *Effort Pedagogies*

According to Dweck (2006), underlying beliefs about intelligence may affect students' motivation to learn and have a direct impact on their performance. A fixed mindset is the belief that your intelligence and talents are fixed, whereas a growth mindset, is the belief that intelligence and aptitudes can be developed. To frame it another way, a student's qualities can be enhanced through effort. Students with a fixed mindset, tend to avoid challenges and those displaying a growth mindset will explore challenging circumstances to develop and achieve their learning goals. Gouédard & Rodrigo (2021), in analysing PISA 2018 data suggest that mindsets have an influence on overall wellbeing, and an attitude towards a growth mindset acts as a bulwark against the adverse impacts of negative experiences. They concluded that growth mindset had a positive impact on a student's sense of belonging in school, satisfaction with their life and experiencing positive feelings.

Growth mindset literature has considered if mindset has an impact on the causes or prevention of aggression, stress, and anxiety among students. Schleider, Abel & Weisz (2015), revealed that youths holding fixed mindset traits showed more anxiety, depression, aggression, and conduct disorder. One implication of this finding is when students are engaged with a task and challenging themselves, they give less attention to their difficulties.

Engagement can happen at many different levels. When students find tasks difficult and want to give up, the responsibility of the teacher is to reframe their inhibition to pursue effort. For example, attempting to connect learning experiences with students' interests where they display effort. Interest and knowledge in sport, music, art, their life experiences, and specific skills showed in other subjects encourage the pursuit of effort. Similarly, when assigning homework or giving exams, constructive feedback, and giving priority to attempt marks is important. In this way, students begin to realise that rewards are associated with industriousness and effort rather than talent and ability.



Attempts to connect the pedagogy of effort with student disadvantage is a current theme in the research community. While growth mindset is not the panacea for student wellbeing issues, research suggests that mindset changes have been a stronger predictor of academic success rather than the availability of economic resources for low-income students (Claro, Paunesku & Dweck, 2016). Students from disadvantage backgrounds can sometimes articulate a victimhood complex based on language and concepts provided by societal culture and media. Rather than raising awareness of the plight of unequal social capital this language can encourage a powerlessness among students to effect change in their lives. It can tempt students to see effort in education as a worthless exercise. Encouraging students to display attitudes of grit, that is, seeking effort in the long term by overcoming obstacles is a necessary trait which help students overcome challenges, enhance wellbeing and consequently foster learning.

### *Belief Pedagogies*

Following the Guidelines for Wellbeing for Junior Cycle (NCCA, 2017), teachers are encouraged to allow space for students to ask important questions about their existence in the world can contribute to positive wellbeing. Frankl (1959) in his seminal work, *'Mans search for Meaning'*, explained that having a sense of purpose in life is necessary for living a fulfilling life and achieving goals. Even in extreme circumstances in concentration camps, he recounts anecdotes of survival and happiness against all the odds when people discover purpose in their lives. Religion and philosophy are two subjects in the Junior Cycle curriculum that seek out answers to the big questions and can encourage students to think about meaning in their lives and their purpose. Gearon (2013), taking the subject of religion, explains how it has moved from a more dogmatic, single-faith background to an academic discipline that provides a framework to reflect on deep questions from a broad range of religious and philosophical ideas. Stegar and Kashdan (2007), argue that meaning in life is an important element of wellbeing, concluding that there are positive psychological benefits for individuals when they have a sense of purpose and meaning in their life. In recent years, we have been battling with increasing levels of self-harm and suicide among young people, and although complex issues, international research has been looking at how young people with meaning in their lives can act as a protective measure against suicidal tendencies (Lew et al, 2020). PISA 2018 concluded that students across the OECD from disadvantaged backgrounds had a lower sense of meaning in their life than students from more prosperous socio-economic backgrounds. Considering these findings, it could be argued that from the perspective of encouraging wellbeing, subjects such as religion and philosophy are probably undervalued in schools and could be given more prominence in promoting a positive wellbeing culture.

As Bandura (1977) notes, self-efficacy is the extent to which individuals believe in their own ability to engage in certain activities and tasks, especially when confronted with difficult circumstances. An inability to deal with challenges can manifest itself in many ways in the classroom. In this regard, lack of engagement, misbehaviour and not experiencing feelings of wellbeing could be a contributory factor in low self-efficacy among students. The PISA 2018 statistics suggest that students displaying a growth mindset have a lower fear of failure and conversely a higher level of self-efficacy compared to those displaying a fixed mindset. Students with a sense of belief in themselves can experience a richer sense of wellbeing since their positive approach to failure and challenges can potentially decrease their anxiety and stress levels (Dweck & Yeager, 2019). Similarly, attitudes of grit in persevering to reach goals attainable after years of work allows for students to work toward challenges while maintaining the same effort and interest over a long period of time despite setbacks encountered on the way (Duckworth et al., 2007). According to Roberts (2009), when individuals are gritty, their motivation increases, and this helps them to reduce obstacles or even overcome them. Furthermore, grit has been linked with low levels of depression signs and adverse effects, as well as high levels of wellbeing and good feelings (Datu, King, Valdez & Eala, 2019).

## **CONCLUSION**

While exploring various wellbeing pedagogical tools in my own practice, the development of students' skills in effort and belief emerged. Indeed, my wellbeing pedagogical framework attempted to show the interactions between belief and effort elicited in the growth mindset attitude, seeking meaning in life, and developing self-efficacy traits in the face of challenges. Practicing these pedagogies, allows for grittier students who can pursue long term goals despite the setbacks and experience an enhanced level of wellbeing. The school acts as a nourishing environment for students to develop these cognitive and social traits and contribute positively to student wellbeing.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE PRACTICE**

Educational policy can promote more extensively positive wellbeing pedagogies that encourage student effort. Risking a narrow understanding of wellbeing by schools could lead to accommodating anxieties and traumas without building attitudes of grit that can help students overcome their difficulties. Encouraging students to be determined and purposeful in their learning despite challenges can enhance wellbeing.

There is considerable debate in the public square about the teaching of religion in schools. Overtime, religious instruction in schools has moved from a more dogmatic, single faith background to an academic discipline that allows for reflection on deep questions from a broad range of religious and philosophical ideas. In line with the PISA measurement of wellbeing, connected to finding meaning in life, a wide-ranging debate considering the positive values that philosophical and religious ideas bring to the enhancement of student wellbeing is necessary. Subjects that ask the big questions in life can help students ponder and seek out a purpose for long-term goals which can create stability in their lives.

In a DEIS context, where more students are from lower socio-economic backgrounds, developing a growth mindset could be a stronger predictor of academic success rather than the availability of economic resources for low-income students. At a national level, it would be a worthwhile endeavour to compare income and wellbeing levels among students and draw conclusion about their related impact on academic success.

In conclusion, this article explored the impact of wellbeing pedagogies in a post-primary DEIS context underpinned by effort and belief, encouraging students to develop a growth mindset, build self-efficacy and find purpose in their life to enhance their wellbeing and enable learning. The results, limited to the authors observations and the difficulties in measuring student wellbeing, nonetheless have led me to acknowledge that a student holistic approach to building qualities of grit through the wellbeing pedagogies employed is a positive approach to learning.

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# The Influence of Global English on the Contemporary ELT Classroom: The Case of the Linguistic Landscape

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Christina Egger is a graduate of the University of Graz for English Language Teaching. During her master's degree she was employed as a research assistant at the Department of English to investigate the role of Global English for English Language Teaching. Apart from her work at university, she taught English at a rural middle school in Upper Styria. In August 2022 she started working as an eDidactics consultant for the University of Applied Sciences Campus 2, where she also teaches Business English. As of this summer semester (2023), she is a lecturer at the University of Applied Sciences FH JOANNEUM, where she teaches IT Industry English and Negotiations.

**KEYWORDS:** ELT, Global English, Linguistics, Language Learning, English Language

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years English has grown into its role as a global language and can often be found on online platforms such as YouTube and Instagram as well as offline in the open streets of urban environments all over the world, not just in English-speaking countries. For English language teachers in countries where English is studied as a foreign language, this means that their learners are increasingly exposed to English outside of the foreign language classroom (the Linguistic Landscape [LL]).

Student teachers of English as a foreign language in such contexts need to be aware of the fact that their role as the single source of English language input for their learners is being diminished. English in the environment, however, can be seen as a new source of English language input that opens up new possibilities for language learning. In order to fully exploit the potential of this situation, teachers must undergo a shift in their assumptions about language learning and their role in the language learning process.

So far, "language teachers' general beliefs about the pedagogical values of LL" (Shang & Xie, 2020, p. 37) have not received a lot of research attention. While some efforts have been made to investigate the usefulness of the LL for language learning purposes, there are only a handful of studies which investigate the attitudes of

teachers in relation to the LL. In particular, there have been no studies that specifically focus on student teachers. The *LEAP* Interface project at the University of Graz in Austria aims to support student teachers in the ELT program in fostering their awareness of English in the environment and using it in their teaching. In my thesis, I use data collected in the project using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to investigate the connections between student teachers' use of English outside the classroom, their beliefs about language teaching and ideas for tasks based on English in the Linguistic Landscape (LL).

## CONTEXT

The growth of English and its rise to the role of a global language has been well documented (Galloway & Rose, 2019, p. 3) and research into this phenomenon is often conducted under the umbrella term Global Englishes, which encompasses investigations into English as an International Language, English as a Lingua Franca, and World Englishes.

The term 'global language' recognizes that English is a universal language spoken by many and suggests that it will spread even further in the years to come. Already today, English is spoken by politicians of many countries, displayed on signs and advertisements, provided in forms of translated menus in hotels, and omnipresent in news reports (Crystal, 2012, pp. 1-2). It is often seen as a symbol of globalization, progress and even diversification; attributes that lead to English being proclaimed as the first global lingua franca. Research is increasingly focused on the scale and nature of the influence of English on non-English speaking countries, rather than questioning whether it even influenced these countries at all (Hickey, 2020, p. 1).

