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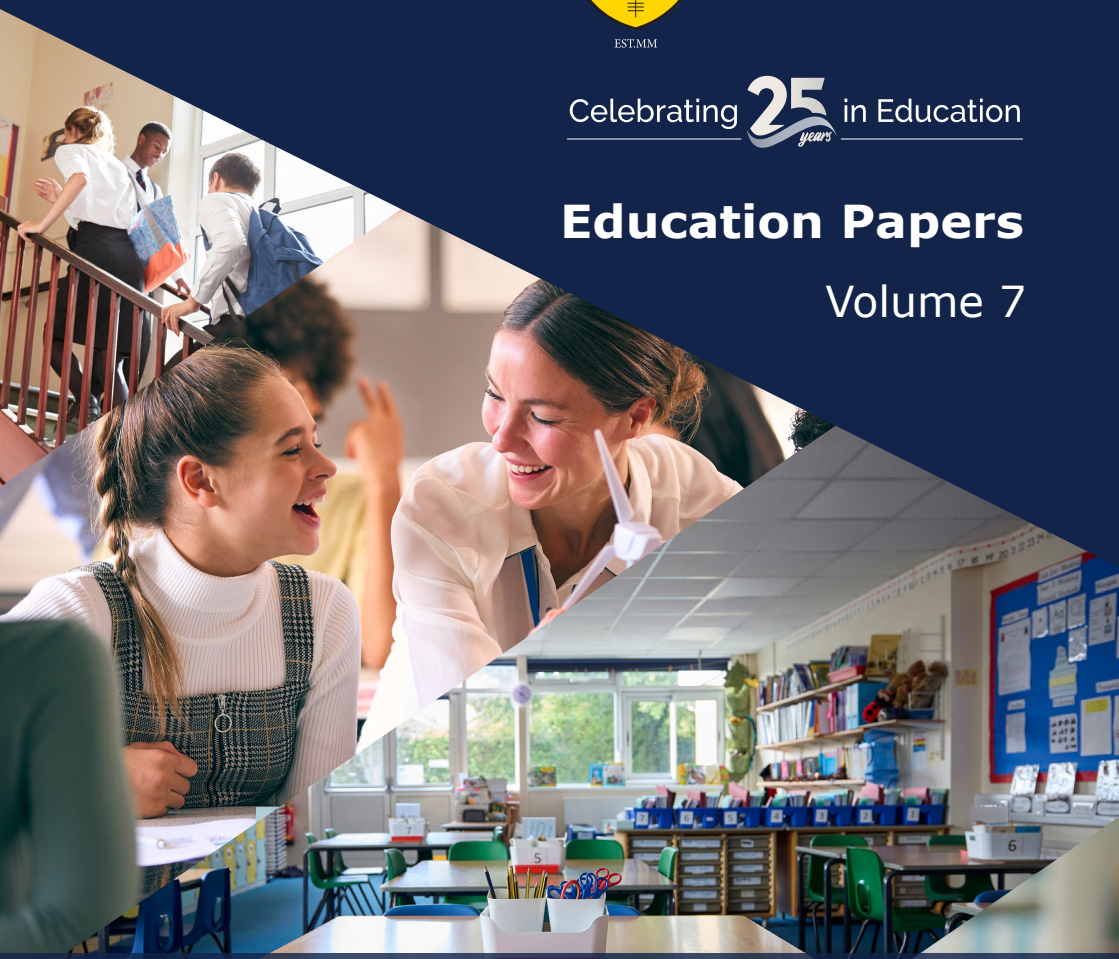
Celebrating 25 years in Education

Education Papers

Volume 7



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Foreword

The School of Education is proud to present Volume Seven of the Hibernia College Education Papers. This year marks a significant milestone in our history as Hibernia College celebrates 25 years of innovation, growth and leadership in teacher education. Since its founding, the College has remained committed to preparing reflective, research-informed educators who make meaningful contributions to schools and communities across Ireland.

As part of the Research module on our Professional Master of Education programmes, student teachers undertake a 10,000-word dissertation. With the expert support of the Research team, they integrate theory, knowledge and practice in ways that are critically informed by their school placement experiences and aligned with *Céim: standards for initial teacher education*. This rigorous process ensures our graduates are equipped to bridge the gap between theory and practice in contemporary classrooms.

Each year, student teachers explore a wide range of research topics across four key pillars:

1. Teaching, Learning and Assessment (TLA)
2. Digital Literacy and Learning Technologies
3. Inclusive Education
4. Global Citizenship, Sustainability and Wellbeing

In this anniversary volume, we celebrate our graduate teachers' intellectual curiosity, dedication and diverse interests. Their dissertations reflect not only the academic richness of the Professional Master of Education in Primary Education and Professional Master of Education in Post-Primary Education programmes, but also Hibernia College's enduring commitment to advancing educational research and practice.

Topics include oral language development, the use of reward systems, English as an additional language, the Aistear framework, play-based pedagogy, the role of ICT for exceptionally able students, fostering student autonomy, differentiation techniques at Junior Cycle, team teaching and philosophical inquiry into critical thinking.

As we mark 25 years of excellence in education, this publication stands as a testament to the hard work and scholarly achievements of our graduates as well as to the vibrant academic community that supports them. We look forward to the continued contributions of these research-informed educators as they shape the future of Irish education.

Dr Mary Kelly
Academic Dean

Dr Linda Butler Neff
Assistant Professor in Education (Primary)

Dr Frank Kehoe
Assistant Professor in Education (Post-Primary)

Teacher Perspectives on the Use of the *Aistear* Framework in Infant Classes to Develop Oral Language, Communication Skills and Communicative Relationships Through Play

Tess Breslin

Biography

Tess Breslin is a dedicated educator with a passion for language, learning and play. She earned a Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in English and Philosophy from University College Cork (UCC), where she was awarded a scholarship to complete an MA in Old, Medieval and Renaissance English. She later obtained a CELTA qualification, teaching English as a second language in northern Spain before returning to Ireland to work in school-based childcare. Tess expanded her experience in education by working with the Department of Education as a home tutor, supporting a student with special educational needs. Building on this foundation, she pursued a Professional Master of Education in Primary Education at Hibernia College, graduating in 2024.

Now a teacher of Senior Infants at a Dublin-based Educate Together school, Tess embraces the power of playful learning to enrich her students' educational journey. With a strong interest in education, language and philosophical inquiry, she finds teaching an incredibly fulfilling role.

Teacher Perspectives on the Use of the *Aistear* Framework in Infant Classes to Develop Oral Language, Communication Skills and Communicative Relationships Through Play

Research supervisor: Marie-Thérèse Downes

Abstract

This dissertation examines teachers' perspectives on using *Aistear* to support oral language development, integrate play-based learning and implement the *Primary Language curriculum* in Infant classrooms. A survey of 20 primary school teachers was conducted (n=20) using a paper questionnaire, with responses analysed using a quantitative methodological approach. Findings indicate that *Aistear* contributes to meaningful oral language interactions and effectively supports play-based approaches including role-play, free play, construction play, small-world play, art play and integrated play. Additionally, all participants (100%) agreed that play is a valuable tool for teaching the *Primary Language curriculum*, allowing children to explore language and communicate effectively.

Keywords: play-based learning, language learning, *Primary Language curriculum*, *Aistear*, meaningful language opportunities, communication, playful teaching methodologies

Introduction and Background

Play is increasingly recognised in educational research as a powerful tool for learning, fostering connections between oral language and written expression (Vedeler, 1997; Roskos and Christie, 2001). *Aistear*, Ireland's early childhood curriculum framework, is designed to support the education of children aged 0–6. While play-based learning is gaining traction in primary education internationally, *Aistear* operates within, rather than replacing, the primary curriculum. This dissertation examined teacher perspectives on the use of the *Aistear* framework in Infant classrooms, focusing on its role in developing oral language, communication skills and communicative relationships through play. Language functions as both a social tool and cognitive tool, enabling spaces for children to self-regulate, learn, imagine, connect with peers

and achieve learning outcomes — just as play enhances language development (Cregan, 2019).

Grounded in existing research and policy on language and play, this study builds on longstanding theories that position play as a fundamental driver of learning and development. Piaget's (1962) theory of play links children's cognitive development to the playful activities through which they construct knowledge about the world. Research commissioned by the Department of Education highlights play as a key pedagogical strategy in supporting language development and emergent literacy (Kennedy et al., 2023). Furthermore, Rand and Morrow (2021) advocate for sociodramatic play as a means for teachers to create spaces that enhance children's written, reading and oral literacy skills.

This research employed a quantitative methodology, using paper-based questionnaires to capture teachers' experiences and perspectives on *Aistear*, play and language development. Open-ended questions were analysed thematically, following Braun and Clarke's 2006 framework.

