STER

Student-teacher Educational Research

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STER
STUDENT TEACHER
EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

Vol.2 2019

Welcome to STER 2019

About the Journal

Embracing a teacher-researcher identity is an integral part of initial teacher education Ireland. Student teachers are asked to conduct a research project in their final year which is thought-provoking, relevant, and practice-driven. In the professional world, research is not finished until the results are shared with others. The student teacher research journal gives students an opportunity to learn about the dissemination process, and offers them a platform to share the findings of their research in a collegial and supportive manner, while also affording first year students the opportunity to volunteer as peer reviewers, conference organisers and to engage with student teacher research.

Dr. Aimie Brennan
Founder and Coordinator of STER
Aimie.brennan@mic.ul.ie
@AimieBrenann

Editor
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Student Reviewers
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Aisling Gavin
Aoife Hosey
Eimear Kiely
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Anne Marie O'Regan Ryan
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Foreword

Professor Niamh Hourigan

I am delighted to present this second edition of Mary Immaculate College's Student Teacher Educational Research journal. STER is one of the most innovative student teacher research projects within the higher education sector in Ireland today. It emerged from the insight that the considerable amount of student teacher research which was being conducted in MIC and was not been collated or disseminated in a formal setting. Therefore, the range of insights and new information emerging from this research was being lost to the wider academic community. STER involves a number of intersecting elements including an academic conference which includes presentations from undergraduate, postgraduate and graduate researchers as well as poster and sound-boarding session for very early stage researchers.

The publication and dissemination of the STER journal not only raises the profile of student teacher research at national level but critically disseminates the findings within that research. Having taught in academic settings for over twenty years, I have noted that each generation has new concerns, original insights and innovative research methods which they bring to their empirical, applied and theoretically oriented research. Therefore, when we provide the up-coming generation of researchers with platforms to demonstrate the excellence of their work, we are demonstrating an openness to those insights and new methodologies as well as a willingness to recognise their inherent value. The STER team have captured the essence of this commitment by not only developing a conference and a journal but a new innovative series of podcasts which will be available on the HEA websites. These podcasts will provide a different format in which to capture and disseminate the insights of student teacher researchers.

The core aim of the STER project is to develop the student teacher as an active researcher and to bring that research consciousness back into the classroom. As you read through the journal, you will be aware that the themes which are core to student teacher research are the critical emerging themes within mainstream teacher education research nationally and internationally. The themes include social inclusion, leadership, well-being and work-based learning and their relevance to experiential practice of teaching is clearly evidence in the articles included in this edition of the journal. One of the most exciting elements of student teacher research is that students have the opportunity to produce new knowledge in common with many other researchers but can also use the insights gained for this knowledge to inform their day to day practice.

Engaging student teachers in educational research for the improvement of practice is essential in teacher education and STER is the only project currently targeting student teachers for this purpose within the HEI sector in Ireland. STER has created an authentic learning community where students are partners in the process of sharing research and providing feedback to peers with the aim of improving practice. In the journal, final year students are the authors and third year students are the peer-reviewers and editors. Students also selected the questions which were asked during the STER podcast sessions. The eagerness of student volunteers to get involved signifies the calibre of students enrolled in Mary Immaculate College at both the Limerick and Thurles campus and their willingness to contribute to the education community. STER is a model that can be replicated in other colleges of teacher education to enhance teaching and learning of educational research. In this sense, I think that Mary Immaculate College is leading the way in providing a model of best practice for the development of student teacher research.

This year, the STER journal includes 10 high quality articles providing snapshots of student teachers' dissertation research. Authors span undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in education and are engaging with issues from student cohorts ranging from early years to the education and wellbeing of the older person. I would like to particularly commend Dr. Aimie Brennan for her work developing STER, her commitment to continued innovation within the project and her support for the diverse group students involved. I hope you all are as challenged and stimulated by the insights in the research presented in this journal as I have been, and I look forward to engaging with many few editions of this exciting journal in the future.

Prof. Niamh Hourigan,
Vice President for Academic Affairs.
Mary Immaculate College, Limerick

Student Article

Article 1, April 2019

Aistear: A Journey Under Construction and Every Voice Matters

Marziya Fazal

Bachelor of Early Childhood Care and Education

Marziya Fazal is a graduate of the BA in ECCE in Mary Immaculate College. Her love for education developed ten years ago in a small Montessori classroom in London. She believes learning experiences have the potential to transform thinking and has bee fortunate enough to be able to work and study in various countries including London, Ireland, her home country Tanzania and currently Tokyo, Japan. She has grown in many different ways and her passion for Education continues to escalate. Her interest in Aistear stems particularly from college placements and part time work in preschool contexts.

KEYWORDS: Policy, Early Childhood Education;

INTRODUCTION

This research study sets out to investigate Early Years Teachers' (EYTs') engagement with *Aistear* - the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) settings in Ireland. It will explore perspectives and understanding of how EYTs' implement Aistear when working with young children. The primary research question for this study was, '*What are EYTs' engagements with Aistear as a curriculum framework for/in the Early Years?'* The purpose of this research is to investigate the voices of EYTs' and the impact of Aistear in their practice. This article is only a snapshot of a larger and more in-depth piece of research conducted during the researchers' programme of study.

CONTEXT

In Ireland, there is currently a remarkable focus on policy and quality provision in education and care for young children. Evidence in research shows that high quality ECCE is powerful and impacts children's holistic and academic development than any other period in education (Whitebread, Kuvalja and O'Connor 2015). Before 2009, Ireland did not have a national curriculum for the early years. Building upon various policies and reports such as United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989), Ready to Learn: White Paper on Early Childhood Education (1999) and *Síolta* - the National Quality Framework (2006), the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), along with other stakeholders developed a curriculum framework to support the education of children from birth to six years.

Aistear, an Irish word meaning 'journey', was developed by the NCCA and set into motion in 2009. It was a significant milestone in curriculum development and was the outcome of an eight-year partnership with the NCCA and various early childhood sectors (NCCA 2004, Daly and Forster 2009). This outcome brought to life the development of the framework. Aistear marks the beginning of a life long journey for children, parents and EYTs' in learning and development (NCCA 2009). The framework highlights the significance of early childhood as a distinct period of every child's life and supports adults to provide the best possible learning provisions for all children. Aistear focuses on providing children with enriching, challenging and enjoyable learning experiences to grow into confident and competent learners (NCCA 2009; French 2013). The framework takes on a thematic approach and includes four sets of user-friendly guides. These contain suggestions and practical exemplars of practice to support EYTs' to provide quality learning experiences for young children. Research has shown that the role of the EYT is central to children's learning and development. The benefits of a high quality ECCE experience is determined by the EYTs' knowledge and understanding of how children learn and develop (Ashiabi 2007; NCCA 2009; French 2013).

Since the publication of Aistear, there hasn't been a national body allocated to support services in using the curriculum. From 2009, there have been numerous settings that have started to use Aistear to guide their practices. However, there is still a weakness and lack of implementation of the framework due to services having limited opportunities for Continuous Professional Development (CPD). In light of making Aistear more visible and to support its implementation, Ireland introduced the first Free Pre-school year (ECCE scheme) in 2010 and a second year in 2016. This universal scheme aims to provide access to all children to two free pre-school years of appropriate programme based learning (Moloney and McCarthy 2010). Preschool settings are now contracted by the Minister of Children and Youth Affairs and must be in agreement to implement the quality and curriculum frameworks of *Siolta and Aistear* (Neylon 2012; French 2013). Ireland's change to investment in the early years resulted from numerous findings and research where evidence shows the value and importance of ECCE. The scheme has proved to be successful through the rise in the number of children availing of it. In the year of 2015/2016 there was a 13% increase in the number of registrations of the program (Neylon 2012). Furthermore, as a result of the expansion on the ECCE scheme, a 63% increase was seen in the year of 2016/2017 in the number of children availing of it (DCYA 2017).

Aistear demonstrates the capacity to be a curriculum framework that recognises and respects the rights and needs of every child. Research is evident that a play based, emergent curriculum is paramount in enhancing children's learning and development in all spheres of life (NCCA 2009, McMonagle 2012; French 2013; Whitebread *et al.* 2015). The development of Aistear in Ireland is a huge milestone for the ECCE sector. However, while there has been some research on Aistear and its benefits, little has been conducted on the voices of EYTs' who implement and engage with it on the ground. As EYTs' begin shifting their focus from structured programs to more emergent play-based approaches, it is likely to bring some resistance and questions about Aistear as they try to figure out how to do things 'right'. While there are many benefits of Aistear and its resources, there may be variation or weaknesses in its implementation in ECCE settings

(McMonagle 2012; French 2013; Whitebread *et al.* 2015).

METHODOLOGY

For the study, six participants were randomly selected from the list of registered services on the Tusla Website in one county in Ireland. Four settings participated; all four had availed of the ECCE scheme. Two of the settings provided sessional care and the others provided both sessional and full day care. The sample size was small in order to collect quality data, but it should be acknowledged that the findings represent the participant's views only and should not be considered generalizable.

The study takes on a qualitative approach as it was concerned with the quality of data it produces; by asking participants to explain their knowledge and opinions on the topic. It investigated how the participants engaged with Aistear and as a result gathered detailed descriptions about their understandings (MacNaughton et al., 2001).

Six face-to-face semi structured interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in a written document. Ten open-ended and closed questions were asked with the use of follow up questions. From the patterns that emerged, the data collected was analysed by using thematic analysis, developing a list of codes and categories (MacNaughton *et al*. 2001; Moore 2006; Thomas 2009; Mukherji and Albon 2015). These emerging patterns were coded by similarity, frequency, and sequence that resulted in the emergence of three key themes; *Aistear, Play and the Role of the EYT.*

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The six settings that participated in the research study avail of the ECCE scheme and offer a sessional day care for the children. From the data it was observed that majority of the settings follow the Montessori methodology and principles as their curriculum for teaching and learning. Settings were weaving in and implementing Aistear alongside the Montessori pedagogy. Most of the participants demonstrated a positive attitude towards the framework and felt they could use it as a guide in supporting children's learning and development:

> I think Aistear is fantastic because I think it kind of gives you an idea of trying to create a curriculum to suit each child's individual needs and development. (Participant B)

> The four themes help you focus on what you are trying to teach the children and you can link it with observations and helps us better plan the curriculum. (Participant F)

Nonetheless, more than half of the participants indicated challenges and fears of implementing the framework.

> I think the biggest challenge is that you are implementing it properly. I know there is probably no wrong way to do it but you will always have that fear. The only thing about Aistear is they tell you all about it but they don't show you how to use it. Which is the worst. (Participant B)

> It can be kind of overwhelming and daunting at the same time because you are trying to incorporate it and you are trying to do the best of everything. I find it very difficult because my full degree is Montessori, we didn't do nothing about Aistear, very little about Siolta as well. (Participant C)

Out of the three themes, the role of the EYT and the sub theme of CPD occurred most frequently throughout the data. The qualifications of the participants varied from Montessori diplomas, FETAC Level 6 in Childcare, Level 7 Montessori degree to Level 8 degree in ECCE. All participants have childcare experience ranging from 2 to 18 years. In contrast to the findings, five out of the six participants indicated that Aistear did not support them as EYTs' in building on and extending children's learning. Pressure and time constraints of documentation were other major concerns. Participants felt they did not have enough time during their working day to allow them to observe, assess and plan to gather and record information about the children.

> I think you are not given the time to plan, or to document and when you are inspected you are supposed to have all this documentation and have everything ready for them. Where are you supposed to get the time to do this? It's all in your own time, so I think that is the only unfair thing about it. (Participant A)

> I don't feel we are really being supported. I just feel it's a bit vague at the moment; we could really do with help. (Participant D)

> To be honest, I feel like it puts me under a lot of pressure inside in the room because you want to please everybody, you want to make sure you know where every child is and you are also trying to think on your feet to appeal to everybody. It puts a huge amount of pressure on you. I don't feel supported by it. (Participant C)

CPD and training was a very conspicuous reoccurring theme in the data, surprising to say the least as the participants demonstrated a strong opinion about it. Five of the six participants felt they did not receive adequate training or appropriate practical CPD to engage and implement the framework successfully. Participants suggested that there should be more in-house or in-service days allocated for Aistear training sessions similar to the Primary School teachers. Evidence in research shows the value and benefits of CPD to ensure quality in ECCE. CPD is a life long process of learning which supports EYTs' to foster excellence in their teaching practice, develop knowledge and skills for effective pedagogy and enhance their professional image (Ho-Lin n.d.).

> I think yeah there should be a lot more training on it. I think as well if they all had observation sheets, curriculum templates, everything straight across the board. So every center on the same level would be great. No matter how many years you are doing Aistear, I think it's important to get refreshed training on it every 2 to 3 years. (Participant B)

> I suppose we really need more training basically and practical training. I don't feel we are really being supported. When we implemented the Síolta program we had a mentor and she would come in on a regular enough basis so we were able to bounce off ideas off her and she was giving us a little bit of guidance which was great and again that was very new to us at the stage so that was very productive. But we don't have any mentoring or any system in place for Aistear. (Participant D)

> To be honest, the first I heard of Aistear was we had our HSE inspection. I mean it's really self taught, you look it up and the first few times you look at it I didn't even understand it. (Participant E)

CONCLUSION

The data gathered and the themes that emerged concur with the literature in regards to the benefits of the framework and the value of play in children's learning and development. However, it was noted that participants experienced various challenges in engaging with Aistear. They indicated that there was an inadequacy of CPD and a weakness in the continuity of its implementation. It was evident from the findings that participants felt Aistear was beneficial in enhancing and extending children's learning and development. Participants acknowledged the benefits of the framework for them and for the children. Most of them agreed that it was a useful guide in assisting them to better understand children's needs and interests.

Practitioners are experiencing some challenges with implementing Aistear in their practice. In particular, the fear of implementing it appropriately and the lack of uniformity within the sector. Many conveyed that its implementation was self-taught and the understanding of the delivery of the framework was upon every individual. They addressed that this challenge was due to the lack of CPD and practical training. Time management was a huge challenge and EYTs' endured a substantial amount of pressure with documentation. Participants indicated that the shortfall of carrying out the framework to its fullest was due to the lack of training in Aistear. The need for CPD/training was a consistent theme that emerged from the findings. EYTs' emphasized the shortage of CPD in Aistear as a major drawback in the sector, which resulted in the weakness of its implementation.

Despite the fact that settings have to be in agreement to use Aistear, the framework is not underpinned by legislation. Its implementation depends on the settings themselves. This is also due to the inconsistencies of support from national organisations, county childcare committees and further educational institutions (French 2013). Therefore, without allocating a specific organisation to support settings in providing detailed plans, clear directions and appropriate training of the implementation of Aistear; how can the sector ensure uniformity and quality services for young children? Furthermore, if both Aistear and Síolta are interlinked and crucial in quality provision, is it not logical to think that they should be seen as one entity of equal importance? Successful implementation of Aistear can produce high outcomes in relation to children's holistic development. However, unless there is a direct engagement with Aistear in every setting with the support and guidance from knowledgeable mentors and organisations, EYTs' will not be able to truly embrace the invaluable practices that Aistear encompasses (French 2013).

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Student Article

Article 2, April 2019

Investigating the Attitudes of Teachers to Science Education in the Irish Primary Classroom

Cora Coppinger
Professional Master of Education

Cora Coppinger is a graduate of the Professional Master of Education (PME) programme at Mary Immaculate College, Co. Limerick. Originally from Athenry in Co. Galway, she is now currently employed as a mainstream primary teacher in Scoil Eoin Kilbarrack, Dublin 5. Cora completed an undergraduate Bachelor of Biomedical Science from National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG) prior to involvement in the PME programme. Her background in science and passion for its teaching inspired this work investigating the attitudes of teachers to science education in the primary classroom

KEYWORDS: Science Education, Primary Education, Attitudes, Teaching

INTRODUCTION

This article aims to provide an insight into current attitudes to science education, which has been correlated from a larger research study conducted by the author. It will compare attitudes recorded in past studies to current primary teachers attitudes to science. It also aims to examine factors affecting teacher's attitudes to science education at primary level.

The motivation for this study originated from a large-scale investigation into teacher confidence in teaching science in 1995 (Harlen, 1997). This seminal report amongst primary teachers found that, when asked to rate their confidence in teaching each of the subjects, science faired poorly in eighth position (only music and ICT ranking below science). In 2007, in a revisited study ten years later by Murphy and Beggs (2007), half of teacher participants identified lack of confidence and ability to teach science as the major issue concerning their teaching of science. This identified lack of confidence could correlate with a poor attitude towards the subject. This research therefore prompted an investigation into what are current teachers attitudes towards the teaching of science in the primary classroom and why?

Currently the IDA markets Ireland as a world-class research system citing a government investment of 8.2billion for science technology and innovation, a robust intellectual property regime, a well-educated workforce and low corporate tax rate as inferences for investment (IDA, 2017). Investigating issues in

attitudes towards science education is thus imperative to sustain growth in the science and research market in Ireland. Furthermore, despite important recognition and funding for science education, Ireland was marginally over the OECD average in science achievement in 2013. Irelands performance in PISA ranking and scores have not shown any discernible improvement in student's science achievement since 2000 (NCCA, 2013). This study wishes to uncover if these results are still apparent in the primary classroom today and if they relate to attitudes to the subject.

CONTEXT

The pace of scientific research is currently at its most accelerated rate, informing and questioning policy decisions in a wider sphere and affecting and educating the everyday decisions of the average citizen at ground level. Scientific and technical activities account for the employment of 39.3% of women and 49.5% of men in Irish society in 2013 (CSO, 2013). Such high employment rates have earmarked the Irish science industry as prosperous investment. This also reflected in the large amounts of financing allocated by government for science and technology research (IDA, 2017). Scientific literacy, DeBoer (1999) too claims, is not only important for the preparation of those entering scientific and technical careers but also has an essential, functional element to educating the everyday citizen in living life effectively with respect to the natural world.

Parker and Spink (1997) demonstrate that science, for many newly qualified teachers can prove problematic. This is highly influenced by their own attitudes and prior experience with such areas of knowledge and is also reiterated in the reflective practice of the researcher in this case. Evidence suggests that 'student teacher's beliefs and impressions of teaching and learning play an important role in decision making processes about their own classroom practices' (Murphy and Smith, 2012). This study demonstrates that increased collaborative, discussion, discovery and reflective two-term science education did effectively reverse some prior negative views previously conceived. The National Curriculum (NCCA, 1999) does require that 'scientific investigation play a fundamental role in children's development', which creates concern as to why this was not foundational in student teacher science education previously (Parker and Spink, 1997). Similarly, 'the possession of knowledge regarding nature of science does automatically mean that teachers will be able to implement enquiry-based learning' which is also an area of concern for higher education institutions to examine (Waldron et al., 2007).

