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Volume 3

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Contents

Foreword

We are very pleased to publish Volume Three of the Hibernia College Education Papers. As part of the Professional Master of Education programme, students complete a 10,000-word dissertation during their research module. They choose a research topic from four different theme areas: (1) Teaching, Learning and Assessment, (2) ICT, (3) Psychological, Sociological and Historical and (4) Inclusion and Differentiation. In this publication, graduate teachers cover a diverse range of research areas, for example, the inclusion of children with special needs; music engagement; the delivery of Science education; and the 'Friends for Life' programme to name just a few.

Their success in choosing such a variety of thought-provoking projects bears testament to their steadfast commitment to research whilst completing a demanding course. This year, we are especially delighted that some of our top-performing graduate teachers in the Professional Master of Education in Post Primary Education join our Primary graduates in showcasing their research activities.

The impetus of this publication is to not only showcase high-quality research of our current graduate teachers but to provide and disseminate models of good research practice to our future students in the School of Education. We pay tribute to the dedication and support of our research supervisors in encouraging our student teachers to not only engage with research in a professional way but to instil a culture of teachers as researchers. We continue to prioritise the value of research and are proud to disseminate this body of student work as a collection of key research issues that permeate Irish education today.

Ms Mary Kelly

Head of School of Education

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Director of Research

An Exploration of the Experiences and Attitudes of Female Teachers to the Teaching of Physical Education in the Irish Primary School, by Seoda Fitzgerald

Biography

Seoda Fitzgerald is a qualified Primary school teacher and a graduate of Hibernia College, where she completed the Professional Master of Education (PME) in Primary Education. She also holds a BA Honours degree in Geography and Business from Maynooth University. She attributes the commitment and dedication of her parents to education as her inspiration to teach. She loves to promote Drama and Creative dance in the classroom to enable spaces that offer children the opportunity to think creatively and reflectively in ways that build confidence.

An Exploration of the Experiences and Attitudes of Female Teachers to the Teaching of Physical Education in the Irish Primary School, by Seoda Fitzgerald

Research supervisor: Dr AnnNoelle Bennett

Abstract

This project explored experiences and attitudes female teachers hold in the teaching of Physical Education (PE) in Irish classrooms. Constituting over 80% of the State's primary school teachers, female teachers are integral to the teaching of PE. Research focused on the six curriculum strands: athletics; dance; games; outdoor and adventure; gymnastics and aquatics. A mixed method approach was undertaken. While findings demonstrated that most teachers enjoy teaching the subject, there exists a lack of adequate training for the delivery of the more technical aspects of the curriculum strands. Findings further illustrated a need for teachers to avail of more training and facilities to increase competency in teaching the subject including the need for specialist teachers and community initiatives to further their support in delivering the subject.

Keywords: Physical Education, curriculum strands, competency

Introduction

The National Physical Activity Plan 2016 highlights that only 19% of primary school children meet the outlined physical recommendations, with girls less likely to reach them than boys (Department of Health, 2016, p.3). Despite such statistics, during her school placements, the researcher observed that primary school teachers are enthusiastic in their efforts to deliver an effective programme but observed there exists a lack of confidence regarding more specialised and technical strands of the subject. These impediments are reflected in the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2016) survey on 'Priorities for Primary Education' in stating that teachers seek further professional development, access to specialised teachers, and more suitable facilities (NCCA, 2016, p.23). This study focused on the individual strands of the PE curriculum specialisation to provide a small but significant contribution to these areas of concern.

Literature Review

The 1990 Report of the Review Body on the 1971 Primary Curriculum demonstrates that Inspectors considered the designed curriculum as appropriate and manageable. Teachers have articulated, however, that the programme is very ambitious and requires specialised expertise (INTO, 2007). A 2005 INTO curriculum survey found that 93% of respondents (INTO, 2008) taught Physical Education. Many surveyed respondents reported the teaching of only some of the strands, stating that games were mostly available to the children in their schools while 30% stated that 'aquatics were never taught' (INTO, 2007, p.12).

Morgan and Hansen (2008) contend that 'inadequate financial resources and facilities impede the full implementation of the curriculum' (Morgan and Hansen, 2008, p.507). A lack of resources has been also raised in the INTO 2005 survey findings, which stated that physical education facilities in Irish primary schools were lacking, with many schools 'relying on inadequate and unsatisfactory halls' (INTO, 2007, p.25). International research further highlights that many classroom teachers find it a challenge to implement a PE programme. Carney and Chedzoy (1998) articulated that a lack of confidence amongst teachers was directly related to a lack of belief in their own ability to teach specific skills and related activities effectively.

Morgan and Hansen (2007, p.103) found that many classroom teachers consider themselves in a good position to know their pupils best, understand and cater for their individual needs. In contrast, when comparing specialists with non-specialist teaching behaviour, Faucette and Patterson (1990) suggest specialists are more effective in delivering high levels of activity for the students. In the Irish context, the PE curriculum recommends teachers to share their 'expertise with other staff members' (DES, PE Curriculum, 1999b, p.24). Primary school teachers have, however, received a minimal amount of in-service in PE in recent years (Siedentop, 1991). Fletcher and Mandigo (2012, p.372) contend that 'practical and achievable ways are required to improve teachers' attitudes and experiences of teaching PE'. Primary schools in the United Kingdom have benefitted from targeted funding in the provision of physical education and sport. Specialist teachers from different disciplines were commissioned to train teaching staff, provide resources in specialist techniques, and liaise with them on an on-going basis (Ofsted, 2014). This model of funding could effectively address challenges associated with

teachers' lack of confidence in delivering the PE programme in the Irish primary school context. Arising from the literature review, the following research question emerged: What are the perspectives of female primary school teachers in relation to teaching Physical Education?

Methodology

A mixed methodology was used to address the research question. A mixed method approach 'allows findings to be corroborated or questioned by comparing data produced by different methods' (Denscombe, 2010, p.133). Strauss and Corbin (1998) also advise that the use of qualitative and quantitative research methods should not only complement each other but there should be an element of interplay between the two.

A qualitative methodology in the form of semi-structured interviews was used to ascertain the opinions of female teachers towards the teaching of PE. The methodology was chosen on the basis that this approach explores 'what people are doing and thinking' (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p.11). The interviews allowed the researcher to observe the attitudes of female teachers to teaching the PE curriculum. Following the guidelines of Cohen et al. (2003), the researcher avoided using too many open-ended questions to minimise interviewee fatigue.

Questionnaires were also employed to measure teacher attitudes towards the teaching of the six content strands of the primary school physical education curriculum. The questionnaire was designed to allow respondents (n=20) to respond to 28 questions. A purposive sample was used. Female teachers were selected from both urban and rural primary schools with the highest percentage from urban schools. The inclusion criteria involved only female teachers since male teachers only account for 15.1% of all primary teachers (CSO, 2013). The researcher considered that by using female teachers as participants, insightful evaluations on the research topic would be garnered. Years of teaching ranged from under five years to more than twenty years to include teachers with varying degrees of service.

Ethical approval was sought and granted from Hibernia College's Ethics Committee before carrying out this research project. The research process was undertaken in accordance with the standards outlined by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018). In line with GDPR, no identifiers were used in the project. Pseudonyms were used throughout.

Findings

45% of respondents indicated they were not involved in any sport outside of school. A further 45% indicated they were involved to a small extent while 10% indicated they were involved in a lot of sport. 75% of participants stated that one hour per week was allocated to PE, which is in line with the curriculum requirement. The teacher participant interviewed with the longest service stated that very little emphasis was placed on the teaching of PE in her training while the two younger participants asserted that there was some training, but this amounted to less than 10% of the course. 95% of surveyed respondents admitted to receiving fewer than four days of training, with one participant stating more. Not surprisingly, 60% of respondents would be willing to attend further in-service training in PE, with 40% stating they would be very willing.
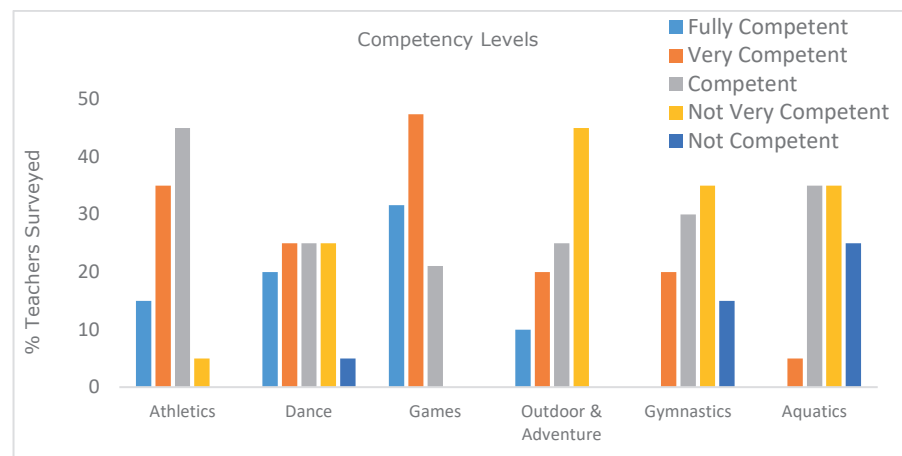
Figure 1: Competency Levels in Teaching the six strands of the PE Curriculum

Athletics

In relation to competency levels of teaching the six strands of the PE curriculum, most teachers (45%) considered themselves as 'competent'. 35% stated they were 'very competent' while 15% of teachers surveyed appraised their level as 'fully competent'. Only 5% of those surveyed indicated that they did not feel 'competent'. Of the six strands, athletics was considered as one of the easier areas to teach due to the availability of

necessary equipment as well as explicit student interest: '*children love running, racing, sprints and relays*' (P2).

Dance

70% of teachers surveyed indicated a range of competence from 'competent' to 'fully competent'. Data extracted from the interviews demonstrated that the availability of excellent online resources was a major contributory factor to their love of teaching dance.

Games

No teacher in the study expressed a negative level of competence in this area. 35% of those surveyed considered games as a strand that is natural in children, thereby teachers reported it as one of the easier strands to teach.

Outdoor and Adventure

55% of teachers surveyed expressed competence in the teaching of outdoor and adventure activities. 45% indicated that they did not consider themselves as 'very competent' in teaching this strand. Issues of unreliable weather conditions and health and safety concerns were highlighted in this strand.

Gymnastics

An alarming 50% of teachers surveyed and interviewed expressed a lack of competence when teaching the strand, Gymnastics. Health and safety concerns were reported as a barrier to the teaching of the strand, as well as many stating they did not have sufficient qualifications to teach it.

Aquatics

A notable 60% of surveyed teachers admitted to either not feeling very competent or competent at all when teaching this strand. Teachers in this study were more comfortable allowing local swimming instructors deliver this strand. 55% of teachers indicated a lack of facilities as an attributing factor. 35% of teachers considered a lack of training as the key issue. 10% of teachers cited a lack of teacher confidence, which suggests that higher levels of competence could be achieved if the lack of facilities and training were addressed.

Discussion

Teachers demonstrated a positive attitude to implementing the programme especially in strands where they consider they have some degree of competence and expertise. Participants who expressed a less favourable attitude to the teaching of PE identified the teaching of gymnastics and aquatics as very challenging. Participants attributed a lack of appropriate training, poor access to adequate resources, and a fear of injury as reasons for not fully teaching these strands.

The correlation between teacher involvement in sport outside of school and the competence levels in teaching PE indicates that those teachers who engage in sport outside of school express a greater level of competence to teach it. Notably, the influence of training time allocated to the teaching of the subject in training colleges was related to perceived teacher competency levels in delivering the programme in schools. Almost half of teachers in the study stated that less than 9% of their college training was spent on the teaching of PE regardless of which educational institution they attended. Since the introduction of the four-year Bachelor of Education and Professional Master programmes in Education in 2012, student teacher placements have increased time slots in an attempt to increase more opportunities for student teachers to practise the teaching of the subject.

In relation to in-service training days, a total of 95% of teachers acknowledged attending less than four follow-up days for training in the subject since they commenced their teaching career. The establishment of the PDST in 2010 has revised the format of in-service training. Professional development opportunities for teachers of PE are now provided in the form of support services and resources.

The Six Strands of the PE Curriculum

Findings ranged from the positive, emphasising the enjoyable experiences that arise from the teaching of some strands to very challenging experiences in teaching other strands.

Athletics

95% of teachers expressed a positive attitude towards the teaching of athletics. This opinion is in line with the curriculum that involves a range of jumping, running and throwing activities making it 'easily adaptable to suit different abilities' (DES, PE Teacher Guidelines, 1999a, p.6).

Dance

Dance is a strand that is currently popular and promotes creativity. Such was the positivity towards dance that many teachers expressed a desire to learn different genres of dance to expand their teaching repertoire of the strand.

Games

Games ranked as one of the highest competency levels. Findings demonstrate that competence of this strand was largely derived from the success of the initiative Cumann na mBunscol in providing an excellent model that supports Gaelic games.

Outdoor and Adventure Activities
Findings illustrate minimal use of this strand. Reasons for this low uptake relate to time constraints, effort and organisation. Concerns about health and safety issues were also raised.

Gymnastics

Notably, 50% of teachers expressed a lack of competence in teaching gymnastics. The findings show that there is a perceived level of skill required to teach this strand that is beyond the capabilities of the teachers in this research. The need for qualified gymnastic specialists to deliver this strand was cited by 30% of teachers in the study.

Aquatics
Findings from the data are comparable to the teaching of gymnastics. 60% of teachers in the study acknowledge that they do not consider themselves as competent to teach the aquatics strand.

Impediments to the delivery of the PE curriculum

Participants identified a lack of training as the greatest challenge in this study. In contrast, studies carried out in Sweden show time constraints as the main barrier to fully implementing the PE programme (Pushe and Gerber, 2005). More recent research indicates that 'a lot of exercises are decontextualised and that little time is devoted to a particular content' (Larsson and Karlefors, 2015, p.585). Time issues were not raised as a major concern for the teacher participants in this study. Consistent with research from Sweden, however, a lack of 'appropriate facilities' (Pushe and Gerber, 2005, p.609) were identified by participating teachers for most of the strands.

Given the prevalence of overweight and obesity issues at an average of 20% amongst 7-year-old first class girls and approximately 3.3% higher amongst girls than boys over a three wave data collection round (HSE, 2017, p.4), the findings and recommendations from this research are both relevant and timely. Findings emphasise a need for what (P2) calls, '*the post of responsibility'* liaison person to oversee the maintenance of PE equipment in schools. The literature review identified the classroom teacher as best placed in meeting the individual needs of each child (Morgan and Hansen, 2007, p.103). Teachers were content and confident in teaching most strands with the exception of gymnastics and aquatics, which they considered demanded a specialist teacher for content delivery, safety, and technical reasons. The INTO (2007) advocate a PE specialist for larger schools and the sharing of PE specialists amongst smaller schools. Any such initiative would, however, demand additional funding.

Conclusion

This study demonstrated a lack of confidence amongst teachers, insufficient teacher training as well as inadequate facilities that act as barriers to the delivery of the Physical Education subject that embeds 'meaningful learning experiences' (Morgan and Bourke, 2008, p.26). As a result of completing this study, this researcher has become more aware of the importance of supporting and strengthening competency levels in the teaching of the PE programme alongside the need to contribute to further research into future appropriate interventions to support best practices in teaching the subject.

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A Qualitative Study into Teacher's Attitudes towards Inclusion of Children with Special Education Needs in the Mainstream Classroom, by Sinéad O'Donnell

Biography

Sinéad O'Donnell is a qualified primary school teacher. She completed her undergraduate degree in Law and European Studies at the University of Limerick in 2010. Following this, Sinéad completed a Master's in Criminology and Criminal Justice at University College Dublin. During this time, she developed an interest in teaching. She decided to apply for a teaching post in Dubai and worked there for four years, teaching infants to Grade two. Sinéad returned to Ireland to undertake the Professional Master of Education (PME) in Primary Education at Hibernia College. During her school placements, she developed an interest in inclusion and considers research in this area to be invaluable to her role as a teacher.

A Qualitative Study into Teacher's Attitudes towards Inclusion of Children with Special Education Needs in the Mainstream Classroom, by Sinéad O'Donnell

Research supervisor: Dr Michele Dunleavy

Abstract

This research explored the attitudes of mainstream classroom teachers towards inclusion of special education needs students, specifically focusing on ASD. There are several factors that can foster or hinder inclusion that include resources, personnel, and training. The researcher was interested in the ways in which teachers perceive such components as influencing their ability to create inclusive spaces for learning in their classrooms. A qualitative methodological choice was chosen and semi-structured interviews were used (n=5). Findings demonstrate that teachers experience several challenges that include a lack of appropriate personnel, equipment, resources, training, and language barriers.

Keywords: Inclusion, special education needs, mainstream classroom, autistic spectrum disorder

Introduction

Over the last number of years in Ireland, limited research has been carried out to investigate the attitudes of teachers towards inclusion of children with special education needs within a mainstream classroom. Inclusion signifies the opportunity for all students to participate in a mainstream class where the teacher and school caters for individual needs. Inclusion has become an essential element in Irish education. On careful analysis of the literature, there is a lack of recent research into how Irish teachers cope with inclusion, out of which the researcher considers this as a researchable area of interest. Against a backdrop of economic difficulties, Ireland has suffered from cutbacks in education, and this may have impacted teachers from an inclusion perspective. Through the experience of school placement, the researcher is cognisant of a wide variety of needs and learning styles that exist in classrooms. The research aims to examine the attitudes of Irish primary teachers towards inclusion and to ascertain what coping strategies

are used that prioritise inclusion of children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in their classrooms.

Literature Review

Over the last 20 years, the Irish education system has become more inclusive, moving from an 'ideological journey from a segregationist, through to integrationist, to an inclusionist perspective' (Drudy and Kinsella, 2009, p.73). Previously, the practice involved the segregation of students with special education needs (SEN) as outlined in the *Commission of Inquiry into Mental Handicap Report* in 1965. Slee (2004) argues that the idea of inclusion has travelled so much that it has become 'jetlagged'. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, evidence has shown that children with SEN fared better when educated alongside their peers both academically and socially (Avarmidis et al., 2002). Inclusion implies a 'restructuring of mainstream schooling that every school can accommodate every child irrespective of disability' (Avarmidis et al., 2002, p.131).

Inclusion was introduced legislatively throughout the late 1990s and the early 2000s through the *Education Act 1998* and the *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act* (EPSEN) in 2004. The *Disability Act 2005* followed the EPSEN Act. The United Nations policies on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 1989 and 2006 respectively have enshrined rights for all children to be treated equally. Avramidis et al. (2000) point out that an overview of studies on teachers' attitudes shows that those who were not involved in an inclusive programme expressed a more negative view than those teachers who were actively participating in an inclusive programme. Drudy and Kinsella's study (2009) further identifies an unwillingness on the part of school personnel to engage in collaborative problem-solving relating to the effective inclusion of pupils with special education needs.

What is Autistic Spectrum Disorder?

Autistic spectrum disorder is defined as a 'neurobiological disorder that affects the way a person communicates and relates to other people' (Marshall, 2004, p.viii). The disorder was first researched by Leo Kanner in 1943. Baron-Cohen (1997) later coined the term 'mindblindness'. Wing (1996, p.208) expresses an uncertainty about the benefits of inclusion for the child with autism, stating that 'Many children with autistic disorders, because of the nature of their impairments, do not learn by copying their age peers'.

She highlights countless adults she has talked to, who as children, suffered in silence due to teasing and bullying at the hands of their peers and are still dealing with the affects as adults (Wing, 1996, p.209).

Arising from the literature review, the researcher identified the following research questions:

1. What are the barriers to successful inclusion?
2. What can be done to enhance the inclusion of children with ASD into mainstream classroom settings?
3. In what ways are teachers adequately trained to deal with inclusion?

Methodology

A qualitative methodology was chosen to analyse attitudes and opinions of teachers. A qualitative methodology involves collecting data the researcher will interpret in some way. In gathering data for this study, teachers were interviewed (n=5) — four females and one male. Interviews were one-to-one and semi-structured with open-ended questions. The teachers were from a variety of different schools located in the west of Ireland. All teachers in the study worked in mainstream classrooms and had experience in working with children with ASD. Participants were asked to read an information sheet and sign a consent letter prior to any data collection. The interviews were then completed and the data transcribed ad verbatim.

Using thematic analysis, it became apparent that there were common patterns that emerged across the data, which in turn, formed themes. Thematic analysis was used as it 'is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data. It minimally organises and describes your data set in (rich) detail' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.79). As this study analysed attitudes and opinions around the topic of inclusion, it was important to identify whether there were common themes in the responses. The researcher was mindful of both validity and reliability. Reflection is an important element in teaching and is also important in education research. It is important for researchers to be aware of the research purpose throughout the process. By engaging with a reflexive process, the researcher worked to ensure the interview questions were valid. By reviewing the data to ascertain consistency, the researcher ensured reliability. Throughout the research process, the researcher worked to establish that 'Reliability is the extent to

which a test or procedure produces similar results under constant conditions on all occasions' (Bell, 2014, p.117).