By examining how *Aistear* supports oral language development through play in Infant classrooms, this study specifically explored its alignment with Element 1 — 'Developing communicative relationships through language (Communicating)' of the 2019 *Primary Language curriculum*. Through investigating teacher perspectives, this research sought to provide insights into the ways that *Aistear* is perceived, implemented and leveraged to foster communication skills and support the *Primary Language curriculum* in early education. The research sought to:

- Identify how *Aistear* can be used to create opportunities for communication and oral language development
- Investigate how the *Aistear* framework helps teachers to teach oral language skills through play
- Identify how the *Aistear* framework can facilitate the teaching of the *Primary Language curriculum*

Through an extensive literature review, this central research question emerged:

How does the Aistear framework support teachers in developing oral language skills through play in Junior and Senior Infant classrooms?

Methodology

Paper-based questionnaires were selected as the primary data collection for this study's quantitative research. Designed by the researcher, these structured questions aimed to obtain data for statistical analysis (Nind, Curtin and Hall, 2016). Questionnaires were deemed more appropriate over semi-structured interviews to enable data collection from a wider group of participants, given the small-scale nature of this research dissertation.

A non-probability sampling approach was used, specifically convenience sampling whereby the most readily available participants were recruited. This method was chosen due to the limited scale and requirement that participants were mainstream primary school teachers who currently teach or have taught Junior or Senior Infants within the past two years. Given that the 2019 *Primary Language curriculum* is relatively recent, it was important to include participants with direct experience teaching language through play using *Aistear* within this timeframe.

This study received ethical approval from Hibernia College's Ethics Committee and complies with British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2018) *Ethical guidelines for educational research,* Hibernia College's *Academic Integrity and Good Practice Policy*, the *Data Protection Act 2018* and data protection policy through GDPR. Ethical compliance was ensured through explicit informed consent, provisions for anonymity and confidentiality, secure data storage, a clear withdrawal process and the removal of identifying information from responses.

Quantitative Methods Approach

Adopting a positivist view, this study employs a quantitative approach to objectively examine the properties of the externally existing social world (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe, 2002). The research focuses on observable, factual-based knowledge, using questionnaires to collect data for descriptive statistical analysis. Survey studies are a common quantitative method because they produce measurable data that can be analysed and interpreted. In this context, the researcher acts as an 'external observer', objectively examining components of 'a social phenomenon' to gain insight into the broader system (Kuada, 2012, p.73).

While primarily quantitative, this study incorporates a limited social-constructivist approach through open-ended questionnaire questions, allowing participants to express their experiences and attitudes. The

inclusion of these open-ended questions necessitated limited thematic analysis to identify key themes emerging from responses. This study's approach reflects the methodologically pragmatic approach to educational research described by Foster (2024). Consequently, while the study remains predominantly quantitative, the discussion of open-ended responses emphasises somewhat limited qualitative insights — that which focuses on words rather than numbers (Scott and Morrison, 2005). Despite the study's limited scope, this qualitative component helped to enhance its value by integrating mainstream teacher perspectives.

The questionnaire design included a variety of structured question types, beginning with straightforward factual questions about participants' teaching experience, followed by 5-point Likert scale questions, and concluding with opinion or comment-based questions. To aid the design, a brief pilot study was conducted, with subsequent revisions made in consultation with the researcher's dissertation supervisor.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistical analysis was used to examine frequency distributions in the quantitate data. For responses to open-ended questions and comment boxes, limited thematic analysis was conducted to ensure a more comprehensive representation of participants' perspectives beyond what numerical analysis would allow. To analyse these responses, a log of recurring themes and participant quotes was maintained, allowing the researcher to engage with the data without immediately drawing conclusions (Russell and Kelly, 2002). This process facilitated the identification of patterns and connections, which were then mapped into overarching themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Coding was applied prior to theme identification, with sample coding included in the dissertation appendices.

A preliminary analysis of the quantitative data provided insight into the 'characteristics of the dataset' and assisted in 'identifying outliers' or inconsistencies and errors within the dataset (Xiaohong-Chen, 2012, p.20). This step enabled the researcher to clean the dataset by detecting and correcting errors, inconsistencies, outliers or duplicates. Any modifications made during data cleaning were recorded to ensure transparency and research integrity. This study was conducted with no predetermined expectations in specific outcomes. The researcher actively interrogated their own assumptions to uphold rigour, objectivity and honesty throughout the process. However, given the small sample size (n=20), the findings may have limited generalisability.

Findings and Discussion

Participants in this study had a range of 2 to 10 years of experience teaching Junior and Senior Infants, with a mean teaching experience of 4.23 years. At the time of the questionnaire, all participants were teaching in mainstream primary classrooms. To ensure relevance to the study, all participants had taught Infant classes within the past two years, aligning with the introduction and implementation of the 2019 *Primary Language curriculum* as illustrated in Figure 1.

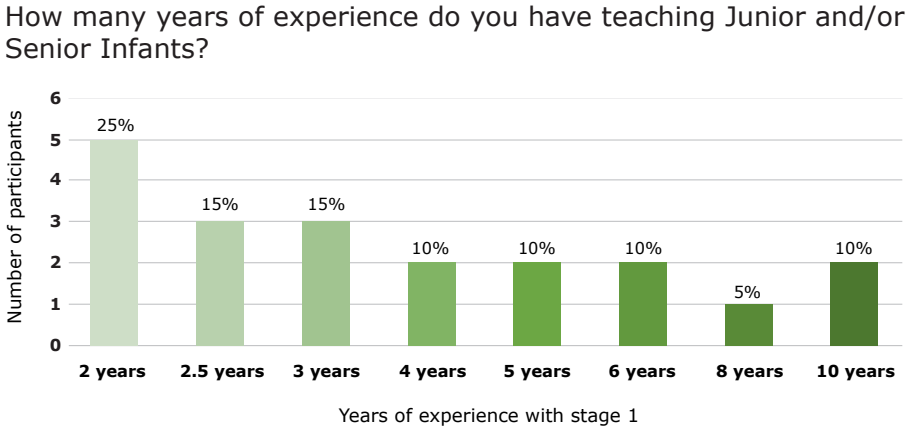

Figure 1: A bar chart depicting the number of years spent by the participants teaching Junior and/or Senior Infants

Meaningful Language Interactions

In their responses, participants indicated that *Aistear* creates opportunities for meaningful language interactions among children either 'often' (40%) or 'always' (60%) (Table 1). The emphasis on the term 'meaningful' is significant as it highlights the quality of language interactions rather than merely establishing a baseline for any communication. For language interactions to be meaningful, they must hold genuine relevance for children. These opportunities align with the Interactionist Theory, which posits that children acquire language through adult-child and child-child interactions (Atkinson and Housely, 2003). Subsequently, this suggests that *Aistear* plays a significant role in facilitating authentic communicative exchanges that support language development.

Table 1: A table showing participant answers to the statement '*Aistear* helps to create opportunities for meaningful language interactions between students' in percentage and raw data form

Answer choices	Percentage of responses	Number of responses
Always	60%	12
Often	40%	8
Sometimes	0%	0
Rarely	0%	0
Never	0%	0

Analysis of the limited qualitative data from the questionnaire's open questions led to the identification of Theme 6, 'Play provides opportunities for children to interact meaningfully using language'. This theme emerged from a number of codes reflecting participants' perspectives that play can provide opportunities for meaningful language interactions. Responses emphasised the role of play in supporting communication through peer discussions, questioning, sharing ideas, turn-taking, collaboration and observational learning from both teachers and children's peers in play-based contexts.

Considering *Aistear*'s role in facilitating such interactions, one participant stated that the framework 'promotes huge opportunities for meaningful language interactions as children are given a wide variety of ways to use new vocabulary in a play-based way'. From the open-ended responses, six central themes were identified through coding. These are summarised in Figure 2, while Table 2 outlines the coding process that led to their development. The emerging patterns reinforce the study's findings, highlighting key benefits in supporting student engagement, increasing language exposure and immersion, supporting meaningful language interactions, and improving accessibility of language learning for diverse learner backgrounds.

Additionally, some responses addressed challenges associated with *Aistear*, particularly in relation to planning, preparation and the provision of materials necessary for its successful implementation. Another recurring theme was the role of play in supporting integrated learning, underscoring its potential to connect multiple areas of the curriculum in a cohesive and engaging manner.