This investigation was revisited ten years on, which again measured student teachers' attitudes and confidence with science in the classroom. Improvements were identified in 'some areas of primary teacher confidence' (Murphy et al., 2007, pp. 1023). However, half of teachers surveyed still expressed confidence issues in ability to teach science. It was claimed that 'higher education institutions need to enhance the preparation of new primary teachers' and 'increase their partnership work with schools and other continuous professional development (CPD) providers, in relation to primary science.' (Murphy et al., 2007). Some areas of pre-service primary school teacher education (PPST) have advanced to reduce and prevent conceptual understanding and misconception in science. Lectures adopted a 'constructivist approach' which 'modeled

active teaching and learning methodologies, required … for the development of both PPST subject matter knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge' in line with teaching council guidelines (Liston, 2016). The results of such 'conceptual understanding lectures' were successful in 'challenging conceptually, questioning their scientific thinking and allowed time to reflect on their misconceptions' (Liston, 2016). However, often such misconceptions are person specific and can be difficult to acutely identify and rectify in such a widespread curriculum (Liston, 2016).

METHODOLOGY

This research utilized special purpose surveys amongst qualified teachers. Surveys relied on standardized questions that were analyzed statistically in accordance with quantitative methods. Such methods allow the researcher to collect a span of data samples and generalize conclusions that reflect a larger cohort of the sample population, reflective of the demographic and participant profile of those surveyed. Such work creates subjective data results based upon the sample surveyed but may seek to create more factual objective data by narrowing the demographic of sample participants (Fowler, 2014). As this research is conducted amongst qualified teachers all surveys contained an exact style of questioning within the surveys which will allow for cross comparable study of answers within the sample (Maxwell and Pearson, 2016). In total, 65 qualified teachers were contacted via email to complete the survey using on online link. Following distribution of this email, the researcher set a target of 40 participants, and 36 surveys were returned.

This study aimed to correlate results of previous studies (Murphy, 2007; Harlen, 1997) and act as a semi-replication study at points. With these studies having been conducted almost ten years ago to date, it is important that they are continually considered, updated and reflective of today's practice. In quantitative research, replication is important for strengthening cumulative knowledge and increasing the dependability of research findings (Funder et al., 2014; Makel & Plucker, 2014; Schmidt, 2009). However, this study presents as conceptual replication research rather direct replication, as the questions utilized in the previously mentioned research cases have in some cases become irrelevant, require modernizing or are not reflective of objectives of the study (Leavy, 2017, p89).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The participating teachers were asked to identify, from a list of common elements involved in delivering the science curriculum, what they felt comfortably confident to provide to their students. (Figure 1). The majority of teachers felt confident delivering elements of science education in their classroom, particularly in areas such as questioning (34 participants) and engagement (27 participants). Overall teachers felt most confident devising and posing questions during science lessons. The elements teachers felt most unsure about included explaining scientific ideas (18 participants) and assessing practical work (19 participants).

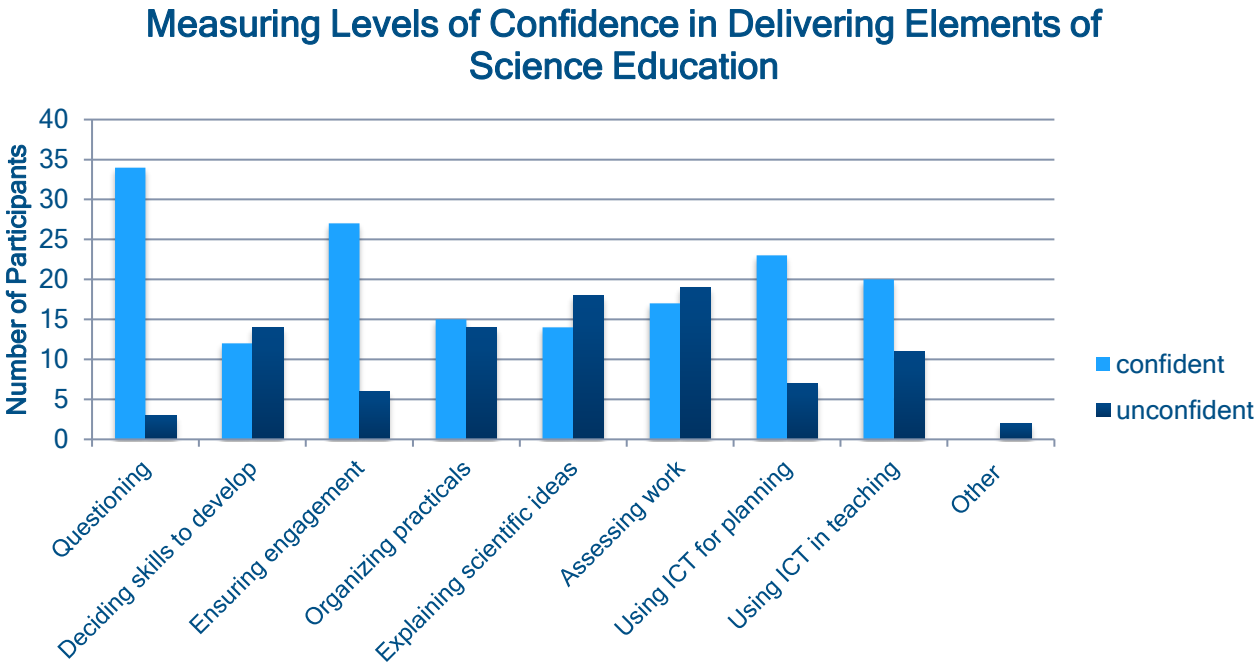

Figure 1 Participating Teachers Confidence in Delivering Elements of Science Education

The teachers were also asked to identify which skills they felt confident developing amongst the children in their class, as outlined in the primary science curriculum (NCCA, 1999). It was found that teachers felt relatively confident developing the scientific based skills of their class which included recording data, observation, fair testing, interpreting data and relating how science affects everyday lives. This is an interesting result as one of the main aims of the STEM education guidelines is to ensure children are equipped with such skills. This result may suggest that while teachers do feel confident developing these skills with their pupils, the quality of application and opportunity for such application may not be done as frequently as expected in the primary classroom (DES, 2017).

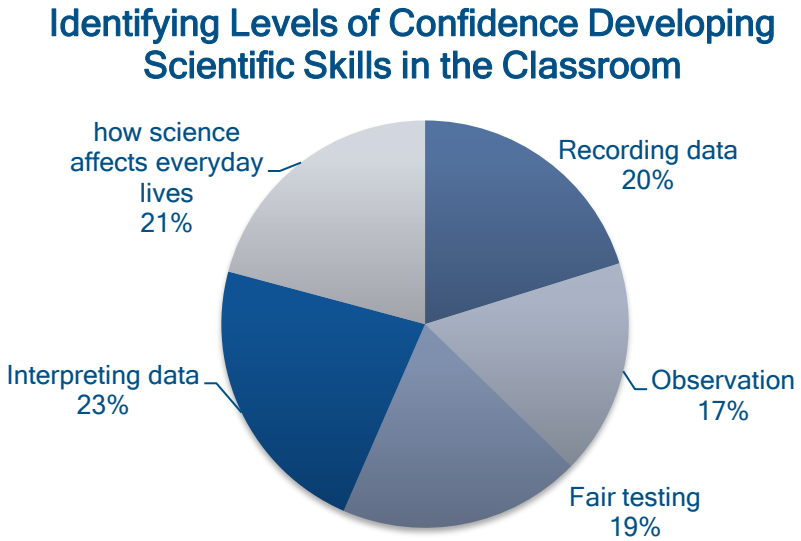

Figure 2 Participating Teachers Confidence Developing Scientific Skills in the Classroom

The participating teachers were also asked to detail what science concepts, outlined in the primary science curriculum content guidelines, that they felt most confident delivering to their class. Findings indicate that many teachers involved in the study feel confident teaching many areas of the science curriculum, especially the water cycle, the flowering plant, and basic life processes. It is interesting to note that many of these concepts would typically fall within the living things strand of the curriculum or be bracketed as life science study. It may be that teachers feel most confident teaching such concepts as they relate tangibly to everyday life and may have been studied by the participating teachers in biology to Leaving Certificate level, the most commonly studied science subject at second level in Ireland (CSO, 2016).

The Science in the Primary School Inspectorate Evaluation Study (2008), previously identified low confidence level among teachers teaching topics such as the flowering plant, forces, light and sound. It is positive to note quite high figures of teachers now reporting confidence delivering the concepts the flowering plant, light and sound in the primary classroom in 2018, within this study. Many teachers felt less confident teaching concepts such as how we see things (17 participants), insulators and conductors (11 participants) and temporary/permanent change (17 participants). There are a number of reasons to explain such results. One such deduction could be that these concepts involve abstract scientific ideas and knowledge which the teachers studied previously mentioned they found challenging to explain, as previously mentioned in the study. It could also be attributed to these categorical physics related topics, one of the least popular science subjects studied in Ireland at second level. These results, in relation to a lack of confidence surrounding physical science-based subjects, disappointingly reflect the results of a similar study conducted in by Harlen in 1997. The concepts chosen for investigation were informed by a previous study upon teacher confidence teaching the concepts to pupils in 2007 in a revisited study (Figure 3).

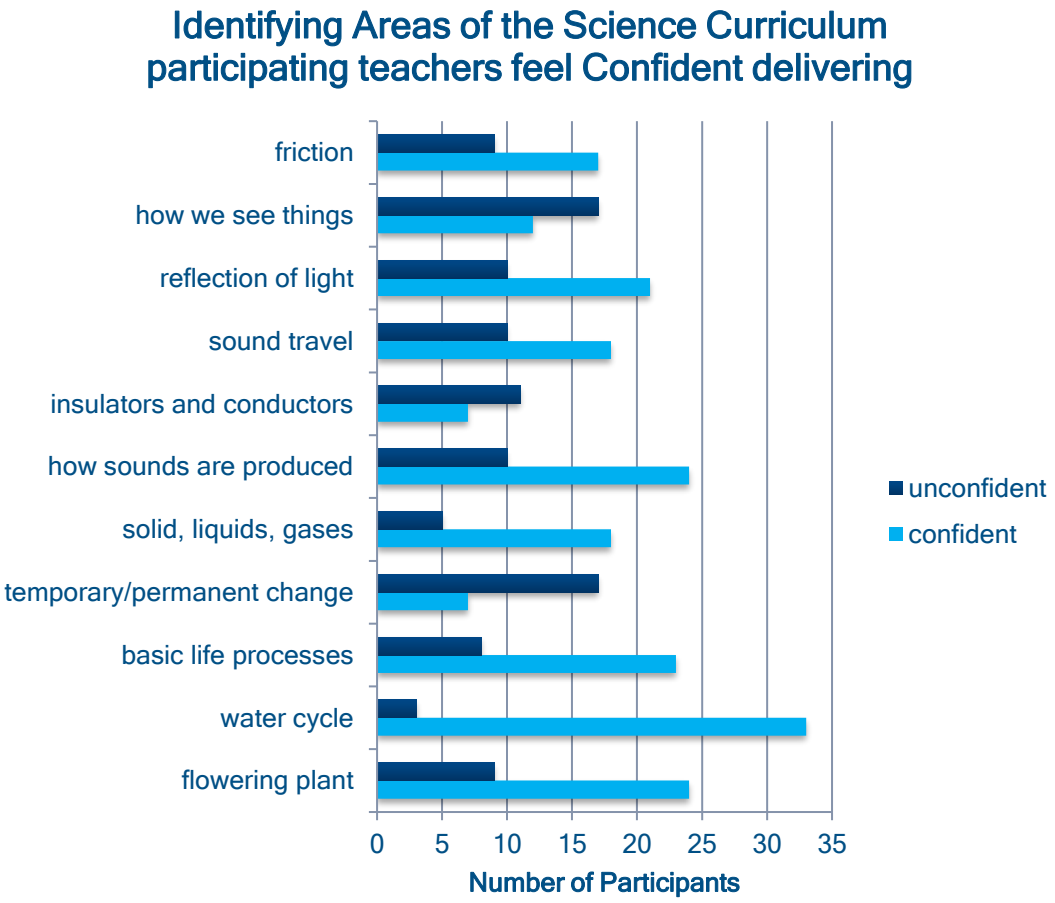

Figure 3 Areas of the Science Curriculum participating teachers feel confident/ less confident delivering

CONCLUSION

This research has demonstrated that teachers hold the value of teaching science at primary level in very high regard. Many teachers have studied science at second level, mainly Biology, which they rely heavily upon for explaining scientific knowledge to their class group. The concepts that teachers feel most confident teaching are those which are covered within the Biology curriculum. There are issues with teacher's confidence providing the primary science curriculum. Thankfully, teachers do feel confident relaying a scientific skill set to their class, which is a significant improvement upon results from previous studies (Harlen, 1997; Murphy and Beggs, 2007). Many teachers highlighted issues with their own scientific knowledge, preparing science lessons and assessing science work. Teachers' confidence levels teaching areas of science have improved in strand units such as the flowering plant but topics such as how we see things, insulators and conductors and temporary/permanent change are still stressed areas that many teachers do not feel confident delivering. It must be considered that the results presented are representative of the sample of participants only and cannot be generalized. Based upon the results of this study, teachers' confidence levels for the provision of science education at primary level have improved in recent years. However, upon reflective review, there are still some critical issues that require employment and revision going forward.

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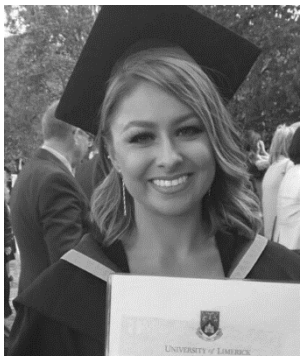
Student Article

Article 3, April 2019

Exploring Teachers' Experiences of Inclusion Strategies for Deaf Children in Mainstream Primary Schools



Holly Cunneen
Bachelor of Education

Holly Cunneen, from Limerick, graduated from the Bachelor of Education programme in Mary Immaculate College in October 2018. Within the four years, she undertook a specialism in Special Educational Needs (SEN). Her interest in this field and more specifically in the education of deaf children has stemmed from both personal and professional experience.

KEYWORDS: Special Education, Inclusion, Hearing Impairment, Primary Education

INTRODUCTION

It is estimated that 90-95% of deaf children in Ireland attend mainstream schools (Mathews 2011) rather than special deaf schools and units, therefore, understanding how these deaf children are taught and included in the mainstream setting is very important. This paper is a snapshot of a larger piece of research conducted as part of a final year dissertation which investigated teachers' experience of challenges faced by both the deaf children and the teachers themselves. The importance of aiming 'to cater for [a child's] needs and potential' is embedded in the primary school curriculum (NCCA 1999, p. 6).

This study aimed to shed light on the strategies used to meet the needs of the deaf children in their class. By doing so, teachers' competencies in teaching deaf children in mainstream schools, alongside their views of the possible link between a deaf child's level of hearing and their level of inclusion in the mainstream class will be briefly discussed. From this investigation, it was found that there are whole class benefits to using inclusion strategies for deaf children. The lack of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and insight into deaf education in initial teacher education and a relationship between a deaf child's level of hearing and their level of inclusion they experience in mainstream classes also came to light.

For the purpose of this research the term 'deaf' is used to describe a child with any degree of hearing loss or impairment. In specific cases, the terms 'mild', 'moderate' or 'severe' hearing loss may also be used as some teachers may refer to the deaf children in this study in this way as their level of hearing may be a significant factor in some inclusion strategies used.

CONTEXT

In the Irish context, deafness is categorised as a sensory disability. It is defined as a special educational need (SEN) which is 'a restriction in the capacity of the person to participate in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability' (NCSE 2014, p.10). This research draws heavily on two main policies, the Education Act (1998) and the EPSEN Act (2004), which officially designate deafness as a SEN. These policies influence the education of deaf children in mainstream schools as the Education Act (1998, p. 13) states that a school must 'ensure that the educational needs of students, including those with a disability or SEN are identified and provided for', which also mirrors one of the central aims of the primary school curriculum (NCCA 1999), 'to cater for the needs of individual children'. In order to comply with legislation, it is essential that adequate resources and teacher training is put in place to ensure that each deaf child receives a quality education.

Due to the recent recognition of Irish Sign Language (ISL) as an official language of Ireland (Irish Sign Language Act 2017), this research is particularly timely. The ISL Act (2017, p. 5) enacts that 'ISL training for teachers of children who are deaf' will be provided and 'the provision of education and support services' for deaf children will be ensured. Whether or not teachers use ISL and feel equipped to teach deaf children will be explored in this paper. Although the importance of inclusive education is clear from the above legislation in Ireland, the IDS (Irish Deaf Society, 2018) maintain that 'teachers in mainstream schools may not be qualified to teach children who are deaf or hard of hearing'. This can be described as contradictory of what current policy of inclusive education claims to provide.

Upon reviewing previous research conducted in this area, many findings based on international research coincide with the findings in this particular study. For example, Marschark and Hauser (2012) outline that if one has full access to language (hearing), they possess flexible cognitive skills and yearn a great potential for learning. In other words, a profoundly deaf child does not have full access to learning and more strategies for inclusion are necessary. This idea can also be compared to O'Neill *et al* (2014) as they state that a profoundly deaf child has more difficulties in participation. As deaf children's access to language is compromised, teachers of deaf children in Ireland perspectives on this topic are important in this paper.

METHODOLOGY

The decision to carry out qualitative research was determined by the research and embedded questions of this study. More specifically, semi- structured interviews were used to 'probe in more detail the actual day-to-day practices' (Creswell *et al* 2007, p. 258). This method was deemed the most appropriate as the participants were able to express their experiences.

Five mainstream primary school teachers who teach/have taught deaf children in a mainstream setting in the region of Munster were invited to participate. The data gathered was then analysed thematically through the method of coding as it will allow various categories of data to arise with respect to each participant (Flick 2009). From this point, various themes such as challenges, inclusion strategies and

teacher competencies were compared and contrasted and hence, analysed thematically based on their context. Upon reflection on the research process, a number of limitations became apparent. Gill *et al* (2008) suggest that the longer the interview, the more data can be collected. However, in terms of this research, the duration of the interviews can be considered quite short and therefore, yielding less data. Although the sample size of five teachers was deemed appropriate for this research, it can be seen as a rather small-scale study means the results are reflective of the sample included and not the general population.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Upon analysis of the data gathered, several themes and sub-themes came to light. The participants outlined various needs and challenges faced by the deaf children and the teachers and in turn, how these needs were met. As Teachers 1, 2 and 5 taught the deaf child in the infant classes, they found phonological/ phonemic awareness to be the main challenge faced by the deaf child in their class. Teacher 1 states: "*they can't hear the same sounds so they are behind".* This can be directly linked to Lederberg *et al* (2012 p. 1) as they acknowledge the language difficulties, especially phonics, in deaf children as they 'do not perceive speech in the same way as hearing people'. The difficulties these children experienced with phonics could've been more obvious to the teachers as children were at a young age.