Ethical approval was sought and granted from Hibernia College's Ethics Committee. The research was undertaken in line with the Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA, 2011). Participants signed consent forms and were reminded of their anonymity and their right to request that the interview be halted if they so wished. The names of teachers and schools or any identifiers were removed in the study. Interview recordings and transcriptions were safely stored in line with GDPR.

Findings

The results were presented under four themes, which emerged during the data analysis process.

Theme One: Lack of Confidence

All participants expressed a lack of confidence when it came to their pre-teacher training for educating children with special needs. One participant emphasised that she did not have sufficient training, stating, '*No, I had very little training in how to best support children with special needs*'. Another respondent highlighted a lack of confidence, commenting that, '*No, I was not confident in my ability from teacher training. My confidence has developed from classroom experience and from working with children with needs*.' Participants identified that many of the skills and knowledge they have were acquired after they qualified through practical experience alone: '*No, I don't believe that there is enough SEN training for teachers and they are expected to deal with it as soon as they enter the world of work…After spending a couple of years as a resource teacher, only now can I say I would be more able to support children with SEN in the classroom*'.

Theme Two: Resources

Access to resources was a recurring theme that emerged in the data analysis. Participants noted the need to access manipulatives in particular, along with greater access to specialist expertise, increased special needs assistant hours and staff, and more professional development. One participant articulated that they '*feel that children with special needs should have more resources readily available to them including manipulatives and learning games*.'

Another response stated, *'with regards resources, I feel that quite simply, more resources need to be provided to classes, teachers and students in order for children with special needs to thrive in a classroom environment.'* Other comments highlighted the need for more continuous support from specialists with expertise: '*More advice and support given to teachers and SNAs by specialists or psychologists in specific areas of need. For example, speech and language therapists'.*

Theme Three: Uncertainty

The theme of uncertainty emerged from the question, '*Would SEN students be better catered for in a special school as opposed to mainstream*?' Participants provided no definitive answer to this question. A variation of responses were given that veered in the direction of uncertainty. One participant considered the context of the case in question, stating: '*Depending on the needs of the child. Children with mild learning difficulties/needs, in my opinion are best suited to mainstream education to develop social skills and relationships with others. I think children with more severe needs benefit more from special schools where they have access to specialist teachers, nurses, sensory rooms and occupational therapists, etc.*'

Theme Four: Barriers to successful inclusion

The most common barriers that the researcher identified were as follows: (a) lack of appropriate personnel; (b) equipment; (c) large classes; (d) difficulty securing an SNA for a child; (e) lack of resources; (f) range of abilities; (g) lack of training; and (h) language barriers. Identifying these challenges reflects the difficulties teachers encounter when implementing strategies for an inclusive classroom. From analysing the data, it would seem that the greatest barrier is finance.

Discussion

Lack of confidence

Participants demonstrated a lack of confidence in relation to pre-teacher training. This corroborates with the study Drudy and Kinsella (2009) carried out whereby many participants considered a comprehensive pre-service education of teachers as one of the essential factors for successful inclusion: '*Other prerequisites for inclusion identified by study participants included adequate pre-service education of teachers followed by ongoing opportunities for continuing professional development specifically related to educating pupils with special needs within mainstream classrooms*' (Drudy and Kinsella, 2009, p.657). Participants in this study also indicated that they were not satisfied with their level of pre-teacher training.

Resources

Schools are encouraged to be inclusive, '*having regard to the resources available*' (Drudy and Kinsella, 2009, p.654). 'Having regard to the resources available' is a significant phrase identified in a number of the Acts that legislate for inclusion in Ireland. Kinsella (2005) suggested that such wording is left open to challenge, with inclusion as essentially a '*rights-based*' concept. This may give schools the choice to refuse to enrol a child with special educational needs if there are insufficient resources available. The lack of resources was a recurring theme in this small-scale study but reflects the broader question of how a lack of resources can counteract the rights of the child to education.

Uncertainty

The theme of uncertainty relates to an ambiguity regarding the severity of needs that should be catered for in a mainstream school setting. Participants expressed some level of hesitancy in relation to whether special schools would be better positioned to accommodate children with special needs and disability. Participants considered mainstream and special schools to have merits in developing the child's social skills. In contrast, special schools may have better resources and greater expertise as Drudy and Kinsella (2009, p.656) assert there are inextricable links between educational inclusion and social inclusion and emphasise the importance of all pupils being educated in their local schools.

Barriers to successful inclusion

The barriers identified to inclusion have created considerable frustration to teachers. From the data, it is explicit that the financial situation is hindering inclusion. The researcher is of the view that if Ireland could better equip schools, inclusion could be enhanced. Drudy and Kinsella (2009) affirm that, despite the Celtic Tiger boom, the expenditure on education has not reflected the rise in the overall public expenditure. Drudy and Kinsella (2009, p.649) state that a, 'portion of GDP devoted to educational expenditure is at 4.6%, still below the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) country average of 5.8%'. This statement relates to times of increased public expenditure and, even then, education was not as much of a priority in comparison to our OECD counterparts.

Conclusion

Overall, the research concludes that participants possess a positive attitude towards inclusion, but struggle due to a lack of resources, mainly due to a lack of finance. The cutbacks to education in Ireland were identified prior to undertaking the research as being a possible factor in hindering inclusion. The researcher now considers the lack of financial support as the main challenge to inclusion and this may have a negative impact on teachers. There are also limitations to the research carried out. The sample of participants used was small and findings demonstrated a lack of transferability. The researcher considers it would be worthwhile to examine a wider sample of teachers to ascertain whether teachers across the State share similar perspectives to those found in this sample. Such research would be beneficial for children with special needs and their inclusion within mainstream classes. The researcher is of the opinion that more financial support and further future studies into this area of research would facilitate more inclusive classrooms around the country.

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Teacher and Support Staff Perspectives on Supporting Students with ASD Transitioning Towards Adulthood, by Aoife Wai

Biography

Aoife is a Post Primary teacher, currently teaching Mathematics and Science in Catholic University School in Dublin. Aoife was awarded First Class Honours in the Professional Master of Education (PME) in Post Primary Education with Hibernia College. Prior to this, she undertook a BSc in Biotechnology at Dublin City University and subsequently gained a PhD in Applied Biochemistry. Aoife has worked as a postdoctoral researcher in The Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland and was a Business Support/Policy Executive with Science Foundation Ireland. During this time, she gained invaluable analytical and interpersonal skills necessary to the role of teaching science and mathematics. Aoife is passionate about inclusive education and has experienced first-hand the benefits of early intervention for children with ASD in accessing the Early Years curriculum. This experience has inspired her to realise her dream of becoming a teacher to apply her knowledge to further support inclusive education research within the Irish context.

Research Supervisor: Mr Frank Kehoe

Abstract

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurological, lifelong, developmental disability affecting how people perceive the world and interact with others. The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) recognises that previous research has focused on primary to post-primary transitions, highlighting the need for more interest in the post-primary supports required by students transitioning towards adulthood. This study sought to provide insights into current practice in an Irish post-primary school setting. A mixed-method approach was used to explore current levels of ASD specific training, its impact on staff comfort levels delivering supports and their perceptions and recommendations regarding current available supports within the research school. Findings highlighted the importance of a promptly implemented student-centred transition process to address the sudden support withdrawal students with ASD experience as they leave the managed environment of post-primary education.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder, Inclusive Education, Special Educational Needs, Transition Planning

Introduction

A key element of schooling involves enhancing the academic achievement of students. However, for students with ASD, preparation for adult life through vocational support is particularly important. It is estimated that there are over 65,000 people with ASD in Ireland of whom at least 15,000 are adults who are unemployed despite possessing 3rd level qualifications. According to DCU President, Professor Brian MacCraith (2016), 'The unemployment rate among people with ASD is currently around 80%, despite many of these people having excellent qualifications'. The transition towards adulthood represents a particularly vulnerable time for individuals with ASD due to increasingly complex socialisations and changes to routine. Research surrounding transitional supports for senior cycle students with ASD in

Ireland is limited. Researching mainstream post-primary staff perspectives on current supports for students with ASD should provide insight into the critical components of transition educational programs.

Literature Review

There is a growing need to understand the difficulties experienced by students with ASD as they move from post-primary education to further education and, ultimately, adult working life. Changes in the diagnostic criteria (APA, 2013) along with an increased awareness of autism has led to earlier diagnosis (Hansen, Schendel and Parner, 2015; Lundstrom, Reichenberg, Anckarsater, Lichtenstein, and Gillberg, 2015), resulting in significant increases in ASD diagnosis worldwide (Kopetz and Endowed, 2012). In Ireland, the need for appropriate and timely supports for school-age children has led to a number of investigative studies by the NCSE. One in every 65 students (1.5% prevalence rate) have an ASD diagnosis, meaning ASD is no longer considered a low-incidence SEN category (NCSE, 2016). Worldwide, educational inclusion is accepted as a basic human right (UNESCO, 2005). However, inclusive education for students with ASD in Ireland is a relatively new and complex concept (Banks and McCoy, 2017; Humphrey and Symes, 2011). This type of inclusion 'requires ongoing engagement, removing barriers to active involvement and participation in shared learning' (Cologon, 2014, p.20). Successful inclusion requires educational interventions informed by international best practice, tailored to the individual needs of students with ASD (Guldberg et al., 2011). It can be argued that schools should model inclusive practices by involving parents and students with SEN in transition planning. Curricular complexity grows substantially throughout post-primary education, where abstract thinking skills are increasingly required. Students with difficulties in this area can become separated from their peers, especially if educators fail to implement explicit teaching models recommended for students with ASD (Carrington and Gramham, 2001). Access to student profiles can be seen as an important consideration for professional awareness of organisational, social, and academic challenges faced by students with autism who are prone to bouts of anxiety, especially during examinations (West, Sweeting and Young, 2010). Supporting adulthood transitions can be understood as important for adolescents with ASD who experience multiple diverse communication, psychological, behavioural, and medical conditions (Mazurek and Kanne, 2010). Although major life changes can be challenging for many adolescents,

there is a unique set of trials for individuals on the autism spectrum, which encompass a wide range of transitional challenges (Arky, 2012; Forest, Horner, Lewis-Palmer, and Todd, 2004). Both the internal and external factors challenging successful transitions for students with autism highlight the complex additional supports that need to be addressed to improve transition outcomes. If prompt, careful, student focused transition preparation is not implemented, students with autism will be more likely to experience anxiety and exhibit regression (Shattuck et al., 2012). Exploring stakeholder perspectives on education and ASD internationally highlights key universal factors contributing to post-primary transition difficulties for students with ASD. Transition planning should be student-centred and established before adolescence. Effective planning involves collaboration along with excellent communication pathways between schools, educators, students, and their guardians (Middletown Centre for Autism, 2014b). Schools are well placed to offer support, especially facilitating the development of self-advocacy, self-determination, life and social skills, plus assessment and career awareness. This approach promotes motivation and increases the likelihood of students actively participating in their transition planning. The NCSE recommends the use of Individual Education Plans (IEP) and the development of outward links to specialist services and employment. A historic lack of focus in this area has led the NCSE to recommend greater research into post-school transitions. Access to autism awareness education programmes would greatly benefit the entire school community. Finally, support for parents during transition planning needs to be acknowledged.

Taking relevant research literature into account, this research sought to address the following questions:

1. What learning opportunities have teachers experienced in relation to supporting students with ASD?
2. What is their comfort level in supporting students with ASD under a variety of contexts (behavioural, educational, social/emotional, life skills)?
3. What are the professional developmental needs in this area, perceived challenges and successes in relation to supporting students with ASD in the current Irish education system?

Methodology

There are many types of mixed method designs; however, the focus for this study was on the Sequential Explanatory method (two different data-collection time points — quantitative data collected first and qualitative data collected last). This type of approach allows researchers to conduct in-depth studies and provide for a more meaningful interpretation of the data being investigated (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2010). This was a small-scale study where all staff members of the research school will have equal opportunities to become a candidate for questionnaire participation. The quantitative approach involved a research questionnaire to gain input from a variety of staff members (teachers, learning support, guidance counsellors and special needs assistants) to build a picture of the most effective transitional supports available and the challenges they encounter (n=20). To further inform this research, a qualitative approach was adopted. Semi-structured interviews were arranged with a small number of experienced staff members (n=4) from different departments within the research school.

Regarding methodological limitations, the research population was confined to a single educational setting inhibiting the generalisability of the research findings. Due to ethical considerations, children were not included in this study. The BERA guidelines (2018) requests educational researchers operate within an ethic of respect for their research participants. Prior to participation, all candidates were informed of their right to participation without duress. The rationale for their input and how it might be used and disseminated was disclosed. Questionnaires and interviews were open and transparent. In keeping with good practice, all participants were debriefed once the study concluded. This study also complied with the legal requirements of the Data Protection Act (1998) and GDPR where participants have the right to access any personal data stored on them. All data acquired during the research process has been secured in a secured location, safeguarded with encryption software to protect any identifying information.

Findings

Main quantitative findings from surveying staff (n=20) in the research school:
Questionnaire outcomes illustrated staff perceptions of their ASD specific training in relation to their comfort levels supporting students with ASD in a variety of contexts. Figure 1 highlights that the most common resources encountered by participants were 'Connecting with colleagues who have more training and experience' and 'Media'. This was closely followed by 'Learning from parents of students with ASD'.
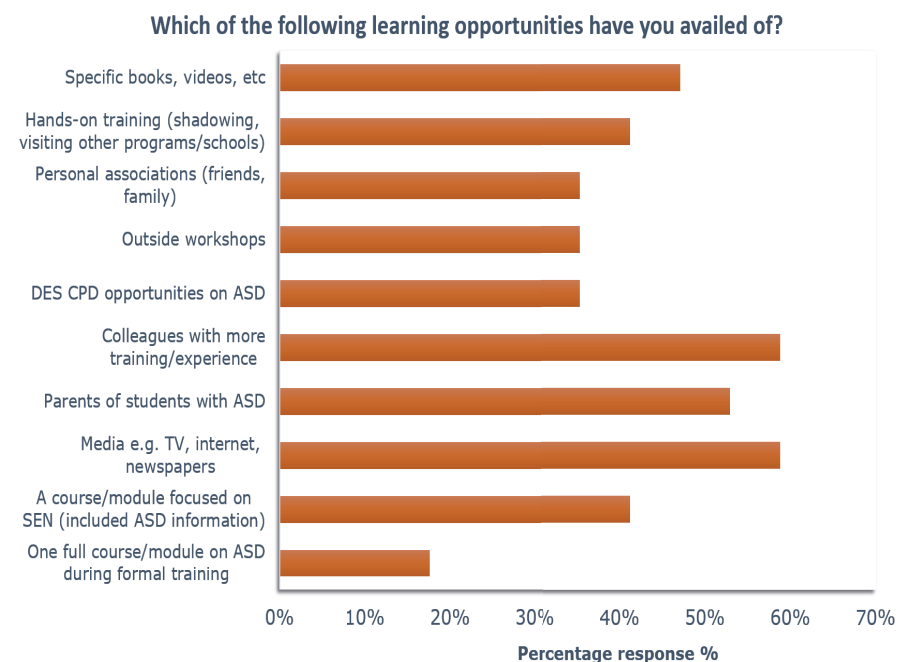

Figure 1: Learning opportunities experienced by participants

Nearly 70% of teachers surveyed did not receive any form of SEN education during their formal training. The majority of teachers surveyed (92%) had six plus years of professional experience. No teachers had access to ASD specific courses during their initial training period (Table 1). Given their job requirements, all support staff had attended ASD specific courses.

Table 1: Training course participation

Training Type	% Participation by Teachers	% Participation by Support Staff
Formal Training Course on SEN	31%	75%
Formal Training Course on ASD	0%	75%
Practical Training (Shadowing)	23%	75%
DES CPD on ASD	23%	75%
Workshops outside DES	23%	75%

Figure 2 below highlights teacher and support staff perspectives on attending a variety of training courses in the future.
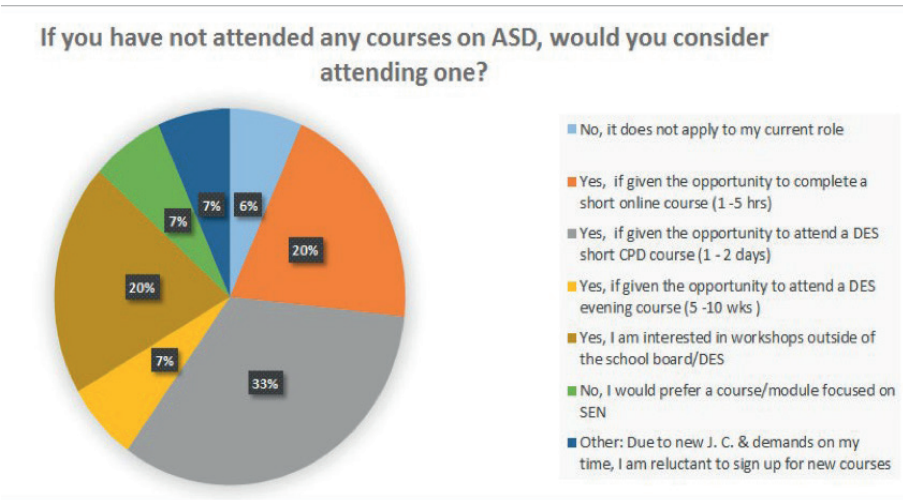

Figure 2: Participant perspectives on attending ASD specific training

Over half of mainstream teachers surveyed helped students with ASD in the areas of emotional support (anxiety), exam support, behavioural management and daily transitional supports. Teachers tended to collaborate with more experienced teachers and learning support staff but only occasionally enlisted the help of SNAs and outside supports (Table 2).

Table 2: Participant experience supporting students with ASD (Behavioural needs)

Behavioural Supports	Learning Support	SNA	Experienced Teacher	Outside Support
Teacher 1	✓		✓	✓
Teacher 2			✓	
Teacher 3			✓	
Teacher 4	✓	✓	✓	✓
Teacher 5				
Teacher 7				
Teacher 9	✓			
Teacher 12		✓		
Learning Support 1	✓	✓		
Learning Support 2	✓	✓		✓
Special Needs Assistant 1	✓			
Special Needs Assistant 2		✓		

Despite limitations of sample size, these outcomes highlight the collegiality of all participants when dealing with a variety of issues and transitional concerns. However, mainstream teachers could benefit from increased collaborations with SNAs, if time constraints were not an issue.
Figures 3 and 4 show over half of respondents experienced student involvement in the planning process on a 'case by case basis', regardless of whether they were senior or junior students.
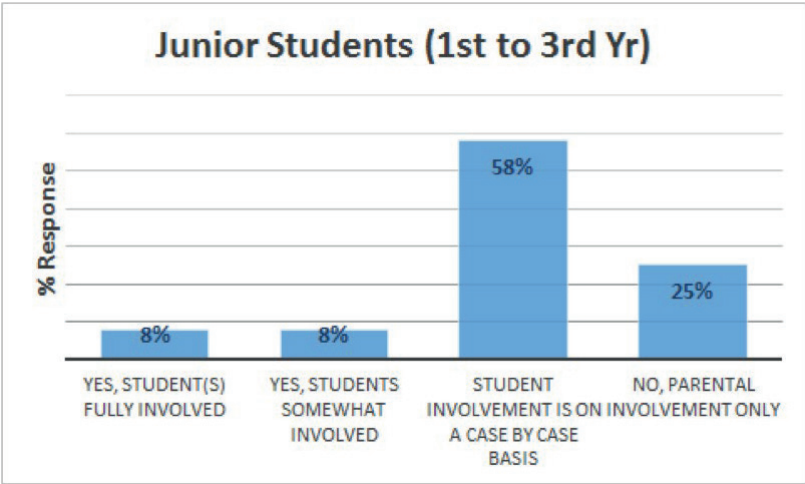
Figure 3: If you have experience with transition planning, were students involved?

