



STER Podcast

Season 1, Episode 4

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SPEAKERS

Dr Aimie Brennan, Grace McNulty

STER 00:08

Welcome to the STER podcast, a student staff partnership project that supports education students to share their dissertation research with the wider community. In this podcast series, student researchers will have the opportunity to discuss their research findings to reflect on their own personal research journey, and to impart some advice for future students researchers. The STER team hope to promote a culture of research in initial teacher education across all sectors by encouraging current students and recent graduates to engage in dialogue and to consider the significance of their research for practice. We hope that you enjoy our conversations, and learn more about the kinds of research being conducted by students across the country.

STER 00:54

In today's podcast, we meet Grace McNulty, Grace completed the professional Master of Education Programme in Mary Immaculate College in Limerick. Her dissertation research focused on teachers approaches to supporting children's well being in the primary classroom. In this episode, I talked to Grace about her experience of doing her dissertation and she gives some advice for future researchers.

STER 01:20

Grace, you're very welcome to the STER podcast today. Can you start by telling us a little bit about yourself, and how you found your way to the PME programme in Mary Immaculate College.

Grace 01:31

My name is Grace and I did the professional Master of Education, also known as the PME. Here in Mary I, before this, I did an Arts degree in UCC. And then I came here to do the PME. And as part of that PME, we had a dissertation to do, or mini thesis, and that involves a lot of research. And I suppose with my undergrad, I had no experience of research or writing anything of that magnitude. And

I suppose when I was told, 10 to 12,000 words, you have to write on whatever topic your topic is, it was hugely overwhelming, because I had no experience with either research, or writing, or anything of that level. So it was definitely something that I thought was insurmountable. But I eventually did do it. And I have come out the other end, and I'm now a teacher. So it's good to know that there is light the end of the tunnel. So there is life after the dissertation.

Aimie 02:33

Grace when you are doing your undergrad in UCC, what subjects did you do in Arts?

Grace 02:37

I did. So I started in first year with four subjects, which is normal, Spanish, Italian, Irish, and economics. And then I majored in Spanish and economics. So I still trying to figure out what I wanted. And I suppose I always had an interest in languages, and economics. I enjoyed that in leaving cert, so I did that. But I soon realized maybe a bit too late into the course that I wasn't very business minded. But I enjoy the aspect of economics.

Aimie 03:05

So when did you figure out you wanted to be a teacher?

Grace 03:08

Well, I always knew in the back of my mind that I wanted to be teacher, but I was, I suppose, I had to just do something that will kind of leave me options open until I decided it was definitely the primary school I wanted to do. But I certainly always had an interest in education. And like the idea teaching, and I suppose I eventually came to conclusion that there was a primary school teaching that I would love to do. And I'm confident now in my decision, because I work now as a primary school teacher, currently in special education, and I love it. I took scenic route to my profession.

Aimie 03:48

So tell me a little bit about your research, then what was your research question? And how did you go about answering it?

Grace 03:54

Okay, so I suppose in first year of the two year PME, we were asked to think about our potential research topic. And I think it's important to say that my initial first what I had chosen in my initial first year, it did change slightly to what I actually finally went with in the end. And I know that the experience of some of my fellow students, what they chosen first year, changed entirely in second year. So that is possible, and it's doable, and there's no problem. But for my own one, I suppose I wanted in first year, I chose to look at how children's mental health and I suppose adolescent mental health is dealt with in primary school, if at all. And then when I went to my into second year, and I met with my dissertation, she kind of set me on another path and suggested that maybe I changed my topic, not in a completely different direction, but to the, let's say, the broader umbrella of wellbeing. So then my research dissertation was based on children's wellbeing at primary school and teachers approaches to it, and how teachers feel they're prepared to deal with it, and to incorporate it and to address it. So that was, I suppose, how my dissertation topic ended up going. So it started in one area. And then while it didn't entirely change fields, it just became a bit broader. And it gave me more scope to go into other areas of

wellbeing, and not specifically mental health. So that's kind of how I arrived at my final dissertation topic, which was well being in primary school.