In terms of English language teaching, there is a growing awareness that learners are more likely to use English to communicate with other non-native speakers than with native speakers of English. Learners thus have to learn to use the language for lingua franca purposes as they will inevitably be in contact with people from all around the world. This has given rise to the idea of Global English Language Teaching (GELT) to prepare students for global contexts (rather than for interactions with native speakers of English) and support them in the development of abilities to navigate these international and often multilingual situations (Galloway & Numajiri, 2019, p. 122).

Hence, teachers clearly have to consider the implications of Global English(es) for their own classrooms and the importance of successful communication in these multilingual and global contexts that are the norm nowadays. It seems obvious that training students to successfully act in these settings should be one of the goals for language development in secondary education institutions (Galloway & Numajiri, 2019, pp. 118-119).

It has been argued that changes in the use of English around the world demand a reconceptualization of "the notion of language, [and] the very subject they teach" (Galloway & Rose, 2019, p. 16). Galloway & Rose (2015) hence proposed six broad GELT principles:

1. Increasing World Englishes and ELF exposure in language curricula
2. Emphasising respect for multilingualism in ELT
3. Raising awareness of Global Englishes
4. Raising awareness of ELF strategies in language curricula
5. Emphasising respect for diverse culture and identity in ELT
6. Changing English teacher-hiring practices in the ELT industry

Points 1 to 5 are of particular relevance for my thesis and will be discussed in more detail below.

To successfully prepare learners for using English international contexts, educators first need to be able to recognize the current role of English. Only an awareness of global English will allow them to make informed decisions about their teaching and the needs of their students. Studies have shown, however, that teachers of English as a foreign language display very little understanding or awareness of English as a global language or the incorporation of EFL practices into their teaching yet (Bayyurt & Sifakis, 2017). Regarding the attitudes towards Global Englishes specifically, few studies have been conducted (Doan 2014; Hall et al. 2013; Kemaloglu-Er & Bayyurt 2018; Dilek & Özdemir 2015).

None of the studies mentioned above investigated the use of the linguistic landscape in relation to the teachers' awareness of the English language and its position in the global context nowadays. This is the gap that my thesis attempts to fill. In doing so, a broad definition of LL is used. Initial definitions of the linguistic landscape were quite restrictive, only referring to "the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region" (Landry & Bourhis, 1997, p. 23). This included "the language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs" (Landry & Bourhis, 1997, p. 25). More recent adaptations suggest, however, that the definition must go beyond its former limits and include "images, photos, sounds [...] graffiti, [and] clothes" (Shohamy, 2015, p. 153) as well.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Attempting to fill the research gap concerning Austrian English teachers' language awareness in connection to the successful incorporation of the LL in their teaching, this study aims to explore how aware novice and student teachers are of their LL, how well-versed they are in the use of the LL for language learning, and how well-developed their own language awareness is in relation to the previous two points. It aims to answer the following questions:

RQ 1: What are student teachers' attitudes towards English in the environment (LL)?

1. How can the linguistic landscape be integrated into speaking or writing tasks to support language learning?
2. In what ways can the LL contribute to language learning?

RQ 2: Are there any contradictions between reported attitudes of student teachers and their realization of the LL language learning tasks?

Following a mixed methods approach allowed for a real-life contextualization and the integration of multiple perspectives, investigating both student teacher's beliefs about Global English and their ability to integrate it into the foreign language classroom. As part of the *LEAP Interface* project cycle of 2021/2022, an online questionnaire was distributed to 47 university students in the ELT MEd program. The questionnaire consisted of 16 thematic sections, 6 of which are relevant for this thesis, resulting in a total of 16 questions (closed & open-ended) The remaining questions concern other areas of the *LEAP Interface* project. The selected pool of questions was analyzed with the software SPSS.

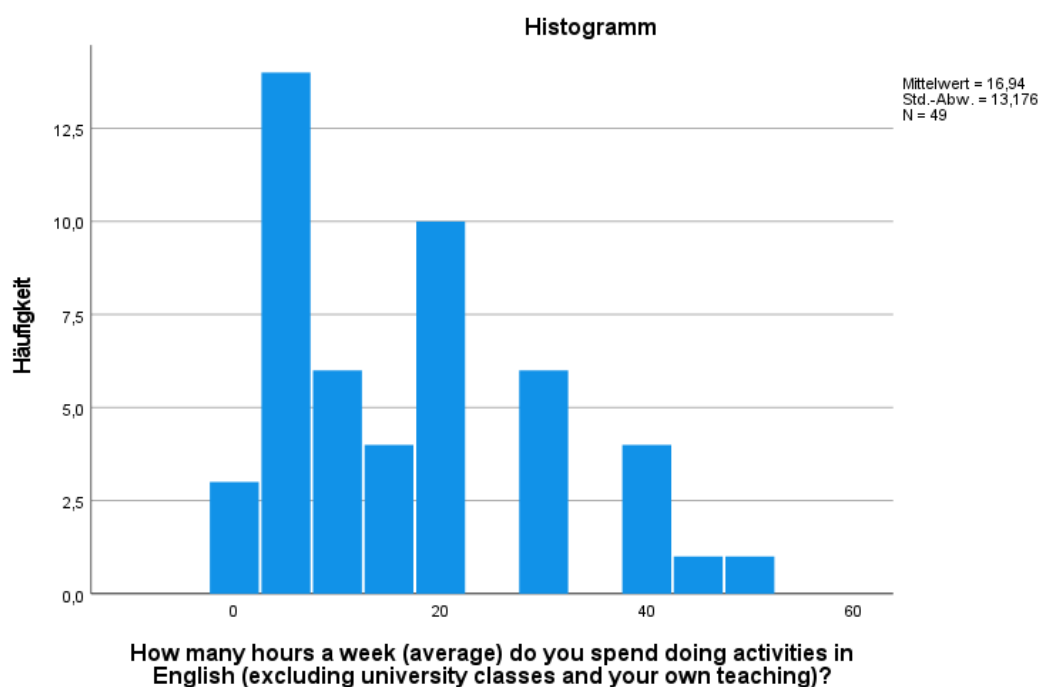
The students who completed the questionnaire were invited to take part in semi-structured interviews, and five students volunteered to do so. In addition to questions about their attitude towards English in the LL, they were invited to discuss a LL task they had designed themselves. The objective of the task was to use the LL as a source of input for language learners (ages 10-14; CEFR levels A1-B1).

The interviews were transcribed and coded with the software MAXDQA and analyzed according to Braun & Clarke's (2006) guide for thematic analysis. Nunan's (1988) communicative task design structure as well as Galloway & Rose's (2015) GELT principals were used for the analysis of the task designs. Overall, the data acquired through the questionnaire was supported by similar results from the interviews. These findings were also detectable in the task designs of the student teachers.

## FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

### *Awareness of English in the LL*

In order to gain an insight into the LL that the student teachers themselves experience in their lives, they were asked to report on how much time they spend participating in activities in English. They were specifically asked not to count their university courses where English is the medium of instruction or their teaching placements in schools where they teach English as a foreign language. Out of 47 participants 22 said that they spend 0-10 hours, 12 said they spend 11-20 hours, and 13 said that they spend 21-50 hours per week participating in activities in English (see figure 1), hinting at a growing predominance of English in their daily lives.



*Figure 1: Hours spent doing activities in English*

Student teachers were then asked to list the activities they carry out in English on a daily basis:

- playing computer games
- watching movies, tv-shows, and YouTube videos
- talking and messaging friends
- listening to podcasts, audio books, and music
- reading books and articles
- consuming social media (Instagram, TikTok)
- singing songs



- thinking (in English)
- watching sports
- interacting with tandems (conversation partners; often native speakers)

When asked about where they encounter English in their environment, participants responded that they spotted English in the following contexts:

- a menu at a restaurant
- advertisements (poster in a store window, movie poster, regular posters in the old city center of Graz, posters at cafés, posters at the university)
- on a t-shirt
- English magazine
- announcement on public transportation
- at the university library
- drive-in sign at the Covid-19 testing station
- English signs at the airport
- graffiti
- news (written, on the radio)
- labels on groceries (incl. list of ingredients, recipes)
- social media ads
- tags on pieces of clothing (e.g. handle with care)

The great variety of answers clearly suggests that student teachers nowadays are aware of the pre-dominance of English in their own as well as their learners' environment.

### *Contribution of the LL to language learning*

A total of 83% of the participants agree that teaching English is not the same as it once was, which again suggests an awareness of the growing presence of English in the learners' lives (see table 2). However, their assessment of the value of the LL for language teaching varies greatly. While some student teachers say that it has become easier to teach English "because pupils play [E]nglish computer games like Minecraft for example" or because "the world has become more connected due to social media and globalization", others argue that teaching today's student has become more difficult for teachers as the need to prepare their own materials "based on current events in the media" rather than using materials that their learners would perceive as outdated. As their students have an "easier access to the language", some student teachers expect to have to deal with more heterogeneous groups as learners may enter school with immensely differing language abilities.

**Choose what applies to you for each statement! [Language change happens faster now compared to 50 years ago.]**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	7	13,0	13,0	13,0
agree	20	37,0	37,0	50,0
agree strongly	18	33,3	33,3	83,3
agree very strongly	6	11,1	11,1	94,4
disagree	3	5,6	5,6	100,0
Total	54	100,0	100,0	

*Table 1: Language change over the years*

While acknowledging the increasing exposure to English of their learners, student teachers show a certain degree of hesitation when it comes to teaching Global English, ELF, or the Linguistic Landscape. Especially in lower secondary schools (ages 10-14; CEFR levels A1-B1), student teachers say that they would not provide theoretical information to their learners (e.g. definitions of ELF and LL) even though they would, for example, use materials including ELF usage in their teaching (e.g. an audio recording of two non-native speakers talking). Interestingly, however, student teachers reported that they would prefer to teach native-speaker varieties of English rather than non-native speaker varieties, suggesting that despite their recognition of the global role of English and the importance of international communication, there may still exist remnants of the formerly predominant pro native-speaker bias.