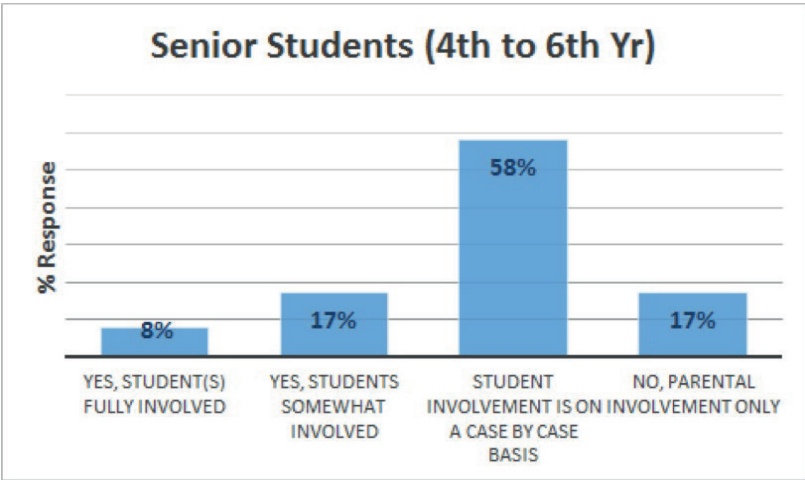*Figure 4: If you have experience with transition planning, were students involved?*

Figure 5 illustrates over 40% of teachers consider students should either be 'fully involved' or 'somewhat involved' in their transition planning process.
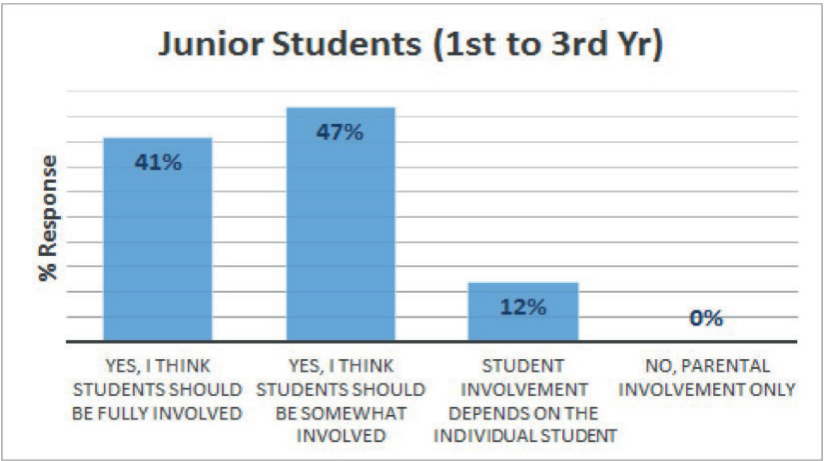

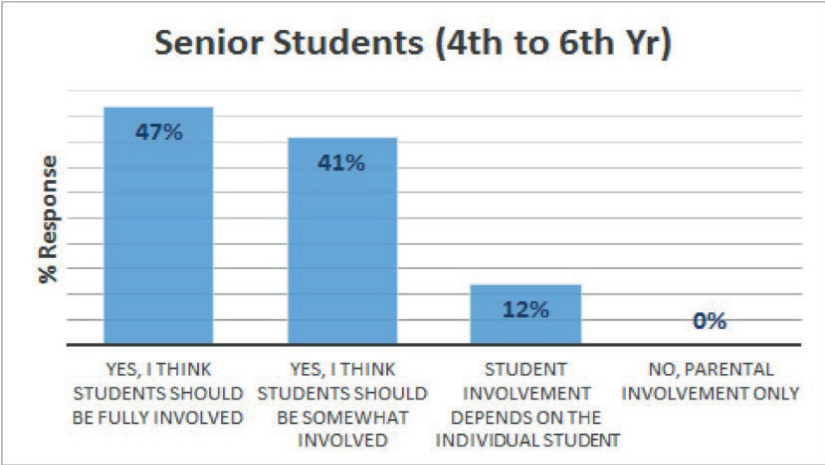*Figure 5: Participant perspective on student involvement in transition planning*

Figure 6: Participant perspective on student involvement in transition planning

A comparison of Figure 4 and 6 demonstrates a significant contrast between current practice and teaching beliefs. Over 40% of respondents believed students should be fully involved in the transition planning process; however, in practice, only 8% of cases were characterised as fully involving students. Both the questionnaire and interview outcomes highlighted factors affecting transition success and gave rise to numerous themes relating to students with ASD transitioning towards adulthood. Emerging themes most relevant to the research questions were selected as recommended by Ryan and Bernard (2003).

Main qualitative findings from semi-structured interviews (n = 4):

Three key themes emerged from data analysis in the context of effective transition support provision for students with ASD. Autism awareness is the foundation theme upon which the other themes are grounded. Implementation of these themes (awareness, communication and peer relationship building) ensures that schools become more inclusive places for students with ASD.

Autism Awareness

A whole school approach is required to promote autism awareness in the student population where faculty have a responsibility to encourage understanding and respect for neurodiversity within their school community.

Communication

Effective communication between all members of the school community can be seen as a key tool to promote autism awareness. However, some interviewees raised the issue of time constraints that challenges effective communications between staff:

> '... it should be a collaborative process but...it's not always...due to pressures of working in a large busy school... it is finding time to speak to your colleagues or … SNA working with them'.

All research participants recognised the value of parental involvement as primary advocates for their child's needs as they transition towards

adulthood. One interviewee emphasised how important parental involvement was:

> P: …some parents give 100% or 1000% ... on the other side...you have parents that expect the school to do everything...
> R: When there's more parental involvement, is their transition outcome enhanced?
> P: Yes much more positive, it's huge!

The importance of early and consistent communications between the school and home was also highlighted:

> '... It's important solid lines of communication are established early on between the school and home so that everyone has the full picture about the student's well-being'.

From these responses, it can be argued that it is vital faculty actively engage in open communications with parents when issues arise either at home or in the school. Transition planning towards adulthood should start early and be consistently student-centred. One interviewee highlighted the importance of talking more about their plans 'as they go up through the school' which encourages supportive engagements. Despite current supports, however, students still face numerous challenges in the school environment:

> '... they would have extremely good technical/practical knowledge but part of doing well at interviews is... selling yourself...that's linked to social skills'.

These comments indicate a need for a more student-centred approach to transition planning so that students can learn the social skills they need to navigate the world beyond the classroom. It is vital that they are given the opportunity to develop self-determination and self-advocacy skills. To achieve greater student engagement, one interviewee recommended implementing transition supports early and regularly as:

> 'they have to buy into it, they have to want to do it...it needs to be something that's always been there, we go see that person two or three times a year'.

If students continued to link in with transition supports once or twice a year, regardless of need, it would become routine and familiar.

Such increased engagement would help alleviate the fear of the unknown. To complement this approach to transition planning, it is important to examine independence and relationship-building skills. One interviewee highlighted the importance of students interacting with a variety of SNAs to promote independence and relationship-building skills. Building such links with their peers can be complex, as one interviewee observed:

> 'towards the end of 1st year ... the hormones are kicking in. they're starting to go to discuss ... the gap widens as they get older'.

There was a general consensus that a gap still exists between post-primary and further education and employment. The findings of this study suggest that young children with ASD are encouraged to develop social skills. Evidence also suggests that they are given opportunities for autonomy as they get older by actively participating in IEP meetings and transition planning processes. By the time students reach senior cycle, these skills are well embedded, helping teachers to better advocate for student needs as they transition into adulthood.

Discussion

Analysis of the research outcomes combined with the literature review allowed the researcher to critically analyse the recurring themes, exceptional points and the resulting implications of the research. Large class sizes followed by time constraints, along with lack of training were cited as the greatest challenges for participants. The need for greater autism awareness amongst the entire school community to foster inclusivity arose as a common theme in both the questionnaire and interviewee comments. Open communications between key stakeholders and promotion of student and parental involvement were also seen as key factors for successful school to adulthood transitions. Enhancing peer relationships was seen as vital for improving transition outcomes as was encouraging independence by providing access to opportunities to succeed along with greater achievement recognition. Whilst interviewees recognised the improvements already made in autism awareness, they still felt further work was needed to encourage student and teacher understanding of invisible disabilities such as ASD.

Conclusion

This study concurs with the findings of the NCSE report (2016a) that recommend further investment into post-primary teaching in-service in ASD training, especially those teachers who currently have no training. Teachers without specific ASD training are at a disadvantage when catering for the academic needs of their students with ASD, and are more likely to misinterpret certain traits as bad behaviour or misread the consequences of unpredictable situations arising in the classroom, e.g. loud noises or changes in routine (Humphrey and Symes, 2013). Overall, this study serves to highlight the importance of increasing autism awareness throughout the school community, the importance of collaborative student-centred transition planning, and the importance of students with ASD developing peer relationships to support their transition into adulthood. It is hoped that this body of research will be an informative addition to current literature regarding ways in which students with ASD can be supported during this transitional period. It also provides an Irish perspective on a universal issue. The NCSE (2016a) also recommends further research on students with ASD transitioning out of the school system. Due to the limitations of this research (small sample size, limited duration, absence of key stakeholder perspectives and possibility of unconscious bias), it is important to highlight how future research could address these limitations. In order to gain a more holistic and balanced viewpoint on the student-centred process and successes of the LCA and ASDAN programmes for students with ASD, it is important that further studies involve key stakeholder viewpoints on the current transition process as a longitudinal study nationwide. Future research should involve sourcing populations from diverse school settings to obtain larger sample sizes. Finally, it would be also interesting to see if team teaching and a time increase for teacher-SNA collaborations would improve the experience for students with ASD.

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Adapting Teaching Methodologies to Enhance Music Engagement in the Primary School Classroom: A self-study, by Hazel Collins

Biography

Prior to completing the Professional Master of Education (PME) in Primary Education, Hazel Collins was a qualified music teacher with 10 years' experience. She has taught music to all ages in a variety of different educational settings. Hazel's teaching experience led to her research interest about the challenges of keeping children (especially boys) engaged in music as they got older. Hazel was especially interested in researching this topic through a self-study project to interrogate the ways in which teaching methodologies can offer spaces as opportunities to enhance the learning of music. She continues to share her passion for music with the pupils she teaches.

Adapting Teaching Methodologies to Enhance Music Engagement in the Primary School Classroom: A self-study, by Hazel Collins

Research Supervisor: Dr Teresa Whitaker

Abstract

This mixed-methods self-study aimed to discover how existing pedagogies could be adapted to enhance music engagement for children, particularly boys, in senior classes in primary school. Reflective observations were recorded of 28 lessons taught to children (n=242) in second to sixth class. Notable gender differences were found in music engagement, with boys becoming less engaged as they got older. This observation was reinforced by a survey of teachers' opinions (n=20) and by a survey of children (n=795) enrolled for lessons in six local music schools, which showed that girls' participation outweighed boys' participation nearly two-fold. The published literature suggested that boys' engagement can be enhanced through ICT integration and by modern pop music. Therefore, both interventions were adopted to modernise the approach to music teaching. Engagement was increased with a noticeable sense of enjoyment perceived in the classrooms. Integration, responsiveness, teacher skill, and the environment were important factors for successful intervention design and implementation.

Keywords: Engagement, Kodály, gender differences, Self-Study, ICT integration, 'Pop' Music

Introduction

Dewey (1910, p.72) described inquiry as being prompted by a 'felt difficulty' — a vague feeling that something is out of place or an experience of unexpected responses to a habitual action. This, he argues, creates a need for resolution through self-reflection and investigation. Teaching music in senior primary classes can be challenging and the researcher has experienced a level of anxiety at the prospects of teaching senior classes (5th and 6th) music. This 'felt difficulty' provided the impetus for this research. Using self-study, the aim was to develop pedagogical knowledge and skills of teaching music with this age group. Evidence suggests that student enjoyment of their classroom music experience informs learning and that a development of skills will follow if children are happy (Hallam, 2010). In this

sense, music education can benefit cognitive and social-emotional skills and enhances development in other subjects and areas of the child's life (Cunha and Heckman, 2006). According to research, however, boys, especially as they get older, are less engaged in music (Heyder and Kessels, 2013). Self-study provided a logical platform to reflect on pedagogies while integrating novel, evidence-based methods into practice. For the successful implementation of such an intervention, responsiveness, the environment, teacher skill and integration were key considerations. The aim of this self-study was to improve pedagogy and practice, to enhance children's engagement with music, whilst simultaneously developing interventions prescribed by the published literature. Six objectives helped achieve the aim:

- To reflect on and improve pedagogical approaches and actions
- To introduce Information Communication Technology (ICT) into my teaching
- To enhance children's enjoyment of music
- To understand key components in effective implementation of interventions
- To establish whether boys' engagement with music decreases as they get older and whether other teachers found the same
- To gain insight into the context of extra-curricular music engagement

Literature Review

The Kodály Method

The Kodály Method complements the philosophy of the Irish primary music curriculum as it is a child-centred approach that is 'highly structured and sequenced, with well-defined skill and concept hierarchies in every element of music' (Choksy et al., 2001, p.83). The essential tools of the Kodály Method include unaccompanied singing, solfa, rhythm syllables, hand signs and movement. Solfa is a musical language, familiar to many as 'doh, re, mi, fa, so' and so on. Students who become fluent in solfa can learn new songs more quickly, read unknown melodies, listen analytically, memorise, and compose easily (Bowyer, 2015).

Music Interventions and Child Development

Music has a positive impact on the development of primary school-aged children especially if it is based on the Kodály Method (Dumont, Syurina, Feron, and van Hooren, 2017; Goopy, 2013). Music interventions benefit motor, language, social, and cognitive skills development (Eerola and Eerola, 2014; Perkins, Tinnett, Uncapher, Tiano, and Fugett, 2013; Swaminathan and Schellenberg, 2017) and can also have therapeutic effects on children with special needs (Dumont et al., 2017). Longitudinal studies indicate a transfer effect from music education to academic achievement (Jaschke, Honing and Scherder, 2018).

Use of 'Pop' Music

The music curriculum recommends the use of classical and traditional genres in the classroom (NCCA, 1999). Similarly, the Kodály Method emphasises the importance of folksongs from the child's country and the need for music of the highest quality (Choksy et al., 2001). It seems incongruous, therefore, to consider popular (pop) music for use in the classroom. However, a large part of the culture of young people involves listening to different types of pop music and it is undoubtedly a major interest of many schoolchildren (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2013). Teachers who have incorporated pop music have found it successful in developing musicality, technical skills, and enhancing engagement (Greasley and Lamont, 2011; Vulliamy and Lee, 2016).

Gender Differences in Attitudes towards Music and ICT

Evidence suggests that gender plays a significant impact on education. Hargreaves and North (1997) write that girls have more positive attitudes towards music than boys. With regards to the use of technology in the classroom, research indicates that while both genders enjoy using computers, boys enjoy using computers more because they are more confident in their computer abilities (Colley and Comber, 2003). The same trends are found in relation to music technology (Hargreaves and North, 1997). This difference in attitudes is reflected in the substantial gender differences in behavioural engagement in music (Wang et al., 2011).

While the Kodály Method is long-established and is highly regarded amongst music educators, it needs a fresh approach for it to remain as relevant today as it was when it was developed. As Ertmer and Otternbreit-Leftwich (2010) argue, adaptation should advance the existing teaching methods, not replace them. By integrating ICT and by using pop music, increased motivation and engagement can be expected. Arising from the literature review, the following research question emerged: *Can adapting teaching methodologies enhance music engagement for children, particularly boys, in primary school?*

Methodology

Prior to the 1980s, evidence suggests that many teachers viewed research as 'something that was done by experts outside of the classroom' (Samaras and Freese, 2006, p.25). During the 1980s, the divide between theory and practice began to lessen, enabling insider knowledge to be published and shared (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2004). Dewey (1938) writes that enquiry should result in practical solutions with individuals motivated to learn through applications in actual practice. The emergence of self-study research allows for information about teacher development to be 'grounded in practice and personal experience' (Hamilton and Pinnegar, 1998, p.236). For this reason, self-study was chosen for this research as the best option to address the research question. Self-study allows problems to be investigated in context, with potential solutions being immediately implemented. Self-study builds on the action research cycle (McNiff, 2016) in that it involves the research cycle of the identification of a pedagogical problem, intervention and evaluation. The use of a critical friend is a distinguishing methodological component of self-study. The researcher chose an experienced primary school teacher based on her level of impartiality and expertise in the field of primary and music education (McNiff and Whitehead, 2005). In co-operation with this critical friend, a list of behaviours or set of criteria were generated to include important actions for good engagement (Table 1). This list provided a basis for observations during the 'action reflection cycle' of the self-study and informed the intervention (McNiff, 2016, p.118).

Table 1 Measurement of engagement in music

Engagement	Positive	Negative
Eye contact		
Participation in talk and discussion		
Effort made when song singing		
Facial expression (Interested/focused/happy)		

Research Setting and Data Collection

This self-study element involved teaching and critical self-reflection on teaching practices with 242 children aged between 8-12 years old in an English medium, non DEIS, co-education primary school over a four-week period. This research activity followed BERA (2018) guidelines and received approval from the ethics committee of Hibernia College. Following the College's ethical consent guidelines, the sample included children from second to sixth class. Each class included between 24 and 34 children. The children received in-class instruction based on the Kodály Method for 30 minutes per week that featured the integration of the music programme Dabbledoo Music, developed specifically for Irish primary schools (McKenna, 2010). Using self-study, informal electronic recordings of reflective thinking were generated after every lesson in a reflective journal. The self-study data was augmented by two participant surveys.

Table 2 Summary of Data Collection

Method	Sampling Frame	Instrument(s)	Number
Self-study Qualitative	English medium, non-DEIS, co-education primary school over a four-week period	Observations and reflective journal Critical Friend Supervisor	242 children aged eight to twelve
Survey Quantitative	50 primary school teachers	Questionnaire	20 primary school teachers
Survey Quantitative	Six local private providers of music lessons	Email	795 children

Findings

Based on previous professional experience of second to fourth class, it was expected that most of the children would participate and engage in the music class, which was indeed the case. In fifth and sixth class, initial observations recorded that the children were more reserved, reluctant and introverted. There was some participation, but it seemed to be mainly from the girls in the class. To contextualise the study to a wider environment, this issue of gender disparity was explored. The second survey of six music lesson providers in the city and county indicated the number of children (n=795) enrolled for instrumental lessons by gender. Evidence suggests that almost twice as many girls (n=512) are learning a musical instrument outside of school compared to boys (n=283). This gender difference was seen across schools regardless of location but was slightly more pronounced in the schools teaching classical instruments. This finding highlighted that integrating contemporary music may be an effective tool in increasing engagement amongst boys.