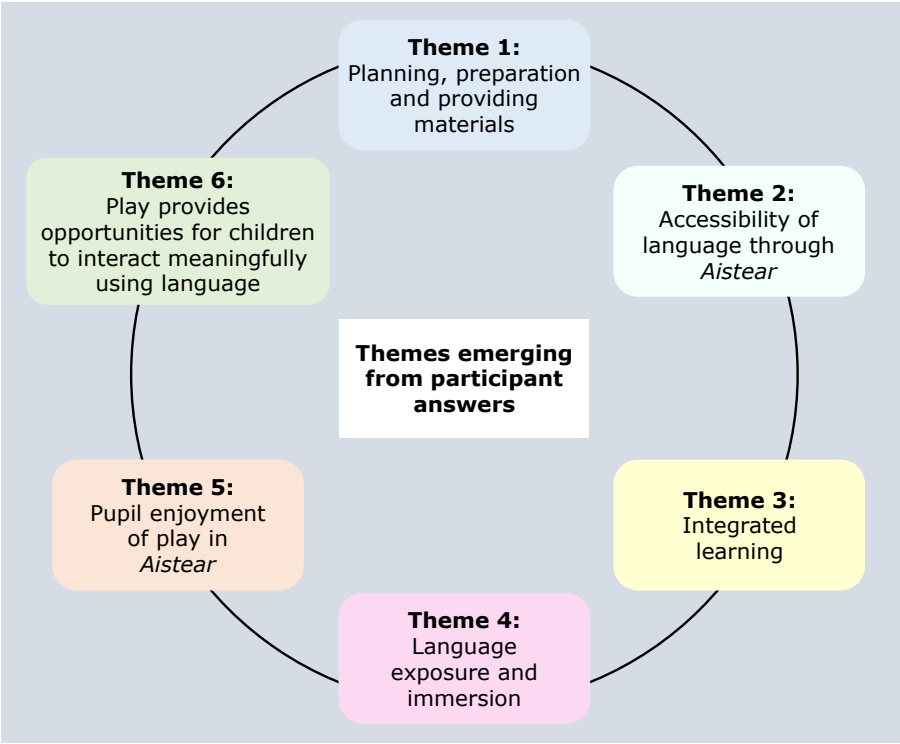

Figure 2: A graphic showing the six themes that emerged from the analysis and coding of participant responses. These answers were given in response to the 'further comments on *Aistear* and language' section and the 'why/why not' explanation to question 4 about whether *Aistear* helps to create opportunities for meaningful language interactions

Table 2: A table showing thematic analysis and codes of the open-ended responses collected in the questionnaire.

Theme: Pupil enjoyment of play in *Aistear* **Codes** ▪ Children enjoy and learn through play ▪ Children relate to the learning through play ▪ Playful pedagogy means the child can relate to and enjoy the learning ▪ Pupil enthusiasm makes it a valuable tool for teachers ▪ Pupils love Aistear ▪ Children feel more relaxed ▪ Fun situations to learn from peers **Subtheme: Play provides a safe, fun way to practise new language.** **Codes** ▪ Informal setting to practise language and vocabulary ▪ Gives a variety of ways to use the language in a play-based way	**Theme: Planning, preparation and providing materials** **Codes** ▪ *Aistear* requires a lot of preparation to be successful ▪ Good planning is necessary for stations to ensure communication ▪ Preparing themed boxes of props and materials every month ▪ Need choices of props for children to choose what resources they want ▪ Having access to hands-on materials and props offers more communication opportunities	**Theme: Play provides opportunities for children to interact meaningfully using language** **Codes** ▪ Pupils discuss their play ▪ Asking each other questions ▪ Play sparks interest and children want to share their thinking with others ▪ Pupils share ▪ Turn taking ▪ Role-play interactions ▪ Group and pair work ▪ Free play encourages the use of vocabulary freely by students ▪ Collaborative activities require interactions ▪ Language modelling from peers and teachers
Theme: Accessibility of language through *Aistear* **Codes** ▪ Modelling language in fun ways supports EAL students ▪ SET support for EAL students during *Aistear* ▪ Offers equal access to language ▪ Can support students with additional needs ▪ Opportunity to communicate at their level and in smaller groups ▪ Can aid language development for EAL students ▪ Promotes language for all levels ▪ Enhances language skills for those who already have a good level of ability ▪ Supports shy students	**Theme: Integrated learning** **Codes** ▪ Thematic teaching ▪ Subjects can be integrated through topics ▪ Worthwhile learning opportunities are created by integrating subjects and methodologies through topics	**Theme: Language exposure and immersion** **Codes** ▪ The immersive nature of thematic play encourages topic-specific language use ▪ Immersion in language through displays, pre-teaching and play contexts ▪ Navigating social interactions and problems using the vocabulary ▪ *Aistear* creates a context to promote language ▪ Playing in role using puppets or role-play ▪ Immersion in the topic's language (oral and written) shows real-world relevance ▪ Exposure to themes/topics that they may not access in their own lives

Sociodramatic Play

Role-play is explicitly recognised and recommended as a teaching methodology within the *Aistear* framework, particularly in the learning goals and sample learning opportunities (NCCA, 2009). Sawyer (2023) highlights that by framing play activities within imaginary scenarios and roles, adults support children to develop the ability to take on different perspectives through the context of sociodramatic play. By participating in sociodramatic play, teachers can guide interactions, model language and increase children's vocabulary through communication (Concannon-Gibney, 2019).

In educational contexts, sociodramatic play typically involves the adult or teacher suggesting a setting or theme and providing the necessary materials for role-play (Rand and Morrow, 2021). These provisions enable teachers to guide language use, ensuring children are immersed in and exposed to the target language. In this study, 95% of respondents reported using 'imaginative play with props' as a playful teaching methodology in Infant classrooms, while 70% used 'dress-up play'. Additionally, four respondents who selected the option 'other' offered specific examples of sociodramatic play, such as puppet play and role-play as their preferred playful methodologies (Table 3).

Table 3: A table of the data in response to the question: 'Which of the following play-based methodologies have you used in the Infant classroom? (Please tick all that apply)'

Response choices	Number of responses	Percentage of responses
Free play	19	95%
Construction play (building)	20	100%
Imaginative with props	19	95%
Art/drawing play	19	95%
Dress-up play	14	70%
Games with rules	15	75%
Word/nonsense/rhyme play	14	70%
None	0	0%
Other	11	55%

The theme of 'Language exposure and immersion' identified in this study is closely linked to sociodramatic play as participants described how role-play creates contexts in which children can immerse themselves in topic-specific language. Many respondents emphasised the significance of using real-world topics and themes in *Aistear*, noting that role-play provides an opportunity for children to be introduced to language they may not typically encounter and to practise using this language in meaningful contexts. Vedeler (1997) found that children's language is significantly more complex and syntactically complete (literate) in sociodramatic play compared to other forms of play or play-based activities. This aligns with the findings of this study, which show that role-play offers children potentially valuable opportunities to experiment with the target language through in-role interactions, problem-solving, negotiations and pretend play.

Creaghe, Quinn and Kidd (2021) similarly highlighted the benefits of pretend play, particularly due to its symbolic nature. Children engaging in role-play must continuously communicate the symbolic meanings of objects, spaces or characters to their peers. For example, if a child places a piece of paper into a box, they must verbalise that the objects represent or symbolise a letter being posted in the post box for the postal worker to collect. This communication is essential for ensuring that peers can engage with and respond appropriately within the play scenario. *Aistear*'s 'Communicating' theme aims for children to 'use non-verbal communication skills', 'use language', 'broaden their understanding of the world by making sense of experiences through language' and 'express themselves creatively and imaginatively' (NCCA, 2009, p.35).

When asked about using *Aistear* to implement play-based learning methodologies in the classroom, all respondents indicated that they believe *Aistear* is helpful. Of the respondents, 85% (n=17) 'strongly agreed', while the remaining 15% 'agreed'. This was the highest level of agreement across the 5-point Likert scale questions in the questionnaire, indicating participants strongly believe that *Aistear* facilitates play in the classroom, regardless of whether the play is specifically designed to develop language (Figure 3).

The use of the *Aistear* framework helps to implement play-based learning methodologies in the classroom. (Please tick one response below)

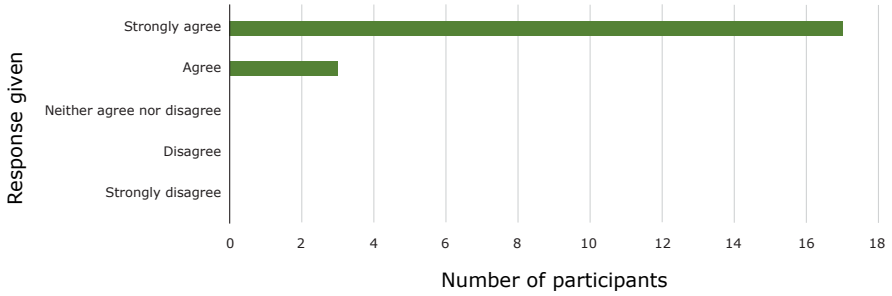

Figure 3: A graph chart of responses on whether the use of *Aistear* helps in implementing play-based learning methodologies in the classroom

Figure 4 illustrates that 100% of the participants surveyed believe that play-based learning is effective in teaching oral language and communication skills. An analysis of the Likert scale responses further confirms this strong consideration, with 75% strongly agreeing and 25% agreeing that play-based learning supports language development. These findings align with existing research, which asserts that playful activities and social interactions play a critical role in helping children enhance their oral language and develop communication, social and interaction skills (French, 2007).