*Contradictions between reported attitudes and task design*

The five LL tasks submitted by the student teachers were assessed based on the principles for GELT put forward by Galloway & Rose (2015). For each of the tasks, it was determined whether they increase World Englishes and ELF exposure; emphasize respect for multilingualism in ELT; raise awareness of Global Englishes; raise awareness of ELF strategies in language curricula; and emphasize respect for diverse culture and identity. The author's initial assessment was validated by two other members of the *LEAP Interface project team*.

Task	Brief description	ELF exposure	Respect for multilingual-	Awareness of global	ELF strategies	Diverse culture	Overall
1	Christmas Advertisements (A2+; giving reasons; vocabulary for describing objects [adjectives], functional language for giving reasons)	-	-	Use of English in Christmas advertisements in Austria (shop windows, online ads)	-	sole focus on Austrian advertisements ; potential for talking about Christmas ads in other cultures	Pupils were not actively engaged in working with the LL; Pupils were presented with examples collected by the teacher;
2	Linguistic Foodscape (A2+; writing a short recipe; vocabulary for talking about food)	-	-	English used for food packaging, recipes, ingredients	-	food from various countries and cultures	Pupils had to collect exponents of English used for food packages themselves; step-by-step building of vocabulary + functional language;
3	Graffiti and street art (A2+; creative writing; past tense; vocabulary for colors, functional language for describing a picture)	-	Potential for exposure to other languages used for graffiti & street art	Use of English for graffiti & street art; little connection to the Austrian context/ LL	-	Potential for exposure to culturally diverse graffiti & street art	Pupils were not actively engaged in working with the LL; Pupils were presented with examples collected by the teacher;

4	English Everywhere (B1; asking questions; structure of questions in English)	-	-	Collection of English they find in their environment; Reflective exercise about the use of English in the German LL;	-	-	Pupils are actively asked to collect samples of the English language in their LL;
5	Emblems of sports clubs (A2+; creative writing)	-	-	No direct connection to the use of English in this context;	-	Background stories of the sports clubs;	Pupils are actively asked to collect sports clubs' emblems; no direct connection to the LL;

The results indicate that while the tasks all provide ELF exposure and are strong in the area of global English awareness, they do not aim to promote respect for multilingualism and diverse cultures and they do not attempt to teach the learners ELF communication strategies. This is in line with the student teachers overall positive attitudes combined with their stated reservations concerning the implementation of ELF in their teaching.

## CONCLUSION

This master's thesis research has shown that while Austrian student teachers in the ELT program are aware of the changes occurring concerning the use of the English language, specifically the role of English as a global language with an increasing presence in the LL, they are not yet able to successfully integrate the LL in their task design.

This has implications for the ELT MEd program. Global English(es) and the LL should receive a more prominent place in the curriculum to further develop student teachers' awareness of these issues. In addition, they should be supported in designing tasks that fulfil all the criteria for global English language teaching (GELT). Moreover, in light of the ever-growing importance of English worldwide, more research is needed into student teachers' approaches to teaching English effectively in a diverse, multicultural and multilingual world.

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# Dissecting Diversity: Experiences of migrant and minority student populations in SETU Carlow.

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As a Research Fellow I completed an independent study focused on EDI in Higher Education for my Masters by Research. My passion for equality, and my love of education, was first given space to develop in a professional capacity for over ten years in my previous work as a Post Primary teacher of English and Religion. My research work now involves the Irish labour market and how qualitative research can positively impact an understanding of EDI in the workplace. I am now an Associate Lecturer of EDI and Academic Writing for SETU, and N-TUTORR EDI Student Champion for SETU Waterford.

**KEYWORDS:** Intercultural Education, Access to Education, Minority students, Belonging, Diversity

### INTRODUCTION

This paper will outline findings from a study that examined the experiences of education inclusion and exclusion for migrant and minority ethnic students at SETU Carlow. The study sought to answer whether or not access to third level education for migrant and ethnic minority students in SETU Carlow can be facilitated through inclusive pedagogies. The paper will highlight research findings under the theme ‘Diversity’ – one of four themes explored in the study. Other themes from this study include ‘Inclusion’ and ‘Belonging’, and are discussed in a forthcoming paper (Nolan, 2024). The methodological design is also described here, along with the idea of researcher’s positionality, and the role of HEIs around the theme selected. To protect the anonymity of research participants, the identifier ‘Participant X’ is used to indicate focus group responses, and ‘Survey Respondent’ is used to indicate survey questionnaire responses. This study was approved by the ethical committee of SETU and conducted in line with all ethical procedures and requirements.

Under the theme ‘Diversity’, findings are discussed as Macro-level Diversity – referring to the institution as a whole; Meso-level Diversity – referring to the general climate of the institution; and Micro-level Diversity – referring to the individual student experience of diversity. In line with the work of Tan (2019) this research study understands diversity in education as:

“The presence of differences within a given setting. This may include gender, race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, place of practice, and practice type.”

Incorporating a sociological perspective of the term diversity regarding educational environments, this research study demonstrated a positive relationship between ethnocultural diversity and access to education. This paper argues that there must be closer attention given to understanding how policies on diversity are best acted on in the interest of the student experience.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This was a qualitative study, based around understanding the everyday experiences of participants, and was informed by the constructivist paradigm. Qualitative enquiry believes that reality is subjective and that social environments are personal constructs created by individual interpretations that are not generalizable (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2003); these beliefs are rooted in constructivism. Qualitative researchers value rich description and deep understanding. Qualitative researchers believe that research is influenced by the values held by the researcher as well as by the theories, or the framework that the researcher is using (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). Ontologically speaking, this study understood meaning as constructed rather than discovered. This ontological position is located in an understanding that reality exists beyond a single, verifiable truth, giving researchers the liberty and space to collect and analyse data in a holistic way (Gray, 2014). In this way, constructivism, as a posture within social research, allows us to understand how meaning, or truth, can be at once objective and subjective (Crotty, 1998, p. 58).

The sampling method used was volunteer sampling in order to respect fully the person-centred ethos of the project. There was both written and oral data collected through the use of survey questionnaire (written data) (n = 74) and focus groups (oral data) (n = 5).

### *Research Participants*

Section A of the online survey questionnaire gathered general background information about participants, focusing on respondents' ethnic backgrounds, nationality, and area of study. The questions asked here were used to establish a broad picture of the student population in terms of ethnicity and minority status, along with differences in level and field of studies. When asked to provide details about their ethnicity, 51 participants responded with two main categories emerging, the first was White Irish/White Other, with a total of 26. The second was Asian/Black African/Black Irish/Black Other/ Arabic, with a total of 24. Additionally, within the category of White Irish/White Other, 11 out of the 26 respondents indicated migrant and/or minority ethnic status. Out of the 51 responses, 1 participant identified as having no race, writing “aracial” as their response. The information provided here indicated that the sample of participants represented the target group for this research project, that is, migrant and minority ethnic students.

Question 3 of the survey asked about migrant status. The question included the following general explanation for participants;

- First generation - you were born outside of Ireland and are not an Irish citizen by birth.
- Second generation - you were born in Ireland but one or more of your parents were born outside of Ireland, and you are an Irish citizen by birth.

57 participants responded with 44 indicating first generation migrant status, and 13 indicating second generation migrant status.

Regarding courses of study, the Humanities was the most represented, with a total of 20 out of 74 respondents choosing this field. This was followed by Business (n14), Science and Health (n12), Computing and Networking (n11), Aerospace, Mechanical and Electronic Engineering (n10), with Sport Media and Marketing, and Built Environment being the least represented at 4 and 3 respectively. In terms of the level at which respondents were studying, the majority were completing undergraduate studies, at 52 out of 74. Further, most respondents were following the more traditional path of full-time studies, 58, over part-time studies, 16.

Regarding the focus group setting, there were five participants, three of which were female and two were male. Two out of the three female participants were completing postgraduate studies and one was in the second year of their undergraduate degree. One male was a postgraduate student, and one was an undergraduate student. In terms of the ethnic profile of focus group participants, four identified as having first generation migrant status, and one as second-generation migrant status. Additionally, two out of the five participants explained that they identified as belonging to an ethnic minority (Nigerian and Ugandan), whereas three participants chose not to disclose this information.

### *Ethical Considerations*

In line with SETU research policy regarding Vulnerable Participants (which includes migrant and ethnic minority groups), the researcher was committed to protecting respondents by way of ensuring that consent was obtained appropriately, and that data collection was safeguarded (ITC, Ethics Policy, Version 8, 2021). Although total confidentiality is not possible for vulnerable groups, the research was conducted in a manner that protected the confidentiality of participants insofar as it was possible as per the policies around guidelines and best practice. In addition, the data for this research project was collected in a manner that was convenient to participants – that is, by remote access to the survey questionnaire, and through online focus group discussion. This was especially significant as the data collection phase was conducted during the Covid-19 emergency. Besides needing to adhere to health and safety guidelines as mandated by the Irish Government, it was important to ensure that respondents felt safe and secure when participating.

Conducting research among vulnerable groups requires awareness of the potential distress this may cause (ITC, Ethics Policy, Version 8, 2021). As such, it was important that I, the researcher, not only made participants aware of this, but that they also prepared for such an eventuality. This was attended to by way of providing participants with detailed information about the project, ensuring participants understood their right to withdraw at any point in the process, receiving informed consent from participants, and outlining protocols for dealing with distress that participants may experience.