WHOLE-CLASS BENEFITS OF INCLUSION STRATEGIES

Through discussing the inclusion strategies used by the participants, the benefit for the whole class was highlighted. For example, the use of a visual timetable was initially used for a deaf child however, the teacher discovered that the whole class benefitted from it as *"they knew what was coming next"* (Teacher 5). Similarly, one of the participants who taught a deaf child in infants used a hand-held microphone to amplify the sound through speakers in the room for this deaf child. This participant also concluded that *"every child in the class benefitted from it"* (Teacher 2) in terms of their confidence as *"they became a little bit more aware of themselves"* (Teacher 2). What at first can be considered a rather positive finding, more individualised support rather than a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach (Westwood 2011), is needed for a deaf child as their needs go beyond their hearing (Marshark and Hauser 2012).

INCLUSION STRATEGIES FOR THE DEAF CHILD

Teachers 2 and 5 noted that both the child's and the teacher's position in the classroom was important. They said that it was essential that the deaf child *"could always see my lips"* (Teacher 2) and *"don't stand in front of the window while you're teaching him because he can't see your lips"* (Teacher 5), this was to enable the child to lip-read. "*Taking cues from others*" (Teacher 1), "*ensuring teachers on yard duty are aware*" (Teacher 2) and "*small group work*" (Teacher 5) were amongst the other inclusion strategies found to be beneficial by the teachers.

Pre-teaching is an inclusion strategy outlined by Teacher 5 as "definitely" the most useful. According to Berg and Wehby (2012, p. 15), pre- teaching can be defined as 'the advance introduction of information that

prepares students for upcoming instruction'. As well as pre-teaching information with the special education teacher, the participant outlined that *"if there was a poem or a rhyme, or if we were talking about the milk man or whatever it was, they would talk about that at home"* (Teacher 5). It was essential to have the learning constantly reinforced for this child both in school and at home.

As the challenge of the deaf child's acquisition of phonological/phonemic awareness was outlined earlier, Teacher 2 described the strategies they used for the deaf child's difficulty with acquiring sounds: *"to differentiate between the hard 'c' and plosive 'p', I would have had him put his hand on my throat or in front of my mouth… and on his mouth for syllable"* (Teacher 2). According to the same participant, the tactile movements of "*clapping it out on your body, making out the sounds on your arm, using different parts of your body to make the sounds"* also benefitted the whole class. This mirrors the UDL approach discussed earlier however, it is clear this participant also had individualised strategies for that child.

TEACHER CONFIDENCE

Although many inclusion strategies were shared by the teachers, all teachers interviewed said that they feel unequipped to teach and include deaf children in the mainstream classroom. The lack of competence in teaching deaf children may stem from the participants' initial teacher education and/or scarcity of Continuing Professional Development (CPD). According to one of the participants, initial teacher education "*does not prepare you"* and that "*there's not a lot of CPD courses"* (Teacher 1). This shed light on how the teachers used their prior knowledge and experience of other special educational needs to meet the needs of a deaf child as one of the participants admitted they were *"winging it"* (Teacher 2). Although not yet in place, the recent passing of the ISL Act (2017) could mean that more CPD courses will be made available for teachers of deaf children to comply with this policy going forward.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LEVEL OF DEAFNESS AND LEVEL OF INCLUSION OF A DEAF CHILD

These teachers' self- proclaimed incompetence can also be linked with the correlation between a deaf child's level of hearing and their level of inclusion. Three out of the five teachers instantly considered there to be a correlation between deaf children's level of hearing and their level of inclusion in the class. One participant considered themselves *"lucky"* (Teacher 4) that the deaf child in their class had a very mild hearing loss while another stated that if the deaf child had a more severe hearing loss, there would be more "*acute problems".* This suggests that the more severe a child's hearing loss, the more severe the problems they will encounter in terms of their learning, socialisation and inclusion. This again suggests their lack of confidence in teaching deaf children in the mainstream class.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that many challenges exist in teaching and including deaf children. The main challenge encountered by the deaf children was that of language needs. Although Webster and Ellwood (1985, p. 81) recognise language as the 'vehicle' for communication, the children in this research did not prove to have

any difficulties in terms of communication, which can be considered surprising. This shows that in this research, the challenges remained academic due to their mild hearing loss. Most teachers appeared to utilize the UDL approach (Westwood 2011) in their classrooms as the strategies used benefitted the whole class and not solely the deaf child. Therefore, it can be concluded that many general strategies can be adopted for all deaf children however, more specific strategies are still required to be implemented.

In terms of the correlation between the deaf child's level of hearing and their level of inclusion, participants appeared grateful that the deaf child in their class had a mild hearing loss. If the child had a more severe hearing loss, the teachers would have to go to considerable measures to ensure the child is appropriately included e.g. learning ISL, which none of them did. Therefore, it can be concluded that the more severe a child's hearing loss, more complex challenges to teaching and including them will be faced. This research can be considered beneficial to a classroom or special education teacher teaching a deaf child as various inclusion strategies used by primary school teachers in mainstream schools were outlined. However, this study can be considered rather general as it did not focus on any specific age group or level of hearing.

As the findings of this research suggest that teachers feel unequipped, this means the teachers' skills do not conform to current policy due to lack of initial teacher training and CPD. Ultimately, there is a mismatch between policy and practice. To satisfy the current policy in relation to inclusive education, perhaps more specific CPD courses in the area of deaf education would be beneficial for current primary school teachers in order for them to provide quality education for deaf children. In terms of further research, perhaps a study that focuses solely on a particular age group or level of hearing would contribute to a better understanding of how deaf children can be successfully included in the Irish mainstream primary school.

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Student Article

Article 4, April 2019

Older People and Well-Being: Perception and Influencing Factors

Mairead Spillane

MA in Education and Well-being of the Older Person

Mairead Spillane is a healthcare professional with over 30 years' experience working in the acute medical setting, particularly in the field of cardiovascular and respiratory disease. She is passionate in her belief that each individual is capable of achieving and maintaining his or her optimal health and overall well-being. This guiding principle continues to fuel her interests and activities, including setting up and running a successful business venture within the complementary health sector for more than twenty years. Successfully completing the MA in Education and Well-Being of the Older Person in MIC, cemented her commitment to engage with this target age-group so that those in mid-life and beyond can be active participants in determining how they negotiate the challenges of the ageing process.

KEYWORDS: Well-being, Health, Aging, Education

INTRODUCTION

Ageing is an irreversible process, a natural occurrence which forms part of our shared human experience. The ongoing worldwide phenomenon of an increasing older demographic is widely documented and universally accepted. With population ageing, policies for healthy ageing have become key to preventing disease, disability and loss of well-being. In Ireland, policy in relation to health and well-being over the trajectory of ageing is underpinned by the National Positive Ageing Strategy (DOH 2013). The stated vision of the NPAS is to create a society for all ages where population ageing is celebrated and *'the equality, independence, participation, care, self-fulfilment and dignity of older people'* is enabled and enhanced (NPAS 2013). One of the goals outlined in the foregoing is to support and utilise research in relation to all aspects of ageing and older people and, to ensure a comprehensive, holistic, multidisciplinary, all stakeholder approach to policy formation.

This study examines the older person's perception of well-being and the factors which influence this perception. Older people's health and well-being can only be maintained and improved if policies take account of their specific physical, psychological, educational and socio-economic needs. The dearth of research into the subjective experiences of older people living in the community setting was a key motivation

for this study. The aim of which was to explore the older persons subjective perception of the factors which impact their well-being rather than the previously much studied professional perspectives. This study seeks to create a better understanding of the process of ageing and to reflect the experiences, beliefs and abilities of older people themselves. This research exploring the facilitators and barriers to the layperson's positive perception of well-being provides an important contribution to the body of knowledge. Understanding the older person's perception of well-being is necessary to inform strategic planning and future public policy.

This article presents a snapshot of the study findings. The findings presented, evidence the positive impact of maintaining opportunities for education, intellectual stimulation and social connection on the perception of well-being among older people.

CONTEXT

Diener and Seligman (2004) contend that policy decisions at organisational, corporate and government levels should be influenced by issues related to well-being. They further argue that current policy focuses only on economic outcomes omitting the measurement of well-being. The concept of well-being and maintaining a positive perception of well-being throughout the ageing process is particularly relevant in the light of the currently extending human lifespan. The United Nations 2017 population prospectus predicts that globally by 2050 there will be 2.1 billion people aged 60 and over, with the number of people aged 80 and over projected to triple within the same time frame (UN 2017). In Ireland Census 2016 recorded a 19.1% increase in those aged 65 and over when compared with the 2011 census, recording in addition 456 centenarians; an increase of 17.2% (CSO 2016). It is universally accepted that this trend is set to continue.

Well-being is a broad, complex and multifaceted construct (Pollard and Lee 2003). As a theory it is open to various conceptualisations, many definitions and various methodological approaches (Crivello et al 2009). This has led to ongoing interdisciplinary debate (Michalos 2008) as researchers seek to develop a level of clarity around a concept which is difficult to define and even more difficult to measure (Thomas 2009). Despite there being no universally accepted definition of well-being, in relation to older people it is associated with affirmative concepts such as '*healthy, active, positive, productive and successful ageing*' (NPAS 2013).

Older people bring their own personal feelings, experiences and opinions to the complex question of what constitutes well-being (Stanley and Cheek 2003), defining well-being in both subjective and objective terms. The perception of well-being is fluid. It is influenced by current events and challenges and reflects the individual's ability to achieve a point of balance between challenges and resources (Headley and Wearing 1989). Studies comparing the views of older people with those of healthcare professionals in relation to the concept of health and well-being in older age, found that their perspectives differed in relation to how a positive perception was achieved and maintained (Giummarra et al. 2007). The primary focus of much of health literature relates to the negative aspects of the human condition (Ryff and Singer 2008). Healthcare professionals conceptualise the absence of disease and maintenance of normal functioning as fundamental to good health, older people in contrast perceive a certain amount of loss as inevitable and accept the need

to accommodate age-related changes. Studies show that despite being classified as being physically and clinically ill or having multiple chronic conditions, many older people continue to report a positive sense of well-being (Cummins 2005; Schickler 2005; Simon et al 2005). Research studies involving in-depth interviews with older people are necessary to better understand this phenomenon (Strawbridge et al. 2002).

The more researched traditional theories have failed to sufficiently consider the broad range of factors which influence the layperson's perception of well-being (Jopp et al (2015). In fact, the perspective of the older person is frequently absent from discussions. The views and perceptions of the oldest old have been found to be even more diverse and complex; the absence of disease perceived as even less important. While there is no universally accepted definition of older old there is a precedent for defining 75 years as a transition point where older age commences (UN 2012). The older old focus on maintaining cognitive ability, being pain-free and being able to carry out certain tasks (Nosarty et al 2015; Cherry et al 2013). This highlights the need for studies to explore and compare perceptions of ageing and well-being among different older age groups (Nosarty et al 2015). Stanley and Cheek (2003) advocate the use of qualitative research methods to study well-being as the lived experience of the older person, thereby facilitating a move away from an external examination of criteria to a study of well-being grounded in the reality of human experience. The subjective perspective of the older person is necessary to increase clarity around the concept of well-being and the factors which influence the older person's perception of well-being (Koistinen et al. 2012).

METHODOLOGY

The interpretivist paradigm and phenomenological approach of qualitative research was employed to examine the research question: *What does the older person perceive as well-being and what influences that perception?* As discussed previously, research indicates that significant changes in perceptions and attitudes to ageing, health and well-being are associated with progressive ageing (Nosarty et al 2015). This led the researcher to use purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is a method of selecting participants for a specific purpose rather than randomly selecting participants (Teddlie and Yu 2007). To ensure the integrity of this study participants were selected from different age cohorts and gender balance was maintained. Two participants one male and one female were selected from each of the following age cohorts 60s, 70s and over 79. The research was carried out in two phases. In phase one participants completed a questionnaire which was based on the Ferrans and Powers quality of life index (1985), while phase two consisted of a face-to-face semi structured interview. The resultant data was analysed using Braun and Clarkes (2006) six phase model of thematic analysis.

As part of this process the data was coded manually, each code identifying a meaningful piece of data (Tuckett 2005). Correlating codes were then merged to create categories which were analysed and organised in order to establish possible themes (Braun and Clarke 2006). These proposed themes were further refined to identify distinct patterns and similarities from which the overarching themes and sub themes were identified. The use of systematic processes identified procedures and rigorous standards

(Creswell and Miller 2000), together with an acknowledgement of the researcher's lens as part of the research process, ensured the validity of data generation, data analysis and researcher interpretation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This comprehensive analysis of the data elicited a number of key findings. The findings presented herein are of particular relevance to educationalists with an interest in the research and development of education and learning opportunities which span the trajectory of ageing. Older people accept ageing as a process, later life leading to increased vulnerability and diminished physical capacities requiring acceptance and adaptation *'physically you change you know, more aches and pains [...] That's one of the penalties of old age;' 'it's an ageing process and natural thing.'* While older people accept ageing as a process, they work hard at active ageing seeking to both accept and mitigate age-related change. All of the participants perceived engaging in activities which promote and maintain physical, mental and psychological well-being as hugely important. Participants felt that engaging in activities to maintain their global well-being was their responsibility and maintained this attitude of self-responsibility irrespective of how well or how limited their own level of engagement, *'...it's up to yourself to have a good time or not.'*

Activities such as walking were identified as providing both physical activity and opportunities for social connection, *'I like to get out walking it keeps me in touch, meeting someone*.' For the study participants, maintaining mental acuity was considered of even greater importance than maintaining physical abilities. The participants perceiving physical decline as something which could be mitigated more easily than mental decline '*you have to learn new things all the time*.' Activities such as participating in poetry groups, song writing, reading and doing crosswords were all seen as promoting and maintaining mental acuity; '*They are elderly now who are doing poetry with me and their minds are clear as crystal! I believe its great therapy [...] Keep the mind busy and especially in anything that's creative.'*

Hunger for opportunities to engage both socially and intellectually was a recurring theme and is reflected particularly well in this declaration by one of the participants, '*Social engagement is hugely important to me and intellectual engagement. I find I still get a kick out of learning something new whether it's from a child or an adult whatever circumstance, I still get a buzz from learning. I love this! I would hate to ever lose it.'* Despite the foregoing however, for older people maintaining social connection and finding suitable opportunities for intellectual engagement can prove difficult. Speaking of walking and shopping locally one participant stating, '*we will not see a face we know*.' This social disconnect was also reflected strongly in comments such as *'it is not like before, you don't meet people now like you did before. Everyone seems to go their own way [...] You don't visit your neighbours anymore.'*

In relation to finding and engaging in suitable intellectual activities for many older people, particularly the older old, technology was perceived as a barrier rather than a tool. Some of the participants perceiving that their lack of competency in relation to technology created an overall negative perception of them as human beings, '*people presume that you are almost stupid if you are not particularly interested in technology;' 'we are only a nuisance, particularly if we are ignorant of online business, they don't want us.'*

This has led some older people to reflect a strong sense of social disconnect and created a reluctance around engaging with further learning and education opportunities. This is expressed in participant comments such as '*we feel at times shut out;' 'they are nice people as I say, aah, life belongs to them it doesn't belong to us;' 'the younger crowd mightn't have much time for you [...] it's the same for everyone.'*

The continued engagement of older people in education and lifelong learning has been shown to positively impact their perception of well-being; increasing their knowledge, motivation, resilience and independence while also providing them with opportunities for social connectivity (NPAS 2013). The data collected in this study further reflects this.

CONCLUSION

This research study set out to examine the older person's perception of well-being and the factors which influence this perception. This snapshot of the research findings demonstrate that older people view ageing as a natural process and adapting to its related challenges a normal part of later life. The older person's perception of well-being is largely positive. Older people seek to optimise their physical, emotional and intellectual well-being. They view social connection and intellectual stimulation as integral to their well-being. In contrast diminished opportunities for social connection and intellectual stimulation were found to negatively impact the older person's perception of well-being. This creates both opportunities and challenges for future policy in all areas including in relation to education policy. Education policies must seek to provide adequate opportunities for engagement with formal, informal and non-formal education across the lifespan.

As previously discussed, the global phenomenon of an increasing older demographic makes healthy ageing policies which aim to prevent disease, disability and loss of well-being a key part of health, social and education policies worldwide. Despite the acknowledged health, social and economic benefits of life long education and learning there remains, a deficiency of research seeking to identify the facilitators and barriers to the ongoing intellectual engagement of the older person. The findings of this research have value in the development of programmes and services which seek to minimise the barriers and support the facilitators of a positive perception of well-being among older populations. A study limitation was sample size. The research findings presented highlight the need for further research studies to examine the type of approach necessary to enable and to promote the continued engagement of older people in education and learning over the trajectory of ageing. This research should include an examination of both the facilitators and the barriers to this engagement including but, not limited to those highlighted within this study.

'Education is a crucial basis for an active and fulfilling life' (UN 2002).

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Student Article

Article 5, April 2019

An Investigation into Five Methods of Student Reflection

Katherine Chapple
Master of Education

Katherine Chapple graduated from NUI Maynooth in 2000 and taught English and Geography in secondary school from 2002 to 2008. After a career break from 2008 to 2015, 2016, Katherine completed a Post Graduate Diploma in Educational Leadership from NUI Maynooth. The main area of focus here was School Self-Evaluation and Reflection. In 2017-18 Katherine completed a Master of Education from Mary Immaculate College. The research investigated five methods of student reflection on which this paper is based. In 2019, Katherine hopes to begin study for a PhD in Education with the subject topic of student voice. She currently works as an English teacher in Laurel Hill Coláiste, Limerick.

KEYWORDS: Reflection, Junior Cycle, Post-Primary Education, Assessment

INTRODUCTION

Reflection in education is not a new concept. There has been a plethora of literature on reflective teaching since John Dewey's "How we think" in 1933 (Fendler 2003) but it was not until recently that reflection in education has crept into policy and practice. There has been a change in the role of the student in education over the last number of years. The student has gone from being an invisible entity in early Irish Educational Policy (Government of Ireland, 1930) to being challenged to be the centre of their learning and to be responsible and autonomous for their own progression (DES 2015).