Play-based learning helps to teach oral language and communication skills (Please tick one response below)

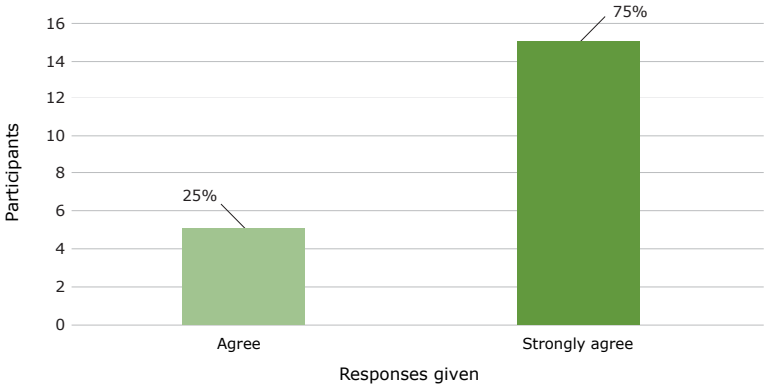

Figure 4: A bar chart showing responses to the statement 'Play-based learning helps to teach oral language and communication skills'

Inclusion and Accessibility

As Figure 5 illustrates, regarding the inclusion of the diverse language needs of students, 95% of participants in this study agreed that play-based learning through *Aistear* can support language development in classrooms with children from varied linguistic backgrounds. One participant noted that 'EAL students or students with communication-based difficulties' can face communication challenges in participating in the framework. However, the participant acknowledged that pre-teaching vocabulary and providing teacher support can improve these students' experiences.

The thematic analysis of the open-ended responses led to the identification of Theme 2: 'Accessibility of language through *Aistear*'. The codes emerging from this theme highlighted how language is used to support students of all abilities within the *Aistear* framework, emphasising the benefits for English as an additional language (EAL) learners. Four participants specifically discussed the 'positive impact' of *Aistear* on EAL learners, noting that it provides 'equal access' to language as language is 'promoted for all levels or abilities in the classroom' (Table 2).

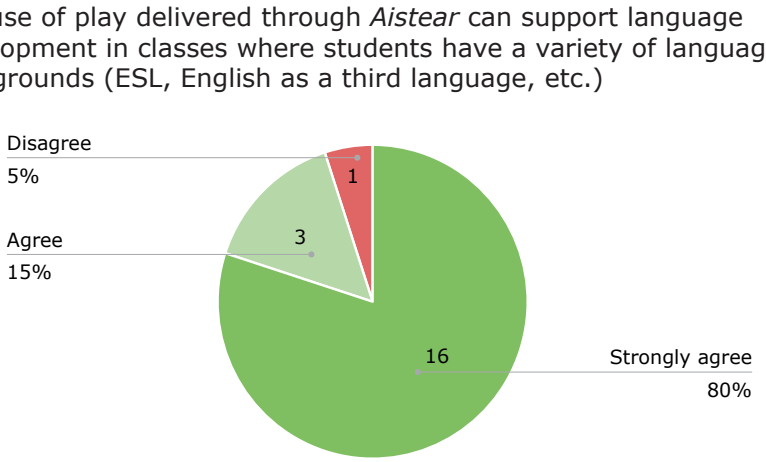

Figure 5: A pie chart showing participant responses to the statement 'The use of play delivered through *Aistear* can support language development in classes where students have a variety of language backgrounds'

Walker's (2023) research on the use of drama to support language acquisition among young EAL students found that sociodramatic pedagogical methodologies help foster both language skills and positive dispositions among EAL learners in New Zealand. Similarly, Chung (2023) noted the role of physical tools in pretend play to increase children's engagement. By exploring materials that are context specific, such as settings like the doctor's office, farm or shop, children can potentially 'assimilate new knowledge and skills for future activities' outside the pretend play's context (ibid., p.9). This research aligns with the themes 'Planning, preparation and providing materials' and 'Language exposure and immersion' that emerged from responses in this study. The *Primary Language curriculum* supports this notion, stating that the reciprocal skills involved in communication are further advanced when children are given opportunities to use words and phrases in their original context and later generalise and apply them 'to contexts beyond those in which they were originally heard and used' (NCCA, 2019, p.16).

The findings from this study demonstrate that 95% of respondents consider *Aistear* as supporting language learners from diverse backgrounds, such as EAL students. This supports Cresham's (2021) findings, which suggested that *Aistear*'s social context benefits children with varying language abilities. Respondents stated that language modelling, additional special education teacher (SET) support, smaller group sizes and the flexibility for students to use language at their level all contribute to supporting language development. This includes EAL students, those with a proficient level of ability and children with additional needs. It is noteworthy that Woods, Mannion and Garrity (2022) found that while teachers and early-year educators reported benefits for developing language and social interactions, significant concerns regarding training, ratios and resources were raised in the research. The more positive responses in this study, however, indicate an improvement in the availability of additional adult support (e.g. SETs) for *Aistear* implementation. Data from this study gave rise to the recurring theme 'Accessibility of language through *Aistear*', which reinforces the consideration teachers have for the framework in offering equal access to language learning for students of all abilities.

In response to the central research question, the study provides evidence that the *Aistear* framework supports teachers in teaching oral language skills through play in Junior and Senior Infant classrooms. It does so by fostering role-play, immersive language experiences and enjoyable opportunities for children to use language in playful, meaningful ways.

This study is distinctive in its critical analysis of teacher perspectives on the role of both play and the *Aistear* framework in supporting language development and creating opportunities for meaningful language interactions for children in Infant classrooms.

Conclusion

The small-scale nature of this study (n=20) limits the generalisability of its findings, meaning they are primarily reflective of the research participant perspectives (Stratton, 2021). Future research could explore the themes identified in this study through semi-structured interviews, allowing for deeper insight into the participants' views. Additionally, examining the frequency and time allocation for play in the classroom could be valuable areas for further exploration. Foster (2024) argues that educational research should adopt a methodologically pragmatic and flexible approach, which this study has attempted to do. While not a mixed-methods study, this research pragmatically integrates aspects of qualitative research, notably thematic analysis to identify and summarise emerging patterns in the open question responses. The focus on quantitative data serves to enhance objectivity, minimising the risk of researcher bias during data interpretation.

This study overwhelmingly indicates that respondents consider play to be a beneficial tool for children in learning language and developing communication skills. The findings suggest that the *Aistear* framework facilitates both play and language interactions in the Infant classroom, contributing positively to language development. This research highlights that teachers find play especially beneficial in teaching oral language and the *Primary Language curriculum*, with 85% of respondents preferring play-based approaches for teaching oral language.

However, challenges remain in terms of planning, resources and ensuring that play experiences are meaningful and accessible for all children The data also demonstrates that teachers are highly engaged in using a diverse range of playful activities with Infant classes. This study illustrates that the *Aistear* framework supports the *Primary Language curriculum* through a variety of play-based methodologies, including role-play, pretend play and small-world play. As one participant noted, *Aistear* 'creates a context to promote language'. Participants credited language immersion, the use of contextual play settings and materials (Chung, 2023) and collaborative learning as key factors in the effectiveness of *Aistear* in supporting language development for children of all abilities, particularly EAL students.

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Infant Teachers' Perspectives on Resources That Support Oral Language Development of EAL Pupils in the Mainstream Classroom

Caoimhe Channon

Biography

Caoimhe Channon graduated from Hibernia College in 2024 with a Professional Master of Education in Primary Education. She previously earned a Bachelor of Early Childhood Education (BECE) from Dublin City University in 2019. With five years of experience across early years and primary education, Caoimhe has developed a particular interest in supporting English as an additional language (EAL) learners within the Irish education system. Her research focuses on resources that support oral language development for EAL learners in mainstream Infant classrooms.

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Infant Teachers' Perspectives on Resources That Support Oral Language Development of EAL Pupils in the Mainstream Classroom

Research supervisor: Dr Maria Mulrooney

Abstract

Children learning English as an additional language (EAL) represent a growing number of the primary school population in Ireland. Given the central role of oral language across the primary school curriculum (PSC), this qualitative study explored the perspectives of five mainstream Infant teachers (n=5) on the resources supporting oral language development for EAL pupils. Findings indicate that teachers actively seek a diverse range of resources to enhance curriculum accessibility and promote language acquisition. However, several challenges were identified that hinder teachers' capacity to plan, teach, assess and support learning effectively. This study offers recommendations for future research, policy and practice aimed at strengthening support for EAL pupils' language and learning development.

Keywords: EAL, oral language, first language, L1, second language acquisition, Primary Language curriculum

Introduction

The impetus for this dissertation stems from the researcher's professional experience in a community national school located in an urban area characterised by a rich diversity of nationalities and ethnicities — reflected in the school's EAL population. In 2022, the Central Statistics Office (CSO) (2023) reported that non-Irish citizens accounted for 12% of the Irish population. Consequently, there has been a significant increase in the number of languages spoken in Ireland (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2019a), resulting in a growing population of pupils learning English as an additional language (EAL) within Irish schools. This linguistic diversity is particularly evident in the early years of primary education, where a strong emphasis is placed on oral language (OL) proficiency (NCCA, 2019a). Accordingly, this study explored Infant teachers' perspectives on the resources that support OL development for EAL pupils within mainstream classrooms.

The CSO (2023) further revealed a 23% increase in the number of people speaking a language other than English or Irish at home. This demographic shift underscores the national and individual imperative to ensure that all EAL pupils attain English language proficiency to fully access the Irish PSC and actively participate in society. The Primary Language curriculum (PLC) acknowledges this linguistic diversity and asserts that 'language is central to how and what we learn' (NCCA, 2019a, p.7). However, existing literature highlights persistent challenges in facilitating the OL development of EAL pupils, prompting the researcher to examine the resources teachers use to address these challenges in the Infant classroom. This study was inspired by the pivotal role of OL in supporting pupils' general language ability (NCCA, 1999), which is essential for accessing and progressing through the PSC.