### *Positionality and Allyship:*

In undertaking this research project, an important part of the work was creating a sense of inclusion at every stage, make research subjects part of the research by doing research *with* rather than research *on* participants. As a white woman working and learning in Irish Higher Education, I benefit from the privilege of normative identity – my position is the default which allows me the comfort and security of being the ‘norm’. In order to counteract the ‘stock story’ of the default ethnic majority position I occupy, and effectively understand the impact of diversity as part of the academic lives of students, this research needed to prioritise experiences which are beyond my own, to counteract what Joseph (2020) terms ‘racial complacency’. I am aware of the need to reflect on, and deconstruct my own positionality in order to become a ‘race ally’ in a meaningful way. Allyship involves recognising personal privilege or power and using it to advocate for people in underrepresented groups. Being a good ally is about awareness and



advocacy. Equality studies research requires that the experiences of participants, informed by their social, political and cultural backgrounds, be prioritised (Joseph 2020).

### **KEY FINDINGS AROUND DIVERSITY:**

When the idea of diversity was explored positives include how SETU is engaging with government agendas in terms of policy reform, identified in this study as macro-level diversity. On the other hand, diversity appears to be lacking in the everyday lived experiences for ethnic minority students, identified in this study as micro-level diversity. The data suggest that it is the in-between space, identified as meso-level diversity, that could be a key area for consideration in order to bridge the gap between policy and the day-to-day reality for students.

#### *Macro-level diversity:*

On a macro-level diversity is part of SETU's identity as per policy documents, however the study found that the claim to be diverse can be felt as a selling point rather than a reality for students. If SETU is to truly achieve diversity as per the public perception being advertised, there must be closer attention given to understanding how policies on diversity are best acted on in the interest of the student experience and bridge the gap between 'doing' diversity and 'being' diverse. When asked if they felt SETU was a diverse environment, one focus group participant commented, "Make it more about the students in real life instead of social media" (Participant X). When asked about changes they would like to see at ITC, a focus group participants commented, "I think there is a lot of lip-service given to, say, the president on campus saying 'oh the students are our greatest asset, and the students are the greatest thing' but in practice you don't necessarily feel that" (Participant X).

Ahmed and Swan (2006) underline this idea by explaining that in cultivating a diverse climate institutes must understand that their community is organised around cultural and ethnic majorities. Diversity is about exposing the concealed inequalities of an "orientation around whiteness", which is achieved by examining how diversity is used as a marketing tool, or as "forms of capital" in order to portray an environment that is inclusive and equal, when this may not necessarily be the case.

#### *Meso-level diversity:*

This second layer of diversity examined the difference between diversity as a policy and diversity as a reality from two aspects, the first is diversity among teaching staff, the second is diversity in the curriculum. Findings here suggest that a lack of meso-level diversity regarding faculty and cultural awareness negatively impacts on curriculum design and delivery.

#### *Meso-level diversity – (a) Diversity among faculty:*

When asked 'Are any of your lecturers or tutors from minority ethnic backgrounds?' the majority of survey questionnaire responses were recorded as 'no'. This aligns with UK and Irish studies and scholarship on diversity in Higher Education and the diversity in the labour market. The lack of representation was sharply felt by minority ethnic and migrant survey questionnaire respondents: "All of my lecturers seem and sound Irish to me with no exceptions"; "It will be nice to see some black or ethnic representation"; "Almost all the cleaners [on campus] are Polish so that just doesn't feel right" (Survey Respondents). This lack of diversity has negatively impacted the student experience, with further comments on this explaining, "it's always there that I'm not from Ireland" (Participant X); "It just reinforces the message that you're different" (Participant X). SETU faculty is lacking in diversity and culturally divergent perspectives and this creates limited educational

experiences for students, an issue echoed in the HEA 2021 Report, 'Race Equality in the Higher Education sector'. The concern here is that if lecturers are limited in their diversity from an ethnical, cultural, and experiential position, then the students' worldview needs to shrink in order to fit in with the limited perspective of their lecturer.

#### *Meso-level diversity – (b) Diversity in the curriculum:*

Kelly and Padden highlight how diversity in HIEs concerns not just the student and teaching population but also the "extent to which institutes respond to the challenges of Diversity and the extent to which a curriculum demonstrates diverse ethnic and cultural perspectives is a key aspect of this." (2018). Diversity in the curriculum generated mixed responses in this study, with a relatively even split between positive and negative responses, such as: "The only examples used in tutorials come from Irish and/or Eurocentric perspectives" (Survey Respondent); versus, "Since the BLM [the Black Lives Matter movement] everyone is definitely more open to hear our insights" (Participant X). However, curriculum diversity is wide ranging and percolates into pedagogical practices; topics are often explored through in-class discussion work. Focus group participants centred on this, highlighting how a mismanaged approach to diversity in lectures, creates feelings of exclusion for some students:

"Depends on what the topic is about, if it's coming from a negative perspective and it's a country where my ancestors are from...it's about reading the room and knowing how to use these examples...there's a lack of understanding." (Participant X); "For some reason when lecturers find out where you're from they keep using examples from Saudi Arabia in class." (Participant X).

Rather than allow for diversity to be a positive learning experience for students, different ethnic backgrounds are referred to in ways that cause difficulties for students. Creating diversity is not about creating divisions or highlighting differences, but about creating respect and highlighting the richness of alternative perspectives, and understandings. Findings indicated that rather than use diverse backgrounds to create positive teaching moments when delivering the curriculum, lecturers appear to be doing the opposite in some instances. In all, exploring the meso-level diversity climate at SETU, this study found that a lack of diversity regarding lecturers and cultural awareness negatively impacts on curriculum design and delivery.

#### *Micro-level diversity:*

The topic of diversity repeatedly involved clubs and societies, but the responses show a dichotomy regarding the positive impact they have on creating diverse environments for students. On one hand clubs and societies appear to support diversity, whereas on the other hand, they themselves are not diverse environments. "An AfroCaribbean Society, that's the only thing that I see that shows diversity" (Participant X); versus; "If you look at the clubs and societies there are actually more international students than Irish. I feel they are where students would meet up and mix, but you're not going to get the mix of students there to begin with." (Participant X). This illustrates a picture of diversity as an intrinsic balance between creating support systems for minority ethnic and migrant students, while simultaneously fostering a diverse culture that creates a positive individual experience for students. The impact of clubs and societies on education experiences for migrant and minority ethnic students was considered in a previous paper, 'Researching Inclusion in HE: A Narrative of Initial Enquiry' (Nolan and Flynn, 2021).

#### *Role of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) – what matters to students:*

The findings from this study deliver powerful testimony to what matters to the cohort of learners this research sought to examine: Their academic journey is fuelled when ethnocultural diversity is responded to, acknowledged, and facilitated, as this helps to create a sense of acceptance, inclusion, and belonging.

Indeed, the educational experience of migrant and minority ethnic students is positively affected when these students encounter and engage with diverse faculty members; representation matters. Additionally, the educational experience is improved when students are not singled out in class – in either a positive or negative manner. In this way, the lecturer-student relationship was identified as an important factor regarding experiences of diversity for migrant and minority ethnic students. Drawing on these findings, the role of HEIs must be to champion the ideals of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, more fully in terms of the micro, meso, and macro elements of diversity discussed here. This paper argues that there must be closer attention given to understanding how policies on diversity are best acted on in the interest of the student experience.

It has been observed that the role of educational institutions extends beyond their immediate environment into the wider social domain in and through the reproduction and legitimisation of dominant cultural practices and beliefs (Freire, 1998[1970]; Bourdieu, 1986; Baker, Lynch et al, 2004, p. 59; Mourad, 2020, p. 2). A key concern of the HEA 2021 report centred on this wider social role of HEIs, where their policy recommendations suggested the need to acknowledge “the power of HEIs to influence Irish Society in general” (Kempny and Michael, 2021, p. 69). The relationship between Irish society and HEIs is a fundamental aspect of government policies concerning the current and future role of education (DES, 2011; HEA, 2008, 2015; Liston et al, 2016). Engaging with the wider society has been identified as one of three core roles of higher education in Ireland (DES, 2011, p. 74). A common observance is that the student population in higher education should reflect “the diversity and social mix of Ireland’s population”, and in that diversity, there needs to be clear lines of tolerance, acceptance, and equality of respect for the varied cultural and ethnic backgrounds of students (HEA, 2015, p. 9; Kelly and Padden, 2018.).

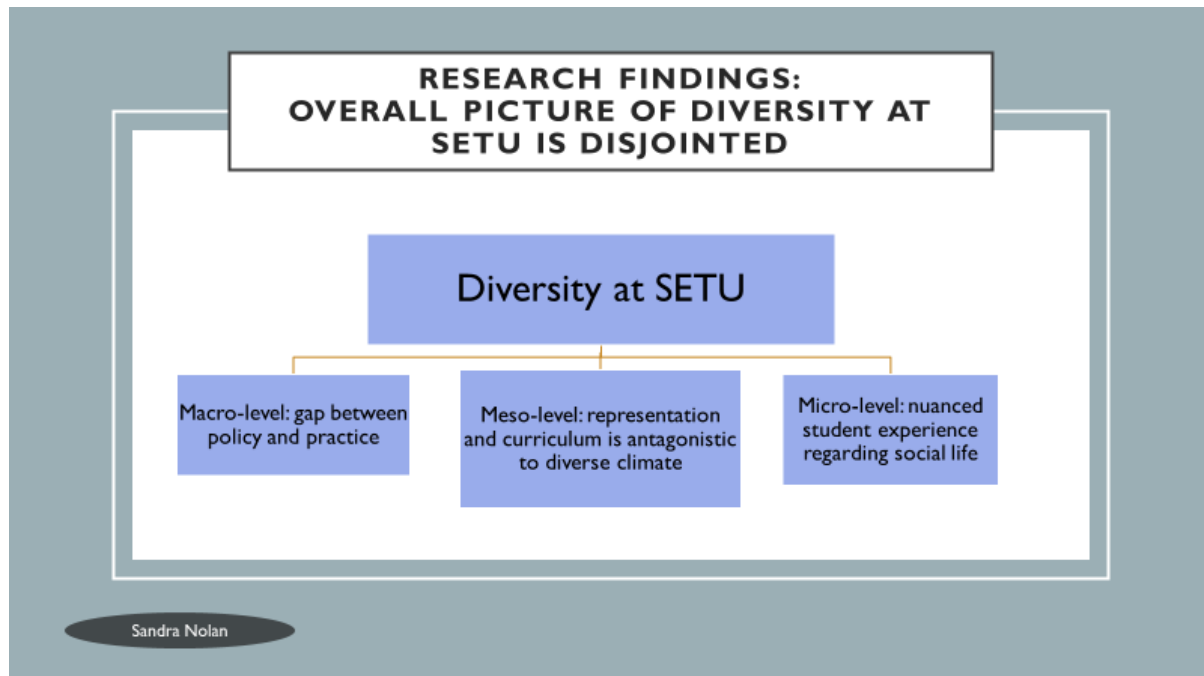
## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