The results from the teacher survey (n=20) showed that responses varied regarding gender difference in engagement and motivation.
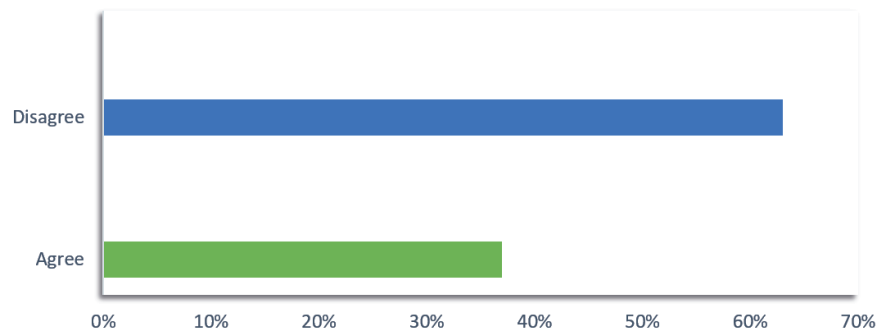
Figure 1: First, second and third class teachers (n=13) responding to the statement that 'engagement with music is easier to motivate in girls than it is in boys'
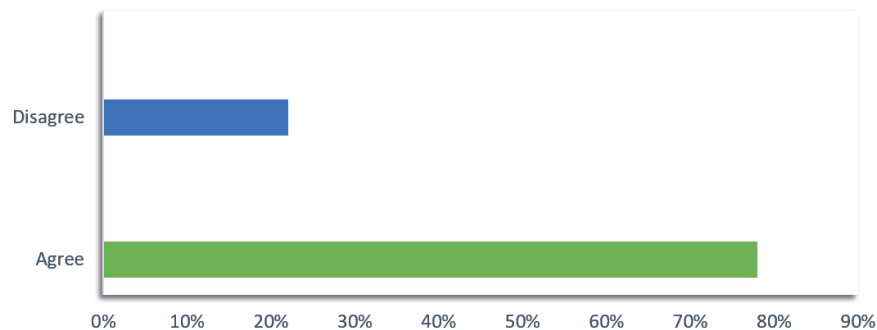

Figure 2: Fourth, fifth and sixth class teachers (n=9) responding to the statement, 'engagement with music is easier to motivate in girls than it is in boys'

Teachers were also asked to rate engagement levels during a music class of boys and girls on a scale of one to five, one being 'disengaged, bored, distracted' and five being 'fully engaged, interested, focused'. When filtered to show fourth, fifth and sixth classes, there was a noticeable difference supporting the assertion that boys' engagement decreases as they get older (Figure 3 and 4).
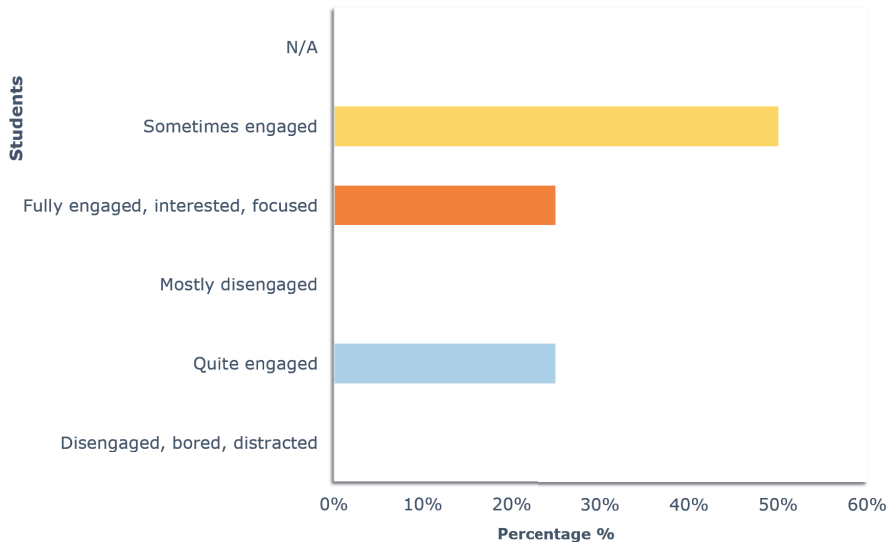

Figure 3: Responses from teachers in Junior Infants to Third Class indicating good levels of engagement
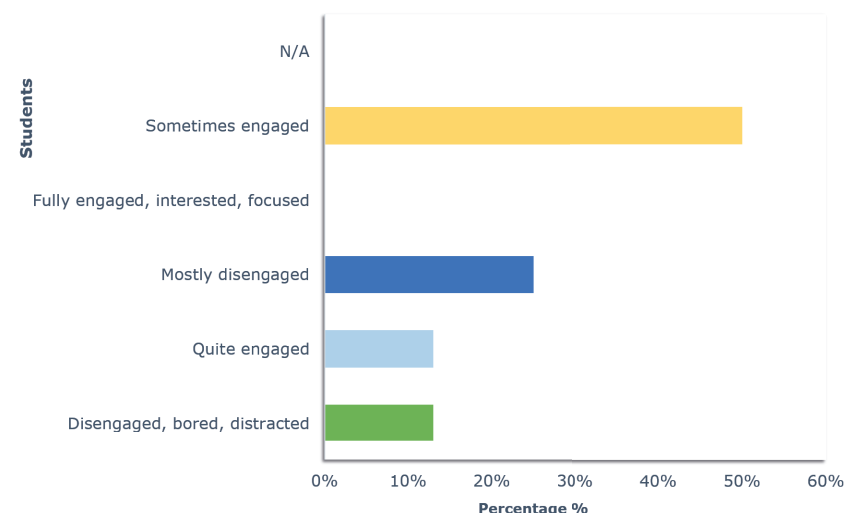
Figure 4 Responses from teachers in fourth, fifth and sixth class indicating lower levels of engagement

Self-study

While engagement and participation were higher in second to fourth class initially, girls were showing more confidence in the singing aspect of the lesson. An increased level of engagement was also noted, particularly from children who would normally withdraw from singing. In the past, music classes included a large amount of singing as this is fundamental to the Kodály Method so engagement was an issue if a child did not like singing or was too shy to sing. With the introduction of the ICT element, children who would typically withdraw from singing began to sing with the rest of the children. It could be argued that, for these children, they were not singing a song; they were playing a game. The children in fifth and sixth classes exhibited an immediate increased enjoyment and engagement. There were good levels of discussion and questioning from sixth class boys. In subsequent weeks, the difficulty level was adjusted, and the children became excited about 'levelling-up' in the game aspect of Dabbledoo Music (McKenna, 2010).

This self-study coincides with research that states the 'gamification' of learning is a powerful motivator for today's children who have grown up with technology (Dicheva et al., 2015; Hanus and Cruz, 2018; Kenny, Lyons and Lynn, 2017).

Use of Pop Music to Achieve Learning Objectives

The children seemed to make a distinction between the music they listen to themselves and the music that they learn in school. In week three, the researcher began teaching the song 'California Dreamin' by The Mamas and The Papas (Philips and Philips, 1965). While the original was recorded in 1965, there is a recent cover version featuring SIA, a popular singer (Sia, 2015). The cover was used in the 2015 motion picture 'San Andreas', which the pupils, especially the boys, were familiar with. The children compared the original song with the cover in week four. It can be argued that this adaptation to the lesson plans was successful and effective because music was used that the children related to. It also satisfied the learning objectives and the philosophy underpinning the Kodály Method. An increase in engagement was noted across all classes during this task.

Discussion

The survey of music schools demonstrated the number of girls learning an instrument as double that of boys. This finding reinforces gender differences observed during music classes in the self-study. These findings also raise further questions regarding gender preferences and suggest there is more parent/guardians investment in enthusing more engagement amongst girls in music education. According to Eccles et al. (1990), parent bias can colour their perceptions of their children's performance in gender role stereotypic activities. It is argued that these perceptual biases, in turn, influence the children's own self-belief and activity choices. The survey of 20 teachers' experiences of gender differences in engagement revealed that most teachers in the junior classes disagreed with the statement that girls are easier to motivate in music learning than boys. When compared to the senior classes, opinion changes. This reinforces the argument that boys become less engaged with music as they grow (Wang et al., 2011).

Initial observations showed that the older classes, especially fifth and sixth, showed a decrease in motivation compared to the younger classes. It is

easier to motivate participation amongst girls who have basic strategies such as verbal encouragement. One reason for this could be the social construction of masculinity. A child's gender is associated with different possible behaviours at school. There is a perception that investing effort and engaging in school is feminine (Kessels et al., 2014). This potentially causes a dissonance between boys' developing gender identity and academic engagement. Furthermore, subjects such as music and art are typically seen as more feminine than subjects such as mathematics or physical education (Gilbert and Gilbert, 2017; Heyder and Kessels, 2013).

Engagement in the older classes may be further affected by student and teacher self-confidence and inhibition. Children's fear of peer rejection, for boys and girls, correlates with shyness and is then linked to disengagement (Buhs et al., 2015). Low self-confidence in music class may also result from a lack of musical experience. Research indicates that many primary school teachers believe that music teaching is outside their expertise and may therefore avoid teaching it (Welch and Henley, 2014). This could mean that by the time children reach fifth and sixth class, they have not had much exposure to music instruction, unless they have engaged with extra-curricular learning. Positive early music experiences shape attitudes and predict involvement in later life (Jeanneret and DeGraffenreid, 2018). As we have seen, there is a gender difference in extra-curricular uptake, which may disadvantage boys' ability to engage when introduced to music in later years. The pupils enjoyed and benefitted from the integration of Dabbledoo Music (McKenna, 2010). As the music curriculum becomes increasingly difficult to implement in the senior classes, particularly for teachers with no specific musical training, the simplicity of Dabbledoo Music makes is accessible to all. Also, the programme complements and modernises both a Kodály-based programme and the music curriculum. However, uptake and implementation in schools will further depend on resources such as technology, teacher time, training and confidence.

Using Popular Music Increases Engagement

As students get older, they increasingly perceive a disconnection between music experienced inside and outside school (De Vries, 2010; McPherson and Hendricks, 2010). Discussion with the children indicated that pop music is their preferred genre. However, Isbell (2007) notes that music teachers find it difficult to adapt pop music in a way that gives it integrity and authenticity.

Choksy et al. (2001, p.82) believe that only music of the 'highest artistic value, both folk and composed, should be used in teaching'. Robinson (2017) observes that there is no training in how to motivate engagement with the music children listen to at home. An evolving database of content and curriculum appropriate songs would be useful for teachers to consult to support the integration of pop music in the classroom. Since the self-study was conducted, Dabbledoo Music have begun to compile such a database.

Conclusion

An interesting insight garnered from this study concerns the modernisation of the understanding and interpretation of the Kodály Method on which the music curriculum is based. This research project demonstrates that it is possible to respect the main philosophies underpinning the Kodály Method — that folksongs of the child's heritage and music of the highest quality should be taught while enabling it to be more accessible to both teachers and children in today's classroom. The use of the Dabbledoo Music programme proved a good partner programme as it was intuitive and user-friendly. The use of pop music is also recommended to further enhance engagement and participation. The integration of quality, age-appropriate pop music was vital to successfully achieving the curriculum learning objectives.

Ascertaining any causation to the effect of the intervention was deemed a limitation in the study as it is not possible to robustly measure student engagement. To ensure the credibility of the findings, this self-study involved triangulation of multiple sources, and availed of the support of a critical friend and dialogue with a research supervisor (Abrams et al., 2014). However, it is arguable that the triangulation is only partial as most of the findings came from one self-study. The teacher survey responses were also low (n=20) and were filled out by respondents mainly working in one region in Ireland. There is also limited generalisability as this research took place in a single school (Cochran-Smith, 2005).

Whether or not a teacher is conducting research, reflective practice and journaling should be employed continuously. The reflective journal, while not expansive, was a great benefit to my own development. The six objectives, set out at the beginning of this project were successfully achieved, particularly when it was observed that student engagement was enhanced.

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Teacher Perceptions of Science and the Factors Affecting the Delivery of the Primary Science Curriculum, by Niall Herron

Biography

Niall Herron recently graduated from Hibernia College with First Class Honours in the Professional Master of Education (PME) in Primary Education. Before this, he studied a four-year undergraduate degree in Biology at Maynooth University. Niall is currently teaching Fifth Class in Drogheda, Co. Louth. Niall has a strong interest in science education and the promotion of discovery-based learning methods to help equip children acquire necessary skills through hands-on experiences to engage with scientific concepts. This research study was designed to investigate the challenges, if any, that teachers face in implementing the science curriculum in Ireland and the subsequent effects that these may have on children's scientific literacy.

Abstract

Science has been the subject of much attention in recent years due to its economic applications and relevance to society at large. Although efforts have been concentrated on a national level to become world leaders in STEM education, is the education system in its current format capable of realising these ambitions? Teachers have indicated that several challenges exist in the teaching and learning of science at primary level that may limit the development of children's scientific skills. Through a quantitative approach, this study explored these challenges among a sample population of 73 primary teachers. The study ultimately concluded that some teachers do not feel sufficiently resourced to teach science at primary level due to difficulties associated with the availability and functionality of equipment.

Introduction

Science was afforded full subject status in the 1999 Primary Curriculum and was housed within a subject called Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE), where it still remains in this formation today (Ireland, 1999a). Since its curriculum introduction, the area of science education has grown considerably and is becoming an increasingly popular research topic due to its relevance to modern society (STEM Education Review Group, 2016). Current and successive governments have recognised the importance of science education in delivering a smart economy and attracting global organisations into the country (Department of Business, Enterprise & Innovation, 2015). Although considerable investment has been made in the area of science research and infrastructure over the past number of years, there has been no significant change in the delivery of science at primary level. During this time, several STEM initiatives have since been introduced to the primary classroom, such as 'Discover Primary Science and Maths'

(Science Foundation of Ireland, 2003); however, the curriculum has remained largely static since its inception almost twenty years ago. Despite efforts made on a national level to invest in science infrastructure and skills, has this been reflected in schools? (Department of Education and Skills, 2017). Moreover, are schools adequately equipped to deliver the primary science curriculum, and are children afforded the opportunity to engage in hands-on, investigative learning as prescribed by the curriculum? (Ireland, 1999a). Given the practical nature of science and its various curricular components, there is an additional requirement for teachers to source and demonstrate the use of equipment to assist with children's conceptual understanding and development of scientific skills (Murphy, Neil and Beggs, 2007). As such, this study explores how confident teachers are in teaching science and investigates if teachers are sufficiently resourced to teach science at primary level.

Literature Review

The Primary Science Curriculum aims to stimulate the natural curiosity and imagination of all children whilst affording them the opportunity to develop scientific skills through exploration and investigation (Ireland, 1999a). Although the curriculum makes appropriate accommodation for these elements, to what extent are they realised within the classroom? In a comprehensive study by Varley, Murphy and Veale (2008), it was suggested that several challenges exist in the teaching and learning of science at all levels within the education system. In a study by Murphy, Neil and Beggs (2007), a lack of confidence was cited as being a major factor in teaching science for primary teachers within the UK education system. The study explored the opinions of over 300 teachers and found that science was a contentious subject for many due to a lack of pedagogical knowledge and experience with the subject. The study ultimately concluded that there are a number of factors that merge which affect the delivery of the primary science curriculum, including a lack of resources, lack of contact time, little previous experience, a perceived specialised nature of the subject, and logistical issues involved in setting up equipment.

Concerns have been raised that primary teachers are often not equipped with adequate subject content knowledge and instead share misconceptions that have been internalised throughout their own engagement with science (Harlen and Holroyd, 1997; Murphy, Neil and Beggs, 2007). Previous

experience has been considered a factor in propelling these misconceptions as pre-service teachers are not sufficiently prepared in identifying the children's inaccurate interpretations, thus creating a continuous cycle of conceptual misunderstandings (Murphy and Smith, 2012). These very sentiments have been shared in the newly published STEM Policy Plan 2017-2026, where pedagogical and subject content knowledge deficits in teachers are a key priority for the Department to address (Department of Education and Skills, 2017). Murphy, Neil and Beggs (2007) further contend that teachers who did not feel confident in teaching science at primary level were more likely to design lessons that were inherently prescriptive in order to afford the teacher a level of certainty over the direction of the lesson. Their study also found that teachers were less likely to adopt inquiry-based methods as they could not confidently facilitate a departure from the parameters of the lesson and entry into unfamiliar conceptual territory (Lucero, Valcke and Schellens, 2013). This meant that children were more likely to observe methodical experiments demonstrated by the teacher rather than pursuing open-ended, autonomous investigations led by the children (Murphy, Varley and Veale, 2012).

In a study by Fitzgerald and Schneider (2013), it was reported that science equipment and materials could be regarded as both an enabler and inhibitor as its use often hinges on availability, functionality and the ability of the teacher to troubleshoot should something not work correctly. As such, teachers may be more likely to opt for whole-class demonstrations of equipment, or perhaps cherry-pick the "safe" topics that have high probability of going to plan (Harlen and Holroyd, 1997). This might result in a situation where bias is assigned to some curricular areas and children may not be given a holistic science experience. Much like the web of a spider, the individual factors discussed are all interlinked and impact on the level of confidence among primary teachers towards science. This research project will explore the level of confidence among primary teachers in teaching science and identify the common concerns experienced in planning and delivering the objectives of the primary science curriculum in Ireland.

In order to guide and shape the investigation, the following research questions have been proposed:

1. Do teachers feel confident teaching science?

2. What is the teacher's own experience with science and how does this impact on their teaching?
3. Is the teaching of science limited to the availability of resources within the school?

Methodology

In order to synthesise a global picture of teacher perceptions of science within the teaching community, a sufficiently broad research approach is required. As such, a quantitative research method has been considered the most appropriate vehicle in realising the research objectives, and data will be gathered through the distribution of online surveys. A quantitative approach ultimately aligns best with the research objectives as it permits access to a larger spread of participants that are not geographically limited to the researcher, thus allowing for a bigger picture to be sketched. As proposed by Scott and Morrison (2005), the use of surveys could be considered a more efficient vehicle at gaining truthful insights from participants due to a greater level of anonymity involved when compared to that of face-to-face interviews. As this small-scale study is reliant on an efficient use of time available, it was necessary to stream these strategies in order to arrive at the most capable option in the given timeframe. It was also important to consider the strategy that would capture the greatest input, and thus deliver the greatest output. With these considerations in mind, the researcher has designed a semi-structured online survey that has both quantitative and qualitative features.

Given the relative ease of access to online platforms for many, the survey was produced and distributed online in order to extend the reach of participants available. Although the response rates of surveys are in broad decline generally, irrespective of the mode employed, the use of Web 2.0 platforms such as social media, blogging sites and email provides researchers with a more accessible environment for carrying out research compared to physical or paper-based methods (Hill et al., 2013).

As this is a small-scale research project using quantitative methods, the findings of the study will invariably be subject to concerns relating to reliability, validity, objectivity and generalisability. As quantitative research tends to establish facts and the extent through which these facts are expressed within a population on a large scale, there is greater potential for a

representative view to be adopted (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 2010). However, as this research does not have access to the entire population of primary teachers for the purposes of probability sampling, the findings of the study will not be generalisable beyond the sample population tested but may provide an appetite for future studies on a larger scale.

Findings

The survey was carefully designed to investigate the factors that affect the delivery of the science curriculum, particularly those identified in the current literature, in order to ascertain whether they are similarly shared by Irish primary teachers. As such, the survey was presented under the following themes: education background, teacher perceptions of science and factors affecting the delivery of the curriculum within the classroom.

Education Background and Previous Experience:

Out of the total population (n=73) sampled, 93% of participants studied science during their second level education with just 7% of participants not having any experience with science prior to their teaching career.

Teachers Perceptions of the Primary Science Curriculum:

One of the overarching objectives of this research was to investigate whether primary teachers in Ireland feel confident in teaching science and how the current curriculum facilitates a holistic science education for children. Participants in the survey were asked to consider how confident they were teaching science by rating their response on a Likert scale from 1-5, with 5 being very confident and 1 not being confident. The responses to this question can be summarised in Figure 1 below.
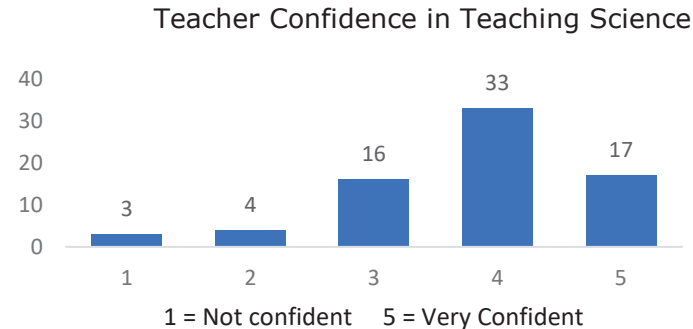
Teacher Confidence in Teaching Science

1 = Not confident   5 = Very Confident

Figure 1: Teacher Confidence in Teacher Science as rated on a scale from 1-5 (n=73)

Participants were then asked to consider their confidence with each of the four strands within the primary science curriculum and rate each one accordingly on a Likert scale. The responses are represented in Figure 2.