OL 'permeates every facet of the PSC' (Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), 2013, p.2) and is 'developed as reciprocal skills in the social interaction of teacher/child and child/child(ren) conversations' (NCCA, 2019a, p.9). For EAL pupils, however, OL development is a complex process, involving the navigation of both language learning and language acquisition (Leonardi, 2011). This raises a critical question on how EAL pupils can attain OL proficiency while simultaneously acquiring a second language (L2) within the Infant classroom. Consequently, this research aimed to:

- Gain insight into the resources that most effectively support EAL pupils' OL development
- Explore how teachers implement the PLC to support EAL pupils in achieving the aim of 'children's communications and connections with others' (NCCA, 2019a, p.12) and the learning outcome of 'social conventions and the awareness of others' (NCCA, 2019a, p.19)

This qualitative study adopted a phenomenological approach, allowing the researcher to explore the subjective experiences of Infant teachers and gain insight into what was meaningful from their perspectives (Nind, Curtin and Hall, 2016).

Methodology

Research Paradigm

The research is grounded in the interpretivist sociological perspective of phenomenology, which focuses on understanding how individuals interpret their everyday experiences and the experiences of others

(Cohen, Morrison and Manion, 2007). Qualitative research is particularly well suited to exploring such perspectives as it seeks to view the world through the participants' eyes (Scott and Morrison, 2006). Rooted in interpretivism, qualitative research allows for the exploration of phenomena by investigating individual experiences within specific contexts (Stake, 2010). Through this paradigm, the researcher was afforded the opportunity to gain meaningful insights into the participants' subjective realities (Scott and Morrison, 2006).

Qualitative Approach

While both quantitative and qualitative methodologies hold value and purpose in educational research (Punch and Oancea, 2014), qualitative research provides scope for more nuanced, subjective alternatives across a range of dimensions (Firth, 2020). Given that this study aimed to examine Infant teachers' perspectives on resources supporting the OL development of EAL pupils in the mainstream classroom, a qualitative methodology was deemed appropriate.

Phenomenology, as a qualitative research approach, seeks to explore participants' subjective and individual experiences as they identify what is meaningful to them (Nind, Curtin and Hall, 2016). Qualitative research can enable a deeper understanding of human phenomena (Higgs, Horsfall and Grace, 2009) — that which recognises how individuals perceive the world (Bell and Waters, 2014) and acknowledges analysis as deeply embedded in societal complexities, thus embracing contradiction and ambiguity with greater tolerance (Denscombe, 2010). In alignment with these principles, the researcher used semi-structured interviews to facilitate rich, detailed exploration of participants' views and experiences.

Five semi-structured interviews were conducted (n=5), allowing the researcher to probe responses, explore ideas and examine participants' motives and feelings. Unlike written responses, such as questionnaires, interviews provide flexibility for elaboration and clarification (Bell, 2010). This approach encouraged participants to offer more nuanced and reflective responses, free from the limitations of predefined categories (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). To further ensure reflexivity and mitigate researcher bias, the researcher engaged in peer debriefing with a critical friend, sought guidance from their research supervisor and maintained a reflective journal throughout the research process.

Sampling Method

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants with specific expertise and experiences related to supporting EAL pupils' OL development. Additionally, convenience sampling was used, guided by the availability of participants in the school where the researcher was completing Advanced School Placement.

Ethical Considerations

This research study was approved by the Hibernia College Ethics Committee and was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines set out by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2018). It also adhered to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (2018).

Rigour

Lincoln and Guba (1985) assert that qualitative research departs from traditional measures of validity, generalisability and reliability — instead, emphasising trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. To strengthen research integrity, they advocate cross-examination through peer debriefing. In alignment with this, the researcher enlisted a trusted and critical friend to review the interview questions, ensuring their clarity, practicality and alignment with the study's aims. A pilot interview was subsequently conducted to verify the appropriateness, comprehensiveness and clarity of the research methods while ensuring their coherence with the study's objectives (Cohen, Morrison and Manion, 2007). As no amendments were deemed necessary following the pilot, the research process proceeded unchanged.

Credibility

Credibility was further enhanced by interviewing several qualified and experienced Infant teachers, thereby capturing a range of perspectives on the same phenomenon (Laws et al., 2013). To promote confirmability and dependability, a robust audit trail was maintained through audio recordings and the verbatim transcription of interviews, safeguarding both the research process and the product (Golafshani, 2003).

While the researcher's perspectives initiated this study, reflexivity was consciously employed to acknowledge the researcher's positionality within the social world under investigation (Atkinson and Hammersley, 2007). Objectivity was maintained throughout, with a deliberate recognition of potential biases (Bell, 2010). As Anderson (2010, p.3) notes, qualitative research is 'heavily dependent on the individual skills of the researcher

and more easily influenced by the researcher's personal biases and idiosyncrasies'. To mitigate this, the researcher placed a strong emphasis on openness and honesty throughout the data collection process, thereby avoiding the constraints of predefined response categories (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). Participants were encouraged to respond openly and honestly, supporting authentic data collection. A reflective journal was also kept, enabling the researcher to document insights and maintain critical awareness throughout the study.

Limitations

Mayan (2009) acknowledges that interviews are inherently limited, particularly concerning issues of authority, reflexivity and representation. This study employed non-probability purposive and convenience sampling, which, while appropriate for exploring the specific context, presents limitations. Such sampling methods do not reflect the wider population but rather focus on a specific subgroup within it (Cohen, Morrison and Manion, 2011).

Given the small-scale nature of this study, restricted to Infant class teachers from a single urban school, there is a recognised risk of sampling bias. Consequently, claims of generalisability and transferability cannot be made. To address this, the researcher approached data analysis and interpretation with caution (Bazeley, 2010), incorporating peer debriefing and respondent validation as strategies to strengthen validity. Respondent validation allowed participants to review the data and verify the researcher's interpretation of their responses, thus enhancing the authenticity of findings (Anderson, 2010). Further measures to address reflexivity and potential bias included the support of a critical friend (peer debriefing), regular consultations with the research supervisor and the use of a reflective journal. Importantly, as Blaxter, Hughes and Tight (2010) contend, while small-scale studies inevitably carry limitations, they nonetheless contribute valuable insights to existing research landscapes.

Data Analysis

This study's analytical framework was rooted in phenomenological epistemology and used thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is defined as 'a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (ibid., p.79). The researcher systematically identified, categorised and coded data by 'identifying persistent images, words, phrases, concepts or sounds within the data'

(Mayan, 2009, p.94). Once themes were established, the findings were contextualised within existing literature, enabling the corroboration of established knowledge while contributing new insights and perspectives. This inductive approach ensured that themes emerged organically from the data rather than being imposed deductively (Mayan, 2009).

Punch (2005, p.29) contends that qualitative research becomes 'more focused as the study progresses'. Similarly, thematic analysis allows for flexibility as it allows patterns to emerge naturally without predefining categories at the outset of this research (Braun and Clarke, 2006). To ensure a rigorous and in-depth data analysis, the researcher followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six stages of thematic analysis, enabling a comprehensive exploration of the data and facilitating the emergence of meaningful themes as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Phases of thematic analysis (Source: Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.87)

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarizing yourself with your data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

Findings and Discussion

Findings are based on the narratives of five mainstream Infant class teachers (n=5), offering insights into their perspectives on the resources that best support the OL development of EAL pupils. The data was collected from three Junior Infant teachers (n=3) and two Senior Infant teachers (n=2), each ranging between two and six years of experience teaching in the Infant classroom. Through analysis, three major themes emerged from the research, as detailed in Table 2.

Table 2: Themes from data analysis

Themes	Understanding EAL pupil dynamics	Pedagogical approaches to support OL development	Perspectives on the PLC
Subthemes	The silent phase	Resources	Teachers' perspectives on implementing the PLC to enhance EAL pupils' OL proficiency for personal and academic conversations
	English proficiency and assessment	Challenges	Teachers' perspectives on resources that best support EAL pupils' OL development through communicative and connective experiences

Understanding EAL Pupil Dynamics

Findings indicate that all participants reported having at least one pupil who experienced 'the silent phase'. Participant 4 noted, if 'it's their first time attending any Irish education systems, a lot of the time they will have a silent phase'. This period is characterised by limited verbal interaction as pupils adjust to the new linguistic environment. Pupils experiencing the silent phase often face difficulties in communicating with their peers. Grosjean (2010) asserts that such silence may reflect pupils' internal motivation for second language acquisition (SLA) as they observe and absorb language used around them.

Teachers highlighted the crucial role of body language and gestures in facilitating communication during this phase, as highlighted by Participant 4: 'I think through body language, pointing, smiling, pictures to communicate'. This observation aligns with the progression step of the

PLC, which advocates for engagement through 'facial expressions, sounds, gestures, signs or speech' (NCCA, 2019b, p.8). Such strategies enable spaces for teachers to form more comprehensive understanding of pupils' language development, supporting progression towards the learning outcome of 'social conventions and the awareness of others' (NCCA, 2019b, p.19).