In terms of recommendations, the findings appear to rest on a general need for culturally responsive teaching and engagement. This research project highlighted some of the tensions and challenges of SETU’s educational policies and practices. We view these findings as opportunities for educational innovation; with the following recommendations for future practice:

Regarding the challenges under the theme diversity, this study recommends that an intersectional lens is applied to enhance curriculum and assessment design. This could provide a wider perspective with which to accommodate the different lived experiences of migrant and minority ethnic students. Adopting an intersectional approach as such could create positive change for these more vulnerable students by accommodating and acknowledging their diversity of culture, experiences, and challenges. This approach could help bridge the gap between policy and practice. In addition, this study recommends increasing diversity among teaching staff thereby creating more representation for the migrant and minority ethnic student population at SETU and consequently, enhance curriculum content, design, and delivery. Finally, this study recommends working from a ground up over and above a top-down approach to bridge the gap between policy and practice, by honing in on the meso-level diversity space in order to successfully move from policy at a macro-level and practice at a micro-level to facilitate positive change in the day-to-day reality for students.

## **CONCLUSION**

The goal of this study was to provide participants with an opportunity to give their opinion about their experiences as part of the SETU student body. This was achieved by asking questions and generating discussion around how the issue of equality is being addressed in the day to day practices of this Higher Education Institution (HEI).



The findings generated from this qualitative research project were experiential and subjective, in keeping with the methodological underpinnings of the study. Regarding diversity, at the macro-level a gap exists between policy and practice; at the Meso-level, representation and curriculum issues are antagonistic to building a more diverse climate; at the Micro-level, nuanced student experiences around social engagement affects diversity; and all of this feeds into the issue that a lack of diversity hampers equal access to education. The findings strongly indicate there is space within the HE arena to create deeper awareness around improving access to education.

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# The Books are Harder: Enhancing the Teaching of Reading Comprehension in The Senior Primary Classes

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The following research was conducted during her final year of study on the Bachelor of Education programme in DCU Institute of Education, prior to completing an MA in Education in UCD. Aoife has experience teaching in a wide variety of contexts, particularly urban DEIS Band 1 primary schools and working with young people at risk. Aoife is the current coordinator of the Finglas Community Lifelong Learning Hub (funded by the HEA under PATH 1), established by DCU Educational Disadvantage Centre with the Dublin Northwest Partnership in order to promote diversity within the teaching profession. Aoife Joy Keogh is a current PhD student in UCD School of Education. Her research interests include literacy education, educational disadvantage, education policy, and access to higher education.

**KEYWORDS:** Literacy, Reading, Reading Comprehension, Language Learning, Pedagogy

## INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is a reader's ability to construct meaning from written texts (Snow, 2002; Anderson & Pearson, 1984). Reading comprehension is an unconstrained skill which develops across the lifespan of the child (Paris, 2005; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2019). As students progress throughout primary school, they will undoubtedly encounter more complex reading tasks. Reading tasks requiring the synthesis of multiple comprehension strategies and texts of increasing complexity can pose challenges to readers in the senior primary classes (Shanahan, 2019; Cartwright & Duke, 2019). Additionally, students must maintain a high level of motivation and engagement in order to select suitable reading strategies and persevere when challenges arise (Guthrie & Klauda, 2015; Guthrie et al., 2007). This article provides an overview of an action research project (ARP) which focuses on enhancing the teaching of reading comprehension in the senior classes of primary school in order to enable students to overcome such challenges.

This research describes the experiences of a final year BEd student undertaking school placement with a cohort of sixth class students in an urban non-disadvantaged Irish primary school with a class size of twenty-eight students.

Throughout this experience a number of key issues were encountered with regards to the teaching of reading comprehension, leading to the development of the research question: *How can the use of specific pedagogies focusing on reading comprehension enhance the teaching of reading comprehension in senior classes?* Two sub-topics were developed in light of key issues which arose when teaching reading comprehension. The first sub-topic was the synthesis of multiple comprehension strategies. While individual comprehension strategies were taught to students using of the Gradual Release of Responsibility (GRR) Model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983), students struggled to synthesise multiple comprehension strategies simultaneously when interacting with texts. Duke and Pearson (2002) state that “good readers use multiple strategies constantly” (p.210). To aid students in mastering this skill, this research endeavoured to identify best practice with regards to teaching children how to draw on multiple comprehension strategies when engaging with texts. Secondly, students were not equipped with the tools to unpack more complex texts which are prevalent within the senior classes. This research examined whether this problem could be overcome through the use of the pedagogies of close reading (Fisher & Frey, 2012) and dialogic teaching (Burbules, 1993; Murphy et al., 2009), in order to engage children in deeper comprehension of these complex texts.

This research design reflects that of Action Research, a cyclical research process involving the four principles of planning, action, observation, and reflection (Lewin, 1946). This research design lends itself to research within the education sector given its foundation in reflective practice, a key principle underpinning the teaching profession (Teaching Council, 2016). This research investigated how the teaching of reading comprehension in senior primary classes could be enhanced in light of the challenges experienced by a final year student teacher when teaching this aspect of reading instruction on school placement. The data sources analysed entailed planning documentation and self-evaluations from the school placement under consideration. Thematic analysis was undertaken to identify ways in which key issues within the development of students’ reading comprehension could be mitigated through enhanced reading instruction within the context of a Balanced Literacy Framework.

## **CONTEXT**

Literacy is considered to be “an essential component of the right to education and a prerequisite for accessing other human rights” by United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2019, p.4). Research has indicated clearly the importance of functional reading skills as a tool for personal, social and economic development and empowerment (Nelis et al., 2021; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2019; Murphy et al., 2019). In the context of this research, it is important to note that reading comprehension is an unconstrained skill which is developed across the lifespan of the child (Paris, 2005; NCCA, 2019). While unconstrained skills cannot be taught in a brief period of focused instruction and are acquired gradually through experience (Snow & Matthews, 2016), it is imperative that there is explicit instruction for the teaching of complex unconstrained skills throughout the primary years (Dougherty Stahl, 2011). In consideration of constrained skills theory (Paris, 2005), the teaching of reading comprehension is pivotal in the senior primary classes in ensuring students’ progression and development within reading (NCCA, 2019).



In relation to the national curricular context, the Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) (NCCA, 2019), (national curriculum for Literacy Education in Irish primary schools) is underpinned by the concept of a Balanced Literacy Framework (BLF) (Kennedy et al., 2012). This research focuses on the teaching of reading comprehension in the senior primary classes within the context of a BLF. Within a BLF, a wide variety of approaches are used to teach reading and writing; and oral language and vocabulary instruction are embedded within this teaching, alongside specific opportunities for word study (NCCA, 2019; Pressley, 2015; Kennedy, 2014).

A BLF is a nonprescriptive framework in nature which targets the needs of the students and explores their interests while using “a systematic approach to the development of the essential skills for literacy” (Kennedy & Shiel, 2010, p.381). One such essential skill is that of reading comprehension. NCCA (2020) outlines that “comprehension lies at the heart of all reading and therefore plays a central role in a balanced and integrated approach to literacy instruction” (p.4).

In consideration of the national policy context, research has shown an enduring relationship between students’ primary literacy education and achievement within post-primary school (Smyth, 2017; Smyth & McCoy, 2009; McCoy et al., 2010). This in turn poses implications with regards to students’ progression to higher education later in life. Additionally, although Ireland ranks fourth in Progress In International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) (Eivers et al., 2017), a considerable difference in literacy achievement exists between children in disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged schools (Kavanagh et al., 2017; Weir & Denner, 2013). This is despite a continuous emphasis within policy on initiatives designed to narrow the gap e.g. *the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (Department of Education [DE], 2011)*, and *the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) Strategy (DE, 2005; 2017)*. *The Higher Education Authority (HEA) (2018, 2022) highlights the need to take a prevention and early intervention approach to exclusion, stating that “exclusion begins early in education and effects future options” (2018, p.7). Given the importance of students’ literacy development with regards to progression to higher education, it is vital that prevention and early intervention approaches to exclusion also target primary school students’ literacy education.*

## **METHODOLOGY**

The methodological approach taken to this research was Action Research (AR). This action research project (ARP) can be classified more specifically as qualitative desk-based action research. McNiff (2002, p.7) describes AR as a “systematic investigation” of one’s practice. This structured investigation provides practitioners with opportunities to identify challenges in their classroom and “reflect, consider options, implement and evaluate potential solutions” (Alberta Teachers Association [ATA], 2000, p.4). Within this research, two key issues were identified within the teaching of reading comprehension and the AR process was undertaken to devise actionable solutions for these problems.

This ARP was carried out using Lewin’s Action Research Model (Lewin, 1946). Figure 1 demonstrates the four principles of this model: planning, action, observation and reflection. ATA (2000) highlights the continuous cyclical nature of AR. The cyclical nature of this research design lends itself to research within the education sector, as it provides educators with the opportunity to reflect on their practice and explore and apply solutions within their classroom in a flexible manner. This flexibility is vital for understanding the dynamic social context of the school environment.



