



STER Podcast

Season 1, Episode 2

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Aimie 00:08

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

Aimie 00:54

In today's podcast, we meet Richard O'Regan, Richard completed the professional Master of Education Programme in Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. For his dissertation, he did a case study on the impact of cultural diversity on one primary school. He was particularly interested in looking at the strategies that teachers use to support the inclusion of all students. In this episode, I talk to Richard about his research design and some of the key findings from his dissertation research.

Aimie 01:21

You're very welcome. I'm delighted you could join us for this podcast today. Can you start us off maybe by telling us a little bit about yourself?

Richard 01:29

My name is Richard. I'm from Bandon in County Cork, I completed a Bachelor of Arts degree in UCC. I also worked then for a number of years as a car sales executive in the motor trade. I really enjoyed that. That work. But teaching was always an ambition of mine and I'm happy that I

fulfilled that ambition when I completed the PME, the professional masters of education in Mary Immaculate College between 2016 and 2018.

Aimie 02:00

Okay, can you tell me a little bit about your research.

Richard 02:04

I carried out a case study which looked at the impact intercultural diversity had on a school in the past 20 years in Ireland, and I suppose, having done history, in UCC, I had an interest in that area, and I would have seen that Ireland was synonymous with immigration for many years. And, you know, in the last 20 years, immigration has really skyrocketed in this country. And I think that just from even talking to people, teachers, that one of the sectors that was most affected by that immigration was the education sector. So I took an interest in this area, and I wanted to find out more, I suppose I was curious to find out how teachers managed issues of intercultural diversity. You know, it was, especially in the early time, it was a it was a new, completely new thing for many teachers, they hadn't had to have dealt with this before. So I just wanted to see and learn about the strategies that they implemented. And the how those strategies changed or maybe developed over the that 20 year period.

Aimie 03:18

Okay, so how did you go about this? What did you do?

Richard 03:21

So I went down the road of a case study, as I say, I just I suppose I thought about it. And I was considering interviewing teachers from all over. But I just felt that because I was looking at how things changed over a time period, I felt like a case study of one particular school would really help with that, because I would be able to speak with teachers that were there from the very start and are still there now. I would be able to speak with teachers who were just there at that time, and also teachers that are currently there. So I'd really be able to get a good understanding of how things developed how things were, how they developed and how they are now, by doing a case study. I interviewed retired teachers, I interviewed current teachers and teachers, as I say, that had been there right through this period. And it I suppose it really went well, the interviews I thought it was very well.

Aimie 04:13

So what did you find?

Richard 04:14

The big thing I found from all the interviewees was that English was a big problem. And this was reflected in the literature in Ireland and internationally, that it was a big problem, especially new pupils coming in, that had no English. And it was it was a problem for them. So I found that many

of the teachers they said to deal with this, yes, they immerse the children in English as best as they could, but they also used the child's own language, maybe to get them to read in their own language to write in their own language, and to talk in their own language because they felt that by doing that the child would be comfortable doing that and they'd get an appreciation of literature and just develop as well because if they found The English very hard. So I found that very, very interesting. That was reflected internationally, for example, in the UK, a lot of the research would have shown the teacher utilizing their own language as well was important for the child, that there was some that disagreed with that, they said that it should be totally English and totally immersed in that, but the interviewees that I spoke to, they were really advocating for the use of the child's own language, their home language to integrate them into the classroom and develop that way,

Aimie 05:36

Was there a good deal of partnership with parents then?

Richard 05:44

Yes, absolutely. The teacher said that was very, very important, and to get literature to get books and to get resources for them to utilize in their own language, they did have to speak to the parents. And that was huge as well, because it was important that the parents could see, you know, the great work that they were doing to try and integrate these children into the the Irish school. So yeah, there was there was definitely a lot of mention of that as well.

Aimie 06:10

And so what else did you find?