Teacher Confidence with 'Living Things'

1 = Not confident   5 = Very confident

Teacher Confidence with 'Environmental Awareness and Care'

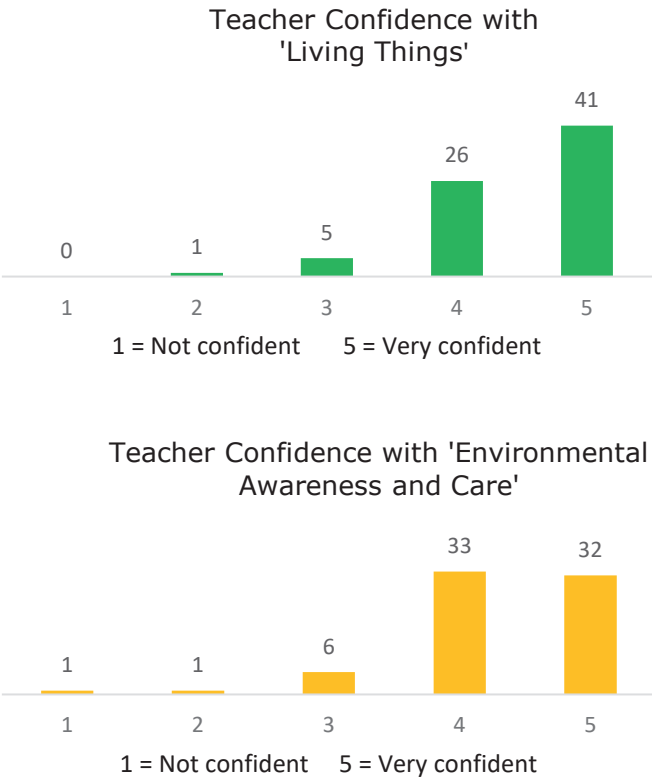
1 = Not confident   5 = Very confident

Figure 2: Teacher confidence of 'Living Things' strand versus 'Environmental Awareness and Care' strand (number of participants who chose each rating on Likert scale, n=73)

Teacher Confidence with 'Energy and Forces'

1 = Not confident   5 = Very confident

Teacher Confidence with 'Materials'

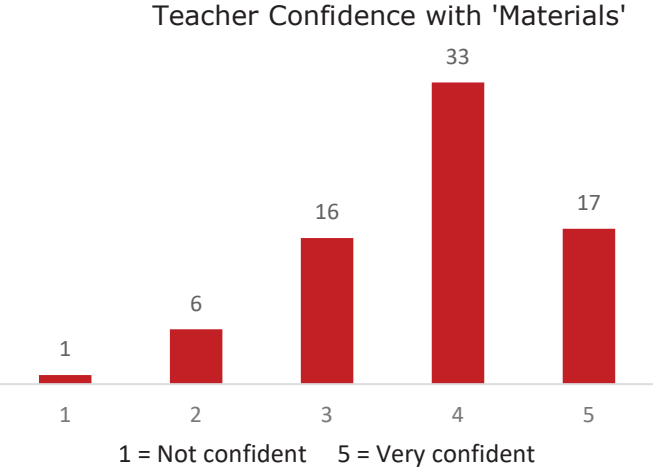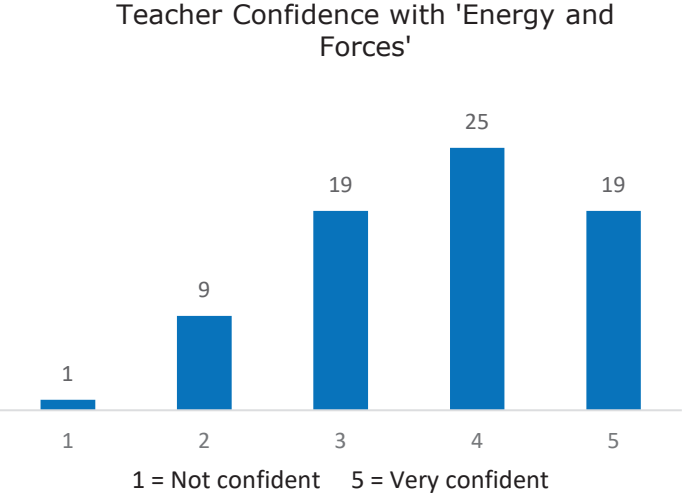1 = Not confident   5 = Very confident

Figure 3: Teacher confidence of 'Energy and Forces' strand versus the 'Materials' strand (number of participants who chose each rating on Likert scale, n=73)

Factors affecting the delivery of the Primary Science Curriculum:

Following the investigation of how teachers perceived the science curriculum in its current format, the next part of the survey set out to explore how this curriculum was realised in the everyday classroom. Participants were asked a series of questions based on their engagement with science throughout the week and the factors that might influence a teacher's decision to teach a science lesson. These responses are summarised in the below figure.

Factors affecting the delivery of a science lesson
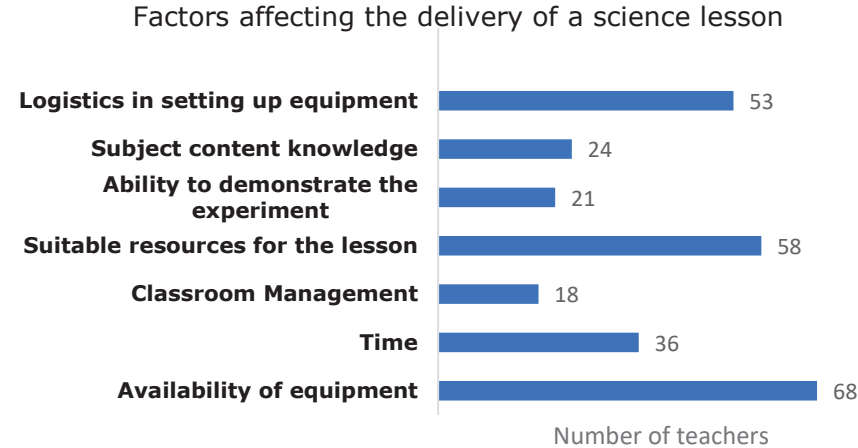

Number of teachers

Figure 4: The extent through which the factors identified in the literature impact on the delivery of a science lesson among teachers in the sample population (n=73)

Equipment:

A recurrent theme identified in the literature, and indeed the survey, was the availability and access to science equipment for teachers when realising the objectives of the primary science curriculum. The survey found that 98% of participants considered equipment to be important in the delivery of science lessons. With such a strong emphasis on equipment, the survey investigated what might happen to the teaching and learning of science should equipment become broken or perhaps unavailable for use. Participants were asked to

consider how likely they would be to teach a curriculum strand (e.g. energy and forces) should the relevant equipment be unavailable.

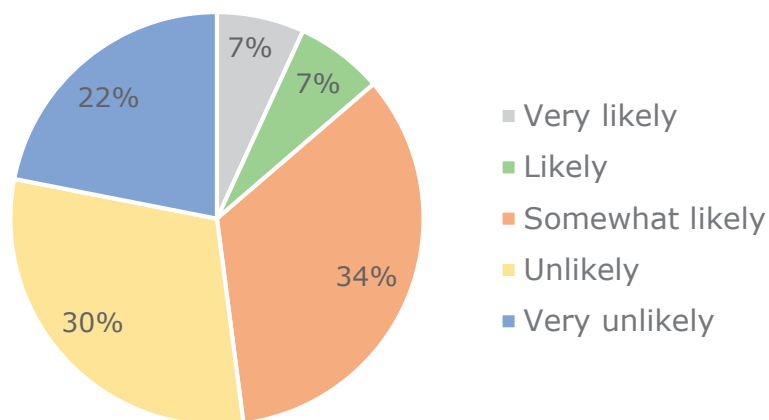Likelihood of teaching a curricular strand without equipment

Figure 5: How likely the sample population would be to teach a curricular strand (e.g. energy and forces) if the equipment was unavailable/broken

Discussion

From examining the current literature surrounding science at primary level, it can be noted that a deficit exists in the level of confidence among primary teachers, particularly within the UK education system. Murphy, Neil and Beggs (2007) explored the theme of confidence among a sample of over 300 primary teachers and found that a lack of confidence was a significant issue among these teachers for various reasons. When putting this question to the sample population resident within the Irish education system, the results proved to be somewhat at odds with the literature. Most participants sampled considered themselves to be reasonably or very confident in teaching science.

When asked if previous experience with science was necessary to teach the subject at primary level, almost 48% of participants considered it to be

necessary with 41% not considering it necessary. Studies by Harlen and Holroyd (1997) and Murphy, Neil and Beggs (2007) demonstrated that subject misconceptions were common among primary teachers and many of these were similarly shared by the children when investigated by the researchers. The studies suggested the possibility that these misconceptions were acquired throughout the course of the teacher's own education and created a continuous pedagogical loop that kept these misconceptions in operation (Berry, Loughran and van Driel, 2008). These studies would therefore suggest that previous experience is indeed a factor in influencing teachers' attitudes towards science; however, many participants in this survey would not quite share this view.

In order to realise the objectives of the primary science curriculum, there is a requirement for the use of equipment and resources, albeit of a relatively unspecialised nature. When asked if the use of equipment was important for science lessons, an overwhelming 98% of participants indicated favourably. Interestingly, when asked how likely participants would be to teach a strand of the curriculum (e.g. energy and forces) without the necessary equipment available in the school, over half of the participants surveyed considered themselves to be either unlikely or very unlikely to do so. This finding highlights an interesting scenario which was not previously flagged by the exploration of the literature.

If schools throughout the country are not uniformly equipped with the necessary equipment and resources, it could invariably result in a situation whereby a child's engagement with science differs according to the school in which they are enrolled. Moreover, if equipment for a specific strand is unavailable in a school, this could result in a situation whereby children do not engage with that strand over the course of their primary education. Given that the biological and environmental curricular strands are relatively equipment-free, could this result in bias being assigned to these strands in some schools where there is a lack of equipment available for other science strands?

One of the broad aims of the 1999 Primary Science Curriculum is to provide a holistic science education that is hands-on and focused on the development of a large skillset through inquiry-based approaches (Ireland, 1999; Varley, Murphy and Veale, 2013). However, these curriculum objectives are built on

the assumption that teachers have access to the necessary equipment and resources to explore each element of the curriculum. If this equipment is not accessible in the school, to what extent can these objectives be realised? This very point was raised through the feedback channels on the survey where a number of participants suggested that the only way some experiments were executed was if the teacher personally purchased the necessary equipment and resources for children to use.

Most participants considered the quality of equipment to be broadly unsatisfactory and it was infrequently replaced or repaired when broken. Some participants noted several challenges, which exist in the logistics of setting up such equipment, coupled with large class sizes that made autonomous scientific investigations difficult due to insufficient equipment available. In such circumstances, the only available option to teachers might be to demonstrate an experiment for children to observe the concepts in action (Murphy, Neil and Beggs, 2007). However, to what extent would this be fulfilling the curriculum objectives for hands-on, investigative learning?

Conclusion

The research ultimately found that teachers were broadly confident in teaching science at primary level despite having issues with some curricular strands. Most participants in the survey had some previous experience with science with over half of participants studying science at both Junior and Leaving Certificate level. The topic of equipment was an unprecedented concern for many teachers in this survey and one which was not previously flagged by the literature. The following graphic summarises the broad findings of the study:
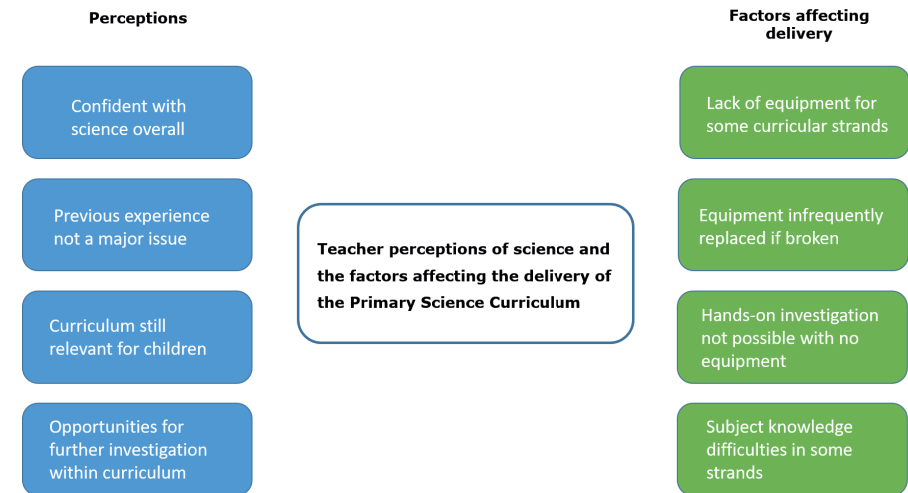
Figure 6: The main findings of the study based on participants' feedback from the survey

As this is a small-scale research study with limited resources available to the researcher, the findings of the study are not generalisable beyond the sample population tested. Although the mechanisms through which the data was collected were carefully chosen and supported by the literature, the sample population is too small to extend the findings to the overall population of primary teachers. Furthermore, despite every effort taken to minimise bias, there is always the possibility of discrepancies that could distort data. Nevertheless, the mixed methodological approach strengthened the credibility and reliability of the data collected.

Considering the findings of the study, it would appear that teachers feel suitably confident in teaching science at primary level; however, there are several challenges within the system that have the potential to counteract this confidence. One of the main issues identified in the findings is the provision and use of equipment in schools to support the science curriculum. These findings might therefore provide an appetite for future research on a larger scale to investigate if the provision of equipment is uniform in schools throughout the country, and if schools are sufficiently resourced to implement the full science curriculum on a school-wide basis.

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Teachers' perspectives on the effectiveness of the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme and its capacity to foster resilience in children in a DEIS school, by Nicola MacDermott

Biography

Nicola MacDermott is from Co. Dublin. Nicola previously completed a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology at University College Dublin and worked in media, business and the children's charity sector for 13 years. Nicola received a 'World of Difference' award from the Vodafone Foundation in 2011 for her work in the children's charity sector. She graduated from Hibernia College in April 2018 with a Professional Master of Education (PME) in Primary Education. As part of this programme, Nicola completed research on 'Teachers' perspectives on the effectiveness of the FRIENDS for Life programme and its capacity to foster resilience in children in a DEIS school'. She is currently teaching Third Class in Swords Educate Together National School, Co. Dublin.

Teachers' perspectives on the effectiveness of the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme and its capacity to foster resilience in children in a DEIS school, by Nicola MacDermott

Research Supervisor: Orla Jones

Abstract

This research investigated teachers' perspectives on the effectiveness of the FRIENDS for Life programme and its capacity to foster resilience in children in a DEIS school. A qualitative case study research design was employed, using individual semi-structured interviews. The findings were deduced using thematic analysis and highlighted the prevalence of social and emotional issues and identified how a low level of resilience can impact negatively on children's participation and learning. The FRIENDS for Life programme was found to be effective in terms of identifying emotions, providing children with tools to help themselves, changing thought patterns and creating a calm atmosphere. The study revealed that the programme can have the capacity to make a positive impact on resilience, although this is dependent upon several factors.

Keywords: Resilience, emotional well-being, social and emotional issues, FRIENDS for Life, DEIS school, qualitative case study

Introduction

Research on resilience in children has increased significantly due to recent evidence highlighting the connection between resilience and emotional well-being (Farrell and Barrett, 2007). In Ireland, the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum aims to build resilience and support emotional well-being by enabling children to build self-esteem, regulate behaviour and cope with challenging situations (NCCA, 1999). Supplementary programmes such as FRIENDS for Life have been made available to teachers to fulfil the aims of the SPHE curriculum (DES; HSE; DOH, 2013). The FRIENDS for Life programme is a school-based childhood anxiety-prevention and resilience-building programme (Barrett, 2004a, 2004b). FRIENDS for Life is the only evidence-based programme recognised at all levels of intervention for anxiety in children by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2004) and, as a result, it has been implemented in schools worldwide. Much of the evidence

supporting the FRIENDS for Life programme has focused on the reported reduction in anxiety levels of children rather than assessing the impact on a child's resilience. The researcher chose to conduct a qualitative case study of a DEIS school as a means of investigating the effectiveness of the programme and the perceived impact of the programme on levels of resilience in children from a socially or economically disadvantaged background (DES, 2017). This decision was based on research that children from socially or disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to be at risk for mental health issues (Xue et al., 2005).

Literature Review

Resilience-building at an early age has been cited as an important protective factor which may result in a lower risk for psychological issues such as anxiety and depression (Friedli and WHO, 2009). Two key features of resilient children are an intact sense of competence and self-esteem and the capacity to repair this sense if it becomes damaged (Goldstein and Brooks, 2007). Carr (2011) suggested that children who do not demonstrate resilience after exposure to challenging and adverse conditions are stretched beyond their capacity to cope in a situation, which can have a significant impact on their mental health.

The Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland conducted a study on the mental health of young people in Ireland which reported that 1 in 3 young people in Ireland is likely to have experienced a mental disorder of some kind by age 13 (Cannon et al., 2013). The importance of mental health and emotional well-being in school has been acknowledged internationally, as evidenced by school policy initiatives aimed at promoting student well-being across Australia, New Zealand, Europe, North and South America (Ruttledge et al., 2016). These figures highlight the need for intervention at an early stage in childhood and the importance of building a child's resilience to act as a potential safeguard in terms of mental health and to equip them with the skills to cope in challenging situations.

Bryan (2005) proposed that children can develop resilience when they have 'protective factors' in their environment, such as a supportive teacher. However, the presence of one good teacher or adult alone is not enough to build resilience; rather, a combination of factors is required such as helping the child to develop a sense of mastery over their own circumstances,

helping the child to regulate their emotions and consequent behaviours and affirming the supportive context of a child's cultural traditions or faith as outlined by the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2015). Currently, the SPHE curriculum provides a space for teachers to promote positive mental health to enable children to build self-esteem and self-confidence; to regulate emotions and behaviour; build a sense of self-efficacy in solving problems and to cope with challenging situations (NCCA, 1999). Other supplementary programmes have also been provided to schools including FRIENDS for Life (Barrett, 2004a, 2004b). FRIENDS for Life is a component of the FRIENDS Programmes — a suite of school-based childhood anxiety-prevention and resilience-building programmes devised by Dr Paula Barrett (2004a, 2004b). The aim of these programmes is to help pupils to develop strategies to deal with stress, worry and change, and to equip them with the social and emotional skills to cope with stress and anxiety in a resilient manner. The title 'FRIENDS' is an acronym for the various skills that children will develop throughout the course (see Table 1).

Table 1: The 'FRIENDS for Life' programme acronym

FRIENDS for Life Programme	
F	FEELINGS
R	REMEMBER TO RELAX
I	I CAN DO IT. I CAN TRY MY BEST.
E	EXPLORE SOLUTIONS AND COPING STEP PLANS
N	NOW REWARD YOURSELF, YOU'VE DONE YOUR BEST
D	DON'T FORGET TO PRACTICE
S	SMILE. STAY CALM AND TALK TO YOUR SUPPORT NETWORKS

Table 2: Description of the 'FRIENDS' programmes

Name of programme	Age range
Fun FRIENDS	Children aged 4–7 years old
FRIENDS for Life	Children aged 8–11 years old
My FRIENDS Youth	Adolescents aged 12–15 years old
Adult Resilience	Anyone aged over 16 years old

The FRIENDS for Life programme is the only evidence-based programme recognised at all levels of intervention for anxiety in children by the WHO (2004). It has a considerable international evidence base and has been implemented in schools worldwide (Stallard et al., 2005; Fisak, Richard and Mann, 2011; Stallard et al., 2014; Murphy et al., 2017). Nonetheless, determining its impact on resilience is more challenging, largely due to the lack of a valid and reliable measure of resilience as outlined by Windle, Bennett and Noyes (2011). Thus, the researcher posed the following research questions:

1. How can levels of resilience impact a child in a DEIS school?
2. How effective is the FRIENDS for Life programme in a DEIS school?
3. How does the FRIENDS for Life programme impact on the resilience of children in a DEIS school?

Methodology

The aim of this research was to investigate teachers' perspectives and feedback regarding the effectiveness of the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme and its capacity to build resilience in children attending a DEIS school. Therefore, the data being sought was the perspective, opinion and insight of teachers rather than numerical data. Accordingly, the researcher adopted the subjective or anti-positivist approach to the study of human behaviour which underpins a qualitative approach to research (Cohen, Mannion and Morrison, 2011). The research task was designed within the context of a qualitative case study as outlined by Patton (1990).

Brock-Utne (1996) recommended qualitative research as a 'holistic' method, which aims to record participants' interpretations of particular intentions in and meaning given to situations and events. The data recorded is subjective and personal to the participant which provides the researcher with in-depth knowledge that is context sensitive, concerned with words rather than numbers and requires personal contact (Punch, 2013). As outlined by Kvale (1994), it has been argued that qualitative methodology interferes with objectivity and can bias results. However, Ratner (2002) argued that subjective processes, including social relationships and use of research instruments in qualitative research, can enable the researcher to objectively comprehend and assess human behaviour.

A case study approach focusing on one DEIS Urban Band 1 School was used as this method provided the researcher with the opportunity to carry out an in-depth study of one aspect of a problem and its implications (Bell and Waters, 2014). The data was collected by the researcher using individual semi-structured qualitative interviews. The researcher conducted a pilot study as a means of developing and testing the suitability of the research in advance of the research process as recommended by Van Teijlingen and Hundley (2001).