*Figure 1. Four-Stage Action Research Model (based on Lewin, 1948, cited in Hung & Tsai, 2017)*

As part of the AR process, qualitative data was identified and gathered in light of the research question and its sub-topics. This data consisted of planning and evaluation documentation from a school placement undertaken during the author’s final year of study on the Bachelor of Education programme. A variety of data sources were chosen so as to triangulate the data and increase the validity and reliability of the research findings (Grady, 1998). These data sources comprised of: one progressional scheme (PS) for Literacy Education, two lesson plans (LP1 and LP2) for Literacy Education and the two lesson evaluations (Eval 1 and Eval 2) which correspond to these lesson plans.

These planning and evaluation documents were chosen as data sources as they pertained specifically to the issues being investigated by the research question and its sub-topics. By analysing these particular data sources, possible solutions could be developed for the specific problems which arose within the planning and teaching of reading comprehension within the context under consideration. The data sources were analysed through the process of deductive coding. Coding involves grouping data into categories based on common characteristics or criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Anchor codes were assigned to the two sub-topics of the research question, which were also the key themes identified within an initial literature review. A set of sub-codes was then devised based on the literature reviewed within each of these themes. A data analysis tool (see Table 1) and rating scale (see Table 2) were used to interrogate the data sources using the anchor codes and sub-codes. This data analysis tool enabled the strengths and weaknesses to be identified in relation to the two key themes.

Category	Key Criteria	Reference	PS	LP1	LP2	Eval 1	Eval 2
The Synthesis of Multiple Comprehension Strategies	Explicit Teaching of Comprehension Strategies (ET)	Shanahan (2019) Duke and Pearson (2002)					
	Gradual Release of Responsibility Model (GRRM)	Pearson and Gallagher (1983) Shanahan, Callison, Carriere, Duke et al. (2010)					
	Metacognitive Awareness (MA)	Shanahan (2019) Flavell (1979) Kennedy (2018) Guthrie and Alao (1997)					
The Comprehension of Complex Texts	Close Reading (CR)	Shanahan, Fisher and Frey (2012) Fisher and Frey (2012) Lehman and Roberts (2013) Paul and Elder (2003)					
	Dialogic Teaching (DT)	Burbules (1993) Murphy et al. (2009) Soter et al. (2008) Kennedy et al. (2012)					
The Relationship Between Reading Comprehension, Motivation and Engagement	Mastery Goal Orientation (MGO)	Guthrie et al. (1999) Dweck and Leggett (1988)					
	Choice (C)	Kennedy (2018) Gambrell (2011) Guthrie and Alao (1997)					
	Social Collaboration (SC)	Serafini and Ladd (2008) Gambrell (2011) Guthrie et al. (2007) Soter et al. (2008)					

Table 1. Data Analysis Tool

5	4	3	2	1	0
Key criteria clearly present in data source and used consciously by the teacher to a very high level. The enhancement of the teaching of reading comprehension as a result of key criteria is markedly evident.	Key criteria clearly present in data source and used consciously by the teacher. The enhancement of the teaching of reading comprehension as a result of key criteria is clearly demonstrated.	Key criteria clearly present in data source, its presence leading to some enhancement of the teaching of reading comprehension.	Aspects of key criteria can be seen in data source, its presence leading to some enhancement of the teaching of reading comprehension.	Aspects of key criteria can be seen in data source, however its presence does not enhance the teaching of reading comprehension in any capacity.	Key criteria absent from data source.

Table 2. Rating Scale for Data Analysis Tool

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As outlined in the previous section, a data analysis tool and rating scale were utilised to examine the aforementioned data sources (See Table 3). The findings from the data analysis are organised thematically according to the two key issues which emerged within this data analysis in relation to the teaching of reading comprehension in the senior classes. These themes are as follows: (i) Teacher Instruction of Comprehension Strategies, and (ii) Choice of Text. Sub-themes also developed within these main themes.

Category	Key Criteria	Reference	PS	LP1	LP2	Eval 1	Eval 2
The Synthesis of Multiple Comprehension Strategies	Explicit Teaching of Comprehension Strategies (ET)	Shanahan (2019) Duke and Pearson (2002)	4	4	3	4	3
	Gradual Release of Responsibility Model (GRRM)	Pearson and Gallagher (1983) Shanahan, Callison, Carriere, Duke et al. (2010)	4	3	2	3	2
	Metacognitive Awareness (MA)	Shanahan (2019) Flavell (1979) Kennedy (2018) Guthrie and Alao (1997)	2	2	1	2	1
The Comprehension of Complex Texts	Close Reading (CR)	Shanahan, Fisher and Frey (2012) Fisher and Frey (2012) Lehman and Roberts (2013) Paul and Elder (2003)	2	2	2	1	2
	Dialogic Teaching (DT)	Burbules (1993) Murphy et al. (2009) Soter et al. (2008) Kennedy et al. (2012)	4	2	3	2	2
The Relationship Between Reading Comprehension, Motivation and Engagement	Mastery Goal Orientation (MGO)	Guthrie et al. (1999) Dweck and Leggett (1988)	4	4	3	4	3
	Choice (C)	Kennedy (2018) Gambrell (2011) Guthrie and Alao (1997)	2	1	2	1	2
	Social Collaboration (SC)	Serafini and Ladd (2008) Gambrell (2011) Guthrie et al. (2007) Soter et al. (2008)	3	2	2	2	2

*Table 3. Completed Data Analysis Tool*

### *Teacher Instruction of Comprehension Strategies*

The PLC (NCCA, 2019) recommends the use of explicit strategy instruction when teaching reading comprehension. The importance of explicitly teaching individual comprehension strategies was also highlighted in the literature reviewed (Shanahan, 2019; Duke & Pearson, 2002). Explicit teaching of comprehension strategies had a strong presence in all of the data sources. However, two key issues relating to teacher instruction of comprehension strategies decreased the effectiveness of this explicit teaching. These issues were (i) over-reliance on independent use of comprehension strategies, and (ii) lack of teacher modelling and collaborative practice of strategic control.

The analysis of the data sources evidenced that while the GRR Model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983) was implemented throughout the progressional scheme (PS), there was an over-reliance on the children’s independent use of comprehension strategies. Although there was a clear emphasis on teacher modelling and shared practice when first introducing comprehension strategies (See Table 3.1), future use of the strategy was almost always exclusively independent use. Eval 1 and Eval 2 demonstrate that the lack of further opportunities for guided support from the teacher or collaborative practice of the comprehension strategy led to the children using the strategy in an inconsistent manner or disregarding the strategy when reading (See Table 3.1).

Through analysis of the data sources, a clear need for teacher modelling and collaborative practice of strategic control within the teaching of reading comprehension became apparent. Strategic control is a key aspect of metacognition in reading (Flavell, 1979). Strategic control relates to when a reader selects a particular strategy, or combination of strategies that seem suitable for task at hand (Shanahan, 2019). In the literature reviewed the need to teach children how to synthesise comprehension strategies was highlighted (Duke & Pearson, 2002; Shanahan, 2019). When analysing the sub-code of Metacognitive Awareness (MA) within the data sources, it was noted that the children struggled to select and draw on appropriate comprehension strategies when they read texts independently. This demonstrated the need to model and engage in collaborative practice of strategic control as outlined by Shanahan (2019).

<p><i>Progressional Scheme – Example of Introducing Comprehension Strategy</i></p> <p><b><u>Modelling the Strategy of Visualising</u></b> [Whole Class]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Using the “making movies in our minds” example, I will model the visualising strategy through drawing using the poem “Springtime” by Derbháil Clarke.</li> <li>Using the “thinking out loud” strategy as I draw and getting the children to co-construct the visualisation with me by asking the children questions.</li> </ul> <p><b><u>Shared Experience of Visualising Strategy</u></b> [Whole Class and Individual Work w/ support]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Discussion: the steps taken while visualising.</li> <li>Reading and analysing the poem “Springtime” by Derbháil Clarke.</li> <li>Purposeful oral re-reading for fluency: emphasis on accuracy</li> <li>Vocabulary development and dictionary work.</li> <li>Identifying important pieces of information.</li> <li>Children express visualisations through drawing.</li> </ul> <p><b><i>Evaluation 1</i></b></p> <p>“The children’s work showed that they were very capable of analysing and writing about the poetic techniques being used in the verse they were assigned. Most children could give an example of where the technique is used. I felt that the use of visualising was inconsistent in the children’s diagrams. Some children drew generic pictures rather than labelled diagrams reflecting the verse they were assigned.”</p> <p><b><i>Evaluation 2</i></b></p> <p>“As the piece was very descriptive, many of the children struggled to comprehend the text due to the number of descriptive images present in the poem. I tried to combat this by modelling visualising to the children but I feel that further work needs to be done to ensure they don’t overlook this strategy when they read independently.”</p>	<p><b>Sub-code 1b: Gradual Release of Responsibility Model (GRRM)</b></p> <p>Clear emphasis on teacher modelling and shared practice when first introducing comprehension strategy. The premature introduction of independent use diminishes the children’s understanding of the comprehension strategy and leads to inconsistent use or disregarding the strategy.</p> <p><b>Sub-code 1c: Metacognitive Awareness (MA)</b></p> <p>Comprehension strategies are taught in isolation. As a consequence the children fail to draw on appropriate strategies and use multiple strategies simultaneously when reading independently.</p>
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Table 3.1. Examples of Analysis of Sub-code 1b (GRRM) and 1c (MA) in Data Sources

## CHOICE OF TEXT

The data sources analysed featured the use of a variety of texts. Through the analysis of these data sources a noticeable issue came to the foreground in relation to the choice of texts used. The literature outlines that the complexity of a text depends on many factors including text structure, organisational features and content (Cartwright & Duke, 2019), as well as the reader's individual ability and background knowledge (Shanahan et al., 2012). The data analysis indicated a need for the examination of (i) the affordances and limitations of texts in relation to readers, and (ii) the discussion approaches taken when interacting with these texts.