Being the centre of the learning poses challenges for students and teachers and it was these challenges that this research sought to investigate. The primary aim was to investigate the benefits and drawbacks of methods of reflection. Five methods were chosen that the researcher had previously used and which secondary school teachers are encouraged to use by the Department of Education, in the new Junior Cycle course (DES 2015). The research was carried out in a "home" setting and in five other secondary schools in Ireland. The research focused on 109 participating students and 10 teachers who gave their views on their experiences of using one method of reflection. Embedded in this research was an

The research sought to assess student's reflection from the student's and the teacher's perspective and how reflection could be guided and promoted by the teacher. At its core, the research posed the question to students "Is reflection an effective way to learn?". This research investigated five methods of student reflection and examined them from the perspective of students and teachers. The five methods of reflection were: Peer Assessment, Student Self-Reflection, Jigsaw method, 321 and KWL. The research recorded both academic and non-academic benefits and pitfalls of student reflection in theory and in literature both in an Irish and an international context.

CONTEXT

Student reflection has evolved over the last 100 years of Irish Education. At the establishment of our state, Irish Educational policies focused on the tangible elements of school life such as buildings and salaries (Government of Ireland 1930). As time progressed the policies changed. In the 1980's, the focus was on employment and getting the student ready to find work (Power 1980). Since the 1998 Education Act, there have been many changes to produce students who are autonomous, reflective and self-managing people who have a positive engagement with education (DES 1998, DES 2015). The arrival of the White Paper on Education (DES 1995) and the Education Act (DES 1998) prompted a radical change education system. There was a call for a balance between internal assessments and external assessments (DES 1995).

In 2009, the Senior Cycle Key Skills Framework, opened with the statement that students needed the ability to think "creatively", "innovatively" and "critically" (NCCA 2009, p.2). The NCCA stated that students needed to be able to adapt to change to be ready for life in the 21st century. The words "reflective learner" appear in the opening paragraph, mooting the idea of the student reflecting on their own work, thinking for themselves, about their own learning (NCCA 2009). More recently still, in the "Looking at our Schools (LAOS) 2016; A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools" (DES 2016) students are challenged to: "reflect on their progress as learners and develop a sense of ownership of and responsibility for their learning" (DES 2016, p.23). The framework for the new Junior Cycle has a strong emphasis on students reflecting on their own learning (DES 2015). The development of self-management and self-awareness are key considerations in the framework.

This study investigated reflective practices as they were being implemented in schools. The five methods of reflection were: Peer Assessment, Student Self-Reflection, Jigsaw method, 321 and KWL. Peer Assessment is when student assess each other's work according to criteria laid out by the teacher. They give feedback to the peers and their peers can assign a descriptor grade (good/ very good / excellent). Student Self-reflection is when a teacher indicates the features of quality in a piece of work and the students assess their own work. They write down what they did well and what they could have done better and how they can improve. The jigsaw method is where a class is divided into groups of four or five. Each group is given a topic to research or part of a topic. For example, in an English class, each group may be given one stanza of a poem to analyse. Then each group reports to the class on what their expert group has learned. When all of the groups have reported back, the jigsaw is complete. The 321 method is utilised before the

end of a class students are asked to record three things they learned during the lesson. Next the students are asked to record two things they found interesting, that they would like to learn more about. Finally, the students are asked to record one question they still have about the material. The KWL method is a chart that has three columns. "K" stands for what I **K**now already. The "W" stands for what I **W**ant to know, and the "L" stands for what I have **L**earned. This can be done before a new topic is started to glean what knowledge is already known and it can be used as a revision device. The research recorded both academic and non-academic benefits and pitfalls of student reflection in theory and in literature both in an Irish and an international context.

METHODOLOGY

This Action Research study was "situated learning": learning that is carried out in the classroom, about the classroom (Collins and Duguid 1989, cited in Cohen *et al*. 2007, p.299). A simplistic approach of Lewin's "Plan, Act, Observe and Reflect" was preferred (Lewin 1946). The research focused on five methods of student reflection; Peer-Assessment, Self-Reflection, Jigsaw, 321 and KWL. Five teachers volunteered, in the "home" setting (a single-sex (girls') school), and five teachers volunteered from different schools (a single sex (boys') school, a private school, a school with DEIS status, a co-educational school and a school for adult learners). Volunteering teachers were given a questionnaire which asked the teachers to specify their top three methods that they would like to use in the study. Teachers were given a method they were interested in using. The brief was that they should use the method in at least three class periods, over two weeks. Students and teachers observed and reflected the method of reflection in questionnaires. Further data came from a student focus group of five students from different settings, each student representing the method of reflection they used. Finally, data was received from the researcher interviewing teachers about their experience of implementing the method of reflection.

Questionnaires gave numerical data but space was afforded to students and teachers to expand on their answers providing the research with rich qualitative data or an "intra-method" mix (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2010). The first questionnaire was given to the volunteering teachers and from this, information regarding their level of experience in using student reflection, what subject they taught, which method they were interested in using and which year groups they were interested in implementing the method with, was gleaned. This initial questionnaire allowed the researcher to take from the volunteer sample a mix of subjects, year groups and levels of experience to gain a purposive sample. The final two questionnaires elicited information from the (a) 109 participating students and (b) 10 teachers regarding their experience of the method of reflection.

screenshot below shows how answers were colour coded into academic benefits (blue) and drawbacks (red).

Students were asked if they found their method of reflection Positive (A) Negative (B)	Then the students were given space on their questionnaire to explain why they found their method positive or negative.
A	It Refreshes Memory
A	It Aids Focus
A	It Aids Focus
B	Repetitive
B	I prefer other methods
B	Did not complete an answer
A	Promotes interest

Figure 1 Colour Coded Benefits and Drawbacks of Student Reflection Methods.

When coding the qualitative elements, the researcher organised them as Attride-Stirling suggests and then through reading and re-reading, themes and sub themes began to emerge (Attride-Stirling 2001). For example: a student may have deemed the method of student reflection beneficial and expanded their answer to say that the method was beneficial for "revision" (colour-coded in green). Below, the screenshot shows student's reasons for liking the method of reflection they used and the theme of revision (aids remembering and refreshes memory) is emerging.

Students who answered (a) Positive were grouped together. Their reasons were collated and colour coded so that sub themes emerged.	The sub theme "Revision" is emerging and is colour coded in green and a further subtheme of "Peer Learning" is colour coded in orange.
A	Helps Remembering
A	Student did not elaborate
A	Refreshes Memory
A	It Refreshes Memory
A	I am learning from others
A	It helps me revise.

Figure 2 Screenshot of the emerging of sub-themes: Revision

To code the student focus group and teacher interviews, the audio recordings were typed verbatim by the researcher. This process allowed the researcher to analyse the data slowly, firstly categorising the comments into quantitative elements and colour coding them as before: red for negative, amber for neutral and green for positive. With the qualitative aspects of the student focus group and teacher interviews, themes emerged from the positive or negative initial questions. These themes were sub divided into categories; for example:

a teacher or a student may have found the methods of reflection too time consuming so the theme "time consuming" was created. The most popular themes produced the findings of this research.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

There was a positive reaction to student reflection. The results presented are a representative of the sample of students and cannot be generalised, however, some interesting findings and questions were raised. 86% of students deemed their method of reflection to have had a positive effect on their learning. 88 students (81%) said they would recommend reflective practice to other students. All participating teachers found the experience positive.

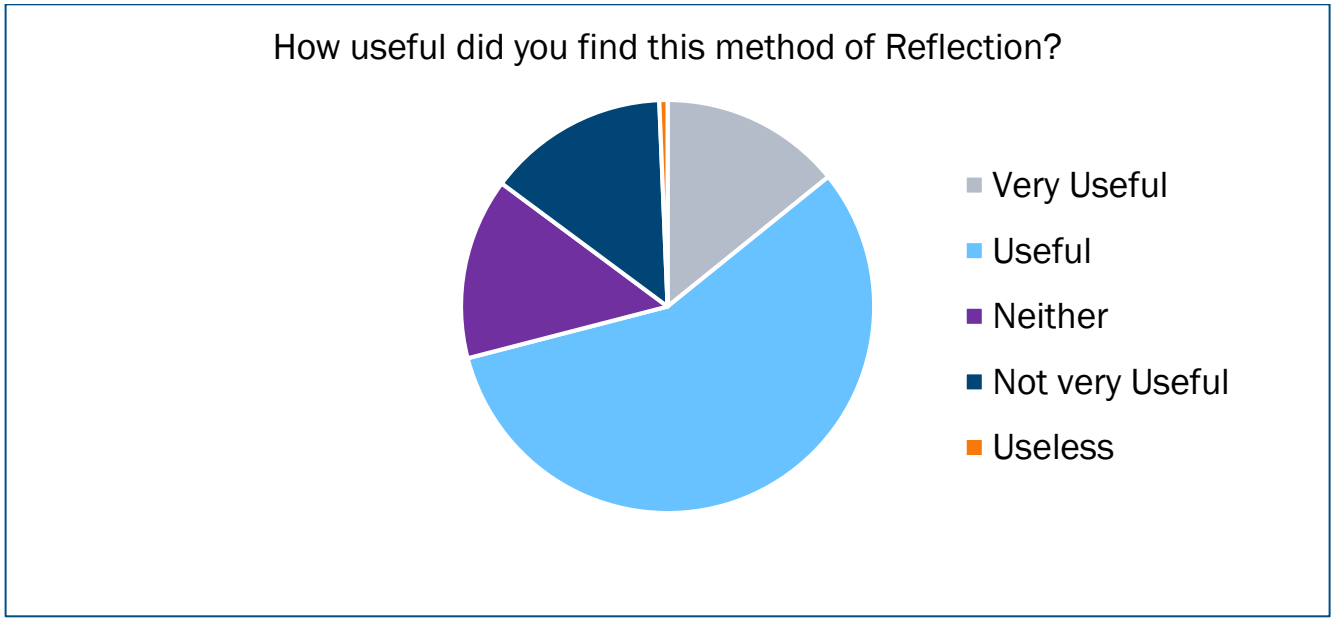

Figure 3 - Student Response to Question

The most popular positive qualitative response from students was that the reflection method they trialled aided their revision. In this study, 23 students (21%) wrote that reflection "refreshes memory" or that it "aids revision". Teachers cited revision as a key academic benefit stating their method [Jigsaw] "aids revision" (Teacher H) and that "[KWL] is a quick revision tool" (Teacher C). Revision and recapping knowledge was the most popular reason that student reflection was beneficial. Among the non-academic benefits noted by students and teachers were personal development, working with peers and enjoyment. In the student questionnaires when asked about what they like about student reflection, responses such as "it encourages you to be more honest with yourself", "it helps self-thought", and "it motives me" were written.

Teachers wrote in their questionnaires that: "the student felt empowered by the reflection" (Teacher A) and that "[Self Evaluation]" raised positivity in students" (Teacher E). Teacher F noted that "(KWL) allowed the students to set personal goals". Teacher B stated that "[In using these methods], students are becoming more confident, independent, critical learners". Teacher I noted the value of teaching students to self-evaluate as a "good life skill". Teacher A said that reflection would "create a sense of achievement" in students.

Working in groups or with peers was another benefit that students enjoyed. In the student questionnaires students cited reasons such as "we learn from each other" when describing why they liked their method of reflection. In the focus group, student 4 explained why they enjoyed the active nature of the "Jigsaw" method when she said, "we spend so [much time] with our heads in books- it's great to move around and talk rather than just learning notes, so it's different to do something in the school day rather than sitting down all the time". This non-academic skill of helping others is an important life skill and is a finding of Waddington and Wright's (2007) study; students find that working together can ease the burden of working alone.

There were drawbacks to the methods of reflection. 40 students (37%) said that their learning would not improve if they continued to use methods of reflection. 21 students (19%) said they would not recommend reflective practice methods to their fellow students. The students' reasons were that the methods were: (i) too time consuming, (ii) uninteresting, (iii) not taken seriously, (iv) preferred working alone, and (v) that student's shouldn't correct their own work. Exams were on the student's minds. Students directly addressed this and their comments were "how will this help in a state exam?", "I won't be able to ask my friend in an exam", "there is no group work in an exam", "it's too small for revision for exam, I have too much to revise", "this is taking from time that we could be revising for an exam" "we won't be peer assessed in the Leaving Cert".

It is interesting to note that the participants, both teachers and students, found a disconnect with these methods and what the students are asked to do in a state exam. In interview 3, the teacher noted that "while group work is a good way to revise, they still have to go home and learn it, they won't have that facility in the exam". In interview 2, the teacher concurred with this by saying "it's not real to them unless there is an A, B, or C from me or on their exam or their work". In interview 4, the teacher stated that "while these methods of reflection have their place, what they are doing is so small compared to an exam that is so big". The teacher continued to say that "we are concentrating on such a small amount of work (in the reflective method), and the course is so long… if we were to give the freedom to the student of questioning every single thing that interests them, then the course would never be covered, and our role, is to cover the course".

In the teacher questionnaire, teachers were asked if they would incorporate this method, or methods like these in their future teaching practice. 100% of teachers replied positively to this. Teachers noted the enjoyment factor, that the methods "highlight strengths and weaknesses and they build self-esteem" (Teacher D), "Positivity and student focus is enhanced" (Teacher F), and "There is good positive reinforcement" (Teacher I).

CONCLUSION

A key finding of this research was that it was a positive influence on the participants regardless of the age of the student, the school they attended, or the subject the method of reflection was used in. The study showed that students began to have a critical attitude to their work and as Smith (2009) noted, they began to see their own potential for development (Smith 2009). The findings showed that students were engaged with

their learning, gave feedback to their teacher and set personal goals for themselves. They were less reliant on their teachers and more reliant on their own ability to self-assess what they knew and what they didn't know. These findings concur with the aims of the Junior Cycle and the Key Skills of the NCCA Framework (DES 2015, NCCA 2009).

Student reflection requires far-sighted vision from all the partners in the school community. Once fostered by all stakeholders in education, the beneficial results will help create students who are equipped to face the challenges of the everchanging 21st Century world. Claxton quotes Albert Einstein saying that "education is what remains after one has forgotten everything they learned at school" referring to the skills we learn, not the content, are more important (Claxton 2009, p.1). For these skills to have value, they must be recognised in some way in the Junior and Senior Certificate examinations.

There was evidence that participants were frustrated when completing these reflection methods as they did not connect with a summative exam. The distance between what they are being asked to do in these methods of reflection and what they are asked to do in a summative exam, is great. The high stakes summative exam needs to be changed but as the high stakes summative exam still exists, are we serving our students well by introducing more formative methods?

The research found that students value academic benefits more than non-academic benefits. These methods of reflection promoted aspects like peer collaboration, personal goals and peer learning. These attributes are not easily turned into marks in a summative exam, so measures could be taken to award marks for recognition of work done in the classroom or on a group-based project. Measures such as these will give merit to these much-needed skills, that students will require in the world beyond secondary school. Reflection is a powerful tool in education (Cavilla 2017). By reflecting, the student builds on previous knowledge, they cement new knowledge, and it empowers them to discover new avenues of learning. This growth needs to be introduced and scaffolded by the teacher. Reflection should be introduced by degrees, so students can gradually gain confidence in their own abilities and in the ability of their peers to become less reliant in the teacher. The benefits are wide-ranging but not instantaneous. The commitment is to growth, and "growth takes plenty of time, effort and mutual support" (Dweck 2006, p.244).

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Student Article

Article 6, April 2019

AIMing for the Target: How has Policy on Inclusion Evolved since the 1990's in Ireland

Eva Stembridge

Bachelor of Early Childhood Care and Education

Eva Stembridge worked as a Special Needs Assistant for 12 years in a primary school in Ireland, igniting a lifelong interest in the education and care of children in both the early years and primary school sector. Having observed how the Department of Education and Science (DES) supported and included children with additional needs within the formal education system, Eva was interested to learn more about how the children she worked with were supported prior to starting primary school. Since the first year of her degree programme (BA in ECCE), the importance of inclusion has been highlighted through current discourse in ECCE and the government has now recognised this by having a unique inclusion policy for the ECCE sector. Eva wanted to explore how Ireland reached this groundbreaking inclusive policy.

KEYWORDS: Early Childhood Education; Policy; Inclusion; Special Education

INTRODUCTION

This article provides an overview of how policy on inclusion for children with additional needs (AN) in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) has evolved in Ireland since the 1990's. It is a snapshot of a larger piece of research conducted as part of the researcher's programme of study, ECCE. The motivation for this study was the introduction of a new and unique inclusion policy for ECCE in Ireland, called the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) (Department of Children and Youth Affairs DCYA 2016). Prior to the introduction of AIM, early years teachers (EYT) had limited support in supporting children with (AN). The AIM is accessible to all pre-school children in Ireland and is paving the way for EYT in partnership with parents in delivering an inclusive early years education experience to children with AN. It is therefore timely, to trace the history of educational inclusion in Ireland.

The primary research question is looking at how policy on inclusion has evolved since the 1990's in Ireland for children with AN's in ECCE. For the purpose of this research, a systematic review/desk based study was deemed suitable as it entailed trawling through literature, policy documents and government legislation to put a timeline in place showing the progression of inclusion in Ireland for the early years sector. This type of study required a qualitative research method and using a thematic analysis to find themes/ sub

themes from the literature review.

CONTEXT

Educational policy development both nationally and internationally have led to more awareness of inclusion for children with AN. As inclusion has been highlighted in recent years in current discourse, Ireland has recognised this and has introduced a unique model of support called the AIM and it is the first attempt by the state to introduce an extensive system of supports for the ECCE sector. The concept of Inclusion has become an integral element of the Irish education system in the 21st Century. In the last number of years, inclusion has become a focal point around educational policies. It has shown a clear shift away from segregated education of children with AN's to an education of inclusion for all (Carey 2005; Winter and O'Raw 2010). Swan (2000) outlines, in three phases, the progression of 'special needs' education and policy in Ireland; 'The Phase of Neglect', 'The Special School Phase' and 'The phase of integration/ inclusion'. These stages outline the changes in education for children with AN's.

Literature both nationally and internationally have foregrounded inclusive practice and the inclusion of children with AN's in ECCE (Schwartz 2001; Nutbrown and Clough 2006; Moloney and McCarthy 2010; Odem, Buyesse and Soukakou 2011). International policies such as the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), The Salamanca Statement on Special Needs Education (1994), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), (1989) and the United Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) have all contributed to the discourse on inclusion.

Nationally, the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (2004) was a groundbreaking document with a central purpose ensuring provision for all children in an inclusive environment. With regard to pre-school children, the EPSEN Act, made limited provision for the assessment of children with AN's in early years settings. The AIM represents a first attempt by the state to introduce an all-inclusive system of supports for the early years sector. It is a child-centred model, enabling children with AN's on equal footing to their peers, access to the ECCE scheme. It strives on meeting the needs of children and assisting them in gaining full participation in all services and supports in the Early Years Sector (Interdepartmental Group (IDG) 2015).