As this research task was a small-scale study, the researcher chose to draw a non-probability sample as a deliberate means of representing the perspectives of a particular group. Purposive sampling was employed which enabled the researcher to choose participants based on judgements of the components that would assist the research (Adler and Clark, 2008). The data was analysed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) (see Figure 1).
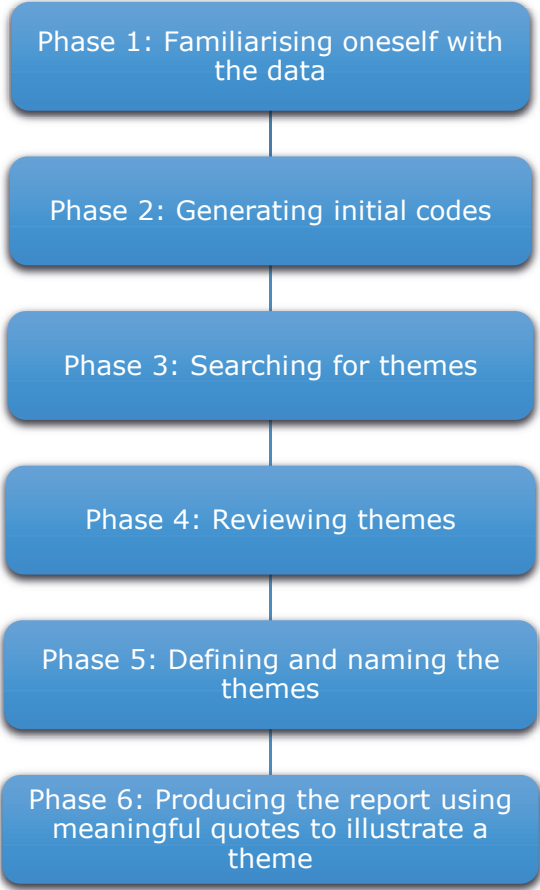
Figure 1: Phases of thematic analysis, adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006)

Findings

Four predominant themes emerged from the findings (Figure 2) in relation to the research questions:
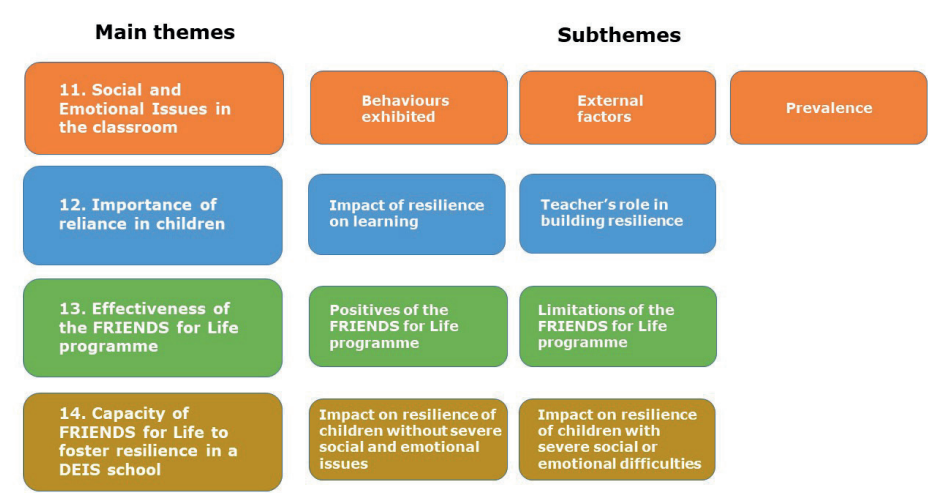

Figure 2: Themes and subthemes identified following data analysis

Theme 1: Social and emotional issues in the classroom

The participants advised that children in classes who participated in the FRIENDS for Life programme presented with a range of social and emotional issues, including inappropriate behaviour such as hitting another student, lying on the floor, shouting out, swearing, crying and banging things. Participant 1 explained that some inappropriate behaviour may be due to external factors: '…*you would have children here who are living in hotels, we've children here who their family members have been shot dead in front of them, you've got children who are surrounded by drugs, children whose* […] *father could be in prison…'*. Participant 3 highlighted the prevalence of social and emotional issues: '*maybe 8 to 10 in any grouping, that would be struggling in some way…'*.

Theme 2: Importance of resilience in children

The participants highlighted the importance of resilience in children and how a lack of resilience can prevent children from flourishing: '*they might opt out* […] *because they know 'I'm not as good as this person', so they just won't take part' (P2)*. Each participant emphasised the key role of the teacher in building resilience. Participant 3 highlighted the importance of focusing on resilience in children in a DEIS school: '*I think specifically in DEIS schools*

and disadvantaged areas it's the first thing we should be looking at. Everything else comes after that and it will come after that. They can't access the curriculum, if they can't cope with life'.

Theme 3: Effectiveness of FRIENDS for Life programme

The participants felt that the programme was effective in terms of identifying emotions, providing children with the tools to cope with scenarios themselves, changing thought patterns from negative to positive and creating a calm atmosphere in class. Participant 3 explained: '*…I think they definitely went away with tools to cope. Tools to help cope and ways to change negative thoughts to positive and ways to reduce anxiety, definitely, and they could list off the different things you could do'.* The participants highlighted some limitations of the programme including the content and age-appropriateness of the programme and the difficulty in measuring the success of the programme after completion due to a lack of follow-up with the class group.

Theme 4: Capacity of FRIENDS for Life to foster resilience

Overall, each participant stated that they believed the programme had the capacity to impact positively on the resilience of children but believed that it may not impact on all children. The participants described how the programme impacted on the resilience of children in the class without high risk external factors or severe social and emotional issues by enabling them to discuss an oral 'Coping Step Plan' when faced with a range of difficult situations. Participant 2 highlighted that not all children were responsive to the programme. This seemed to be particularly evident with children who were dealing with high-risk or serious external factors: '*it's just not important to the ones who are really, really struggling who probably have the most significant social and emotional difficulties' (P2).* Participant 3 advised that the impact of FRIENDS for Life on resilience is also dependant on a range of factors including teacher input, school environment and additional support systems.

Discussion

The findings revealed the prevalence of social and emotional issues in the classroom and identified how a lack of resilience can impact negatively on children's learning and participation in activities. The FRIENDS for Life programme was found to be effective in terms of identifying emotions, providing children with the tools to help themselves, helping children to change thought patterns and creating a calm atmosphere in class. The findings indicated that the programme can have the capacity to make a positive impact on resilience, although this impact is dependent upon several factors including teacher input, school environment and additional support systems. Children with severe issues or external high-risk factors may not be impacted by the programme. Four key themes emerged from the findings as outlined above in Figure 2. The researcher evaluated the extent to which the following three research questions are answered by the qualitative data:

Research question 1: How can levels of resilience impact a child in a DEIS school?

The participants provided strong statements indicating that a lack of resilience can have a significant impact on children in school in terms of willingness to participate, academic attainment and self-esteem. This finding is supported by Weare (2000) who emphasised the importance of the relationship between mental, emotional and social health and academic attainment. In addition to importance of resilience, each participant highlighted the key role of the teacher in helping a child to build resilience. This finding supports the recommendation of Bryan (2005) and Carr (2011) that having 'protective factors', such as a supportive teacher, can help children to develop resilience.

Research question 2: How effective is the FRIENDS for Life programme in a DEIS school?

In posing Research Question 2, the researcher sought to assess the effectiveness of the FRIENDS for Life programme in meeting the needs of children in an Urban DEIS Band 1 school who may or may not present with social and emotional issues. The following subthemes were identified as key performance indicators of the programme (see Table 3):

Table 3: Subthemes identified as key performance indicators of FRIENDS for Life programme

Positives of the FRIENDS for Life Programme	Limitations of the FRIENDS for Life Programme
Helping children to identify emotions	Suitability of content (age-appropriateness and relevance to demographic)
Giving children tools to help themselves	Need for follow-up intervention after programme provided
Helping children to change their thought patterns from negative to positive (red thoughts to green thoughts)	Engagement of children with high-risk external factors or severe social and emotional issues
Positive impact on atmosphere in the class	

Overall, all three participants provided positive feedback regarding the effectiveness of the programme, citing examples of the positive impact it had on the children. All participants described how the FRIENDS for Life programme gave the children tools to help themselves. Participant 2 recommended the 'Coping Step Plan' (Barrett, 2010) as a potential method of reducing anxiety and building resilience as the children orally discussed how they would cope in given situations. One tool cited as extremely effective was enabling children to change thought patterns from negative to positive using the 'red thoughts to green thoughts' strategy (Barrett, 2010). The participants also provided limitations regarding the FRIENDS for Life programme including the content and age-appropriateness of the content and activities. Furthermore, the participants highlighted that a follow-up intervention of some kind was needed as the programme was taught in isolation.

Research question 3: How does the FRIENDS for Life programme impact on the resilience of children in a DEIS school?

The findings revealed that the programme can positively impact on resilience in children in a DEIS school. This impact is evidenced by increased use of coping strategies, higher levels of peer support and improved levels of self-esteem. However, this impact is dependent on a number of factors and may not impact on some children with high-level social and emotional issues. The increased use of coping strategies is supported by Stopa et al. (2010), who reported an improvement in the use of coping strategies in children after provision of the FRIENDS for Life programme. Higher levels of peer support could lead to increased levels of resilience as discovered by Stewart et al.'s (2004) finding that children who describe feelings of 'belonging' with peers and adults demonstrate higher levels of resilience. Additionally, the reported improvement in levels of self-esteem is supported by the research that FRIENDS for Life can impact positively on emotional outcomes for children, as reported by Iizuka et al. (2015), Rodgers and Dunsmuir (2013) and Stallard et al. (2005).

As proposed by the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2015), the participants stated that the impact of the programme on resilience is dependent on numerous factors such as the important role of the teacher, the school environment and the supports within the school. Despite these findings, the participants stated that not all children were responsive to this programme. Participant 2 suggested that the programme may not have the capacity to foster resilience in children with high-risk external factors or severe social and emotional difficulties.

Conclusion

This study highlighted the importance of resilience in children and provided an insight into teachers' perspectives on the effectiveness of the FRIENDS for Life programme and its capacity to foster resilience in children in a DEIS school. The effectiveness of the FRIENDS for Life programme and impact on resilience were detailed at length with overall positive results. Nonetheless, this research task is not without limitations. This was a small-scale study with a sample size of three participants. As it was a non-probability sample, the findings cannot be generalised to the wider population (Cohen et al., 2011). A number of recommendations were drawn from the research findings including the need for a follow-up intervention of the FRIENDS for Life

programme to ensure that the positive effects of the programme are sustained. In addition, the research highlighted that children with existing severe social and emotional issues or high-risk external factors struggled to engage with the programme. The participants reported that the support required for these children is beyond the scope of the FRIENDS for Life programme in isolation. This study sought teachers' perspectives on resilience using a subjective, qualitative approach. As reported by Windle et al. (2011), there is no current "gold standard" (p.17) measure of resilience. As this area is rapidly evolving, a valid resilience measure is urgently required for use with children, and other populations, to consistently assess well-being and to provide valid reports that may impact on the development of policy guidelines.

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Towards an Inclusive Classroom: Using Drama in Education to Break down Social Barriers, by Rachel O'Brien

Biography

Before completing the Professional Master of Education (PME) in Post Primary Education, Rachel gained both a BA in Drama and Film Studies and a Master's in Drama and Theatre Studies from the University of Kent. Rachel's passion for drama resonates in her personal and professional life. She recently directed an award-winning performance of Macbeth at her school and enjoys acting and performing in her own time. Rachel uses drama methodologies in her English classroom and this interest led to research into using Drama in Education (DIE) methodologies to promote inclusion. She has spent the last year teaching at Mount Anville Secondary School in Dublin and is looking forward to taking up an English teaching position at Oatlands College in September 2019.

Towards an Inclusive Classroom: Using Drama in Education to Break down Social Barriers, by Rachel O'Brien

Research Supervisor: Rita McHugh

Abstract

The study explored the role of Drama in Education (DIE) in creating inclusive classroom environments within Irish post-primary settings. It investigated time and value given to DIE as students' transition from primary school to post-primary school. It also explored teacher attitudes towards DIE and towards using DIE methodologies within their classrooms to improve inclusivity. The research included qualitative interviews with teachers (n=3) across a range of different teaching subjects. The findings of this study indicate that efforts to change and advance the place of arts in post-primary education are limited and in need of greater critical attention.

Keywords: Drama, Inclusion, Education

Introduction

The arts have the capacity to create new perceptions which are transformative for the individual experiencing them (Deleuze, 1995). Furthermore, Drama in Education (DIE) specifically allows students to experience a unique learning opportunity, whereby they navigate emotions in an effective way (Mavroudis and Bournelli, 2016). DIE provides a naturally inclusive framework for students to explore both themselves and others within, by protecting them from the consequences that would usually follow in a real-life circumstance (Edmiston, 2000). Irish curricula and policies are reflective of this, stating that drama 'comprises interrelated activities which explore feelings, knowledge and ideas, leading to understanding. It explores themes and issues, creates a safe context in which to do so, and provides for opportunities to reflect on the insights gained in the process' (Government of Ireland, 1999, p.3). This rhetoric is heavily present in primary school documents; however, there is limited research and theory aimed towards post-primary. The researcher wanted to understand what aspects of DIE they find to be particularly transformative and what experience they have (if any) in utilising DIE methodologies. DIE is a dynamic process combining emotional engagement with cognitive processing, as well as individual and collective

living experiences with reflection (Papavassiliou-Alexiou and Zourna, 2016). The researcher sought to understand whether teachers consider there to be a relationship between the emotional engagement experienced through DIE and whether these experiences are conducive to an inclusive classroom environment.

Literature Review

The principal aim of this small-scale research project was to gain understanding of the benefits of DIE and the effect it has on promoting inclusivity. It also includes literature on the difficulties in elucidating these relatively young areas of pedagogy and theory. There is also international policy included to expound on global outlooks. Finally, an examination of Irish policy is also detailed to provide national perspectives. The researcher identified gaps in the literature that included the verity of teachers' first-hand experience of implementing DIE and teacher perceptions on using DIE in relation to inclusion. Moreover, there has been little research carried out in this area in the post-primary system in Ireland.

Irish Perspectives

It is widely acknowledged that the Irish curriculum has undergone a substantial decrease in the amount of exposure students have to drama when they transition from primary to secondary school (Keating, 2015). When one examines the Irish primary school Arts Education curriculum, it clearly states that Drama is an integral component as it helps to promote thinking, imagination and sensitivity. It also works as a means of promoting social and cultural development (Government of Ireland, 1999). A report published by the Arts Council (1979) highlighted the discontinuity between primary and post-primary secondary schools. It argued that the primary school curriculum is very much focused on experiences, whereas the post-primary is geared towards preparing students for the transfer to third level education.

In 1995, the White Paper on Education (Department of Education and Science, 1995) outlined intentions for a consultative process across primary and secondary education to implement change and development. It indicates the distinctive and intrinsic value of arts education and the importance of its role within the whole school curriculum. Furthermore, the Paper stated that

the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) would develop drama and dance Junior Certificate courses to develop cultural identity. Whilst the NCCA has created short courses, such as *artistic performance*, there is not enough promotion of the use of arts methodologies, such as DIE, across all second level subjects as underpinned by the Arts Council Report. The gap in the importance placed on and time spent using drama as a pedagogy from primary to secondary school is problematic. Whilst there is an instructive drama curriculum for primary school outlining how drama can aid in the fulfilment of a child's personal, social, emotional and intellectual development (Government of Ireland, 1999), there is no such literature to be found at second level. In order to ascertain this, the researcher posed the following research question: *Does DIE help promote inclusion for Post-Primary teachers?*

Methodology

The researcher chose a qualitative research approach to best address the research question. Semi-structured interviews were used as a data method. Whilst there are benefits of carrying out quantitative methods such as accurate and numerical analysis, the researcher considered this would be too prescriptive in investigating the benefits of DIE on inclusive education.

Qualitative research design allows for participants to elicit detailed accounts of their experiences regarding the research topic (Creswell, Hanson, Clark and Morales, 2007). Additionally, the researcher was able to focus on the quality of participant experiences. Qualitative research seeks to explore the social production of issues and how people make sense of their surroundings (Rahman, 2016) and the researcher deemed this appropriate in addressing the research question.

The open-ended nature of the interview questions allowed participants to convey their perspectives. Data was analysed using thematic analysis and coding. All measures have some amount of error, but in this instance, the error was minimised by well-written questions (Maruyama and Ryan, 2014).

Findings

The research question stemmed from the researcher's pedagogical interest in the area, and a concern that DIE is not promulgated sufficiently within the Irish second level system. The researcher considers the findings to corroborate this initial inference.

Skills and Training

All three participants noted their hesitation regarding use of DIE as a teaching methodology. The most significant finding was in relation to Continuous Professional Development (CPD). Each participant noted that they saw the benefits in using DIE and would invariably employ it more if relevant training was available. One participant explained, 'You hear a lot of talk from policy makers about the benefits of arts education and DIE, but this isn't reflected in the CPD courses they're offering. It's a big shame as it would definitely encourage more teachers to utilise it'.

What is most evident from the findings is that these post-primary teachers do see the benefits of using DIE to promote inclusivity evident within their own classrooms. Furthermore, interviewees stated that training resources offered to them in this area are largely insufficient. These teachers considered that for DIE to be used to its fullest potential, there needs to be more CPD courses and in-school training offered in this area. Participants also cited a lack of training relating to DIE at post-primary, particularly in comparison to primary level.

Crucially, the findings illustrated and answered the research question insofar as DIE can be a significantly powerful pedagogical tool and can be potentially, transformational when teaching about inclusion and learning inclusively. As Berghammer (1985) argues, all students, regardless of age, enter the classroom with a certain set of values, which they have unwittingly acquired from the people in their lives. These values can sometimes give rise to insensitive behaviours. DIE can aid students in discovering their own personal values, allowing them to be cognisant of how these shape their responses to life issues and occurrences and, furthermore, encourage them to recognise and be cognisant of differing values.

Discussion

Inclusive education requires constant evaluation to support educational models of good practice for all students. The State has begun to acknowledge the need to engage with such change (Petrescu, 2013). This can be seen with the implementation of short courses, such as *artistic performance* and more awareness around the benefits of active forms of education.

The Gaiety School of Acting is currently the only drama CPD course, approved by the Department of Education, available to primary school teachers in the Irish Republic. Primary teachers can choose/pay to do a week-long Drama in-service course during the summer. This allows teachers to gain Extra Personal Vacation (EPV) days. However, no such courses are in existence for second level teachers. The only available courses to develop skills in DIE are third level courses, such as the year-long Master's in Education (Drama), offered by Trinity College Dublin. Robinson (1981) argues that DIE fosters the reciprocal and developmental processes of both personal and cultural growth and that the teacher is central as an enabler of this. However, the question as to whether this is possible without sufficient teacher training being offered to teachers within Irish post-primary education is an open one.

Findings indicate that the NCCA and Department of Education could invest in creating a specification for DIE that teachers across all subjects can refer to and that there is at least one CPD course designed and implemented in relation to DIE. Currently, there are no CPD courses relating to DIE for secondary teachers in Ireland. A CPD course combined with literature will help form dynamic relationships between teacher and student, as the teacher will be equipped with more skills to better interact with their students (Gajewski, 2017).

A significant finding of this research was the lack of knowledge surrounding the benefits of DIE to all curricular subjects. In providing research data from the Irish educational perspective, it is intended that the data will encourage more teachers to utilise DIE in their classrooms and see first-hand the positive benefits it has on creating an inclusive environment.

Finally, data analysis highlights that second level teachers see the direct benefits of DIE in relation to inclusion in their classrooms. The teachers are

willing to experiment more with the methodology and were vocal about their desire for more training and materials to support pedagogy. Findings suggest a need for the NCCA to lead and carry out a nationwide initiative that promotes DIE within secondary schools. This would highlight to educators that DIE is not just a tool that can be used for rewarding good behaviour or a tool useful only to humanities subjects, but that it can be used to help students to consider their values of fairness, equality, individuality and independence across a range of subjects (Berghammer, 1985).

Conclusion

The researcher considers there to be a significant gap in training available to second level teachers in DIE and arts education in general. The research highlighted a lack of literature surrounding DIE at second level education. Despite the lack of training and literature in the area, there are positive steps that can administered by second level schools moving forward. Such steps include school wide drama initiatives and the sharing of DIE methodologies by more experienced teachers in the area with those with less experience. These are small recommendations that can contribute to forming new understandings on how educational inclusivity can be achieved, by drawing attention to means of participation beyond the commonly typical realms of pedagogy (Allan, 2014). This can be implemented by developing a sustained effort over time to ensure growth (Department of Education and Science, 1995). It is hoped that the findings from this research project are a part of the sustained effort and initiative to grow DIE at post-primary level in Ireland and that they will provide a beginning for teachers seeking to develop more inclusive school communities.

A principal limitation of this study related to the small sample size. Only three participants were interviewed. However, data offered some meaningful insight into the subject matter under investigation and, following Hackshaw (2008), it is often better to approach a new research hypothesis with a small number of participants. Another limitation related to the sample size was the potential risk of the data collection and analysis not properly addressing the questions the researcher wanted to find answers to (Willig, 2013). The researcher mitigated this by ensuring that the key research ideas were prevalent in all questions to avoid formulation of answers that did not pertain to the research topic (Maruyama and Ryan, 2014).

While this study located its analysis and attention in an Irish context, the research findings were in line within the broader international research sphere. The study was intended to deliver an insight into current experience and practice in Ireland. Whilst recognising the limitations of the study and the need for more empirical research in the area, it is hoped that research findings might provide a point of departure for individuals hoping to examine the relationship of DIE in promoting inclusivity in the Irish classroom.

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Does Inclusion in the Classroom Always Work?: A Study of the Advantages and Disadvantages of implementing Inclusion in the Mainstream Classroom, by Sadhbh Langan

Biography

Sadhbh is from County Mayo and has recently completed a Professional Master of Education (PME) in Post Primary Education with Hibernia College with First Class Honours. Prior to this, she completed a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Music and English at Maynooth University. During her studies at Hibernia College, she became interested in the area of inclusion and inclusive practices in education. Her dissertation focuses on challenges teachers face when implementing inclusive practices.