Grace 05:34

it's a buzzword at the moment, I think. Yeah, it's very topical, very topical, I think. Yes. So as it happened, I mean, when I started my dissertation, as in first year, and when I continued in second year, I think people were really starting to, you know, sit up and really pay attention to this. And now, as you said, it's very topical, and people are paying a lot of attention to it. And I heard only recently on the news, that they were seeing that I'm not sure a small percentage of the jobs advertised for the HSE for child and adolescent psychiatrists, only half of them are filled or some small, you know, percentage of them were filled. So it's definitely something that people are paying more attention to now and realizing that it's actually something that needs to be addressed and something that needs attention.

Aimie 06:20

okay, well, that was nice that it was yeah, it was something that's actually kind of an emerging area that you found yourself going into

Grace 06:26

and I felt kind of validated I don't know is validated the right word, but I felt almost like, you know, what I was talking about was relevant. And it kind of gave me the confidence that what I was writing about actually did bear relevance and was actually something that was topical, as you said, so.

Aimie 06:43

Okay so how did you go about answering that question, what was your research design?

Grace 06:49

Well, I took a, quite a qualitative approach to my research, which, which involves me interviewing people having focus groups, that kind of idea, rather than quantitative, which would have involved surveys and that kind of thing. So I focused on qualitative research methods. And I had interviews with six teachers, two of those participants, participants were retired teachers, and two of them were principals. And then I had two NQT's. So I felt that I had a good range. And I think that's important when you're doing if you are doing qualitative research, I think it's important to have a range in your sample. I think it's good to have a range, you know, I had participants who had over 40 years of experience in the classroom and in the primary school setting. And then I had people who were just newly out of college, newly qualified, and I suppose thrown in the deep end into the huge minefield that is primary school. So and, and all the challenges that that can bring. So I think that was good that I had a range. And I suppose it's important, it's not easy, everyone leads such busy so I mean, not everyone is forthcoming with giving you their time, because everyone, as I said, is busy. So I mean, it's not easy getting people to sit down with you for 30-60 minutes, whatever your time is. But I think when you do eventually find the sample of people sit down with, you know, they're, they're just, they've a wealth of knowledge, and they give you so much they give you, you know, the real, they give you the body of your research. So, I mean, their interviews, and their feedback is really to be valued because it's so fundamental to your entire research, it gives you your findings, and it gives you, you know, some some real flesh that you can analyze, you know, so yeah, important.

Aimie 08:52

So can you tell me, then, what did you find? So you were looking specifically at how children's well being is supported in primary school? Yes. What were some of your key findings?

Grace 09:02

Okay, so I think my most remarkable or memorable finding from my research is probably that a lot of teachers didn't feel that they were adequately trained. And that's something that my supervisor, I remember when I, you know, kind of piloted my questions to her and she saw the word trained, she did kind of, you know, she wasn't a fan of the word, but I suppose that's how I framed it. And my finding one of my most remarkable findings was that a lot of teachers didn't actually feel that they had adequate or sufficient training. I don't know what other word I could use, but they didn't feel hugely confident in dealing with any issues surrounding children's well being. And I suppose they did. Some of them did. Say that. Well, you could do a CPD course or you could, you know, you know, go on courses or do training weeks or something on well being. While you're in college you don't actually you're not there's no specific module or, you know, it's not hugely addressed maybe in SPHE, and things like that. But that was certainly one find it finding that I discovered that a lot of teachers didn't feel well equipped to deal with issues surrounding children's well being their overall well being

Aimie 10:23

So was it that they didn't feel confident addressing issues that might arise in conversation with children? Or was it that they didn't feel equipped teaching children how to look after their own well-being?

Grace 10:35

I think it was a bit of both, they certainly felt that. And another thing that came to light was that a lot of the teachers, almost all of the teachers expressed how overloaded they were, with what they had to get through, you know, they have so many subjects, so many curricula, to get through that really, maybe subconsciously, child's well being is almost put on the back burner. And that's something that, you know, it's it's okay, that'll be dealt with at home. And my job is to get through this, this and this. And, you know, a lot of them find well, really upon reflection, is it a priority of mine that I'm looking after their well being? Do I know the telltale signs? Do I know how to deal with it? Things like that. So I suppose it was a very enlightening research for me.