METHODOLOGY

The primary research question explored for this research, was how has policy on inclusion evolved in Ireland since the 1990's, for children with AN's in ECCE. For the purpose of this research, a systematic review was undertaken. This involved trawling through literature, policy documents and government legislation to put a timeline in place showing the progression of inclusion in Ireland for the early years sector. This type of study required a qualitative research method and using a thematic analysis to find themes/ sub themes emerging from the literature.

As this study is concerned with a timeline showing how inclusion for the ECCE sector has been recognised in

policy to date, a systematic review was suitable to present the data. Analysing and gathering data from these sources is drawn heavily on qualitative research (Moore 2006).

The researcher was limited to using reputable sources for data, as desk-based research does not let the researcher carry out interviews or questionnaires. The time frame of the proposed method of the research limited the researcher to explore a wider range of literature. Thematic analysis was used to find repeated patterns and meanings in the literature review. The researcher used Clarke and Braun (2013) six-step approach to Thematic Analysis, as it is a flexible method used to trawl the data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Based upon the analysis of the research data, a series of themes and sub-themes emerged from the literature of this study. The researcher has included an overview of two themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data:

Themes	Sub-themes			
Language of Inclusion	Terminology used	Physical Disabilities Mentally defective children Mental/physical handicap	Segregation Integration Inclusion	Disability Special Needs Special Education
Quality of ECCE	Importance of quality	Full participation Access and Benefits	Inclusive environment	Importance of the early years.

Figure 1 Emergent Themes and Subthemes from Policy Analysis

From exploring the literature for this study, it was noted the broad range of language that has been used when talking about inclusion. The terminology used has evolved over the years. Language used such as 'segregation' emerged in the literature from many different reports and books.

> Mental illness includes a wide variety of types and degrees of disorder and patients vary in age and in the extent to which they are disturbing to others or are unable to care for themselves. Provision for some segregation of patients is, therefore, essential. (Report on the Commission of Inquiry on Mental Illness 1966, p.34)

On the other hand, a review that was written by Winter and O'Raw 2010, presents different views from other authors on 'inclusion' and how "we should not accept that difference in learning ability should mean segregation of so many young people" (p.17). Terminology used in the early twentieth century could be seen as crude described by Swan (2000) such as:

> It is in every way undesirable that mentally deficient children, even of the higher grade, should be placed with normal children. Such children are a burden to their teachers, a handicap to other children, and being unable to keep up with their class, their condition tends to become worse. (Commission of Inquiry into Reformatory and Industrial Schools 1936, cited in Swan 2000, p. 1)

In the mid 80's, the term 'special needs' came to the forefront and was seen in reports and policies issued in Ireland. The Special Education Review Committee (SERC) provided a report on the 'Special Education' of children from preschool to secondary school. It intended to make recommendations of educational provision for children with AN's in respect of:

> the arrangements which should be put in place in order to provide for the educational requirements of such children through complete or partial integration in ordinary schools, through special classes in ordinary schools or through schools or other special arrangements in accordance with the circumstances of each child. (DES 1993, p. 15)

Swan (2000) describes how the inclusion discourse used when describing a child with AN's has evolved since the early 20th century to the early 21st century. Exclusion to inclusion has been a long and erratic process with different terminology used though the eras. Progression through the 1990's saw "the concept of integration was superseded by inclusive education, placing an added emphasis on adapting school to the varied needs of individual pupils with learning disabilities" (p.3). Inclusion in ECCE was fully recognised with the development of the AIM. Inclusion discourse was evident in their report, particularly in Level 1 'An Inclusive Culture', which was the critical foundation of the AIM. The IDG also suggested the idea of an "Inclusion Coordinator in each ECCE setting" and to provide training "in inclusion for these early years practitioners" (AIM 2016, p. 7).

When Ireland ratified the UNCRC in 1992, it was the beginning of a range of policies that were aiming for quality services in ECCE. Ireland was committing to quality supports and services, which were evident in *Ready to Learn*- the White Paper on ECCE. It's rationale for 'Early Education for Children with Special Needs' states that:

> with quality early childhood educational interventions, the handicaps and difficulties of a child with a disability such as autism, cerebral palsy, hearing impairment or Down's Syndrome may experience will be reduced and additional problems will be prevented. Early intervention can support families in adjusting to having a child with special needs; moreover, if parents have the assistance of an early childhood teacher, who is trained and experienced in special needs education, they may be assisted to acquire the skills they need to help their child to develop to his/her full potential (DES 1999, p. 83).

Building on this statement, early intervention is effective when it provides "high quality, intensive and clearly articulated programmes, delivered by highly skilled and carefully trained personnel" (DES 1999, p.84). Features of high-quality inclusion are "a sense of belonging and membership, positive social relationships and friendships and development and learning" (Odem *et al.* 2011, p. 2). Efforts to improve and regulate quality in ECCE are an ongoing process, however there are three distinct features that should be recognised in high quality inclusion; access, participation and supports (Odem *et al.* 2011). Another key feature in the importance of quality in ECCE is the 'full participation' of children with AN's and meeting their needs. Many policy documents in Ireland such as Siolta, Aistear and the Free Pre-school Year scheme support inclusion

of children with AN's and that they participate fully in ECCE settings. To promote quality and equality for children with AN's, Standard 4, 'Consultation' of Siolta ensures that:

> inclusive decision-making requires consultation that promotes participation and seeks out, listens to and acts upon the views and opinions of children, parents and staff, and other stakeholders, as appropriate (CECDE 2006, p. 35).

EYT's that reflect on how they promote quality will benefit the children in an inclusive and accessible setting. An 'inclusive environment' is a key component in the LINC programme. It supports EYT's "to develop their professional knowledge, understanding, skills and competencies with a particular focus on embedding inclusive practice in Aistear and Síolta" (LINC 2016). A high-quality inclusive environment is one where children see themselves reflected in it, enriches their development and learning and encourages them to explore it (CECDE 2006; NCCAa 2009; Graham 2017). The importance of the early years is highlighted in Síolta in its first principle 'The Value of Early Childhood'. It states that "Early Childhood is a significant time in life that must be nurtured, respected, valued and supported in its own right" (CECDE 2006, p. 6). It is seen as a critical time in a child's life to have positive experiences. The SERC report also reiterates this saying:

> If the child is exposed to social interaction in a more stimulating environment s/he may well be enabled to make up for ground lost in areas such as social development, play skills and cognitive and linguistic development. (DES 1993, p. 28)

Building on this, if early intervention is made and supported with a multi-disciplinary team, children with AN's will thrive in mainstream primary education, as highlighted by Moloney and McCarthy (2010), children "must experience quality early intervention within early childhood settings for their enhanced future and well-being" (p.11).

CONLUSION

The findings in this study are consistent with previous research (Moloney and McCarthy 2010; Winter and O'Raw 2010) in viewing inclusion as being a process. It has replaced many terms used over the years to describe children with AN's. Ample educational policies and legislation have been written and implemented to support the inclusion of children with AN's and have used varying terms to do so. The language used has progressed from 'mentally handicap', to 'disabled' to 'special needs'. Terminology continues to evolve. The word 'handicap' was used in the early 20th century to describe a person with a AN's. Society nowadays has become more sensitive to the language that is used. Using first person language such as 'Paul who has Down's syndrome' or 'Joe uses a wheelchair'.

In the ECCE sector today, inclusion is more prominent where early years teachers have a better level of awareness and understanding of including children with AN's in their settings. This is due to the introduction of the AIM for the early years sector. This model has paved the way for the early years sector since 2016. In the short space of time it has benefited thousands of children in using AIM supports and the provision for pre-school children with AN's has been revolutionised. It provides seven levels of support including: enhanced CPD; the provision of equipment and appliances; access to therapeutic intervention and

increased capitation for pre-school providers for children with very complex needs (DCYA 2018). The AIM has reduced challenges EYT's may have experienced such as time, resources and CPD. Through the 7 levels of support these challenges have been reduced. For example, the support of Level 4- 'Expert Advice, mentoring and support', time management has improved and helps EYT's to better provide for children with AN's. Along with this an Early Years Specialist is available for advice.

It is recommended that an evaluation on the AIM be carried out to map the progress of it so far to assess what facilitates an inclusive pre-school practice. High quality inclusion incorporates seeking ways to include practices that benefit all children (Odem *et al.* 2011). A further recommendation would be for educational institutions such as Mary Immaculate College, Limerick and the National University Institute of Galway to include the LINC modules in their degree programmes, where graduates would be trained as Inclusion Coordinators.

"Diversity is being invited to the party, Inclusion is being asked to dance" Verna Myers

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Student Article

Article 7, April 2019

An Investigation into Secondary School's Approach to Collaboration and Communication with their Feeder Primary Schools

Helen Lowe
Master of Education

Helen Lowe has a Bachelor of Business, a Post Graduate Diploma in Business Education and a Post Graduate Diploma in Special Educational Needs. In 2018 she completed an M.Ed. in Mary Immaculate College. She has worked as a secondary school teacher since 2005, in addition to teaching she also served as a Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator. It is in this role she developed an interest in and saw the value of timely and complete information gathering on all pupils especially new, incoming students in a bid to create smooth transitions that allow the pupils a positive experience of settling into second level.

KEYWORDS: Post Primary Education; Transition; Collaboration; Education Passport

INTRODUCTION

This article is a snapshot of a larger piece of research conducted as part of my programme of study, which focuses on the management of information transfer from primary to secondary school on all incoming first years. The research investigates how secondary schools use data on new students to inform teaching and learning specifically the data collected from the Education Passport.

The transition from primary to post-primary school is regarded as one of the most difficult in pupils' educational careers (Zeedijk et al., 2003). Waters et al., (2012) and Zeedijk et al., (2003) both argue that success in navigating this transition cannot only affect children's academic performance, but also their general sense of wellbeing and mental health. Research suggests that the transition should be a collaborative process with strong lines of communication to ensure a smooth transfer. Strnadova et al (2016) maintain that collaboration between relevant stakeholders is a necessary condition for successful transition. This research was undertaken to investigate practices devised by secondary schools to manage information on their incoming first years.

The aim of the study is to build a picture on how schools manage the collection, analysis and dissemination of this information to enhance teaching and learning for the child and help teachers better

understand their new pupils each September. Furthermore, the study reviewed the NCCA's Education Passport, a new initiative aimed at providing a more systematic approach to information transfer. It focused on how secondary schools have been merging the passport with its own local practices to enhance the transition experience for students, parents and staff. Neal et al (2016) states a successful transition from primary to post primary education can only be achieved with a combination of strong collaboration between schools, a joined-up approach to assessment and a firm grip on effective data management. This is echoed by Evangelou et al (2008) "A key element to a good transition is the importance given to the completeness of the information collected about each child" (p.8).

CONTEXT

The 'National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, 2011' sought to "address significant concerns about how well young people are developing the literacy and numeracy skills that they will need to participate fully in the education system" (p.7). The policy has indicated that the continuity of learning is of importance to the child's development from early education to the completion of secondary. The key to improving this continuity is to build a rounded picture of the child's learning and create fluidity of strategy and assessment between the primary and secondary "the timing of the transfer of information is important ensuring there are no 'stakes' attached, it should happen immediately after enrolment and when first year is under way" (p.78).

To improve this transfer of information the NCCA created the Education Passport which aims to collate information that paints a holistic view of the transitioning pupil for their next school. Its key objective is to create a more formalised approach and structure to information transfer. This promotes "consistency in the information received by a post-primary school from its feeder primary schools." (DES, 2011c). The NCCA sees the role of the Education Passport as facilitating the sharing of information about children's learning to support their transition "continuity for the learner across all stages of education" (p.11). In 2012 the Education Minister, Ruari Quinn noted "that this sharing of information between primary and post primary schools is a common-sense approach that will benefit both students and teachers". The NCCA have designed the Education Passport "to complement local practices and eventually replace some" (NCCA, 2010).

From a practitioner's perspective there are a lot of flaws and inadequacies in the transfer of information to date. This results in the risk of some students 'falling through the net' especially students with additional needs. According to Foley et al (2016) there is a need for co-ordination across schools to ensure a continuum of support to address the individual needs of students and create a complete transition. To date Ireland's educational policies have failed to create a document that adequately guides and supports schools in the management of data transfer at transition periods. Some of the central problems identified in research and experiential data is the fact that the transfer of information in Ireland remains localised, informal and for the most part shared verbally through school visits

METHODOLOGY

Data required for this research was qualitative in nature therefore, the author chose data collection methods that would provide relevant and enough information with cost and time effectiveness. The method that fulfilled this criterion was semi-structured interviews. The researcher chose a sample of nine schools from three backgrounds in order to incorporate as wide a range as possible in regards structure and ethos of schools across the spectrum of the Irish educational landscape. The purpose of this kind of sample design is to provide as much insight as possible into the management of data on new students entering second level.

The interviews involved principals and teachers from the different backgrounds of DEIS, Voluntary and ETB. The researcher chose only secondary schools to understand how management and middle management create systems to administer new student information and build relationships with their feeder primary schools. The researcher acknowledged the absolute value of the in-depth information from interviews and the rich source of data it can bring to the research and theory development in this area. The interview is the most prominent data collection tool in qualitative research and is a good way of exploring people's perceptions, meanings and constructions of reality (Punch and Oancea, 2014, p. 182).

Limitations of the study include the sample size of nine participants, due to the fact the researcher was limited by resources and time, the sample size was small, consequently, the findings might not be assignable to a representative population and the generalizations suggested may not be well-founded. In addition to this the research was limited by the fact only second level perspective was examined. A primary level perspective could be a possibility for further research to get a deeper understanding of the transfer of information at transitions from both sides.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

LOCAL PRACTICES DEVELOPED TO GATHER AND DISSEMINATE INFORMATION ON INCOMING 1ST YEARS

From the data it emerged that systems for managing transitions remain localised with no defined centralised systems from the DES. Each school interviewed has designed and managed their own methods for administering the transfer of information from their primary school feeders.

> We facilitate a transition-planning meeting and we use our own self-designed post primary transfer form (Participant 2). I developed a template going to the school to find out key pieces of information. (Participant 8).

> Yes we would meet our main feeder schools roughly six that would make up the bulk of our students, the smaller feeder schools we tend to call, we would generally meet with the principal, 6th class teachers and SEN teachers of these feeder schools. (Participant 9)

Despite the fact the schools have self-designed and adjusted systems to suit their own needs, their timeline and methods were very similar. At the early stages of information gathering, representatives from every school visit their main feeder schools and ring their smaller feeder schools i.e. primary schools that supply

two or three children. "*Yes, I would go and visit all the main feeder primary schools and then ring the other schools to get information" (Participant 1).*

Most information is verbally exchanged with some of the schools bringing transition forms to fill as they listen. All the interviewees place huge importance on the visits, describing the information they receive as invaluable. Such accounts would certainly seem to confirm Looney's description of the transitions in Ireland as "locally organised and generally ad hoc with post primary schools more likely to receive verbal communications than written reports" (p.349). The research revealed that relationships with feeder schools are highly valued.

With all participants indicating they only visit their main feeder schools and ring the smaller ones, indicating there are a percentage of students every year that do not benefit from these visits. Schools have reiterated the value in these face to face meetings, therefore, a child coming from a 'smaller feeder' school could be at a disadvantage to a child from a 'main feeder'. It also highlighted that there are inconsistencies within the primary sector in terms of the quality of data delivered, and very importantly, when this information is sent to secondary schools.

THE IMPACT OF THE NCCA'S EDUCATION PASSPORT ON THE TRANSFER OF INFORMATION

As policy surrounding the transfer of information at transitions progresses and evolves, the newest policy introduced the 'Education Passport' in 2015. The research investigated how this latest addition has been received by secondary school teachers, and how they have integrated it into their local practices. The passport's main objective is to complement and eventually replace some of the local systems, consequently, the data revealed the passport is not fulfilling its main objective. The research highlights that secondary schools are not using the passports as part of their systems, and the main reason is they are receiving them too late.

> They come in over the summer and September and I haven't time to read them at that stage. They need to come in the last couple weeks of May to make an impact otherwise they're too late and we are gone when they arrive. (Participant 2)
>
> When it arrives in June, I have all the information I need I know all their scores and class groups have been organised. (Participant 7)

Seven of the nine schools reported some passports do not arrive into the school until November, if ever. On a practical level the schools are preparing timetables and resources for new students from February when registration is confirmed. Therefore, the valuable information the passport can supply is arriving too late so the secondary schools collect the information themselves which results in a lot of overlap of data collection. As one teacher noted *"They are tested by us in March or April and again by the primary school at the end of May realistically collecting near identical information" (Participant 2).*

The deadlines set out in policy are too late for it to have any meaningful impact as it is set for the second week in June when secondary schools are on holidays, so nobody is there to facilitate them into a designated system. It was also revealed that secondary schools do not feel supported by policy and CPD has

not been offered explicitly in the area on how to manage the passport and good practice for its uses and mergence with local practice. One teacher revealed *"I have never been told about their uses and how I should be handling them once they arrive". (Participant 4)*

On a positive note, schools do use the passport to get the test scores in order to get a rounded picture of a child's ability. Two of the nine schools reported that the profiles from the student and parent are very beneficial in understanding the new student better. However, the other seven found the information to be too 'fluffy' and 'aspirational' therefore, did not use the profiles. As put by one school *"It feels like the schools are putting emphasis on the filling of it and it feels the information can be trivial". (Participant 3)*

ROLE OF ASSESSMENT AT TRANSITION FROM PRIMARY

The data underlined that schools consider self-administered assessment as the most significant of all the information gathered on their new pupils. This information is used to create class groups and identify any educational needs to guide timetabling. The reason for the strong reliance on these tests is the trust the secondary schools place in their own data. Results are reported in standardised age scores (SAS) which is consistent with all second level standardised testing. Therefore, it creates a baseline for trends and measuring progress in learning in a familiar manner. SAS is also required by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and the State Examinations Commission (SEC). In contrast primary schools report all standardised tests in STen so the incompatibility in information collating systems makes the merging of transfer information very difficult. As one teacher expressed *"we are very familiar with SAS results and unfamiliar with the meaning of STen so it wouldn't have the same impact on understanding the child." (Participant 6).*

Despite this fact the DES have requested that secondary schools stop testing 6th class students prior to entry (0045/2015). Nonetheless, the interview data reveals second level schools are not willing to stop the testing process, as they value their own test scores and require them for the future educational needs of the student**.** In 2004 Smyth who was commissioned by the ERSI to conduct research on transitions from primary to secondary level, reported that there were twenty-six different tests being used by secondary schools to test their incoming students, her research highlighted that a lot of these tests were "self-designed and unstandardised". However, the interview sample in this study demonstrated that the choice of tests has reduced significantly, with all the schools now opting for standardised testing as opposed to the self-designed tests previously used as part of the 'entrance' style exam. The most popular choices amongst the interview sample were the CAT4 and the Woodcock Johnson. There are drawbacks to these two tests however, namely, that neither are Irish-normed being British and American in origin respectively, and also the lack of homogeneity prevents the compilation of a set of national statistics on the results.