Richard 06:12

I also found that, you know, teachers, especially the retired teachers, and that they, they really felt that it was a huge challenge. At the very beginning, I'm talking about the period of the late 90s, early 2000s, I suppose around the time when there was a huge increase in the number of member countries in the European Union. So now all of a sudden, there were children coming from far and wide. And they that difficult in terms of I suppose there really were kind of left at our own discretion as how to deal with it. I suppose it was new to the whole country. So at that time, there was, I suppose maybe not, I wouldn't say lack of support, the support was probably there. But everybody, I suppose, including they felt the Department and everybody was trying to figure out what was the best way to manage the situation. But as the time went on, and from you know, speaking to the teachers that have been there right through it all, they would have highlighted the fact that there was documents, there was policy documents, there was support given that has been really helpful. For example, you know, the NCCA had Intercultural Education Guidelines¹, there

¹ National Council for Curriculum & Assessment (NCCA). 2005. Intercultural Education Guidelines for Primary Schools. Dublin: NCCA. Available from: https://www.curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/236745b0-a222-4b2a-80b1-42db0a3c7e4c/Intercultural-Education-in-Primary-School_Guidelines.pdf

was Diversity and Equality Guidelines in 2006. And the Diversity Equality and Inclusion Charter² in 2016, these policy documents have been huge, and they were highlighted, particularly by one principal, who had been there right up until 2017. So, you know, support has really changed and has developed, and it's there for the teachers now, so I found that it was difficult at the start, there's still challenges, the current teachers said, there are still challenges, but there is support there now for them, you know, documents for them to refer to, and the support there to help manage these challenges.

Aimie 07:57

What did you learn then, from having done your research?

Richard 08:00

I think, for myself, as a teacher, I definitely learned some fantastic strategies, you know, to use in the classroom, myself, and like in every school that I have taught in, as a substitute teacher, now as a teacher myself and also even on placements, I've learned strategies now, and I see myself thinking of these strategies, and thinking of these interviews, when I'm inside the classroom and a situation arises - thinking, okay, the research I did has been a huge help to me, because it gives me something, it gives me a base to work from as well, and a support to me as a newly qualified teacher, you know, information and strategies to help with issues of intercultural diversity. So, I was carrying out this research as part of my PME course and I suppose the idea behind it really was that we would gain research skills, which we absolutely did, and also, I suppose, to research an area in education that would help develop our own practice as a teacher. And, you know, one area that I had an interest in was EAL, which is English as an Additional Language and the integration of pupils from different countries into the, into the classroom.

Aimie 09:24

What was the best piece of advice you were given when you were doing your research?

Richard 09:28

The best piece of advice, I got lots of good advice, but I suppose one thing that always sticks like there is a lot of reading to do in terms of your research, you know, you really helped this research to be a success. So it's to keep on top of that, but I think the best advice we got was that for the summer period, when we were off, even just do one reading a day, you know, it might take you 15 minutes, but for me, by doing that it really made...It is what it's work, it's hard work. But if you pile everything up, there's gonna be pressure on you. But if you can keep that pressure at a minimum, it will be much more enjoyable process and you learn a lot more so by doing one reading a day, over the summer period there when I had no other deadlines to meet and no other placements or

² Department of Children and Youth Affairs. 2016. Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Education. Dublin: Government publications. Available from: <https://assets.gov.ie/38186/c9e90d89d94b41d3bf00201c98b2ef6a.pdf>

essays to be doing that really helped with my research. So that was probably one of the best bits of advice that I got.

Aimie 10:25

Has that helped you now as a teacher?