Aimie 11:24

So when you were talking about wellbeing? How would you define well being?

Grace 11:28

Well, that was that was a huge part of my research, actually. Because upon, you know, having done a lot of research, I discovered that actually, wellbeing is a very ambiguous term. And there are so many different understandings of it. And even through my the six interviews that I did, my one of my first questions was, what is your understanding of wellbeing. And it was remarkable how each participant had such a different, you know, take on what well being was, you know, some of them mentioned all the different aspects, you know, there's physical well being, there's mental well being, there's educational wellbeing social wellbeing all these different aspects. Whereas some teachers out there, and some of the teachers that I interviewed, they only had it in their mind that wellbeing was one element of it. So that actually set me on the road in my in my research, to address and analyse all the

different types of wellbeing. And in turn, look at the research that was already there for each wellbeing for each element of well being so.

Aimie 12:29

Did you find that teachers or policy or research had a tendency to focus on one particular type of well being over another?

Grace 12:37

Well, I suppose Yes, and No, I mean, some of the policies or the research that I found, or the readings that I did, they were very much focused in on one element, rather than overall, because I mean, it is such an all encompassing term that it is hard to, you know, not acknowledge each and every one of them. So I think that there was different papers for different specific ones. So that meant that I quickly made me realize that I needed to have different sections in my dissertation for the different elements to address the meet, to address each of them and that I couldn't just, you know, it really made me realise how broad the term was. And that how, why, why and how I had to break it up in different sections. ,

Aimie 13:22

Okay, so even in the in the national curriculum, the fact that there is time for PE the fact that there is time for music, the fact that there is SPHE like, is a child's well being supported by the curriculum?

Grace 13:40

Well, I mean, as you know, a lot of the curricula is being updated at the moment. So some of them are really say, for example, the 1999, curriculum, a lot of that is focused more like academic side. And while the SPHE and PE curriculum do address well being, I don't know if it was emphasised or put to the forefront of the learning outcomes. So I think in the newer curriculum, curricula, there's certainly more scope for it. And people are becoming more aware of it, particularly, for example, with the new language curriculum, there are elements in the oral strand of that which you know, actually touch on well being and how you can incorporate that and how you can almost, you know, was a big buzzword, you know, when you can integrate sphe with oral language and make it a really nice lesson, which is beneficial for both English and SPHE but definitely SPHE and PE, were where I found the main they were the two subjects that I found were the main subjects to address well being, whereas I think that there is more scope and could be addressed in all subjects and brought into all subjects and for example, in when you're teaching, you know, you might have 10 minutes in the morning or half an hour in the morning where you might do meditation, or you might do 10 At 10 you know, which is great physical wellbeing, whereas I think your timetable is so overloaded, and you have to get so much done in the day. And sometimes it's hard to factor that in. Whereas I think if there was a subject, you know, designated to doing those kinds of things, whether it be it meditation be it 10, at 10, be ait nature walk or things like that, which I know nature walk can be, you know, his part of geography and all that. But I think if there was more designated time for, for well being be great. I don't know if my rafter answered your question.

STER 15:32

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Aimie 15:45

I'm just thinking now, as you're talking, do you think this it is up to the individual teacher, even though wellbeing is present in the curriculum? In certainly in some areas? Do you think that it's up to the individual teacher to prioritise it?

Grace 16:01

I suppose it is up to the individual teacher to prioritise it. That's what I found. Because, I mean, if you do, you know, you're there to teach the curriculum. And let's say if you don't prioritise the well being, you're not doing anything wrong, you're there teaching, you're teaching what you're teaching, whereas I think it is go that extra little that going the extra mile to incorporate it. Whereas I think that it may be could be, you know, incorporated or implemented into policies, that it is your duty, and it is part of your job to incorporate it, rather than a teacher taking it upon themselves to do it. And to bring it into the classroom, I think it should be, you know, paramount to the teachers practice, and, you know, Paramount, and all your reflections and all these lesson plans, I think it should be there. And it should not only be paramount or, you know, incremental, I think it should be mandatory and necessary you know.