The schools interviewed were asked if they valued a standard transition test that was Irish normed and ran collaboratively with the primary schools. The objective of such a goal would be the reduction in the level of testing 6th class students are subjected to in a short space of time by both sectors. The results were very much in favour of this as it would reduce the workload for both primary and secondary sectors and would

also reduce costs and resources involved., *"I would be first to put my hand up and say I don't want to be doing tests on a Saturday and also the expense involved in it." (Participant 1)*

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to determine the nature of the relationships built between primary and secondary schools and how partnerships have been built to create a collaborative approach to transition. In summary, it has revealed that schools have worked hard to develop their own systems of data collection on new students, however they are tailored to their own needs so that their structures and systems are built around the independent requirements of the school i.e. no national structures recognised. Frustration has been expressed by the secondary schools that there is no protocol or policy to follow especially if transfer information like the Education Passport is not passed over to them. There are no definitive lines of inquiry to follow with the DES.

Relationships built between the primary and secondary schools have a huge influence on the depth of information gathered on the students. What is apparent is that schools build better relationships with their main feeder schools which tend to be the ones in close-proximity. This has a negative impact on students coming from smaller feeders as schools do not put the same emphasis on the data collected from these schools as relations are weaker. Although schools create their own transition forms to fill when visiting the schools, they still rely heavily on verbal information and face to face meetings are central to the data collection methods. This outlines a second problem as verbal information lacks record and is open to human error, omission and subjectivity.

Schools place great value on their own testing and results show they are the best source of information for schools in building baseline scores for mixed ability class groups. The education passport has been introduced by the NCCA to aid the information gathering at transition times. Its main focus is intended to complement local practices and put national structure to them, relieve the level of testing carried out on 6th class pupils by providing test scores and creating a voice for students and parents in the profiles they fill in the passport. Nonetheless, the passport has been described by secondary schools as aspirational and 'fluffy'. This research illustrates that the main obstacle to their acceptance into secondary systems is the transfer deadline, as they arrive so late management have already gathered the data. Teachers require support and training to deal with the passport and allow its potential to grow. Policy and practice is not meeting in this area and information collection at transition points still remains incomplete.

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Student Article

Article 8, April 2019

An Investigation into the Attitudes of Pre-Service Teachers towards Teaching Children with Special Educational Needs

Aoife Munroe
Bachelor of Education

Aoife Munroe recently graduated from the Bachelor of Education programme in Mary Immaculate College with a first-class honour's degree. She completed an education specialism in the area of Special Educational Needs and her research interests are firmly embedded in Special Education. Aoife's experiences on school placement working with several children with SEN made her wonder about the experiences of her fellow classmates and how they responded to and supported these pupils to enable them to reach their full potential. Aoife is currently undertaking the Master of Education course while gaining worthwhile experiences in a range of classrooms as a substitute teacher. The working title for her master's thesis is 'Four Legged Friends: How can Assistance Dogs support children with Autism'.

KEYWORDS: Primary Education; Teaching; Special Education; ITE

INTRODUCTION

Important changes have been witnessed in both national and international inclusion policies. Data gathered from the *Growing Up in Ireland* study estimated that 25% of children have a special educational need (SEN) as defined by the EPSEN Act as 'a restriction in the capacity of the person to participate in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability, or any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition' (DES, 2004: 6). As a result, Ireland has seen a shift towards adopting a more inclusive model of education, whereby the learning environment responds to the needs of all children (UNESCO, 2005; Banks *et al.*, 2011). It is therefore essential that Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes equip pre-service teachers with the skills needed to meet the diverse needs of children in classrooms today.

This article introduces some findings from a larger research project which investigated the attitudes of pre-service teachers towards teaching children with SEN. Understanding the views of pre-service teachers as they climb onto the first step in their professional career is essential to provide the support required to facilitate progression as they navigate the complexities of teaching. The findings of this study presenting

interesting results in terms of beliefs about inclusion, the impact of the type of SEN on a pre-service teacher's attitude and their self-belief. The findings indicated that increased support and knowledge, alongside specific SEN setting placements would be beneficial to prepare teachers for their initial teaching careers. In addition to this, it is crucial to recognise how impactful attitudes can be, with negative attitudes identified as 'a major barrier' to inclusion by a UNESCO report in 2005. While participants in this study were predominantly positive towards teaching children with SEN, it was interesting to learn about the factors that challenged these attitudes.

CONTEXT

The inclusion of children with SEN has dominated the discourse in education in recent times. Today's vision of inclusion for children with SEN is a stark contrast to the earlier models adopted in education. Traditionally, segregation was viewed as the most appropriate approach for educating children with SEN (DESc, 2007; Monsen *et al.*, 2014; Varcoe *et al.*, 2014). In the 1960s, the notion of segregation progressed to integration which focused on the placement of children in mainstream classrooms (Avramidis *et al.*, 2002; Maloney *et al.*, 2010). While integration has been identified as the stepping stone towards inclusion as it is known today, it was flawed in its nature of assimilation whereby the child was required to adapt to the school rather than the school adapting to the child (Maloney *et al.*, 2010).

The World Declaration on Education for All (UNESCO, 1990) paved the way for developments in SEN provision. Ireland demonstrated their commitment to inclusion with the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of a Child in 1992, ultimately recognising the importance of enabling access to and facilitating achievement in 'social integration' and 'individual development' for all children without discrimination (UNESCO, 1989:23; Maloney *et al.*, 2010). The Special Education Review Committee (SERC) Report (Government of Ireland, 1993) sparked the development of Special Education in Ireland, while the release of the Salamanca Statement in 1994 was noted as the most important indicator of commitment to inclusive education acknowledging that 'every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs' and should receive an education appropriate to their needs (UNESCO, 1994: viii; Meegan *et al.*, 2006; Kraska *et al.*, 2014).

Following these developments, Ireland has been proactive in its approach to improve the provision of special education through the passing of crucial acts, the establishment of numerous bodies and the ongoing developments of various initiatives such as the NCSE, the NBSS and the Visiting Teacher Service. It now widely accepted that children with SEN should be educated alongside their peers as active participants in their own learning (UNESCO, 1994; Government of Ireland, 2004; NCSE, 2011).

While the Department of Education and Skills play a pivotal role in providing guidance on the implementation of inclusive education, it is essentially the responsibility of the school and the teachers within the school to translate this policy into practice. As a result of this, the teacher's role in the primary classroom has evolved significantly (Heinz *et al.*, 2017).

METHODOLOGY

Data was collected using a researcher designed survey that facilitated both quantitative and qualitative data to be gathered. The three-part survey followed the structure of demographic information, a response pair section and finally a five-point likert scale assessing opinions with additional open-ended responses facilitated. A combination of convenience and volunteer sampling methods were utilised to recruit student teachers to participate. In total, 137 students interacted with the research. The demographics of the sample varied in terms of age, gender, stage in course, placements completed, specialism in SEN and experience working with children with SEN. A sample limitation existed in terms of gender, with only 13% of participants identifying as male. Numerous methods were used to examine the data; quantitative data was analysed using both Microsoft Excel and various functions on Survey Monkey. Following the analysis of the data, three key themes emerged; beliefs about inclusion, type of SEN and teacher's self-belief.

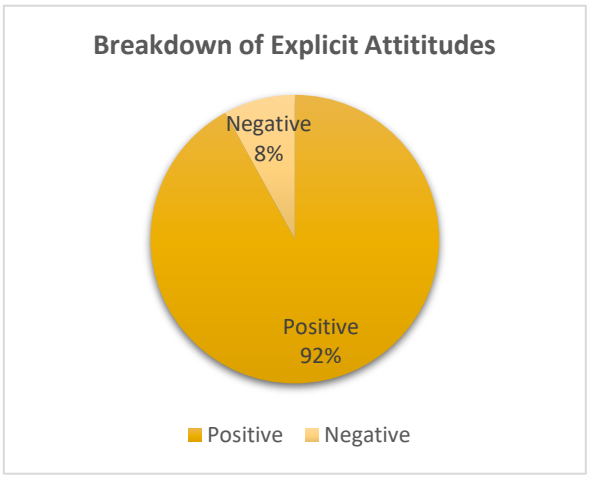
FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The three-part survey provided a clear structure in the data analysis stage of the study. A sample of the demographic information of participants elicited in part one is displayed below.

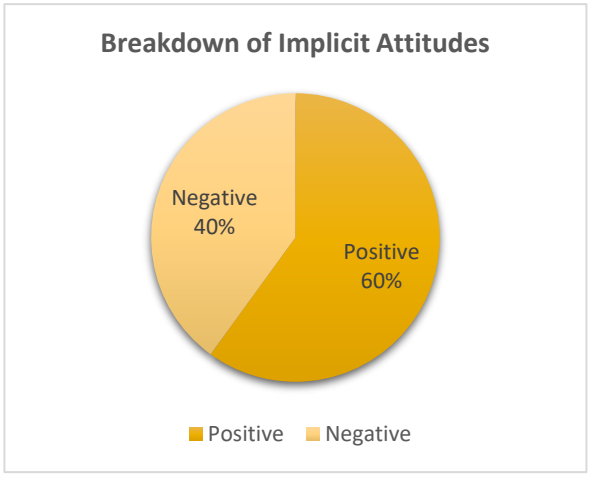
		Frequency	
Variable	Groups	n	%
Gender	Male	18	13.1
	Female	119	86.9
School Placements Completed	0 – 3	64	46.7
	4 – 7	73	53.3
Total Sample		137	

Figure 1 Participant Information

The second section of the survey presented participants with eight bi-polar adjective pairs, influenced by Osgood's (1952) semantic differential scale, in the personal response pair section. Participants had to select the most appropriate word to best describe their initial reaction to teaching a child with SEN from contrasting adjectives pairs such as comfortable/uncomfortable, positive/negative and prepared/unprepared. Unsurprisingly, fourth-year pre-service teachers presented more positive attitudes which can be accounted for by the increased knowledge and experience. The researcher decided to code all the adjectives into two categories; positive and negative to reveal implicit attitudes. Following analysis, the implicit attitudes revealed a 60% positive and 40% negative portrayal of attitudes. This presented an interesting finding as the analysis exposed stark differences between the implicit and explicit portrayal of attitudes.



Explicit Positive v Negative Attitudes



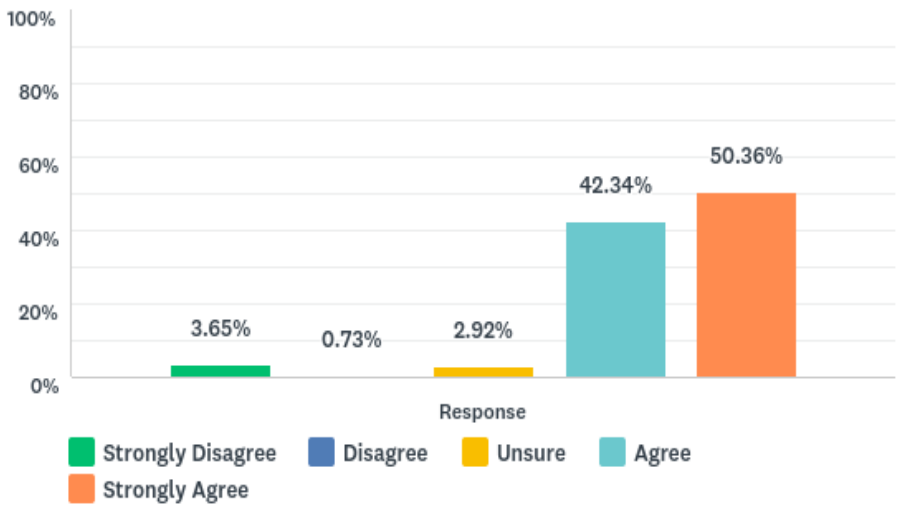
Implicit Positive v Negative Attitudes

Finally, the third section on the survey was used to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the attitudes. For the purpose of this article, only three of the key findings will be discussed; *beliefs about inclusion, type of SEN* and *teacher's self-belief.*

BELIEFS ABOUT INCLUSION

A generally positive attitude towards inclusion emerged from the data surrounding this topic, correlating with the literature pertaining to this theme (Avramidis *et al.*, 2000; O'Toole *et al.*, 2013; Young *et al.*, 2017). The first statement presented was based on the underpinning of the EPSEN Act 2004. As shown below, over 90% of participants agreed with the statement with the accompanying qualitative data emphasising that all children have the right to a fair education and the opportunity to receive their education alongside their peers.

One



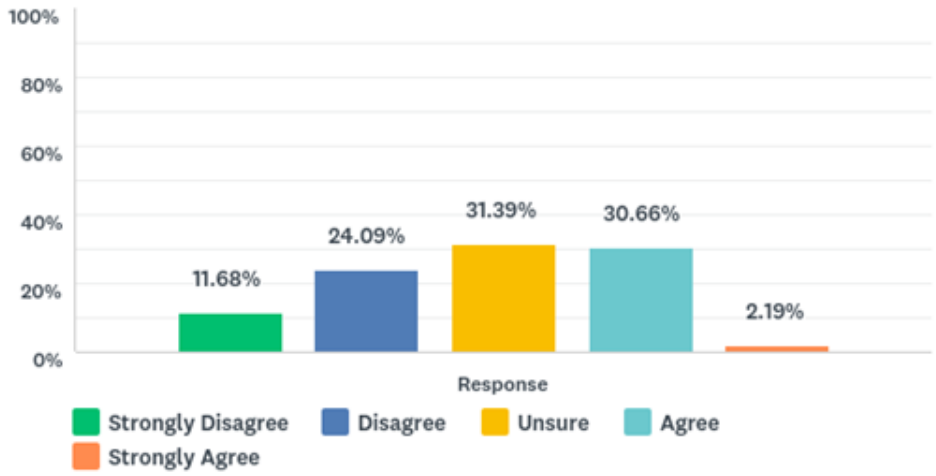
Q21 Every Child with a SEN should be included in a mainstream class unless it would be to the detriment of that child or other children

respondent claimed that inclusion "is undoubtedly the best option for the child – socially, academically and

otherwise". Participants also cited the benefit of the Individual Educational Plan (IEP) in another statement, claiming that they shouldn't have negative connotations for the child and should be viewed as an approach to facilitate success in education; "An IEP is a form of differentiation in the mainstream class". Full inclusion was challenged however, as participants, in line with Young *et al.* (2017) and Shevlin *et al.* (2013), acknowledged that the inclusion into mainstream is not always practical and is dependent on the individual.

TYPE OF SEN

The findings of this study correlated to an extent with previous research in that the type of SEN influences teachers' attitudes (Avramidis *et al.*, 2000; MacFarlane *et al.*, 2013; Shevlin *et al.* 2013; Hassanein, 2015). While the quantitative data indicated that the type of SEN impacted approximately 33% of participants' attitudes, in analysing the open-ended responses participants identified the 'severity' of the SEN as a factor that influences their attitude. Further analysis of the data presented an emerging theme that students with behavioural difficulties were a concern for pre-service teachers.



Q38 - The Type of SEN impacts my attitude towards inclusive education

One participant stated; "I would feel most confident about dealing with SEN such as ASD or physical needs, I wouldn't feel as confident about EBD as I have had little experience of it" while another participant said "If behavioural issues are a factor as well it would definitely impact my attitude (much more difficult)". These findings are consistent with Avramidis *et al.* (2000) and emphasises that experience definitely plays a huge role in teacher confidence.

TEACHER SELF-BELIEF

This theme looked at teacher preparedness and self-belief in supporting children with SEN in the mainstream class. Unsurprisingly, first year students felt the least prepared, this finding was expected when the exposure to SEN modules, opportunities for SEN specialisms and the field-experience of fourth year students is taken into consideration. The value of SEN modules was emphasised by participants claiming that the lectures

were “very informative”. Another pre-service teacher acknowledged that they were “given strategies and places/agencies to turn to” if they required more information.

Linking back to the previous finding, the need for further input on supporting students with behavioural difficulties was acknowledged by participants. Participants often noted that it was their own experiences that had prepared them for this type of SEN rather than direct instruction. However, across numerous other statements, predominantly positive attitudes were recorded in terms of willingness to work with others to support children with SEN in their class.

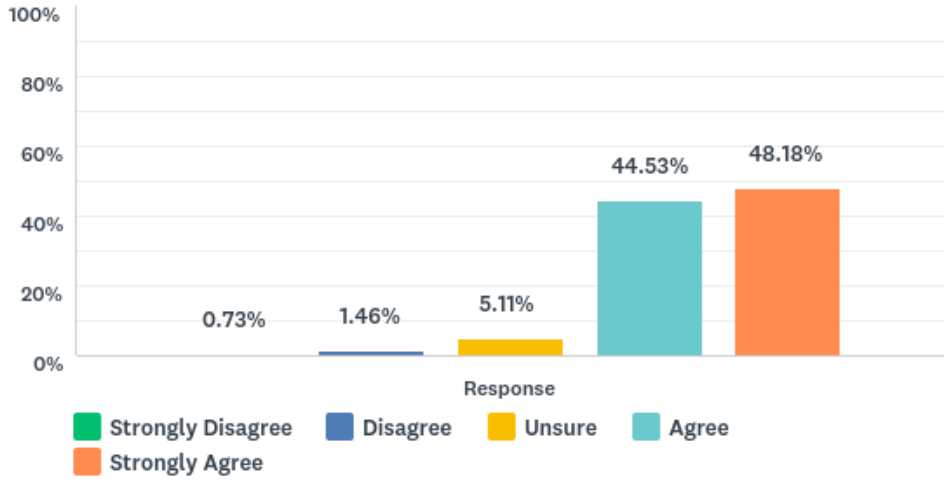


Figure 4 - Q39 I would feel comfortable working collaboratively with special education teachers if I had a child with SEN in my class

Analysis of the data in this realm conveys high levels of pre-service teacher efficacy as they display an immense willingness to support all students. One response, successfully captures this willingness – “I would want to do the very best that I can for the child”. Furthermore, many of the other comments were child-centred, with participants concerned with doing their best for the child, sentiments reflective of Shillingford *et al.* (2014). Conclusively, the pre-service teachers who engaged with this study displayed an overall positive reaction towards inclusion with most of the findings conveying positive attitudes and relevant comments.