Richard 10:27

Absolutely, I think it's just not to let things pile up. You know, I think as a teacher, every teacher will be able to empathize with the fact that there's always something different comes to your door, in terms of paperwork, you obviously have a lot of planning to do, you have a lot of, you know, reflecting to do and just general paperwork for different situations. And it is very easy to just start stacking that up, as it would have been with readings in the in the research to just say look like I'll get it there, but I'll read it another time. All of a sudden, you've 30 readings to do in two days, or you have 30 pieces of paperwork to do inside the classroom. So that organization, I think it's an organization skill and as a teacher, you need to be organized. It definitely helped me as I say, I'm, I'm happy that I'm quite organized on the classroom, I keep on top of paperwork and planning and things of that. And that helps my practice as a teacher, my job as a teacher, because I'm more effective. If I'm under pressure with paperwork, I'm not as effective as a teacher. So it's definitely helped with that side of things

Aimie 11:31

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Aimie 11:44

What part of the process did you find most enjoyable?

Richard 11:47

The interviews without a doubt? You know, like the reading is great, but some of the reading as you can imagine, you're going through and you're thinking, is this really helping? So the reading, I found some wonderful stuff reading but the interviews were massive. That was the most enjoyable part for me. I mean, you're speaking to people that have first hand experience of what you're interested in, you know, so and you can focus it, you can focus the questions. So, you know, they're so effective. They're so you're not wasting any time with the interviews. And you learn so much. And I learned so much from the interviewees, they were so accommodating and so honest, I felt, you know, they're just they really engaged in the, in the research with me. And yeah, definitely, I just found them really, really, really interesting.

Aimie 12:35

So it was a good thing that you had an opportunity to actually talk to people.

Richard 12:38

Oh, absolutely. Yeah, I think I think So if, for me, if I was to offer, you know, advice myself to some of the research, I think, if you can, if you can do it in that qualitative, where you have interviews, I think it's massive, because the interviews for me were just brilliant, they're really, really informed my research massively, you know, so I just talking to people who have first hand experience, that was the, that was the key.

Richard 13:05

And that's the thing as well, I feel like if I hadn't done a case study, if I was just picking out teachers at random for my sample you could be getting teachers and you could spend 15 minutes doing an interview with them and they're really kind of telling you at the end of it, I don't have that much experience with intercultural, whereas this case study was more focused, and they all had first-hand experience. So it really helped, you know, so I found the interviews great. Things like questionnaires you see as well. I know they're in a different style of research. They're good. But you know, for something like this, you wanted to get the first-hand the real experience to the stories and the memories and the firsthand experiences was what was important.

Aimie 13:47

Okay, so what are your top tips for engaging in teacher research? So whether it's doing a dissertation or actually doing research in your classroom?

Richard 13:56

First of all, I suppose it's like I was saying about the advice - it's to stay organized in any, any research centers, and to just you have deadlines, and you have people especially so for teacher research, you know, we had a fantastic lecturer helping us and set us deadlines, and there was once or twice yeah, as organized as I thought I was, there was times where you just didn't meet maybe a deadline. But looking back, if I had have made the deadline, it would have made things easier. So organizing yourself getting organized and trying to stick to deadlines as well - I want to get these interviews done by this date; I'm going to get these questionnaires done; I'm going to get these readings done. If you can be organized, if you can get things done as you plan and you can do it. Listen, as busy as we were in the PME and we were busy. It is a very, very hectic course. There was time to get these things done but what happens is that at times we can leave things build up as they said, and that's where it gets becomes hard but if you can stay on top of it I found when I did stay on top of my research in terms of being organized, it was a breeze and it was enjoyable because you're really, I suppose you're you're taking in what you're reading, you're, you're really good at giving yourself the time to go through the interviews properly, and you're really learning from it. Whereas if you're doing 10 readings in two days, that's a hard thing to do. And you're not, you're not actually doing it right, then my best bit of advice to anyone doing it, get yourself organized right from the start, don't put it off from day one, do something you're interested in as well, actually, if I could say that, on top of that, do research something you're interested in, find

something to a small bit of reading and find something you're interested in, don't just pick something for the sake of getting this done, do something that you actually have an interest in, that will also help it. And then once you have that, get going, get organized, get some advice on how to start and get going on it get reading, and stay organized.