Through the analysis of the data sources, the need to examine the affordances and limitations of the texts being used for the teaching of reading comprehension in relation to the ability of the students in the class became apparent. In LP1 the text used provided many opportunities for the analysis of poetic techniques (See Table 3.2). However, the complexity of this text with regards to the students' ability is highlighted as an issue in Eval 1 (See Table 3.2). The vocabulary and text structure of the poem were major limitations of the text in relation to the students' prior knowledge and experience. This was evident in the use of texts throughout the PS. Had the affordances and limitations of the text in relation to the students' ability been considered, the use of suitable pedagogies such as close reading could have been planned for within the lesson. Close reading is the revisiting of a short section of complex text that has already been read, with a specific lens or focus (Fisher & Frey, 2012). The use of this strategy would have enhanced the teaching of reading comprehension by enabling the students to re-read and analyse short sections of the complex text using a suitable lens, thus deepening their comprehension (Fisher & Frey, 2012; Paul & Elder, 2003).

<p><i>Lesson Plan 1 – Development Activity</i>  <b>Visualising: Diagrams of Imagery and Analysis of Poetic Techniques</b>          [Pair/Independent Work]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Each pair/child will be assigned an image/line/verse from the poem and given a template to draw and label a diagram of an image in that verse.</li> <li>• The students will also analyse and write about the poetic techniques being used in the verse and give an example of where technique is used.</li> </ul> <p><i>Lesson Plan 1 – Development Key Questions</i>  <b>Poem Questions: Imagery and Poetic Techniques</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What important words in this line tell me about the image being created in the poem?</li> <li>• What image/s is/are created in this line/verse of the poem?</li> <li>• What poetic techniques does the poet use to create these images?</li> </ul> <p><i>Evaluation 1</i>          “I think many children struggled with using the comprehension strategy of visualising as the structure of the poem and the formal language caused confusion at points. I felt that while I taught the vocabulary words, the children may have benefited from more time interacting with the text, re-visiting parts of it and analysing it before engaging in the independent task.”</p>	<p><b>Sub-code 2a: Close Reading (CR)</b>          It is evident in the activities and key questions of LP1 that the text used offers many opportunities to analyse the poetic techniques that the children are exploring. However Eval 1 illustrates that the children could not fully engage with the analysis of the poetic techniques as the text content and structure proved to be highly complex in relation to the children's existing knowledge and experience of poetry. More in-depth analysis of the text in advance could have enabled the teacher to plan for close reading of complex sections of the text.</p>
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Table 3.2. Examples of Analysis of Sub-code 2a (CR)

The literature indicates that the use of dialogic teaching can increase students' comprehension of complex texts (Burbules, 1993; Murphy et al., 2009). The literature reviewed highlighted the implications of different discussion approaches for children's comprehension of complex texts. Soter et al. (2008) group discussion approaches according to three distinct stances: (i) expressive, predominantly focusing on the affective response of the reader to the text; (ii) efferent, predominantly focusing on acquiring information from the text; and (iii) critical-analytic, involving the interrogation of texts in search of underlying arguments or beliefs that can be inferred from the text. Research has shown that an expressive stance produces more pupil-led talk than other stances and better enables students to co-construct their interpretation of the text through continuous negotiation with others (Murphy et al., 2009) Thus, the use of discussion approaches which take an expressive stance can be highly effective in enhancing children's comprehension of complex texts.

Through this data analysis it became apparent that while dialogic teaching was consciously planned for in the PS and LPs (see Table 5, Key Criteria (DT)), the lesson evaluations demonstrate that the implementation of dialogic teaching was not fully effective within LP1 and LP2 due to the emphasis placed on teacher-led discussions and an excessive focus on an efferent stance (Soter et al., 2008) (See Table 3.3). The implementation of an instructional model such as Literature Circles which involves small groups of students engaging with self-selected texts in a guided manner facilitated by the teacher (Daniels, 2002; Kennedy et al., 2012). Such an instructional model could have enabled the children to comprehend the texts at a deeper level by providing an opportunity to engage in pupil-led discussions facilitated by the teacher which take an expressive stance (Murphy et al., 2009; Kennedy et al., 2012).

<p><b>Lesson Plan 2 – Development Key Questions</b>  <b>Comprehension Questions: ‘London Spring 1941’</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What pastime is this poem based on?</li> <li>• The poem has positive and negative lines, give 2 examples of each.</li> <li>• How many descriptions of destruction can you find in the poem?</li> <li>• Can you list 2 things that were unaffected by the bomb?</li> <li>• What lines tell us that it is springtime or summertime?</li> <li>• What is a Moses cradle? How did it get its name?</li> <li>• Did you like/dislike the poem? Why?</li> <li>• Why do you think the baby is on its own? Where might its parents be?</li> <li>• What poetic techniques can you see in this line?</li> <li>• Why do you think the poet says if they could paint, they’d show them? Do you think what the poet saw was out of the ordinary by this opening line?</li> </ul> <p><b>Evaluation 2</b>          “When asked the key questions following the reading of the poem, the children were very capable of finding and relaying the information from the poem. I felt that the more higher order questions generated greater discussion and was more engaging for the children. The use of think pair share allowed the children to further develop their answers and co-construct meaning.”          “In future I would focus less on lower order ‘scan and search’ questions and more on open-ended higher order questions.”</p>	<p><b>Sub-code 2b: Dialogic Teaching (DT)</b>          In LP2 it is clear that the discussion of the text is very much led by the teacher and focuses on the children’s ability to retrieve information from the text rather than the children’s own emotive response. Eval 2 illustrates the greater effectiveness of open-ended questions and pupil-led talk. Taking a more expressive stance towards the discourse would have enhanced the children’s comprehension of the poem.</p>
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Table 3.3. Examples of Analysis of Sub-code 2b (DT) in Data Sources

## CONCLUSION

This research study focused on the teaching of reading comprehension in the senior classes of primary school within the context of a BLF. Specifically, the efficacy of specific pedagogies focusing on reading comprehension were examined in relation to the enhancement of teaching reading comprehension. The research methodology of AR has enabled the exploration of key issues encountered by the author when planning for and teaching reading comprehension as a student teacher. The four principles of planning, action, observation and reflection that constitute Lewin's Action Research Model (Lewin, 1946) (See Figure 1), form the basis of reflective practice which underpins the teaching profession (Teaching Council, 2016). This cyclical nature of AR implicates that researchers can apply their findings in an authentic classroom context and continue to reflect upon and improve their practice in light of this action. As such, ARPs can provide teachers with the foundation for engaging in the self-evaluation of their practice throughout their career.

A limitation of this research is the deeply contextual nature of the research methodology utilised within this study. As qualitative research explores nuanced social phenomena, findings are not generalizable (Creswell, 2012). As such, certain limitations exist with regards to the universal applicability of these research findings within all school contexts. Given the deeply contextual nature of this study, the transferability of findings will relate to the context under consideration. Practitioners will be required to make judgements appropriately to determine the similarity of the study context to their own environment. However, the new knowledge and insight provided by this research may be valuable for many school communities and can be shared with other professionals for this reason. This imparting of knowledge could impact the professional practice of the educators in these communities, and consequently the broader context of primary Literacy Education in Ireland with regards to the teaching of reading comprehension (McNiff, 2002).

While this research focuses on the practice of an individual teacher in an urban non-disadvantaged context, there is a lack of evidence-based guidance for schools on how to adapt literacy practices to support students experiencing socio-economic disadvantage in DEIS primary schools in Ireland. This extends to the teaching of reading comprehension in the senior primary classes. As discussed in the context section of this paper, students' primary literacy education impacts their later achievement in post-primary school, and thus their progression to higher education (Johnson et al., 2021; McCoy et al., 2010; Smyth, 2017). Further research on the ways in which pedagogical practices utilised to teach reading comprehension could be adapted in schools experiencing socio-economic disadvantage would enable prevention and early intervention approaches to exclusion to be undertaken (HEA, 2022, 2018).

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An examination of the benefits of incorporating aspects of play therapy, speech and language therapy and physiotherapy into the classroom for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder to enhance their educational experience.



## Alanna Cronin

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Alanna Cronin is a Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT), recently graduated from Marino Institute of Education in 2022 after four years of study. During the B. Ed programme, Alanna developed a keen interest in Inclusive Education after the Inclusive Education module as well as the Special Education Placement in 2<sup>nd</sup> year. It was while on this placement that Alanna saw many interventions in place in an ASD Class which led her to want to investigate the benefits of using aspects of other interventions in the classroom with this cohort of children to enhance their educational experience. She is passionate about catering for all students in the classroom and ensuring that each child is supported. The research was thought-provoking, challenging and provided Alanna with the skills to ensure every child is supported in her classroom in the future.

**KEYWORDS:** Child Centered Play Therapy, Speech and Language Therapy, Physiotherapy in Education, Autism

## INTRODUCTION

This dissertation seeks to examine how the implementation of elements of play therapy, speech and language therapy (SLT) and physiotherapy into the classroom of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) can enhance their educational experience. The objectives of this dissertation are to research ASD, define it and examine research from the foundations of the discovery of the disorder to the present-day research. Research has shown that children with ASD can have deficits in social skills, communications skills, and movement skills. Secondly, to explore play therapy and explore the benefits of using aspects of play therapy with children with ASD. This dissertation will explore how effective the implementation of play therapy is when used in the classroom with children with ASD. Following this, this research will explore physiotherapy and explore the benefits of using aspects of physiotherapy with children with ASD. This dissertation will explore how effective the implementation of physiotherapy is when used in the classroom with children with ASD. Lastly, this dissertation will explore speech and language therapy and the benefits of using aspects of it in the classroom with children with ASD. This dissertation will then study how effective the implementation of speech and language therapy is when used in the classroom with children with ASD.

Overall, this study aims to investigate the effect of different interventions on various needs of students with ASD. This article is a snapshot of a broader dissertation, which examined the benefits of implementing these interventions by looking on a global scale of interventions in Australia as well as the United States and then looks to Ireland to recommend how we can best include these interventions into our inclusive practice.