CONCLUSION

The primary aim for this research was to investigate the attitudes of pre-service teachers towards teaching children with SEN. The study revealed that the general perceptions of pre-service teachers were primarily positive. These findings correlated with the vision of inclusive education as outlined in Irish educational policy documents. Participants recognised the advantages of inclusion with significant emphasis being placed on the social and emotional benefits of inclusion in the mainstream class for children with SEN. The attitudes and views expressed by pre-service teachers in this study provide an optimistic vision for the future of inclusive education in Ireland.

The most common cause for concern identified by participants related to the inclusion of a child with SEN was a lack of experience and a SEN specific knowledge. However, the willingness displayed by participants to support students with SEN indicates a commitment to inclusion. An increase of SEN modules and support workshops could possibly be an invaluable resource for pre-service teachers as they attempt to respond to the increasingly diverse classrooms which present themselves in Ireland today. Many of the findings correlated with previous research conducted in the area, however, it is important to take the limitations of this study into consideration., the use of a researcher designed survey, albeit influenced by instruments used in other studies, was not psychometrically tested. To summate, the researcher believes that the following quotation encapsulated the realities of inclusion.

> Despite all the ideology, declarations, legislation, circulars, guide-lines and frameworks, inclusive education depends for its success on individual teachers, with individual children, in individual schools (Day and Travers, 2012: 1).

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I would sincerely like to thank the people who have contributed immensely to the success of my research project. To my supervisor, Dr. Michele Dunleavy, thank you for your professional guidance, advice and encouragement. To Dr. Emmanuel O'Grady, for the support you provided in your role as B.Ed. research coordinator. To Dr. Aimie Brennan, for affording me with the amazing opportunity to publish my research in this journal. To my family and friends, I greatly appreciate your unending support and understanding throughout the research journey. Finally, to my fellow B.Ed. students, without your engagement this research would not have been possible.

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Student Article

Article 9, April 2019

Distributed Leadership-A 'Happily Ever After 'for the Post-Primary School?

Marinella Raftery
Master of Education

Marinella Raftery is a practising teacher, former acting Deputy Principal and current post-holder in a second level school. She embodies many of the changes in leadership practice which have particularly escalated within the last five years. As part of her middle leadership role as Junior Cycle co-ordinator, Marinella has been at the veritable coalface of this evolutionary process, working collaboratively and reflectively with all members of the school community from students to senior management. In developing my research question, Marinella was particularly interested in capturing and integrating the voices and views of those who operate not in the realms of policy or academia but rather at the interface between policy and practice as the literature on DL acknowledges the absence of their valuable and indeed indispensable contribution.

INTRODUCTION

Once upon a time in the domain of post-primary education, principals reigned supreme assisted only in matters of management by their deputies. The time for this heroic, hierarchical style of leadership has long passed, however, and we are now in the era of the horizontal and unstratified where leadership has been levelled and distributed leadership (DL) - it would appear– is the latest trend. DL is a relatively recent addition to the leadership lexicon, having only begun to gather momentum in policy and in practice since the dawn of the new millennium (Bolden, 2011), and has varied and often interchangeable interpretations, sometimes being used synonymously with 'shared leadership', 'team leadership' and 'democratic leadership' (Spillane, 2005, p.143).

The consensus would appear to be that leadership does matter (Buck 2016) and has a significant role to play in contributing to school performance and school improvement. Despite this widespread recognition of the relationship between leadership and school improvement, however, there are still many questions that remain unanswered and many gaps in the literature that remain to be filled. Foremost among these is the fact that much of the leadership literature has hitherto tended to focus on formal leadership roles, notably that of the principal, thereby disregarding the forms of leadership roles and functions that may be distributed throughout the school (Harris, 2004).

In the light of the above, my research explored the perceived relationship between DL and school improvement and effectiveness in a single-sex, second level school in Ireland. In pursuing this research, I hoped to establish whether the DL model could indeed lead to an educational happily ever after, or whether its adherents are merely indulging in a fruitless expedition through the rabbit holes of leadership Wonderland. This paper provides a snapshot of the research and endeavours to encapsulate some of its key findings.

CONTEXT

The OECD (2008) report on improving school leadership concluded that the escalation of accountability and responsibility for school leadership was creating the need for increased distribution of leadership roles. This international policy trend, towards a more collaborative, participative and distributed approach to school leadership, is also evidenced in The EU Comenius Report, *The Making of: Leadership in Education* (EU, 2011), which confirms growing EU-wide trends in distribution of leadership tasks and responsibilities to various forms of teacher teams and middle leaders.

The guiding principle of leadership, as a distributed and all-encompassing means of optimising leadership performance and capacity is further endorsed in a contemporary examination of policy developments in European Union Member States conducted by the EU Commission's Working Group on Schools (2017), which acknowledged that effective school leadership must not be limited to either individuals or small-scale teams but should instead extend to more wide-ranging teams comprising members of all school community stakeholders. DL is also pervasive in the Irish educational policy context. The Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Social Protection in April 2014, acknowledged the evolution of the understanding of school leadership and further defined effective school leadership as being,

> inclusive and distributed across a range of partners and personnel who have a shared understanding, ownership and commitment to transform and make changes happen in a context that is itself constantly changing (Ward, 2014, p.1)

These sentiments were echoed by Richard Bruton, Minister for Education and Skills in an address to the NAPD in November 2014, where he reiterated that 'effective leadership is inclusive-not power dictated from one person, but a responsibility shared across a range of people' (Bruton, 2014, p.1). This was further articulated in the *Action Plan for Education 2018* (DES, 2018a) which pledges to enhance in-school middle management structures and empower school leadership through the provision of resources, training and mentoring (DES, 2018a). Other recent seminal policy documents such as: *A 2020 Vision for Education* (Post -Primary Education Forum, 2013), *Looking at Our School 2016:A Quality Framework for Post Primary Schools* (DES, 2016a), and *A Proposal for Management Structures for Post-Primary Schools* (JMB and ACCS, 2014) and initiatives such as the WSE process, the SSE process, and the Framework for Junior Cycle (DES, 2015) all advocate a whole school, collaborative approach to leadership and explicitly herald the merits of DL. This endorsement is most strongly articulated in the Department's recent circular on *Leadership and*

Management in Post Primary Schools (DES, 2018b), a document which is wholly predicated on the notion of a shared vision and purpose in terms of school leadership and peppered with the language of distributed leadership as is evidenced in its delineation of the new roles and responsibilities of the in-school middle management team.

METHODOLOGY

As my study sought to explore the role of DL from the perspectives of staff, management and students within a particular school context, and to make visible the lived experiences and perspectives of my participants and fellow practitioners, qualitative research was the optimum approach. My research study, therefore, was a multi -method case study of a single-sex second level school in Southern Ireland which was executed over a 6-month intensive research period in the field. In order to maximise my understanding of the case under study, I collected and integrated many forms of qualitative data including one-on -one semi-structured interviews, a focus group interview, an on-line questionnaire, and my own reflexive journal.

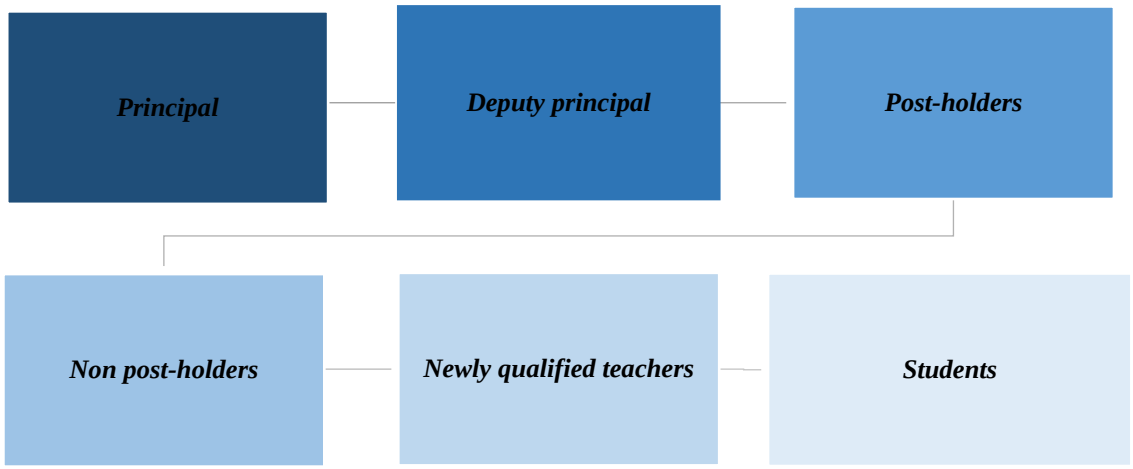

Fig 1.Stratified Purposeful Sampling

I considered stratified purposeful sampling to be the optimum approach in endeavouring to elicit differing perspectives from the various sub groups among the teaching staff comprising: newly qualified teachers, post holders, non- post holders, and management, as illustrated in figure 1 above. My two teacher sample groups were chosen using this sampling strategy and participation in each group was on a voluntary basis. I purposefully selected the Student Council members as they best represent the various strata of students in the school and therefore their multiple voices. As my intent in this study was, to illuminate the particular phenomenon of DL, its operation and effects within the specific context of my own school (Pinnegar and Daynes, 2007), the imperative for this study was not the size of the sample but rather the depth and quality of the detail to be collected about the site.

As my study attempted to provide an understanding of my participants' lived world and ascribe meaning to their experiences, as current practitioners in a contemporary second level setting, the qualitative

interview was the optimum choice (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). Consequently, I chose semi-structured interviews, both one-on-one and focus group, as my primary method of data collection.

I endeavoured to incorporate my data analysis as an integral part of the research process itself, involving careful transcription of my recorded open-ended interviews, copious note-taking and reflection post–nterview, and throughout the transcription process where feasible, organising, reading, re-reading and coding interrelated themes, thereby delving deeper and deeper, as advocated by Creswell (2009), into understanding the data. Integral to this search for reliability and consistency of my findings was the checking and cross-checking of all codes used. I used what Creswell (2009, p.191) terms 'intercoder agreement' and cross checked my codes on selected transcript passages with my external auditor and my critical friends.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

The beginning of this research journey for me, was the question of whether distributed leadership, the current buzzword in educational leadership literature and policy could in fact lead to overall school improvement and effectiveness. Findings emerged in five key thematic areas, two of which are dealt with below.

IMPLICATIONS OF DL FOR THE ROLE OF THE PRINCIPAL

The findings in this thematic area unanimously echoed the consensus of the literature, which highlights the paradox at the heart of DL as being that the principal far from being rendered redundant in the practice of DL remains a changed but nonetheless integral and indeed pivotal part of the leadership equation (Leithwood et al., 2007; Harris, 2013). Participants across all echelons of staff and management acknowledged the implications for the role of the principal as being many and varied, highlighting in particular the crucial role played by the principal in the strategic distribution of leadership roles, the importance of developing leadership capacity in others and the key role played by the principal as a catalyst for transformation and innovation through relationship building.

The potential for issues of power and control to arise was also acknowledged echoing the work of Lumby 2013 and 2016 and also that of Youngs (2009), with emphasis being placed on the importance of the principal creating an environment of openness, trust and fairness. Interestingly, while much of the recent policy initiatives have been pre-empted by the perceived need to reduce the administrative burden on the principal, thereby freeing them to concentrate on broader leadership tasks (JMB and ACCS, 2014), the findings point conversely to an escalation in the principal's workload. Throughout the interviews all participants alluded to the key role played by the principal in the DL process with the principal herself echoing the words of Harris (2012) in her assertion:

> I don't think that the Principal's redundant because like I said, somebody does have to drive the bus and sometimes there are difficult calls to make and it's not really for somebody who is a team member be it a team member for a year or thirty years to make that call.

This notion of the principal occupying a centre stage position within the distributed leadership framework (Harris, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2007; Seashore Louis, Leithwood et al.; 2010) was echoed by other

interviewees, notably the Deputy Principal who emphasised the importance of having someone 'steering the ship' and further postulated that irrespective of the many leadership opportunities offered by the distributed model,' ultimately the buck stops with the principal.' This recognition of the interdependence of distributed and hierarchical leadership and indeed that the distribution of leadership is ultimately as the literature has suggested, predominantly perceived as being the purview of the principal (Leithwood et al., 2007) was reiterated by the focus group participants, who concurred that the role of the principal is that of a strategic overseer, ensuring that the various teams and initiatives are, 'going in the right direction.' (Teacher E)

Thus the inference may be drawn that in the context of the research setting at least, the paradox at the heart of distributed leadership (Harris, 2007) is that although distributed leadership exists and is perceived to be flourishing within the school its existence and continuation is ultimately dependent on the strong and focussed leadership of the principal (Harris, 2013; Seashore Louis, Leithwood et al., 2010). The changing role of the principal, from sole leader at the apex of the school hierarchy to someone who nurtures, fosters and indeed actively facilitates the leadership capacity of others (Harris, 2013), was also articulated by Teacher B in their assertion that:

> A leader doesn't always have to be out in front doing everything obviously they have to co-ordinate things, but the ideas don't always have to come from them … a good leader will be able to take the followers' views on board without feeling intimidated or threatened in any way. That's the mark of a good leader really that they will recognise other people's ideas.

This imperative was further emphasised by Teacher A, who postulated that, 'the principal has to embed an attitude of leadership in the school' and furthermore,' ensure that there are provisions in place for people to access leadership' (Teacher A). The above suggests a cognisance amongst the school community of the need for the principal in the distributed model, as evinced in much of the literature (Leithwood et al., 2007; Harris, 2012; Harris 2013; Harris and Jones, 2014), to be at the helm in cultivating a culture of leadership and in actively encouraging and fostering leadership in others.

IMPLICATIONS OF DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

In this key thematic area also, the findings echoed the literature in the consensus that DL has the potential to contribute indirectly to school improvement and effectiveness through fostering a sense of collaboration and ownership (Penlington et al., 2008; Hallinger and Heck 2011: Harris 2013). Staff and management were unanimous in their agreement with the literature, however, that distributed leadership can only have an impact on school improvement if planfully or strategically implemented (Leithwood et al., 2007; Harris and Spillane, 2008; Seashore Louis, Leithwood et al., 2010; Harris and De Flaminis, 2016). The extant literature on DL places repeated and consistent emphasis on the fact that the success or failure of DL in contributing to overall school improvement is hugely dependent on the nature of the distribution, and indeed the overall school context., (OECD, 2008; Harris and DeFlaminis, 2016) DL, as the literature has cautioned, is not a magic wand which will transform a school and lead to improved outcomes for all. Indeed, this perception permeated the findings of this study with the principal asserting, from the outset, that DL can't just happen

randomly but rather must have, 'a certain focus, it can't be implemented any old way' (Principal). Another crucial component of planning, that of the importance of implementing change such as the DL model slowly and progressively in order to maximise its impact , as evinced in the literature by Harris (2013), was developed by the Deputy Principal in her assertion that for DL to 'go in the right direction' in terms of contributing to school improvement, the paramount consideration should be to move cautiously and patiently to: *'feel the temperature and know who all of the players are and that some of the players aren't ready yet'*

Interviewees across all strata echoed the literature (Penlington et al. 2008;Harris and De Flaminis 2016) in their identification of a perceived link between working collectively and collaboratively and the potential for school improvement and effectiveness and indeed positive organisational change. This idea of the potential benefits of working together, of embodying the principle of the old Irish proverb, 'Ní neart go cur le chéile' (In togetherness comes strength) was articulated by the Principal in her assertion that the school could not be 'effective' without the involvement of 'all the people in the school' and without the 'balance of different angles and different voices' (Principal).This perceived benefit of incorporating all the voices in the pursuit of overall school improvement was further highlighted by the students as encapsulated in the following ,'more opinions and more voices give more ideas and possibilities'(Student 1)

This perceived positive impact on the affective domain and its consequent perceived benefits for school effectiveness and improvement was also evinced by Teacher B in their assertion that distributed leadership could lead to a better functioning school through creating a 'happier environment' because as they further expanded, 'if you feel that you are part of a system you are going to work better than if you just feel like you are a mere cog in a machine' (Teacher B). This perception of DL as being a positive and empowering experience was echoed by the student participants as articulated by Student 7 in their assertion that, *'I feel like I have a great opportunity to discuss important things relating to my school and implement changes and improvements'*

The importance of a shared sense of purpose, responsibility and ownership with regard to in-school visions, developments and initiatives, which permeates the literature (Penlington et al., 2008; Leithwood et al., 2007) was also a persistent subtheme with regard to the perceived implications of distributed leadership for school improvement and school effectiveness. Here, as elsewhere, there was consensus across all echelons of staff, management and students that sharing a sense of responsibility, of having a sense of ownership, could have positive implications for school improvement and effectiveness in the long term as evidenced by Teacher G's assertion that such a sense of ownership and responsibility could potentially, 'benefit the Principal and the Vice principal in the long run and the students too ultimately'

CONCLUSION

This research illuminates many possibilities for enhancing the operation of DL and for maximising its potential impact on school improvement and school effectiveness, not only in the school under study but in similar second level settings. The findings indicated that DL was perceived to be inherently beneficial and likely to impact indirectly on school improvement and school effectiveness but *only* if implemented under

the right conditions. In order to optimise its effectiveness, DL requires a transformation in both the leadership style of the formal school leader and indeed the culture, attitude and ethos evinced throughout the school.

While initiatives to enhance and support the quality of both senior and middle leadership in schools, such as the Professional Diploma in School Leadership (PDSL) course for aspiring school leaders which has been allocated 50 extra places this year to accommodate the burgeoning interest in leadership throughout the system are laudable and encouraging, much more is needed. Ongoing school-based CPD courses in leadership are vital for time-pressed teachers unable to avail of time-consuming courses such as the above, such CPD could be offered on an e-learning basis. As the literature also emphasises the importance of increasing students' awareness of leadership and of maximising the student voice (McGregor, 2007; Fleming, 2015) the NCCA and the DES need to enhance the provision of specific leadership training modules for students at both Junior and Senior Cycle level.

One of the major challenges to the effective implementation of DL identified in the findings was the issue of time deficit; a challenge which must also be addressed as– despite teachers' acknowledgement of the inherent benefits of DL–the findings excavated a deep rooted fear that time spent on the practice of DL could encroach on precious class contact time, thereby paradoxically impacting negatively on teaching and learning. Given the increased emphasis on the DL model, and the fact that a staggering one in three (34.5%) of teachers are currently working in promoted positions of leadership in our schools (Bruton, 2018), redressing this time imbalance is imperative. Although the allocation of 22 professional hours for teachers to support efforts to implement and embed the New Junior Cycle framework as allocated in a recent Departmental circular (DES, 2017) are a welcome introductory gesture, policy must look in a more concerted way towards a reduction in class contact hours for teachers in leadership positions, as outlined above, commensurate with the levels of their roles and responsibility.