Does Inclusion in the Classroom Always Work?: A Study of the Advantages and Disadvantages of implementing Inclusion in the Mainstream Classroom, by Sadhbh Langan

Research Supervisor: Dr Michael Dayton

Abstract

This study examined perspectives of inclusion in a co-educational post primary school in a rural town in the West of Ireland. Using a mixed methods approach, post-primary teachers (n=30) completed questionnaires on their views of inclusive education in a mainstream school. Semi-structured interviews (n=2) were also carried out with a special needs assistant and a special educational needs organiser to discuss the inclusion of children with SEN in the mainstream classroom. The findings highlighted a willingness amongst teachers and SNAs to engage with inclusive practices but there were concerns around available resources and training. Recommendations point to placing more emphasis on how to run an inclusive classroom in initial teacher education courses and CPD courses. The role of the SNA also needs to be re-evaluated in furthering their role for inclusion.

Keywords: Inclusion, inclusive teaching/learning, Special Education Needs (SEN), Special Needs Assistance (SNA) aka. Assisted teaching (AT)

Introduction

In recent years, inclusion has been part of the educational zeitgeist of Irish educational policy. Changes in legislation have promoted more inclusion of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) into mainstream classrooms. This has been supported by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). This dissertation investigates the theory that informs inclusion polices and interrogates examples of other policies in relation to the Irish context, namely, the Salamanca Statement 1994 and the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). Inclusive schools can be described as places of learning that prioritise in practice students' rights to an education regardless of additional learning needs (ALN). According to the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), inclusive schools are 'schools for all, institutions

which include everybody, celebrate differences, support learning and respond to individual needs' (1994, p.iii). The extent to which inclusion works informs the thesis statement around the inclusivity of inclusion in mainstream classrooms. The researcher's rationale for the inclusion of students with SEN students within Irish policy arose from various teaching placements. Supports and legislation underpin the theoretical study of adolescent challenges. The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 provides a legislative framework for the inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream classrooms. This research sought to focus on inclusive practices within the classroom for all students.

Literature Review

Atkinson et al. (1997) declare that, 'historically, people with specific learning disabilities have been segregated from mainstream school practices as well as economic and social activities' (cited in Wang, 2009, p.154). This has only been challenged in the last twenty-five years. The EPSEN Act 2004 requires that a child with Additional Learning Needs (ALN) be educated in an inclusive environment with children who do not have such needs. The foundation of inclusion in the classroom is formed from the Salamanca Declaration that embeds increasing recognition of the rights that children with disabilities and special educational needs have, stating: 'The Salamanca Statement acknowledges that schools must change if they are to genuinely provide equal opportunities for all pupils' (Wang, 2009, p.159). The influence of the media upon societal conceptions of disability has a seemingly long and pernicious history. According to Hodkinson and Vickerman (2009), the media has stigmatised people with impairments by focusing upon the medical model's outlook that disability is a 'personal misfortune' (Shakespeare, 1994, p.284).

The Salamanca Declaration and Framework for Action (UNESCO, 1994) is an international framework on the six policies, principles and practices in SEN. Ireland was among the participants representing ninety-two governments. This global declaration 'assumes that human differences are normal, and that learning must accordingly be adapted to the needs of the child' (UNESCO, 1994). As part of the new Labour government in 1997, Hodkinson and Vickerman (2009, p.126) highlight 'the principle of inclusive education, enrolling all children in regular schools, unless there are compelling reasons for doing otherwise'. The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994, p.x) called

upon international communities to 'endorse the approach of inclusive schooling and to support the development of special needs education as an integral part of education programmes'.

In the USA, the implementation of inclusion has resulted in approximately 96 per cent of children with disabilities attending mainstream schools, with the remaining percentage opting for special school education. According to the United States Department of Education (2005, p.19), 'About half of all students with disabilities spent 80% or more of their day in regular classrooms'. Reiter et al. (1998) acknowledge that in other countries like Israel, 'commonly held misconceptions that disabled people are different, cannot learn with the rest of mainstream society and are not able to work - may well go unchallenged' (cited in Hodkinson and Vickerman, 2009, p.107). Philosopher Mary Warnock promotes the theory of 'inclusion by choice' (Hodkinson and Vickerman, 2009, p.81) whereby students should not be forced into the mainstream education system on the basis that society has made a commitment to inclusion, but rather such students have a choice in their learning environment.

Methodology

Johnson and Christensen (2008, p.51) instruct researchers to 'be sure to consider the fundamental principle of mixed research, which says that it is wise to collect multiple sets of data using different research methods and approaches in a way that the resulting mixture has complementary strengths and non-overlapping weaknesses'. The researcher adopted a mixed method approach on the basis that 'Many researchers have used mixed methods because it seemed intuitively obvious to them that this would enrich their ability to draw conclusions about the problem under study' (Mertens, 2014, p.303). Niglas (2000, p.2) asserts, 'there are some methodologists who propose that the combination of various elements of quantitative and qualitative approaches can offer much wider possibilities'. This researcher weighed up the advantages of choosing each individual method and decided that a mixed method approach would offer richer data.

An online questionnaire was emailed to teachers (n=39). One semi-structured, face to face, interview was carried out with an SNA who has been working in the school for over ten years. The researcher used a semi-structured interview to obtain impartial answers, while closed ended

questions may force participants to answer in a particular way (Creswell, 2012; McNamara, 1999: cited in Quad, 2016).

The researcher also engaged with teachers in a series of informal conversations on the topic of inclusion. These unscheduled and informal discussions fall under the category of observational data. This type of data collection is a technique where one personally watches, communicates or interacts with specific research subjects. It can be recorded by simply writing notes, recordings or even sketches. Ethnography is a term that describes the observation of the lifestyle of a cultural group. In this scenario, it was a group of educators that were observed by this participant observer. Evered and Louis (1981) assert that 'inquiry from the inside carries with it the assumption that the researcher can best come to know the reality of an organisation by being there: by becoming immersed in the stream of events and activities by becoming part of the phenomena of study' (pp.388-389). When providing evidence from the face-to-face interview, the pseudonym, Laura, is used to ensure 'participants' entitlement to privacy' (BERA, 2004, p.8).

Findings and Discussion

Resources available, student confidence, challenges of successful inclusion and teachers' attitudes were some of the themes generated from the findings. To address the collected findings, this researcher themed the common issues that constantly reoccurred throughout the data collection. A theme is generated when a similar idea or issue expressed by participants is grouped into a single category for discussion by the researcher. These themes are then explored and analysed and linked back to the central motif, inclusion. Findings demonstrated that some participants offered examples of a typical class where inclusive teaching was a challenge.

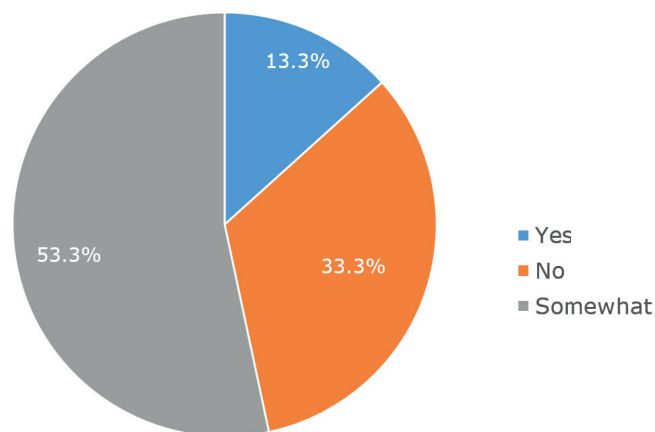Participants' responses to if they have the proper resources to teach inclusively

Figure 4.5: Accurate resources available to teach inclusively

Inclusion is not solely placing SEN students among those without learning difficulties under one roof with the aim of justifying the model of inclusion but rather about developing the education and catering for the needs of all children. Research proves that an inclusive education can develop and improve social skills and behaviour. Therefore, inclusive teaching not only benefits the need for students to feel included but prepares all students for the future. The significant increase in resource teachers and SNAs allocated to schools has resulted in a reduced number of students attending special schools, which according to research can lead to social exclusion. The number of SNA posts has increased from 960 to 12,900 in the same year (NCSE, 2016). Deliberate attempts to improve inclusion in education is evident from the 'pivotal legal challenges by parents to ensure their children's rights to an education, under Article 42 of the constitution, are satisfied. The historic cases of O'Donoghue, 1993 and Sinnott, 2001 were significant in the reviewing of the constitutional rights for SEN students and the development of the term inclusion.

Section two of The Equal Status Act defines disability spanning a broad range of physical, mental, behavioural/emotional and sensory impairments that may prohibit the same learning as students without these disabilities (Equal Status Act, 2000). The drafting of rights based legislation is the easy part. The massive cost involved in enabling rights based legislation is what causes problems. Large parts of the EPSEN Act 2004 have not yet been enacted.

Conclusion

Many factors influence inclusive educational practices. The area of educational provision for children with special educational needs has seen a gradual shift from a system characterised by separation and exclusion to a system based more on the principles of inclusion, integration and statutory rights and obligations.

This researcher had certain limitations during this dissertation. The small sample size was defined by the Hibernia guidelines that indicated that the research must be carried out during Advanced School Experience and Professional Practice (Advanced SEPP) (Hibernia College, 2017). This limited the data collection because it was focused on one school, which in turn narrowed the number of participants. This researcher capped the questionnaire at thirty participants due to time restrictions and out of three SNAs in the school, only one was available for a sit-down interview. The results would have been more extensive if the guidelines allowed for a greater timeframe and possible data collection from all three placement schools.

Recommendations that inform policy in ways that link theory to practice is a concern for this researcher because the reality of implementing inclusion is not something that can be effectively applied within the classroom as an ongoing practice. A review of inclusion in practice should be made explicit in policy and implemented within schools at all levels. SENOs should have more presence in schools to ensure SEN students are experiencing inclusion. This should be implemented in inclusion policy for Ireland.

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Connecting the Past to the Present: Using ICT to Enhance the History Classroom, by Gillian Rice

Biography

Gillian Rice graduated with a BA in History and English from University College, Dublin in 2011. She subsequently worked as a troubleshooter for an Internet payments company in Melbourne Victoria before returning to Ireland to complete the Professional Master of Education at Hibernia College Dublin. She currently teaches English and History in a post-primary school in Co. Louth. She teaches First Year to Leaving Certificate level and is a mum to two young boys.

Research Supervisor: Dr Michael Dayton

Abstract

The Irish government has made a €210 million commitment to the investment of ICT infrastructure for schools. This pledge aims to create an education system to be one of the best in Europe by 2026. The prioritisation of ICT in education arises from concepts that promote a 'knowledge society' and 'information society'. This study aimed to address the drivers of such changes – the teachers in their implementation of ICT within the classroom, with a specific focus on the subject of history. Comprehension, competence and confidence underpin change. This study examined teachers' perspectives on the use of ICT within their classrooms, usage confidence and their preparedness with a specific focus on factors that explain why they are using it. Findings indicate that while confidence levels using ICT are high, teachers consider they could benefit from more specific training, with a focus on pedagogical uses of ICT rather than just ICT mastery.

Keywords: ICT, implementation, teacher, competency, attitudes, training

Introduction

Cochrane (1995) proposed that, 'in future, there will be two types of teacher, the IT literate and the retired' (cited in Haydn and Barton, 2008, p.440). In 1995, Tony Blair stated that 'the future lies in the marriage of education and technology. The information race has begun'. In Ireland, the *Schools IT 2000* initiative (DES, 1997) and *Blueprint for the Future of ICT in Irish Schools* (DES, 2001) lay the foundations for the emerging 'knowledge economy'. A distinct feature of the 'knowledge economy' is the reliance on the transmission and use of knowledge than on knowledge creation alone. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) can provide teachers with the tools to engage with pedagogically. *The Digital Strategy for Schools* (2015 – 2020) has set out to embed digital learning across the curriculum.

Literature Review

Globally, since the mid-1990s, there has been an increased emphasis placed upon the integration of ICT within education policies. In keeping with international trends, Ireland has developed and implemented specific initiatives to support ICT use in schools at primary and post-primary levels. The Inspectorate *ICT in Schools* highlighted positives of ICT use in schools but also discussed the need for technical support, and infrastructure and integration challenges in teaching and learning (Digital Strategy for Schools, 2015). The resulting government expenditure was a direct result of the DES recognising the educational potential of digital technologies, in addition to meeting the needs of the emerging 'knowledge economy' and 'information society'. However, curriculum reform takes time and teachers need spaces to make the pedagogical shifts necessary to implement such reform in their classrooms.

'Digital natives' (Prensky, 2001) is the term used to refer to that generation of young people born after 1980 who have grown up using computers, mobile phones and other devices attributed to the digital age. Since then, youth dependence on ICT is part of an everyday lifestyle. According to the Central Statistics Office (CSO) (2017), figures illustrate that Irish households connected to the Internet have risen from 57 % in 2007 to 89% in 2017. This increase reflects the recent surge in technology used in the home along with the propagation of online communication amongst young people.

The 2011 *EU Survey of Schools (ESSIE Study)* highlights Irish teachers' predominant ICT usage as one that focuses on ICT for the presentation of lesson content. This primary level usage is in direct contrast to that of students (Cosgrove et al., 2014). Furthermore, the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) Foundation states that exposure to technology cannot be confused with the ability to use it. Curriculum development initiatives have emphasised twenty-first century skills (often referred to as Key Skills Framework: NCCA, 2008) qualities that prepare students to live and work in a digital society (Cosgrove et al., 2014, p.5). Yet Helsper and Eynon (2009, p.504) discuss that 'breadth of use, experience, self-efficacy and education are just as, if not more important than age' in defining how people become digitally adept. Livingstone (2012) theorises that the growing ICT revolution, spanning from industry-supporting digital education

initiatives to the ever-growing number of families gaining internet access at home, will be as significant to the twenty-first century as the book was to the nineteenth century.

Flecknoe (2002) and DeWitte and Rogge (2014) suggest that ICT possesses the ability to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of lessons. Moreover, it provides an opportunity for a constructivist pedagogical approach to learning; learner investigation, collaboration and construction of knowledge are vital steps to understanding. These skills do not occur through didactic ways of teaching — that which Paolo Freire (2000, p.32) referred to as the 'banking system' of education. When used effectively, ICT can provide opportunities for co-investigation, collaboration and the construction of knowledge.

The existing literature surrounding this topic raised the following research questions:
1. How successful is the implementation of ICT at a subject-specific level such as the history classroom?
2. How does using ICT in a classroom enhance the teaching and learning of history?
3. To what extent do teacher attitudes, beliefs and competencies of ICT impact the quality of ICT used in their classroom?
4. How can ICT be utilised to further enhance life skills of research, critical-thinking and analysis for students?

Methodology

Bullough and Pinnegar (2001, p.15) define self-study as 'the space between self and the practice engaged in'. The importance of self is acknowledged; the experience of teacher educators is capitalised as a resource for research and this encourages those who engage in self-study to be critical of themselves and their roles both as researchers and educators (Feldman, Paugh and Mills, 2004). By using teachers' experiences as the primary source, quantitative and qualitative methodological approaches were deemed appropriate. The acknowledgment that the researcher should remain both impartial and critical of their role throughout the piece was at the forefront of the research. Both interpretivist and positivist paradigms were selected for this study. The mixed method approach comprised three different methods that included the recording of reflexive field notes and an

online questionnaire. Semi-structured interviews were also used based on the data collected from the two other methods. The use of theoretical sampling dictated that the researcher chose participants who work as teachers in the Irish school system using purposive sampling. The focus of the study was on the history classroom, with a comparison sample obtained from the wider curriculum. Questionnaires were conducted online using Google Forms.

Findings

The results of data collected in this study are encouraging. They show that attitudes are positive and that teachers are receptive to ICT if teachers are equipped with the appropriate knowledge of its usage. Data demonstrated that ICT use is widespread in the classroom. This finding raised questions on the effective use of ICT and whether teacher digital competency levels had an impact on the extent of usage in the classroom.
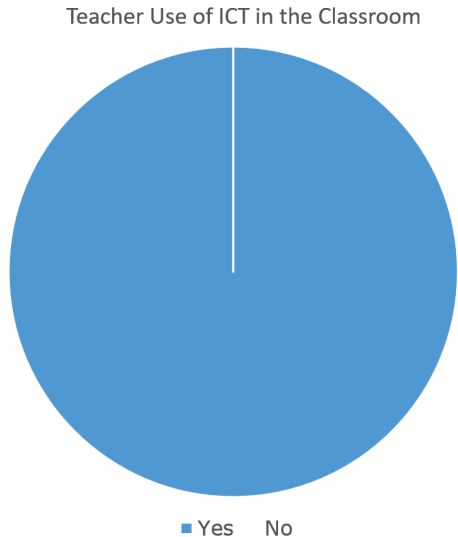
Teacher Use of ICT in the Classroom

■ Yes   No

Figure 1: Teacher use of ICT in the classroom (n=40)

The results of the research were organised into three distinct themes:

1. Successes and challenges of ICT in a classroom

2. Quality versus quantity of ICT used in the classroom
3. Teacher's attitudes, beliefs and competencies of ICT

Successes and Challenges of ICT in a Classroom

Teacher A described ICT as offering a difference in that "*it takes…the isolation out of the profession, there's entire forums and discussion boards that definitely make things easier if you want to bounce an idea off someone in the same field as you … so you get ideas from other teachers on the 'net, or you can get some resources".*
From the students' perspective, Teacher B discussed ICT as acting as a "trigger, something to promote thinking", which was corroborated in Teacher C's response in stating that "…part of the reason history is a subject on the curriculum is so that students will…go out into their lives being able to critically question and analyse information". Moreover, Teacher C suggested that the marriage of ICT with history worked because "You're speaking to and teaching the students on a level they can process and can understand". The recurring challenge that emerged was the perception students hold around digital literacy skills. Teachers A and C both discussed students' lack of basic ICT skills, with Teacher C stating that while students were undoubtedly 'tech-savvy', this did not refer to their ability to use it effectively.

Quality versus Quantity of ICT use in a Classroom

Teacher competence and discernment of ICT use in the classroom have the potential to impact on the way in which students learn. Teacher C posited that "there's no point using it if it's not going to enhance the lesson". Yet, when teachers were asked if they considered they could teach a lesson as adequately without the use of ICT, 50% of teachers answered "yes". When these results were analysed specifically in relation to history teachers, the results were similar with 45% respondents stating "yes".

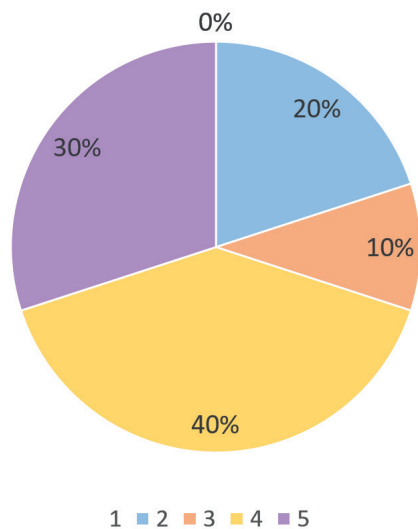Teacher confidence using ICT in history classroom

Figure 2: The levels of confidence history teachers feel in using ICT in their classes. 1 being 'not at all confident', 5 being 'very confident'

Teacher's Attitudes, Beliefs and Competencies of ICT

The implementation of ICT in the classroom is evidenced as either voluntarily or out of a sense of duty, showing that, overall, attitudes to ICT are positive. Teacher A, B and C all considered ICT to have a positive impact on the classroom, with Teacher A stating, "we've really embraced it and … it has made teaching a whole lot easier".

When triangulated with the researcher's field notes, teacher attitudes towards ICT in the classroom were also positive. The data showed there was an upturn in teachers' attitudes towards ICT, mirroring a similar trend in teachers' confidence levels in using ICT. 55% (n=6) of respondents surveyed used ICT in every history class, with 27% (n=3) opting to use ICT in "most classes", and 18% (n=2) saying they would use it "sometimes".

Discussion

Without adequate training at teacher-training or in-service (Continuous Professional Development (CPD)) level, teachers will rarely move past the 'technology literacy' stage.