## **CONTEXT**

Researching inclusive education is important because it is crucial in education to understand children with different additional needs and how best to support them. Inclusive education research in the past has viewed these needs as “a problem to be solved rather than an individual to be understood” (Prizant, 2015, p. 17). In recent decades, we move to understand these children and support them as they achieve their own personal best. On teaching practice, I encountered a play therapist working with a child with PTSD. Fascinated by her work and ability to work through personal reactions and challenging behaviours in the child, I wondered how this could benefit children with ASD. Physiotherapy and SLT soon inspired this research project as movement and language skills are important. When research is done, educators are better able to teach as they are empowered with research and evidence.

Researching inclusive education and ASD is so important and research in these fields are ever-changing. New interventions are constantly being introduced. The National Council for Special Education’s (NCSE) policy principle three states that “all students with special educational needs (SEN) have access to available educational supports in line with their needs” (NCSE, 2013, p. 3). The NCSE (2013) list SLT, physiotherapy and play therapy as available interventions from the Health Service Executive (HSE) for children with SEN. The researcher believes the use of these therapies in the classroom with children with ASD will enhance their educational experience which provides an important need for this research. The foundation of this dissertation is based on the fact that there is a lack of literature on this topic in the Irish context but findings internationally are promising and the findings should be implemented in the Irish classroom.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In this research project, qualitative research was used as the methodology. Qualitative research is mainly concerned with subjective ‘meanings’ in contrast to the quantitative research’s pursuit of objective facts. Some aims of qualitative research include, “understanding human experience, treating interviews and focus groups as providing direct access to the content of people’s heads and foregrounding the empathetic skills of the researcher to achieve this” (Silverman, 2020, p.3).

Qualitative research focuses on collecting and analysing non-numerical data such as text, video or audios to understand opinions and experiences. Qualitative research is commonly used in research in education, and employs complex reasoning that has many aspects to it. The findings of qualitative research reflects the reality of the thinking of humans. When researchers collect data, data is then examined and the researchers must decide if data gathered has answered the questions they were posing, whether further research is necessary or whether they need to repose the question and look further. This approach is different from quantitative research due to the fact that the main tool used to gather required information is researchers themselves rather than questionnaires or numerical surveys used by quantitative researchers. Qualitative methodology takes the form of an investigation where the researcher works to gather data relevant to come to a conclusion on the topic (Hogan et al., 2009).

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Child centred play therapy (CCPT) is an effective intervention to support the educational experience of children with ASD. Research says that there is a strong correlation between play and social and emotional development in children with ASD (Wolfberg, 2015). Children with ASD frequently have difficulties with initiating play, turn taking, building friendships, and enjoying social interactions with peers. CCPT interventions develop four crucial areas: joint attention, imitation response, theory of mind, and symbolic and functional play skills (Salter et al, 2016). Joint attention skills are important for children with ASD. It requires the ability to gain, maintain and shift attention with others. It is done by using eye contact, gestures, and vocalisations. Joint attention skills are closely linked with social skills and maintaining a level of social competency. By engaging in elements of CCPT in the classroom, the repertoire of social behaviours and skills of children with ASD can be used to enhance their experiences in school (Salter et al, 2016).

This can be seen from the imitation response skills that CCPT helps to develop and encourage. Imitation response skills can help children with ASD in schools make friends with their peers as they imitate social skills and copy behaviour to help them integrate so that their “act is an acceptable reproduction of the model act” (Miller, & Dollard, 1941, p. 9) such as social cues and skills they will have learned from imitation response skills (Salter et al, 2016). Imitation skills can be developed through the teacher modelling behaviours that occur naturally through social interaction. The child could initiate roleplay where the teacher would act as different personas in complex social interaction (Salter et al, 2016). “Because these interactions are child-led, children tend to be receptive to this form of social learning” (Salter et al, 2016, p. 79).

Theory of mind is one of the most central social deficits associated with children with ASD. Theory of mind refers to the ability to recognise that people have thoughts and feelings of their own which is the development of perspective and empathy. Many children with ASD find this difficult (Baron-Cohen, 2001). CCPT in the classroom can help to grow the child’s theory of mind and develop their sense of empathy and perspective. From researching this topic, it has been shown that a staple element needed to enhance the educational experience of the child is a trusted adult that will support the child. It would be beneficial to integrate this into the classroom with the class teacher to support them throughout the process.

CCPT aids the development from functional play to symbolic play. Functional play can be defined as playing with toys or objects in accordance with their intended function, for example, rolling a ball or feeding a doll (Pierce, 2009). Functional play is the first way that a child will learn to make sense of the world and it is important for social interactions. This is because children interact with each other through play. Symbolic play or pretend play comes later. Symbolic play occurs when the child will use objects to represent other objects, for example, using a banana as a phone or using a box as a house. Research shows there is general agreement that play deficits are present in children with ASD between functional play and symbolic play (Pierce, 2009). Through the use of CCPT, this developmental step is supported.

In various studies done worldwide, both formal and informal measures indicated positive improvement for all children following CCPT interventions. In these studies, there are reports of children’s anxieties decreasing as the sessions go on. Salter et al. (2016) reports that by the fourth session, the child reported that he enjoyed school much more. By the seventh session the child had made his own breakfast and by the eighth session the teacher was seeing behavioural improvements in school. The same improvements were reported in other children in their specific areas of need. The same was shown in another study by Parker and O’ Brien (2011).

They completed twelve counselling sessions with a 7-year-old boy with ASD. The child's journey through progress was recorded and by the end of twelve sessions the child's incidents in school had gone from forty incidents a week in week-one to under five incidents a week by week-twelve.

When researching the speech and language therapy or intervention element to this thesis question, communication was shown to be a gateway into the world around us and for children who have a deficit in this area, it is important to develop their communication skills. The findings from the studies that had taken place were promising and it was made clear that incorporating an intervention in the classroom to help children with ASD with communication skills was important to enhance their educational experience. Low and Lee (2011) looked at speech and language therapists records and one case study was looked at in detail. The areas that needed improvement were communication and preverbal skills, language comprehension and speech and language production. These elements made up the teaching plan for the 4-year-old girl with ASD. Over twenty sessions, the child went from scoring 10/100 in areas of verbal language to scoring 90/100 in those same areas after twenty sessions.

The same strong results were seen in a study by Thiemann-Bourque and colleagues (2018) when they researched incorporating speech-generating devices into the classroom with children with ASD. The results from this study were promising as the researchers reported that the children with ASD and their peers were better able to initiate, respond and stay engaged in play with one another and ultimately allowed the child with ASD to enjoy school and communicate with each other and with the adults. Every child deserves a chance to be understood, listened to and have their voices heard. By bringing in different tools and interventions in communication, each child is given that chance. The findings of these studies appear limited but they also exhibit clearly that each child with ASD is unique, one intervention that works for one child may not work for another but if it works for one child then it is worth it.

Aspects of physiotherapy and movement skills are proven to develop target areas in children with ASD. It is commonplace for movement breaks to be used with children with ASD and it is showing the children's focus improves after a movement break to refresh them. Research shows that bringing movement into more aspects of the school day is beneficial. Cynthia and colleagues (2019) state that children with ASD in schools are less likely to be active and participate in fewer activities compared to their age related peers. The authors go on to say that due to this, children with ASD are more likely to develop health complications such as heart disease, diabetes and obesity. Kurtz (2018) reported that the biggest barriers for children with ASD to exercise were lack of motivation, lack of peers to engage with and lack of community programs which would imply that school is a perfect place to include exercise in the day.

Physiotherapists are trained and skilled in enhancing motor development, prescribing physical activity and improving physical skills and fitness. Petrus and colleagues (2008) found that when elements of physiotherapy and exercise were brought into the classroom, children's challenging behaviour decreased. Functional behaviours such as hand movements for eating, drinking, holding among other behaviours all improved through fine motor skill exercises. Exercises such as jumping, single leg hopping, throwing, jogging, mobility and joint exercises could be incorporated into the school day to improve fundamental movement skills (Costello, & Warne, 2020). Exercise improves gross and fine motor skills as well as fundamental movement skills.

## CONCLUSION

This article sought to explore the benefits of implementing aspects of play therapy, speech and language therapy and physiotherapy in the classroom with children with ASD. The emphasis is put on implementing the use of aspects of these therapies in the classroom with children with ASD, as the research shows that improvements have been made in areas that were previously exhibiting deficits. These need to be implemented in a casual way that doesn't require the services of a play therapist, speech and language therapist or physiotherapist, so that the class teacher, SNA or SET teacher can facilitate these aspects during the school day, as this is an ideal environment to integrate these tactics. Salter and colleagues (2016) stated the importance of a "secure relationship to support the child" (p. 1) which would make the class teacher the ideal adult to work with the children.

In order to facilitate this, teachers must be trained up in the areas and given detailed training on the activities, the progression plans, strategies to implement and how to facilitate play, speech and language therapy and exercise to facilitate those outcomes. It is important that these aspects of these therapies be introduced to educators as professional development. 'Cosán' framework for teacher's learning states that educational research plays a significant role in directing teachers to the pedagogy that will be most impactful in practice through evidence (TCI, 2016). This would ensure that children would experience benefits provided from interventions as evidenced in the case studies. By the interventions being integrated into the classroom in this manner, it would ensure that students benefit in a timely manner.

These interventions mentioned above as well as other elements taken from the research need to be included in Special Education modules in teacher training colleges to support student teachers and students in our classrooms. These practical interventions will help teachers when they graduate and form an inclusive classroom. Information about these topics and the research behind them would be very beneficial for student teachers as they complete a special education placement, potentially in a class with children with ASD. Information would also be very beneficial to these students as they go out on school placement and then eventually into their NQT year.

Research needs to be carried out on this topic from an Irish education point of view. All case studies and literature on this topic was conducted worldwide and so far, there is little evidence of this topic being explored in Ireland. In an Irish context, valuable research on the topic would include research into if these interventions are currently being implemented in any schools in Ireland and if not, why not and how can we begin to research this and introduce them to the Irish classroom.

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To Teens, we were girls together.



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