Aimie 16:55

Okay, so even though you're a teacher now, and you know, how overloaded everything is and the school day is, you think there should be an additional focus?

Grace 17:03

I suppose, maybe not an additional subject, because that would just be contradicting what I said, what I think that maybe it should be somehow brought into what's already there, maybe that'd be a better approach. And I, you know, it's funny, we were talking before, we sat down here, a few of us were talking about how, you know, when you're doing your PME, and you're doing your essays or whatever, you have your assignments, it's, you're writing it in such a, you know, ideal world where, you know, the children sit down properly, and everything is fine, and there's no disruptions, and there's no, you know, interruptions to the day, but when you're actually teaching and on the ground, you see how all these things that you read about and all these things that you're talking the lectures, they're absolutely wonderful, and they're amazing. In an ideal world, but life is life and things happen and, you know, things you, you know, talk about and doing, and I suppose things that I even wrote about in my dissertation, I can see now how they actually wouldn't, wouldn't work in the real world. You know, so I think it's, you definitely get another perspective on things when you're out teaching, you know,

Aimie 18:13

Given that, is there anything from your findings or your recommendations from your dissertation that you do think would work for yourself as a teacher even?

Grace 18:21

Yes. I think maybe allocating time, that was one of my recommendations, allocating time in the day to do something which would benefit the child's well being, you know, any aspects of any aspect of their well being, I think, allowing 10 minutes at the end of the day, or at the start of the day, or any time of the day to do it. And I sort of now that I'm teaching I can see, not only the benefit, but the possibilities that there is to do that, while I am, you know, over while, like many teachers, I'm overloaded with, you know, things I have to get done. And this, that and, the other I think that, you know, I can make time for it, and it's so important that I do,

Aimie 19:01

okay, so what is the benefit then, of making that time for a 10 minute meditation or whatever it is

Grace 19:08

Well I suppose it's giving the child a holistic education, and like, you know, ensuring that they, you know, when they come home, that they when they go home from school, not only have they learned a great deal academically, but that they feel that they have been, you know, they feel happy going home, or that they feel, you know, that they're valued going home.

Aimie 19:35

I'm just thinking like, what is the benefit? I suppose it's, it's having it's letting them to have time. Yes. So yeah, and even learning how to express themselves.

Grace 19:44

Yeah, maybe perhaps. You know, it's amazing what happened, what what can come out, you know, I have a huge interest in art and it's amazing. I think what can come out, you know, when you're doing art or you know, art is is a form of expression, and it'd be it drama be it art visual arts or music, it's amazing what feelings can be provoked when you're doing art. So I think even, you know, I found in my dissertation that arts, the arts and well being there is a connection there that could be far more developed. And that could be really, you know, looked into, I suppose, because sometimes some teachers may, you know, put the art education, those subjects on the backburner, they might say, Okay, I'll do that if I have time, or you know, or, you know, they may use as a treat, when really, you could use that as your well being to, to develop skills or to develop social, you know, to learn about the child and the child may present an anxieties they might have through a piece of drama they're presenting or through piece of art that they make, or, you know, music that they compose, or music that they react to. And you know, music is really poignant, and it can really bring out emotions that you or a child may have buried deep inside. So I think it's crucial that, you know, our attention is paid to arts as well, which is sometimes overlooked. I've learned.

Aimie 21:09

So when you were saying there that teachers don't feel like they're adequately trained to use the word, I'd say educated?

Grace 21:16

Yeah, much better. I'll go with that.