At the beginning of my narrative on DL, I began at the beginning with a retrospective look at the changing face of leadership from the 'Once upon a time', heroic model of the lonely leader leading from the heights of academia to the more fluid and dynamic latter-day distributive model where the principal is truly a 'primus inter pares'–a first among equals–and where leadership is no longer perceived as being the preserve of the 'few' but is rather, widely accessible to the 'many'. In listening to the voices of the many, I am happy to conclude that the distributed model of leadership as postulated in the literature (Leithwood et al., 2007; Harris, 2008) may not be a veritable leadership magic wand but that a 'happily ever after' for DL as a potential contributor to school improvement and effectiveness is indeed possible, if not probable, if that wand is strategically and planfully applied.

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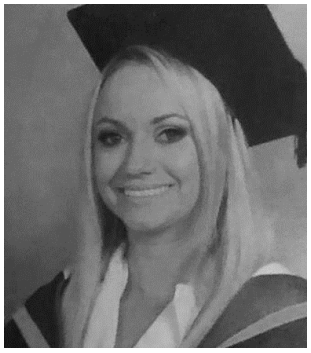
Student Article

Article 10, April 2019

Work-Based Learning: Bridging the Gap Between Learning and Doing?



Siobhan Sentry
Master of Education

Siobhan Sentry graduated in 2011 from the Institute of Technology Tralee with a Bachelor of Science (Honors) in Health, Fitness and Leisure. Siobhan took her first major step into training and education as a sole trader and owner of private adult education academy 'Advanced Fitness Education', accredited by UK awarding body ITEC. Siobhan graduated from Mary Immaculate College in 2017 with a Post Graduate Diploma in Adult and Further Education, she then went on to study for a Master of Education, graduating in 2018. Throughout her 8 years in the adult education she has worked on various Community Education programmes and Vocational Training programmes for various ETB's across Ireland. She now works full time as an Employer Based Training Co-ordinator with the National Learning Network.

KEYWORDS: Adult Education, Experiential Learning;

INTRODUCTION

This article provides a snapshot of some key findings from a larger research study exploring perspectives of adult learners within the Further Education and Training (FET) sector. This study is an exploratory, qualitative study, exploring students perspectives of work based learning in preparing them for the labour market. Work Based Learning is a curriculum approach whereby students engage with a work experience, usually on a long-term basis, as a supplement to their theoretical studies within their chosen field, in a mutually beneficial relationship (Boud and Solomon, 2001). As this is a relatively new and broad field of education there is little research of commonalities between work-based learning programmes, this study examines one example.

The FET Strategy 2014-2019 outlines a key aim; to provide skills for the economy, addressing current and future needs of learners, job-seekers, employers and employees. This study is intended to look at the experience of the adult learner engaging in work-based learning, to analyse the alignment with the key policy aim of addressing the needs of learners in relation to their skills for their chosen vocation. The study aims to explore their perspectives of the structures that constitute work-based learning. This study questions if work-

based learning encourages additional practical and vocational skill acquisition that traditional education does not? Thus, bridging the gap between learning and doing.

The primary method of data collection used was semi structured interviews. The secondary source of data used was the researchers' reflective diary, documenting observations during interviews, the research process and interactions with critical friends and colleagues. The data was analysed using an inductive thematic networking and coding process, this was followed by a deductive round of coding to check accuracy of the analysis process. Findings showed that participants who received support from a dedicated person within the workplace (mentor) and those who were given increasing responsibility within the workplace experienced positive learning and skill development. Participants opinions of the transferral of learning from the classroom to the workplace varied dependant on the programme of study. However, a strong finding appeared on the importance of work-related social skill development within the classroom.

CONTEXT

Adult education in Ireland emerged from cultural and agricultural developments in the late 1900s, social cohesion, active citizenship, equality, and inclusion were at the forefront of the agenda (Grummell 2007). Over time adult education has evolved in line with globalization, advances in technology and with political and economic movements. The recession of 2008 had a significant impact on the sector bringing with it the need for economic growth and labour market activation. Both the adult education sector and vocational training sector merged to become the FET sector. The merging of the sector was in line with the change in focus of the sector, where the balance tipped in favour of labour market activation. Some may argue that holistic outcomes such as active citizenship and social integration became mere byproducts of entering the labour market, rather than worthy goals in their own right. Grummell argues, 'that adult education principles are increasingly being colonialized by a neo-liberal economic and political logic' (2007, p.182). S/he describes this new focus of adult education as working to the advantage of the economic marketplace, quoting Vincent (1993), adult education is becoming part of the "symbolic gloss of popular democracy" (p.182). This study examines the learners' perspectives of their education experience within the knowledge economy shaped by policy makers.

One may argue that students preparing to enter the workforce need more than theoretical knowledge and skills. According to Moon (2004) reflective practice plays an important role in the development of employability skills and positive student experiences in work experience. However, Moon (2004) also points out that superficial reflection may not be beneficial to learning; that an awareness of the depth of reflection needs to be created. Lave and Wenger (1991) situated learning theory encourages one to wonder, what good is theoretical knowledge if work related social skills remain underdeveloped? Without the development of work- related social skills how can one move from the periphery of the field to being a player in the field? (Bourdieu 1977). It appears from the literature that being competent in the work force requires more than theoretical knowledge and the physical capacity to do the job. The question remains, are work based learning programmes bridging the gap between learning and doing adequately? Raising these questions is essential

if we are to do what policy is asking and encourage those on the margins of society into the workforce through active inclusion; as set forth by The European Parliament (2015)

METHODOLOGY

As this research aims to explore perspectives and experience, the primary method of data collection was face to face, one to one, semi-structured interviews. The interviews were based on semi-structured, open-ended questions with opportunities for deep exploration to gain insights into the perspectives and views of the participants (Creswell 2014). Using purposive sampling, students were chosen from three different disciplines of study; Group 1 (N=3), Group 2 (N=3) and Group 3 (N=3).

A secondary source of data included the researchers' reflective diary, which provided a multitude of uses.

- monitoring observations during interviews
- noting engagements with critical friends
- reflecting on thoughts and feelings throughout the study

As the researcher resides in an interpretivist paradigm a thematic coding analysis was essential, as identified by Flick (2005) 'The underlying assumption is that in different social worlds or groups, differing views can be found' (p.185). An inductive coding strategy was used as the first step of the analysis process, 'allowing for themes to emerge direct from the data' (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006, p.86). Interview transcripts were broken down in interpreted concepts, termed 'codes' these codes were attached to the transcripts in forms of annotations. Recognizing that coding is an interpretive act dependent upon the researchers ontological, epistemological values, while also, realising through the lived experience of the field, that the stage of the analytical process also influences the interpretive act of coding. In doing this the researcher maintained a reflexive diary during the data analysis process to ensure reflexivity throughout the analysis process (Saldana 2016), as well as, completing one final deductive round of coding. Limitations to this study were the small sample size used, moving forward a larger scale sequential mixed method style study may bring greater insights and greater generality to the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

MEANINGFUL LEARNING OCCURS THROUGH MODELLING AND INCREASING ROLES OF RESPONSIBILITY

In line with findings from Billet (2000) and Sibson (2003) that workplace mentors are of importance to learning at work, modelling from co-workers was the most common method of learning within the workplace.

> I look at people the whole time I watch and look at the way people handle situations and I absorb it and I do use it I'm not gonna lie I'm starting to use the techniques and ways of other people because like I said I didn't have much experience and you don't know everything in life you learn every day so I've kinda taken up stuf' (Group 3 Participant 1)

> I have a one to one with one of the girls there sometimes it's with her or sometimes I'm with one of the fellas who puts the furniture together or he … … explains things to me as well so I'm learning from him as well (Group 2 Participant 1)

Adeline Yuen Sze Goh (2014) found that participating in legitimate peripheral participation, starting with peripheral tasks and moving towards the completion of central tasks with more responsibility resulted in positive learning. Participants in this study also spoke of being trusted with responsibility and the importance of this in building their confidence and their learning:

> You're given more responsibility and that can be a good thing (Group 1 Participant 3)

> They've shown me everything now, all I have left to learn is a Z read, which is great, I like to keep busy, being trained into the tills is great cause if I have nothing to do I can jump in and help out there (Group 2 Participant 2)

Learning through responsibility in work was highly rated in the community development sample which concurs with observations made by the researcher:

> very supportive workplace with rich opportunities to learn and be given responsibility appears to be a common theme with community development students (Researcher Reflective Diary Excerpt)

> they let you find your own steps which I think is right because if they wrap you up in cotton wool you're never going to survive, and you'll only be vulnerable to everything (Group 3 Participant 2)

> I wanted to be given responsibility, I wanted to learn, I was ready to work and learn (Group 3 Participant 3)

It would appear, that supportive relationships with co-workers coincides with learning through modelling in the workplace. This is concurrent with conclusions made by Levett-Jones *et al.* (2009) on the importance of staff making students on work placement feel welcome and their role as students validated in order for the experience to be meaningful and for progressive learning to occur. It also validates claims made by Billet (2000) and Sibson (2003) on the value of learning mentors in the work placement setting.

LEARNING CONSISTS OF BOTH SOFT SKILL DEVELOPMENT AND THEORETICAL KNOWLEDGE

It appears across all samples, that the practical teaching and learning strategies implemented in the classroom generate meaningful learning, discussions, problem-based learning, presentations, and role plays are the methods of prominence showing in the data. With disdain evident towards some of the pre-prescribed, formal assessment procedures currently used in the Further Education and Training Sector.

> I thought … the work diaries, not alone did I not think they were really worth it because the marks that were given for them were quite low and it wasn't really worth the paperwork to be quite honest, to be blunt (Group 2 Participant 3)

> the communications I hated, I thought it was a bit … OTT … posters being made, it seemed to be very childish (Group 1 Participant 3)
>
> 'The school work I'm not too sure how I feel about it, I like coming into the classes and the people are good and the interaction there is good some of the work sometimes though I don't know, some of it relevant some of its not (Group 2 Participant 2)

Contrarily, students in the discipline of group 1 included in this study generally felt there was more relevance between the theory studied in class, assessments and the transferability to the workplace:

> the globalization really until you get into it, when I first saw it I hadn't a clue, but when you got into it you do understand why you have to look it, there was valid points in Finland and Sweden and their whole education structure we should model off it (Group 1 Participant 1)

Students in group 2 showed a positive response to practical learning and assessment methods used in the classroom, showing increased confidence:

> I felt that because the other students took their turns at doing it (presentation) in front of the rest of us, when I had to do it myself it broke the ice a lot and brought me out of my shell (Group 2 Participant 3)
>
> 'most beneficial is the role play stuff, if you have problem what do you do is very helpful, procedural things (Group 2 Participant 2)

Aarkrog (2006) argues that learning in the workplace cannot be simulated in the classroom and tasks such as role plays do not adequately meet the function they are required for, however, findings in this study show differently. From the findings displayed there is a clear link between practical tasks such as role plays, giving class presentations and a general increase in student confidence and self-efficacy. In conclusion to this finding one may argue that linking classroom learning to the development of soft skills may evoke the lack of linkage between the classroom and work-based learning described by Burke *et al* 2009.

CONCLUSION

In the exploration of the learners' perspective of the impact of work-based learning on their skill development and learning, it appears that students feel their needs are met in relation to skill development when certain support structures are in place. Students need to feel that they belong within their work experience company. This sense of belonging is needed for positive learning and skill development to occur. They need to feel that their role as a student in the workplace is validated. This validation occurs through work placements taking on a mentoring style role providing opportunities for learning through modelling. Strategically increasing student responsibility in the work place in a phased approach with the support of the work-based learning teacher is key to providing a supported, rich learning environment within the workplace.

In the exploration of the classroom experience of the learner, it appears that the preparation for work is made meaningful through the acquisition of theoretical knowledge and opportunities to apply knowledge

practically in the classroom, through activities like role play, presentations and discussions. It appears that implementing these practices appear to have the most impact on student learning and development, bringing theory to life. In turn, nurturing the development of soft skills, student confidence and self-efficacy.

For work-based learning programmes to meet the needs of the learner engaging in them, it is essential that support structures are in place. The support structures that this study shows to have significant impact on learners are: A combination of theoretical and practical knowledge acquisition is needed within the classroom to provide meaningful preparation for work; Positive mentorships within the work experience and increasing roles of responsibility to encourage learning and skill development within the work place. Planning work-based learning programmes that incorporate these elements may lead to meaningful learner experiences, high learner retention rates. Further, in line with the policy agenda for the FET sector, may lead to successful transition to employment upon completion of the work-based learning programme.

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STER Conference 2019

Abstracts

STER
STUDENT TEACHER
EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

Tuesday 2nd April
Lime Tree Theatre
3pm-6pm

Student Presentations

Cross Cultural Exploration of Gender Differences in ECCE
Claudia Kelly

The research is titled as "A cross cultural comparative exploration of the differences practitioners in Ireland and Italy experience in relation to gender differences in young children's play in the early years." The research will detail a cross-cultural comparative of the differences practitioners in both Ireland and Italy experience in relation to gender differences evident in young children's play in the early years sector in both countries. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data with early years practitioners, three in Ireland and three in Italy to ensure a balance with regards too the data sets. The research aims to provide a unique study through which practitioners in the early years sector can build on gender equitable practice for young children.

Pre-Service Teachers' Attitudes towards SEN
Aoife Munroe

Recent policy in Ireland recommends that children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) are educated in mainstream classrooms alongside their peers unless to do so would not be in keeping with the best interests of the child with SEN or the children with whom the child would be educated with. Negative teacher attitudes have been identified as a major barrier to inclusion, therefore it is imperative that positive attitudes are fostered among teachers. The purpose of this study was to examine the attitudes of pre-service teachers towards teaching children with SEN. First and fourth year students were given the opportunity to share their experiences and opinions through a mixed-methods survey. Findings were categorised into three themes; beliefs about inclusion, type of SEN and teachers' self-belief. Overall, a predominantly positive response to inclusion emerged in the results. However, participants expressed some concerns regarding preparedness, lack of specialist knowledge and the type of SEN as an influential factor in determining their attitude. Building on the latter, behavioural difficulties were portrayed as more challenging to cater from compared to other categories of SEN. These findings are relevant in terms of supporting pre-service teachers as they prepare to enter the ever-increasingly diverse classrooms which present themselves in Ireland today

Primary Teachers' Collaboration during IEP Development
Asheligh O'Neill

This research explores primary school teachers' perspectives on collaboration during the design and development of individual education plans (IEPs) for children with special educational needs in the mainstream primary classroom. This small-scale study was undertaken using a qualitative approach. Six semi-structured interviews were conducted with three mainstream primary teachers and three special education teachers working in a mainstream setting. The findings were categorised into three themes; pupil involvement, parental involvement and collaboration with others. The findings show that whilst primary school teachers perceive collaboration during the IEP process to be largely beneficial, the challenges often impede this collaboration. Such challenges include time constraints, issues surrounding working relationships and other variables. As a result of this study, it is recommended that specific time within the school day is devoted to collaborating to design and develop the IEP.

Inclusion Strategies for Deaf Children in Mainstream Primary Schools
Holly Cunneen

As the importance of inclusion is embedded in the primary school curriculum and other relevant policies, the inclusion of deaf children in mainstream primary schools was of interest in this research. Most deaf children in Ireland attend mainstream schools therefore, how these deaf children are taught and included by their teachers is important. Through undertaking interviews with five mainstream primary school teachers, the inclusion strategies used, challenges faced, teacher's competencies and the correlation between deaf children's level of hearing and level of inclusion were explored. From this investigation, it was found that there are whole class benefits to using inclusion strategies for deaf children. The lack of Continuing Professional Development and insight into deaf education in initial teacher education also contributed to these teachers' experiences.

Distributed Leadership – A 'Happily Ever After' for the Post Primary School
Marinella Raftery

Distributed Leadership is a relatively recent addition to the leadership lexicon, having only begun to gather momentum in policy and in practice since the dawn of the new millennium (Bolden, 2011), and has varied and often interchangeable interpretations, sometimes being used synonymously with 'shared leadership', 'team leadership' and 'democratic leadership' (Spillane, 2005, p.143). The consensus would appear to be that leadership does matter (Buck 2016) and has a significant role to play in contributing to school performance and school improvement. Despite this widespread recognition of the relationship between leadership and school improvement, however, there are still many questions that remain unanswered and many gaps in the literature that remain to be filled. This presentation explores the perceived relationship between DL and school improvement and effectiveness in a single-sex, second level school in Ireland.

An Investigation into Five Methods of Self Reflection
Katie Chapple

The primary aim was to investigate the benefits and drawbacks of methods of reflection. Five methods were chosen that the researcher had previously used and which secondary school teachers are encouraged to use by the Department of Education, in the new Junior Cycle course (DES 2015). The research focused on 109 participating students and 10 teachers who gave their views on their experiences of using one method of reflection. Embedded in this research was an investigation to reflective practice for students and do these teaching methods aid teaching and learning. The research sought to assess student's reflection from the student's and the teacher's perspective and how reflection could be guided and promoted by the teacher. This research investigated five methods of student reflection and examined them from the perspective of students and teachers; Peer Assessment, Student Self-Reflection, Jigsaw method, 321 and KWL.

Older People and Well-being: Perception and Influencing Factors
Mairead Spillane

This study examines the older person's perception of well-being and the factors which influence this perception. Older people's health and well-being can only be maintained and improved if policies take account of their specific physical, psychological, educational and socio-economic needs. The dearth of research into the subjective experiences of older people living in the community setting was a key motivation

for this study. The aim of which was to explore the older persons subjective perception of the factors which impact their well-being rather than the previously much studied professional perspectives. This study seeks to create a better understanding of the process of ageing and to reflect the experiences, beliefs and abilities of older people themselves. This research exploring the facilitators and barriers to the layperson's positive perception of well-being provides an important contribution to the body of knowledge.

Work-Based Learning: Bridging the Gap Between Learning and Doing?
Siobhan Sentry

This article provides a snapshot of some key findings from a larger research study exploring perspectives of adult learners within the Further Education and Training (FET) sector. This study is an exploratory, qualitative study, exploring students' perspectives of work-based learning in preparing them for the labour market. Work Based Learning is a curriculum approach whereby students engage with a work experience, usually on a long-term basis, as a supplement to their theoretical studies within their chosen field, in a mutually beneficial relationship (Boud and Solomon, 2001). As this is a relatively new and broad field of education there is little research of commonalities between work-based learning programmes, this study examines one example.

Inclusion Strategies for Deaf Children in Mainstream Primary Schools
Robbie Costello

Inclusion Strategies for Deaf Children in Mainstream Primary Schools
Lauren Scanlon

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