Perspectives on the PLC

A consistent theme across the findings was the central role of play in supporting EAL pupils' OL development. Teachers emphasised that play facilitates communication, offering opportunities to initiate, sustain and engage in conversations. This mirrors the shared principles of the PLC and the Aistear curriculum framework, both aiming to support pupils to become 'capable and confident communicators' (NCCA, 2019a, p.15).

Findings reinforced the PLC's conceptualisation of language learning as an integrated process, enabling pupils to transfer skills and concepts across contexts (NCCA, 2019a). This perspective reflects Vygotsky's (1986) theory, which posits that first language (L1) acts as a bridge for second language acquisition (SLA). Similarly, the PLC supports 'children's communications and connections with others' (NCCA, 2019a, p.13), promoting the use and appreciation of pupils' home languages.

Although play emerged as a significant resource, the findings placed even greater emphasis on valuing and incorporating pupils' home languages. The findings corroborate with existing research highlighting the importance of celebrating and integrating pupils' L1 within classroom practices to support L2 pronunciation (Tarone, 2005), build a solid foundation in English comprehension prior to speech production (NCCA, 2006), and facilitate comparisons between languages (NCCA, 2019a). Rhodes, Ochoa and Ortiz (2005) further argue that proficiency in L1 Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) is crucial for developing L2 CALP. However, while teachers endeavoured to celebrate pupils' L1, the findings raised questions about whether this practice alone is sufficient to fully develop L1 CALP.

The significance of digital technologies, as advocated by the PLC and Department of Education (2020), also emerged from the findings. Apps such as Google Translate were highlighted for 'showing that you care about their language' (Participant 4), while interactive EAL activities and bilingual books were lauded for their personalised approach to language learning and celebrating pupils' L1.

Pedagogical Approaches to Support OL Development

The findings highlighted the positive influence of the PLC on OL development, particularly its flexible and adaptable nature, which enables teachers to 'mould it to what you need it to be' (Participant 2). However, teachers also voiced the added pressure and resourcefulness required beyond the framework itself. Some pedagogical strategies emerged from the data, including Think, Pair, Share activities situated within 'talking time' interventions (Grabarek and Lanni, 2019; Murphy et al., 2019), repetition, teacher scaffolding and modelling (Cortazzi and Lixian, 2007), and differentiated questioning techniques (Hill, 2016).

EAL withdrawal groups, provided under the two-year language support scheme (Department of Education, 2023), were also noted. Additionally, teachers reported adjusting the pace of lessons as a differentiation method (NCCA, 2006) to 'afford pupils with that extra bit of time to grasp the content and language associated with it' (Participant 5), alongside conferencing.

Visual aids emerged as particularly popular and effective in supporting pupils' SLA, contributing to meaningful communicative and connective experiences as 'pupils make links to the posters and displays around the school and classroom' (Participant 2) and 'they can point to pictures to show their understanding' (Participant 3). Chomsky's (2006) theory, which views language acquisition as innate, is relevant here; the findings suggest that this innate capacity is best nurtured through social interactions within the school environment. Establishing a solid, secure foundation for all pupils was viewed as essential, ensuring they feel confident before advancing to more complex communication skills.

Even when pupils struggled to communicate fully with their teachers, fostering a supportive and positive atmosphere was considered vital as 'their wellbeing is more important than the academic side to start with because you need to be happy in school first for holistic success' (Participant 4). This prioritisation of pupil wellbeing, regardless of EAL status, was consistently emphasised across the findings.

Challenges of Teaching and Learning to Support OL Development

The findings stressed the need for comprehensive EAL training and a standardised framework to guide planning, teaching, learning and assessment to support EAL learners.

Participants expressed concern over the lack of a clear structure, as reflected in the comment, 'there's no set programme or structure and it's quite hard to figure out what is actually needed' (Participant 1), with some describing the experience as 'going in blind' (Participant 3). Foley, Sangster and Anderson (2013) argue that many teachers lack essential knowledge about language due to insufficient EAL training. Similarly, Barnett and Hustedt (2003) highlight the critical role of teachers in preparing pupils in the early years for a successful school experience. This sentiment was echoed in the findings, where the PLC was highly regarded as a beneficial tool in addressing the diverse needs of EAL pupils and promoting OL development to support future success.

However, the findings also revealed challenges teachers face in distinguishing between social difficulties and language-related communication barriers, adding complexity to their role. Concerns were raised regarding the assessment of OL skills, particularly a limited familiarity with and scepticism towards the existing Primary School Assessment Kit (PSAK) as 'the PSAK assessment isn't the best tool in the world in my opinion' (Participant 4). As a result, teachers reported a heavy reliance on observation, teacher questioning and checklists to assess vocabulary, comprehension and sentence structure.

The findings finally demonstrated a clear sense of teacher empathy towards EAL pupils, particularly regarding the challenges they face in connecting with others while navigating language barriers. Cregan (2010) outlines the difficulty of using academic language appropriately, expanding vocabulary, constructing coherent sentences and achieving accurate pronunciation. Notably, the findings identified a heightened concern for EAL pupils who struggled socially to the extent of isolating themselves from group activities. Chatha (2019) suggests that unfamiliarity with cultural values and beliefs can hinder EAL pupils' ability to fully express their academic potential. This insight underscores the importance of teachers being mindful of such challenges and adopting strategies to navigate them effectively. Consequently, the findings highlighted the need to establish a robust foundation to nurture all pupils' wellbeing and happiness within the school environment.

Conclusion

The findings of this research contribute valuable insights into planning, teaching, learning and assessment practices for EAL pupils. These insights support the development of informed teaching strategies aimed at enhancing pupils' OL skills while fostering inclusion and wellbeing. Accordingly, recommendations have been developed, as presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Recommendations in summary form to guide further research, policy and practice

Researchers' and policy makers' role	Schools' role	Teachers' role
• Need for further research to explore teachers' perspectives on the impact of nurturing pupils' social and emotional skills on SLA as they progress through their language-learning journey • Need for a standardised EAL framework, providing a collective bank of resources to address SLA needs and support structuring OL lessons • Need for a mandatory training programme through in-service initiatives or teacher-training courses to guide teachers in planning, teaching, learning and assessment	**Planning** • Need for collaborative planning to identify withdrawal groups to pre-teach vocabulary and foster social skills development **Teaching** • Need for a variety of digital technologies, such as interactive language books, to support pupils' language-learning, enriching their OL skills and engagement **Learning** • Need for the celebration of language diversity at a whole-school level to reflect pupils' L1, thus nurturing SLA **Assessment** • Need for further clarification on how to best use and apply the PSAK to evaluate pupils' needs	**Planning** • Need for guiding planning through Progression Continua within the PLC to tailor pupils' individual language-learning journeys • Need for curricular integration to facilitate the acquisition of appropriate language styles **Teaching** • Need for visual aids to enhance pupils' understanding of content, concepts and language **Learning** • Need for play-based methodologies that are fun, visual, interesting and practical **Assessment** • Need for a variety of assessment methodologies and clear success criteria such as pupils' vocabulary, comprehension and sentence structure

To conclude, this study generated findings that highlight the myriad challenges faced by Infant teachers and their EAL pupils in supporting OL development. Teachers undoubtedly hold a significant role within Irish society, shaping the lives and future opportunities of children and young people (Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), 2018). Yet, as

VanSciver (2005, p.534) aptly observes, 'teachers are now dealing with a level of academic diversity in their classrooms unheard of just a decade ago'.

In response to this growing diversity, teachers have demonstrated remarkable resilience and creativity, adopting a range of pedagogical strategies and resources to support the SLA and OL skills of their EAL pupils. However, with the increasing EAL population among Irish primary schools, there is a clear and pressing need for sustained, targeted efforts to ensure that schools are fully equipped to deliver a comprehensive and consistent education that addresses the diverse needs of EAL pupils. While the PLC offers invaluable guidance for promoting OL development, these findings underscore the necessity for a dedicated EAL-specific framework and comprehensive EAL training to strengthen teaching and learning experiences. By addressing these needs, we can work towards creating more inclusive and equitable educational environments for all learners. This research also paves the way for further investigation into the impact of EAL pupils' wellbeing on SLA, offering valuable insights into an essential aspect of the curriculum. As the PDST (2013, p.2) notes, 'OL permeates every facet of the PSC', reinforcing the importance of prioritising both language development and pupil wellbeing within educational practice.

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Teacher Perspectives on Strategies to Support English as an Additional Language (EAL) Students with Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) in Middle and Senior Mainstream Classes in the Primary School Setting

Gary Gallagher

Biography

Gary holds a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature and Film Studies from Trinity College Dublin, graduating in 2007. Following his studies, he spent a number of years in Andalucía, Spain, teaching English as a foreign language, where he developed a strong passion for education. Upon returning to Ireland, he transitioned into the media industry, working as an editor in film and television.