Aimie 21:19

So if teachers don't feel like they're adequately educated to integrate well being or prioritise well being in the week or in the day in school? Is there any advice that you could give them? That they could take away just from the research that you've done? if they want to make sure that they're giving the child a holistic education, which I'm sure every teacher

STER 21:50

Yes, yeah, absolutely. Well, I suppose maybe, you know, when you're making out your, if you are making a lesson plan for subject, you know, you have your, it's been so long now, you have your, you

know, daytime subject learning outcomes, you know, you might have a section at the end of it, what did I do to benefit the child's well being, or just think, you know, have it in your mind the whole time, how is this benefiting the child's well being, it might be, I don't know, something so. So, it might be something that you think is so totally unrelated to wellbeing, you might be teaching volcanoes and geography, you know, try and bring that back to, as I touched on earlier, you know, you can have various educational wellbeing. So even through teaching and allowing the child to, you know, come away from the textbooks for a little while, and, you know, explore it themselves, or really think about something you're touching on their educational well being there. But even you could bring it back to their own, you know, personal, maybe their mental well being, and I don't know, trying to incorporate in some way or, you know, for the homework that night, they might go home and talk to their parents by the volcanoes or, I don't know, interview someone about something, you know, change the homework up, you know, I think homework is, I suppose, quite topical at the moment as well. And, you know, you can incorporate Well, being in the homework, you know, homework doesn't always have to be do, you know, page, page 27 Questions A to, F, you can have your homework, you know, go home and speak to someone, go home and interview your grandparent go home. And I don't know, play outside for 10 minutes, you know, get away from the ps4, whatever it is they're playing on, and just go outside, I guess. So maybe think about the homework you're giving? Could you change that up to benefit their well being? Could you change how you, you know, do a Friday test? Could you change the assessment? You know, I know, I, through my research, I learned that the assessment and the Friday test, it really evokes huge stress anxieties and children that you wouldn't even think, and I suppose maybe you could change, change? Or think about how you do that? Could you design a different way to benefit them or to, you know, you would still be assessing them but doing it in a different way? Or could you have more fun in the classroom, you know, sit in a circle change how you sit for the day, you know, one day a week can they sit next to who they want to, you know, have circle time was so I think valuable and sometimes so underrated the benefits of circle time and the benefits of having a speaking tool where you can only speak where you have it and you have respect for the people or person and speaking. I think that it really is so, so important, and so much can come out of that. So perhaps something you could incorporate. I know when I was when I had a class. Last term. It was something that I did for almost every SPHE lesson where we sat in a circle, and sometimes it was more fun and we had roleplay and other times it was you know, we talked about things that were quite serious and you know, that in itself takes a lot of that's hard to get the mood right in the classroom because you know, they might be distracted or they might be you know, really energetic and you have to set the, you know, set the right mood for that kind of thing. But I think circle time was hugely beneficial. And you don't have to just do for SPHE you could do another subject too an oral language class, you know, the opportunities are endless.

Aimie 25:14

Some really good suggestions in there. Would you recommend the teachers go on some sort of CPD course around wellbeing just so that they feel themselves more confident?

Grace 25:27

Absolutely. Because the main finding that was, you know, common across all interview participants, was that each and every one of them felt that they weren't adequately trained, when, as you said, they weren't adequately educated, to deal with any any well being issues that come up. So I think it would be great idea for them to do some kind of CPD course, or, you know, in service day or whole school

training, and there's there are different areas to our wellbeing I think it would be great idea. Really. They're naturally supporting their educational well being.

Aimie 27:40

Do you feel now that you're finished? And now that you've done this particular dissertation and this particular topic? Yeah. Do you feel like it's something you think about a lot in your practice?

Grace 27:49

I think so. I think subconsciously, it is something that I'm you know, aware of, but saying that sometimes I'm so focused on getting what I need to get done, done, you know, I'm so focused on, you know, I think my. And I'm thinking of what I need to cover with this child or this class, that sometimes I have to take a step back and say, Well, wait a second, what did I spend my hours and days and months, writing so many words on? Oh, yeah, wellbeing. And I'm thinking, Did I do anything to foster this child's well being today? Did I do anything to enhance this classes well being today? And I think it's something that sometimes I do need to, you know, take a step back and think, Wait a second, what did you write your thesis? Oh, yeah, yeah, did I do this today? So I think now that you've mentioned that I might actually bring my dissertation into my office and have it sitting on the desk facing me. So it's a constant reminder. Might have to do that. It's dusty, now as a doorstep.

STER 28:51

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