The UNESCO ICT COMPENTENCY FRAMEWORK FOR TEACHERS			
	TECHNOLOGY LITERACY	**KNOWLEDGE DEPENDING**	**KNOWLEDGE CREATION**
Understanding ICT in Education	Policy awareness	Policy understanding	Policy innovation
Curriculum and Assessment	Basic knowledge	Knowledge application	Knowledge society skills
Pedagogy	Integrate technology	Complex problem solving	Self management
ICT	Basic tools	Complex tools	Persuasive tools
Organisation and Administration	Standard classroom	Collaborative groups	Learning organisations
Teacher Professional Learning	Digital literacy	Manage and guide	Teacher as model learner

Figure 3: The competencies necessary for teachers to effectively implement ICT in their classrooms (UNESCO, 2011)

Findings confirm that teachers acknowledge the need and importance of ICT. Findings also illustrate a need for participating teachers to establish belief, and build confidence on the uses of technologies through opportunities, such as professional development programmes (Kojima, 2014). However, the data also demonstrated that the exposure to technology should not be equated with the ability to use it (Helsper and Eynon, 2008). Beliefs structures play a key role in teacher decision-making, regarding curriculum and instructional tasks (Richardson, 1996).

With 70% of history teachers stating they were "confident" or "very confident" using ICT, it is noteworthy that 30% of history teachers in the

same study did not. Furthermore, while confidence levels using ICT were relatively high, 64% of participants consider they would benefit from more ICT training. Cox, Preston and Cox (1999) theorise that a lack of confidence and experience with technology directly influences teachers' motivation to use it in the classroom. It is only through confidence in the use of ICT that teachers can identify the benefits of using ICT in their teaching and will endeavour to extend their classroom use in the future. However, teachers discussed the collaboration ICT brought to the profession in that it enabled teachers to share ideas and resources online.

BECTA (2004) posit that pedagogical training as opposed to simply training teachers to use ICT tools is important. Even after CPD, teachers surveyed remained unaware of how to integrate ICT on a pedagogical level. Instead, they were simply more aware of the rudiments of computers in practice. Teachers need development in pedagogical ICT skills, as well as training in basic skill sets. This all corroborated with previous research findings (Sutherland, Robertson and John, 2004; Bonnet, 1997; Haydn, 2003).

There would appear to be misconceptions regarding the level of digital literacy students hold. Teacher A and C were aware of the gaps in students' knowledge in ICT and consider their digital literacies as an area that needs further research. However, Teacher B, a 'digital immigrant' (Helsper and Enyon, 2009, p.3), regards students as having "nothing to learn" about computers but acknowledged students' lack of knowledge on how to use ICT for research. Furthermore, 50% of participants and 55% of history teachers surveyed stated they could teach a lesson just as effectively without the use of ICT. This statistic implies that teachers are failing to recognise the benefits of ICT as a tool to enhance their teaching. In concurrence with Shoepp's (2005) study which found that although teachers acknowledged that there was ample technological hardware available, they are not being guided, supported, educated or mentored in the integration of technology in their teaching.

Participants identified taking students past the confines of the classroom, books and the curriculum as areas where ICT can enrich learning experiences. Teachers also considered the need for students to be provided with more opportunities to contextualise statistics and historical facts in line with new JCSA strands for history. Overall, the data collected showed a

positive shift in teachers' attitudes in using ICT in their classrooms when compared to the literature reviewed.

Conclusion

The implementation of ICT as an enhancement to the history classroom has undergone some significant successes. Findings demonstrate that ICT is being used across the curriculum by all teachers of the sample schools. Additionally, teacher attitudes have changed towards ICT, signifying that investments in school ICT infrastructure could lead to further future opportunities in its effective pedagogical usage. Schools should undertake to create formal peer mentoring schemes to facilitate the collaboration of good models of practice amongst staff members. Essentially, history teachers who make effective use of ICT could act as mentors to other colleagues in their respective subject.

ECDL should be a compulsory five credit module during teacher training. If this proves costly and, consequently, not an option, then teaching training colleges should make it a compulsory part of their acceptance criteria before potential student teachers are accepted onto such programmes. Furthermore, ECDL should become an integrated part of students' formal education.

ICT CPD for post-primary teachers should be compulsory. In 2005, *History in ICT* was a manual and training programme developed as a way of assisting with integrating basic ICT skills in the history classroom. The manual should be updated, re-integrated and supplied to every history department in the country and made compulsory. In addition, teachers need extensive and on-going exposure in ICT to truly understand the benefits of digital literacy. Development of appropriate pedagogical practices is more important than technical mastery of ICT. CPD in this area should be frequent and certified.

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Optional or Compulsory? Teachers' Perspectives on the Transition Year Programme in an Urban Girls Post-Primary School, by Aisling O'Neill

Biography

After completing a BA in English, Theology and Religious Studies at Mary Immaculate College, Aisling undertook a Special Education course based on inclusive practice. She has implemented strategies acquired whilst teaching English in Poland and, subsequently, when teaching in a specialist early education deaf school. Thereafter, she decided to complete the Professional Master of Education (PME) in Post-Primary Education with Hibernia College, focusing on her preferred subject area, English. The amalgamation of prerequisite knowledge, experience and the learning of new material whilst completing the PME in Post-Primary Education has enabled Aisling to confidently enter the teaching profession at post-primary level.

Optional or Compulsory? Teachers' Perspectives on the Transition Year Programme in an Urban Girls Post-Primary School, by Aisling O'Neill

Research Supervisor: Frank Smyth

Abstract

This dissertation explored teachers' perspectives on an optional or compulsory Transition Year Programme (TYP) particularly within a girls' school which had a compulsory TYP. In utilising a mixed methodological approach, participating teachers (n=24) were invited to take part in an online questionnaire. Following the questionnaire, the researcher conducted a semi-structured interview with a TY Coordinator (n=1). Findings included the emergence of recurring themes such as continuing professional development (CPD); curriculum; student suitability; and teacher collaboration.

Keywords: Compulsory, self-directed, student suitability, non-exam environment

Introduction

In 1974, the Transition Year (TY) programme was introduced into the Irish Education System as an optional one-year programme for post-primary schools. However, the DES currently outline that TY can be ratified in the admissions policy as compulsory by the school's Board of Management. The DES suggested that TY be offered in 644 participating schools in Ireland with 42,891 students partaking in the academic year 2016/2017. TY is available in approximately 75% of schools across Ireland according to the National Council Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). The TY programme is in itself, unusual; it is a unique Irish educational experience (Clerkin, 2013). In May 2014, The Irish Second-Level Students' Union's (ISSU) 'Transition Year: Exploring the Student Experience' involved 1,323 students and 57 Transition Year Coordinators. It found that 18% of schools implemented a compulsory TY. When the programme was offered as an optional year, the student uptake was 89%. Cognisant of such figures, the aim of the research explored teacher perspectives on whether TY should be optional or compulsory.

Literature Review

The TY programme provides a full year of mainstream schooling dedicated to fostering 'students' personal development' and is a unique 'Irish experiment' (Clerkin, 2012, p.5). Currently, there are just 'two countries which offer a transition or orientation year after the conclusion of lower secondary phase', both Ireland and France (Le Métais, 2003, p.14). This particular year in France is referred to as 'Seconde'; however, it varies greatly to the TY programme as there is a lack of emphasis on students developing in the 'absence of examinations and has a centrally-prescribed curriculum' (Clerkin, 2012, p.5). Alternatively, the TY programme creates a 'non-examinable environment' in the sense that it is free from state-certified examinations (DES, 1995, p.61).

Guidelines and PDST

The TY guidelines along with the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) are succinct in expressing that educational activities undertaken during this year should have an emphasis on self-directed learning (DES, 1993). Jeffers (2008) asserts that the TY programme is more student-centred than the Leaving Certificate years as it can be tailored to meet the profile of students engaging in it. Additionally, Jeffers states that the altered relationship between students and teachers in TY reduces the 'inherited authoritarian tradition' (Jeffers, 2011, p.68). Enrichment should come from the involvement of the student body, creating a flexible programme based on shared responsibility (DES, 1993).

Programme Success

According to Smyth et al. (2001, p.116), 'Students who took Transition Year achieved higher Leaving Certificate grades than those who did not'. Research has shown that TY students were more likely to be 'educationally adventurous with regard to the subjects they select for Leaving Certificate' (Jeffers, 2008, p.53). Additionally, subject sampling in TY is a contributing factor to the diverse subject choices when students progress to Leaving Certificate (ISSU, 2014).

Programme Challenges

Jeffers (2008) alludes to the 'cost burden' of TY on some families. Currently, the DES Circular letter 0029/2016 states the TY programme grant per pupil is €95.00 for the academic year. However, a study undertaken by the ISSU (2014) found that the parental contribution fund for the TY programme varied from €150 to €900 with the average being €300 per year. While opportunities were present for students to engage with 'learning beyond the classroom', the cost burden was deemed to 'contribute significantly to the TY experience' (Jeffers, 2008, p.271).

Informed by the Literature Review, the following overarching question emerged: 'What are teacher perspectives on the TY programme as to whether it should be optional or compulsory?' Other questions also arose that included:

1. What are the successes of the TY programme?
2. What are the challenges of a compulsory TY programme?
3. What improvements or changes could be made?
4. How can these findings inform policy and practice around TY?

Methodology

The researcher chose a mixed methodological approach as the 'best fit [for] the context' of this study (Check et al., 2011, p.261). Quantitative data was collected by using a questionnaire (n=24). Respondents were offered a choice of a five pre-coded response scale that ranged from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. A follow-up semi-structured interview was conducted with a TY Coordinator once data from the questionnaire was gathered and analysed. This was thought to be a methodology to 'yield rich material' and it maximised triangulation (Bell, 2005, p.157). The researcher believed that the responses gathered from the questionnaire could be 'developed and clarified' further when undertaking an interview with the TY coordinator (Bell, 2005, p.157) and provide the researcher with 'the opportunity to gather live data from live situations', postulating it was not second-hand information (Cohen et al., 2005, p.305). Data was collected during Advanced School Placement.

Findings

The researcher aims to ensure that this section provides the reader with 'statistical generalisations' arising from the sample of the teaching population (Bell, 2005, p.12).

Theory suggests that even in small studies such as this, that sampling has to be 'representative of the population' in order to be able to draw generalisations from the data gathered (Bell, 2005, p.145). The sample size was twenty-four teachers with eight males, fifteen females, and one participant opted not to disclose their gender. Within this demographic, it was found that only twelve teachers received any level of formal training around the TYP.

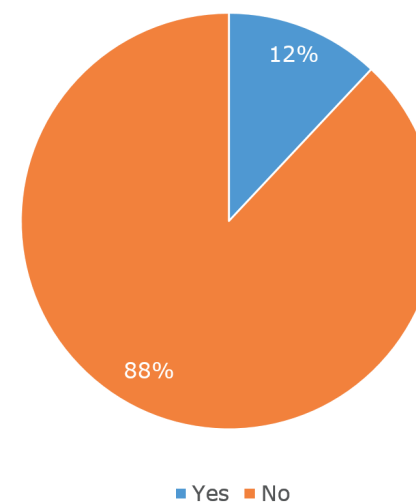Have you ever received any formal training in relation to TY?

Figure 1: Continuing Professional Development (CPD) of Teachers

Additionally, among the overall sample of teachers, 58% of teachers had been teaching TY for less than five years; 25% of teachers had been teaching TY between six to ten years; and 17% of teachers had been teaching TY for eleven years or over.
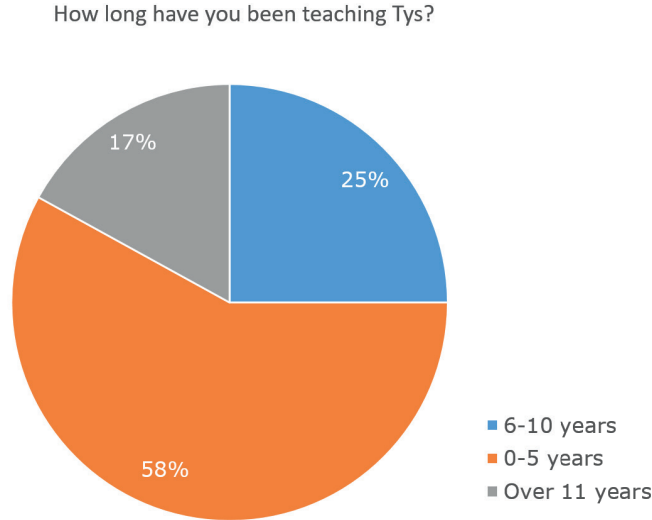
How long have you been teaching Tys?

- 6-10 years
- 0-5 years
- Over 11 years

Figure 2: Duration of TYP teaching

Opinions on TY as Optional or Compulsory

Seventeen teachers or 71% of teachers considered that this year should be offered as optional. Alternatively, seven teachers or 29% of participants suggested that the TY programme should be compulsory for all students. These statistics were interesting within the context of the school as TY was a compulsory year.
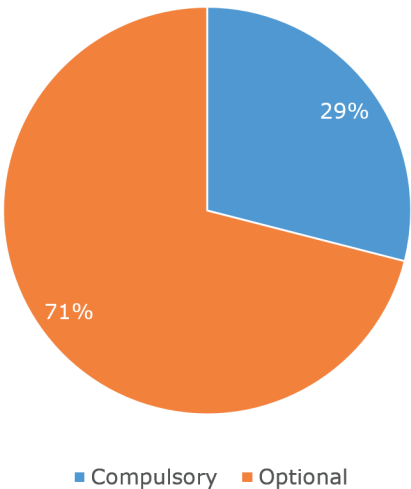
Do you think TY should be optional or compulsory??

- Compulsory
- Optional

Figure 3: Teacher Opinions on whether the TYP should be optional or compulsory

Student - Teacher Relationships

Findings suggest that teachers were less authoritarian and opted for a more 'facilitative approach with students' partaking in the TY programme within this school (Jeffers, 2008, p.323). This was an area which the questionnaire explored by posing the following statement: 'the relationship between students and teachers is more relaxed in TY'.
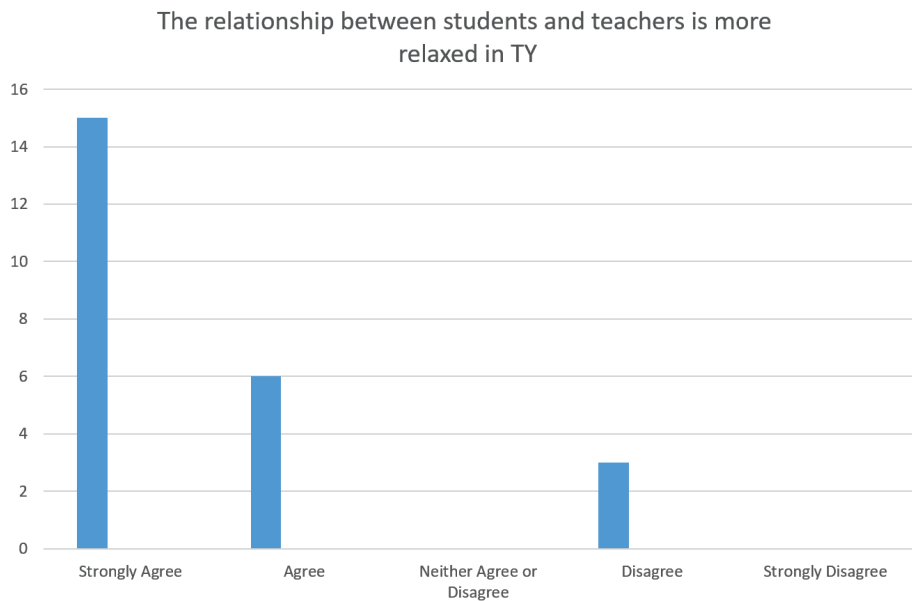
The relationship between students and teachers is more relaxed in TY

Figure 4: The relationship between students and teachers in the TYP Curriculum

79% of teachers who took part in the questionnaire would rather have a prescribed curriculum for TY. Only five teachers stated that this year should remain as it is with teachers being able to embed their own 'curriculum content' (DES, 1993). Many teachers were concerned that their courses were very challenging for students to cover over a two-year Leaving Certificate period. However, the DES TY guidelines (1993) state that 'TY is not part of the Leaving Certificate' and should not be seen as an opportunity for spending three years studying the material (DES, 1993).
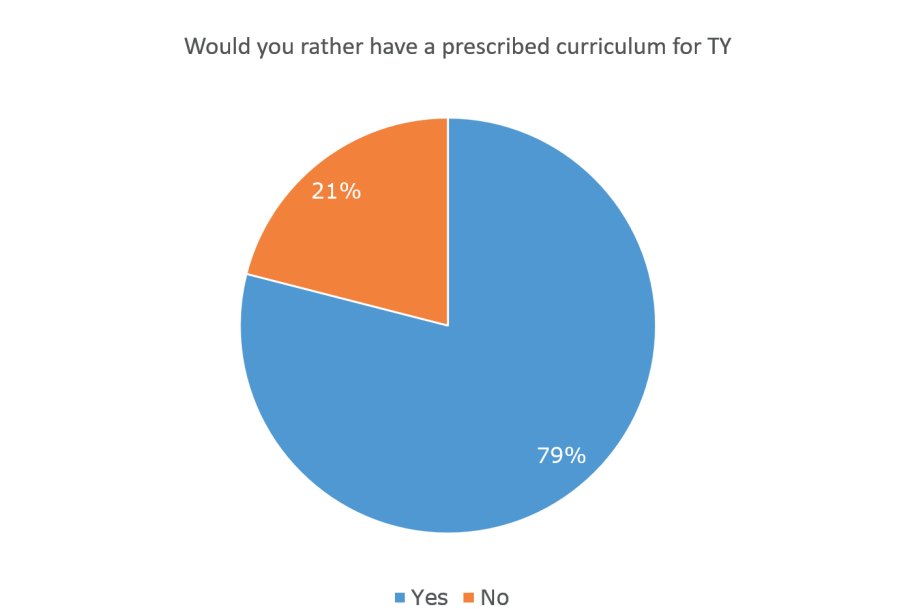
Would you rather have a prescribed curriculum for TY

Figure 5: Teacher Perspectives on whether the TYP should be prescribed or optional

Student Suitability

Student suitability is always an area of concern when a programme is implemented as compulsory. Questionnaire findings found that teachers deemed that this year did not suit all learners. Teachers expressed a view that they found it very difficult to motivate disengaged students at risk of leaving school early, particularly students of minority groups.

Discussion

The links to personal development, more self-directed learners, and the achievement of higher points at Leaving Certificate were possible motivating factors for schools to implement a compulsory TY programme. Current research suggests that TY can put a financial strain on families. Having the programme as compulsory could be seen as a way to exclude certain social classes and minority groups from applying to schools which have this year as compulsory. The following sub-sections explore possible improvements to the TY programme according to current research and according to the research findings.

Improved Funding

Research data found that teachers expressed dissatisfaction regarding the cost of engaging in the TYP for families. With the DES allocating just €95.00 per student, this issue needs to be considered when planning a compulsory TYP. The TY programme can cost up to €900.00 (ISSU, 2014, p.17). The financial burden this year can have on lower income families became apparent when interviewing the TY Coordinator. He reported the figures outlined above by the ISSU were an 'underestimation' considering there is a trip abroad included in the programme. An improvement in state funding is something which would improve inclusiveness within the programme and particularly in a school which has this year as compulsory.

Curriculum

The area of prescribed curriculum content had mixed reviews in the questionnaire. Nineteen teachers would prefer a prescribed curriculum whereas five teachers were happy to implement their own. The researcher's informal discussions with the English Department found they would rather use their own materials during the TY year as opposed to following a prescribed course. However, due to survey anonymity, it is unclear whether this too was the opinion of the respondents. The researcher posed the idea of a prescribed curriculum to the TY Coordinator during the interview. The interviewee considered this should not be the case, in contrast to the majority of staff surveyed.

Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

Findings regarding CPD demonstrated a very small minority of teachers have taken part in any formal training for the TYP, suggesting more CPD in this programme should be provided. Such in-service could 'enrich teachers' professional knowledge' in collaboration with the PDST (Teaching Council, 2011, p.19). Collaboration and team teaching were said to be high areas of priority amongst teachers of the TYP. However, teachers also expressed the view that compiling resources for this year was time-consuming.

Conclusion

This research took place in a very specific educational setting, i.e. a girls' school which implements a compulsory TYP. Findings from the questionnaire and interview indicate that teachers, for the most part, are in favour of the TY year being optional for the students within this school. Recommendations arising from this research conclude that students should be given the option to take part in this programme. Finally, the PDST suggest that schools should continue to internally evaluate their TYP. For all schools, it is recommended they involve themselves 'in a process of obtaining information and using it to form judgements which in turn are used in decision making' relating to, for example, the TYP (PDST, 2017). This process of reflection would continue to inform schools in relation to their implementation of an optional or compulsory TYP.

The researcher undertook this study within a school which had a compulsory TYP. This setting therefore is not representative of schools across Ireland, for example, coeducational schools or all-boys schools. Finally, this study is also limited in the sense that not all aspects investigated could be discussed in detail due to the constraints of space and time.

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