In 2024, Gary earned a Professional Master of Education in Primary Education from Hibernia College, which equipped him with specialised skills to support young learners. He now works as a special education teacher with Second Class children at a community national school in Co. Cork. In this role, Gary is dedicated to creating an inclusive learning environment that celebrates diversity and fosters a love of learning across all abilities. His interests in linguistics, science and mathematics inform his teaching approach, helping children explore a wide range of subjects with curiosity and confidence.

Teacher Perspectives on Strategies to Support English as an Additional Language (EAL) Students with Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) in Middle and Senior Mainstream Classes in the Primary School Setting

Research supervisor: Dr Ray Walsh

Abstract

This study explored primary school teachers' perspectives on supports available for middle and senior classes for whom English is an additional language (EAL). Specifically, the study examined resources provided to EAL children who no longer qualify for separate withdrawal support. Adopting a qualitative methodology within an interpretivist paradigm, the study involved five semi-structured interviews (n=5). Findings indicate that older EAL children face challenges in accessing the curriculum due to limited proficiency with academic English. Recommendations include increased teacher training specific to EAL needs and further research to address the distinct challenges faced by these learners.

Keywords: English as an additional language (EAL), cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP), teacher training, content and language integrated learning (CLIL), differentiation, withdrawal, translanguaging, plurilingualism

Introduction and Background

In recent decades, the number of children entering Irish primary schools who do not speak English as their first language has risen significantly (Murtagh and Francis, 2012; Batardière et al., 2023). These children, commonly referred to as English as an additional language (EAL) students, often experience evolving language needs as they progress through school, particularly due to the increasing academic demands placed on them. Research suggests that without adequate support, older EAL students (those above First Class or approximately eight

years of age) may struggle to fully access the curriculum, highlighting a critical gap in meeting their educational needs (Cummins, 1992; Strand, Malmberg, and Hall, 2015; Strand and Hessel, 2018; Hessel and Strand, 2023).

The nature of such a gap centres primarily around the development of cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) (Cummins, 1979). This is the language of higher-level abstraction and subject-specific discourse. Cummins (2008) asserts that it takes between five and seven years for a non-native speaker to attain the CALP of their native speaker peers. In light of Hessel and Strand's (2023, p.2) finding that English proficiency 'accounts for up to six times more variance [in academic outcomes] than other student background variables (ethnicity, gender and socio-economic disadvantage) combined', the need to ensure CALP is fostered appears clear. Presently, the Irish education system provides up to two years of language support through language support teachers, a framework established in 1999 (Murtagh and Francis, 2012). However, there is little mention of the need for CALP in documentation published by the Department of Education. Indeed, the target for the current system of equipping children with a 'B1 (intermediate) level' on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001) is potentially inappropriate for children in Second Class or above. Though the CEFR scale does not make explicit reference to CALP, Jones (2011, p.45) is categorical: 'in the CEFR "CALP" is very much the stuff of the C levels [two steps above B1 level]'. In a similar vein, Catibušic's (2011, p.329) generally otherwise assessment of the current system recognises that:

> *[for] older pupils [in 1st – 3rd class], B1 proficiency in both reading and writing is a minimum requirement for ESL [EAL] pupils to reach their full academic potential in the mainstream classroom.*
>
> (Emphasis added)

This comment seems to suggest that for students in Fourth to Sixth Class, the B1 level is not sufficient.

Added to concerns about the goals of the current system, questions surrounding the training and resources in place for teachers to pursue their attainment are also worthy of mention. Murtagh and Francis's (2012, p.203) review of Irish initial teacher education (ITE) for primary school teachers fails to find a course with a dedicated module focused on

supporting EAL students. A more recent study by Gardiner-Hyland and Burke (2018, p.11) records teachers' self-reported lack of confidence in meeting the needs of EAL learners and the prevalence of a 'trial and error' approach. Given a lack of consensus surrounding both goals and resources, this thesis investigates primary school teachers' perceptions of the adequacy of the current system and whether they believe it effectively addresses the needs of EAL students in middle and senior classes. To guide this exploration, the study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are teacher perspectives on the connection between the level of language acquisition of EAL children and their academic achievement?
2. How do teachers view the provision of resources for equipping EAL children with CALP?

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative case study approach grounded in an interpretivist paradigm to explore primary school teachers' perspectives on supporting EAL students in developing CALP in middle and senior classes. The interpretivist paradigm was selected to align with the research objective, which sought to understand the subjective experiences and insights of teachers working directly with EAL children. Unlike quantitative methodologies, which prioritise empirical generalisation, the interpretivist paradigm and qualitative data collection through semi-structured interviews enable an in-depth exploration of participant perspectives, albeit this approach may limit generalisability and transferability.

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method. To ensure access to participants with relevant insights, five teachers (n=5) experienced in EAL support were selected through purposive and snowball sampling, targeting 'knowledgeable people' (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2007). Semi-structured interviews were selected for their adaptability, allowing the researcher to explore unanticipated responses while maintaining a level of consistency across interviews. This structure facilitated meaningful comparisons during analysis without constraining the natural flow of participant responses.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), guided by Braun and Clarke's (2019) framework. This process involved five key stages: transcription and familiarisation with the interview data; inductive coding to identify patterns across the dataset; development of overarching themes for the codes; review and refinement of these themes; and, finally, naming each theme. Reflexive journalling was integrated throughout the analysis to manage potential biases and enhance rigour, as recommended by Watt (2007). The journal captured both the researcher's responses and reflections on participants' contributions, supporting a reflexive approach to data interpretation. RTA's inherent flexibility allowed for nuanced interpretation of each participant's context, aligning with the study's emphasis on understanding individual perspectives rather than generalised explanations.

To enhance trustworthiness, the study incorporated measures to enhance credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability, as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1986). Credibility was supported through peer debriefing sessions and pilot interviews, which refined the interview schedule. Dependability was addressed by thoroughly documenting the research process, while 'thick' (ibid., p.77) contextual descriptions enhanced transferability. Finally, confirmability was reinforced by reflexive journalling, which provided transparency regarding the researcher's influence on data interpretation.

Findings and Discussion

English Proficiency and Academic Achievement

The data indicated a prevalent perception among teachers that EAL students' English proficiency significantly impacts their academic achievement, with four out of five participants reporting a positive correlation. Teachers suggested that as EAL children improve their English skills, their overall academic performance tends to improve as well, aligning with research on achievement disparities between EAL and native-speaking students (Strand and Lindorff, 2020). For example, one teacher noted that students who had advanced further in English were generally stronger academically, while another observed frustration among EAL students struggling with English in subjects requiring substantial reading skills, pointing to an indirect impact of language

proficiency on subject-specific tasks. However, one participant expressed uncertainty about this link, suggesting that the influence of language on learning might vary depending on the task, reflecting the complex relationship between language skills and content knowledge.

Interestingly, three teachers discussed the 'linguistic façade', where EAL students' conversational English proficiency can sometimes mask their difficulties with more complex academic language. Teachers reported that while EAL students often excel in oral communication, they may struggle with higher-level comprehension and expressive skills. For example, one teacher described EAL students as 'great' in conversational English but noted that their academic writing remained 'basic'. This observation aligns with Cummins' (1979) concept of the linguistic façade, which highlights how fluency in basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) can obscure challenges with CALP — the latter being critical for academic success.

Withdrawal of Support at B1 Level

A recurring theme of concern in the findings was the withdrawal of EAL support once students reached the B1 proficiency level. Teachers pointed out that, while B1 is considered an intermediate level according to the CEFR, it may not equip EAL students with sufficient academic language skills to succeed independently, especially in middle and senior primary classes. Teachers suggested that, although B1-level students can manage everyday conversations, they may struggle to understand complex academic content on their own. For example, one participant noted that B1 students 'wouldn't be able to write a decent essay', while others observed that even basic math word problems could be confusing for students at intermediate English proficiency level.

Some teachers commented that without sustained EAL support, these students often require additional resources from general learning support, creating further demands on those services:

> *I suppose it's not really fair in a way because it's putting pressure on your learning support that, you know, you might have to take out other children.*

Research, including Catibušic's (2011) finding that B1 represents a 'minimum requirement' for comprehension in the primary curriculum's lower classes corroborates teachers' concerns. This study reinforces arguments in existing literature that B1-level proficiency may not adequately address the language demands of higher classes,

underscoring a need for prolonged or specialised EAL support in middle and senior primary levels.

Teacher Training for EAL Support

All participants voiced concerns about the lack of training on EAL-specific strategies in their initial teacher education (ITE) programmes and the limited continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities focused on CALP. These findings align with Murtagh and Francis's (2012) observation that Irish ITE programmes lack systematic preparation for teachers working with EAL students. In this study, teachers reported feeling underprepared to meet EAL students' needs, with some noting that they received no EAL training during their ITE. Consequently, participants described relying on informal learning, peer support and online resources to compensate for the absence of structured EAL training. As one teacher explained:

> *You kind of just have to do your own training…a lot of it would just be taking it on your own back. Like for us, from my situation anyway, researching it yourself, like, you know, I have different teacher pages, and I'd research stuff myself.*

Teachers who had access to EAL-focused CPD generally expressed satisfaction with the content, but participation was often limited due to access issues. Some teachers mentioned that scheduling conflicts made it 'impossible' to attend online webinars, while others pointed out the lack of CPD opportunities focused on advanced EAL strategies, such as CALP development. This informal, ad-hoc approach reflects a broader trend in EAL teaching, where many teachers learn 'on the job' through trial and error (Gardiner-Hyland and Burke, 2018). These challenges underscore the urgent need for structured EAL training modules in both ITE and CPD.