Aimie 15:46

Do you ever find yourself thinking about the research that you did now in the classroom?

Richard 15:51

Absolutely. As I said previously, like that often, whether it was as a substitute teacher, where am I got a week or two was working in a certain school, and there may have been a lot of intercultural diversity or even in the school, I'm in now, like, in every school that I've been in, you know, there has been intercultural diversity. So you do face it, and the things that I learned in the research, especially from the interviews, from talking to teachers that had first hand experience, the stuff I learned there, is invaluable. Like, it's just wonderful. It's so it's such a big help, to me, you know, and also even stuff that I learned from the readings, just doing the readings, you've strategies that teachers have done internationally. So things you know, as I said earlier, about using the the language, the child's own language, I find now if a child is struggling with English, it can be frustrating, they could have wonderful polish. So if you can give them a book every now and then in polish their love it, and they're not getting turned off, you don't want them to get turned off. And so little ideas like that, or other ideas that I definitely thought were fantastic. I have suggested this, or will suggest it say and I've suggested in our schools is intercultural, intercultural days, learning about the different cultures, the teachers that I interviewed told me that they were fantastic experiences. And it just really helped the children to integrate properly. So things like those intercultural days, I really think they're a great, great thing to do as well.

Aimie 17:21

Do you think it was worthwhile, then, that you did this particular research for you as a teacher?

Richard 17:27

Oh, yeah, definitely. Definitely, as I said, in the last 20 years, the demographics of this country have completely changed. You know, in my research, I, there was one stat of 612,000 people speak a different language at home of a population of four and a half to 5 million. So that's a big, big number. So there is, for me I could see it that this was a challenge and an opportunity that I was going to face in school. So I wanted, I suppose for me, the benefit that I've got out of it is I've got strategies and ideas, to manage challenges. But I've also got ideas, to utilize the opportunities that are there as a result of intercultural diversity.

Aimie 18:09

What kind of opportunities?

Richard 18:10

I said, the intercultural education days, getting the children to even we do things in school like 'interest talks' and new kids love to talk about the home country. So giving them that opportunity to come up and tell the rest of their class about their home country, it's good for them to do that. But it's also good for every child in the class to learn about it, they're fantastic opportunities. And for me, as a teacher, it's to be open to learning about different countries, that's where you would for me as a teacher, I would feel that instead of just immersing them in English, and kind of totally ignoring the fact that they're from Poland, or from Pakistan, I'm to find out about that country, you're learning, they're learning and the whole class are learning. So there's huge opportunities, you just have to make use of them.

Aimie 18:56

If you were allowed to put up a billboard, at the entrance of your college - that students and teachers will see every day - what would it say?

Richard 19:04

I think, I probably not the best person to be designing these things, I would never do in advertising. But I think for me, and just talking to classmates, people are a little bit afraid of research, I think they find it's a big job, it's a hard job. But as I said to you, if you stay organized, and you're doing something that you're interested in, it will be a success. So it's encouraged people to not be afraid of research, I would simply be saying, you know, I'd use four words, Learn, Explore, Discover, Research.

Richard 19:36

So I just think, definitely, people should engage in research and do something that they're interested in and they'll enjoy it. And they go out to like, I would say, as with any teacher that is teaching a class where there is intercultural diversity, that take that little bit of time, you know, give yourself that time to do a small bit of reading. Listen, I know as teachers we're very busy. but just taking a bit of time will make your life easier and that child's life easier. That's what I got from the research that there is documents out there. There's documents, the NCCA documents; the Department of Education documents; there is policy documents that can help. And there's also some lovely articles on this topic as well, that you could look up and you just by Googling it, you might get some information, definitely take the time to do a little bit of reading. And of course, the other thing I'd say as well is that what I got from the interviewees is to talk to the parents to get them on board with what you're doing, and listen to their concerns or their ideas on how to best help the child because they're the primary educator and they will be your best resource. Definitely talk to the parents as well.

20:49

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