Content and Language Integrated Learning for CALP

While the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) advocates for the use of content and language integrated learning (CLIL) to support language learning, most participants in this study were unfamiliar with the methodology, associating it with the teaching of Gaeilge (Irish). Only one teacher, the sole mainstream class teacher, reported using CLIL principles to integrate Gaeilge informally into subjects such as Physical Education and Music. The teacher expressed interest in adapting these strategies for EAL students but acknowledged a lack of clear guidance on CLIL to CALP-specific challenges.

The limited use of CLIL for supporting CALP among participants points to a missed opportunity, as CLIL-based strategies align closely with effective CALP support. CLIL involves adapting instruction to specific content areas, combining subject learning with language practice, which helps develop deeper academic language skills. Despite CLIL's inclusion in the *Primary Language curriculum* (NCCA, 2019), participants reported receiving little to no CLIL-specific training, suggesting a gap between policy and its practical implementation. CLIL could be particularly beneficial for Irish EAL students if its methodologies were more explicitly integrated into teacher training, offering strategies to support both receptive and productive CALP.

Strategies for Developing CALP

Participants reported primarily relying on vocabulary-focused strategies, such as word banks and translation software, to help EAL students understand subject-specific terminology. For example, one teacher emphasised the importance of pre-teaching key vocabulary as a central strategy. However, most of the strategies described were focused on improving students' receptive language skills, with little attention given to expressive language functions like comparing, describing and predicting — skills essential for engaging in academic discussions and tasks.

This emphasis on receptive rather than productive language development contrasts with CLIL recommendations, which advocate for the explicit teaching of language functions required in different content areas (Crisfield, 2022). For example, students may need to understand conditionals in Science or complex tense-aspect structures in History, which requires deliberate, structured language instruction. The focus on receptive language skills highlights a broader issue in EAL pedagogy in primary education, where expressive language development often takes a backseat due to limited resources and training.

Use of First Language in CALP Development

The findings regarding the use of students' first language (L1) for CALP support revealed mixed perspectives. Teachers acknowledged the social and motivational benefits of including L1 but were cautious about its impact on CALP development in English. For example, some participants noted that bilingual texts and peer support among students who share an L1 helped create a more inclusive classroom environment, improving engagement and self-esteem. However, other teachers expressed reservations, prioritising English as the main language for academic development. One teacher remarked:

> *I will try and say that when we're here, can we please just use English? Because that's what we're trying to do. We're trying to improve our language, and that's only through practising.*

This statement reflects a belief that focusing too heavily on L1 could hinder English language acquisition. This ambivalence mirrors ongoing debates in the literature on plurilingualism and translanguaging practices. While many studies highlight the affective benefits of L1 use (Chalmers, 2022), empirical evidence supporting L1 as a tool for CALP development remains limited, particularly among younger learners. As such, teachers' mixed responses underscore the need for further research on the role of L1 in CALP acquisition, with a particular focus on practical strategies for using students' home languages to enhance their English academic skills.

Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights into primary teachers' perspectives on supporting the acquisition of CALP in Irish schools. The findings underscore teachers' recognition of the link between language proficiency and academic performance, particularly in middle and senior classes, where CALP is crucial. Teachers largely agreed that EAL students who reach the B1 proficiency level often struggle after dedicated language support is withdrawn, highlighting the need for continued in-class support to develop academic language skills.

Policy recommendations include extending EAL support beyond the B1 level and incorporating CALP-focused modules into both teacher education and CPD. Addressing the specific needs of EAL students in senior classes will require policy adjustments, including enhanced training on methodologies like CLIL and a reassessment of the current two-year support limit for EAL students.

Further research is needed to explore the effectiveness of plurilingual approaches, particularly in promoting CALP. Longitudinal studies tracking EAL students' progress with CALP-focused support would provide valuable data to inform future practices and interventions. By addressing these areas, educational policy can more effectively support EAL students in acquiring the language skills necessary for academic success across the curriculum.

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Teachers' Perceptions of Play-Based Pedagogy in the Infant Classroom

Sal Henehgan

Biography

Sal graduated with First Class Honours in Performing Arts from the Irish World Academy at the University of Limerick in 2022, where she specialised in Irish traditional music. She also pursued classical violin studies for a year at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. Upon returning to Ireland, Sal continued her academic journey at Hibernia College, earning a Professional Master of Education in Primary Education in 2024.

Currently in her first year of teaching, Sal works with Fourth Class children at a Gaelscoil primary school in Mayo. She finds great fulfilment in guiding children as they discover and develop their unique strengths and abilities. With a profound passion for Irish music, language and culture, Sal is dedicated to fostering an appreciation for the arts in her students. She was drawn to teaching by the continuous challenges it presents, which demand creativity and adaptability.

Teachers' Perceptions of Play-Based Pedagogy in the Infant Classroom

Research supervisor: Dr Maria Mulrooney

Abstract

The aim of the dissertation was to investigate teachers' perceptions of play-based pedagogy in the Infant classroom through an interpretive paradigm. Utilising a convenience purposive sample of five teachers (n=5), the study explored educators' perspectives, experiences and practices relating to play-based learning. As a qualitative-based project, data was collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for an in-depth analysis of contextual factors that inform play-based teaching methodologies. Findings demonstrated a diverse range of understandings, practices and interpretations pertaining to the role of the primary school teacher, play-based learning and the Aistear framework. The study contributes to educational best practices and offers evidence-based insights into practices that support children's engagement and learning through play.

Keywords: play-based pedagogy, play-based learning, Infant classroom, qualitative, pedagogy, Infants, Irish education, curriculum, engagement, developmental benefits, teacher role, teacher's role in play-based learning, child-centred approaches, philosophy, educational philosophy, Aistear, Primary Language curriculum

Introduction and Background

This research aimed to explore teachers' perspectives on using play-based learning in Infant classrooms. Play-based learning is rooted in the understanding that play is a fundamental aspect of human development and learning (Pyle and Danniels, 2017). Hunnicutt (1990) posits that play has always been an essential part of human existence. It is noteworthy that both Plato and Socrates recognised the importance of play in childhood education as a central conduit for teaching the liberal arts (ibid.). In recent decades, play-based pedagogy has gained recognition and adoption following the work of seminal theorists such as Froebel, Montessori, Dewey, Piaget, Malaguzzi of Reggio Emilia and Vygotsky. Many

countries have integrated play-based learning into their early childhood education systems, recognising its effectiveness in promoting holistic development and preparing children for lifelong learning (Bruce, 2016).

In 1992, Ireland signed up to Article 31 of the United Nations (UN) *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC) (UN, 1989), which placed children's rights at the centre of social and political agendas. It is obligatory for signatories to facilitate the right of the child to engage and learn through playful pedagogies (ibid.). Some 17 years later, the Irish government's response materialised as *Aistear*, the Irish word for 'journey' (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2009). Introduced on a phased basis in 2016, the *Primary Language curriculum* (PLC) focuses on developing children's language skills (NCCA, 2019). Play-based pedagogy is one of the pedagogies encouraged for early primary years (Junior Infants to Second Class) in line with the *Aistear* principles.

Although the approaches of influential play-based philosophers vary, they collectively emphasise that play can act as a powerful tool for children to make sense of the world in ways that support their development in diverse and multifaceted ways. Piaget's (1962) constructivist theory and his theory of cognitive development highlight play as a means for individuals to integrate new information into their pre-existing cognitive frameworks or 'schemas'. Piaget identified different stages of play, ranging from sensorimotor play during infancy to more sophisticated forms of symbolic play in early childhood (ibid.).

Similarly, Vygotsky (1967, p.62), a Russian psychologist, described play as 'the leading source of development in the preschool years'. His sociocultural theory of development underscores the significance of social interactions and cultural context in shaping children's learning. Vygotsky contended that play can create a Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where children engage in activities slightly beyond their current levels of understanding. With guidance from more knowledgeable individuals, children have the potential to expand their cognitive abilities (Vygotsky, 1967). Accordingly, Vygotsky (1978, p.110) affirmed that through play, 'children become a head taller than their current selves' in their ability to internalise new concepts and skills through interaction with peers and adults.

Comparably, Froebel, the German educator, known as the father of the modern kindergarten, identified key elements of play that he embedded in his kindergarten model, emphasising the importance of 'free play' (Smedley and Hoskins, 2020). In contrast, Montessori classrooms focus

on purposeful play, allowing children to explore their surroundings and develop essential life skills. Montessori believed that children learn most effectively when engaged in activities they find meaningful and purposeful (Lillard, 2021). The Reggio Emilia approach views play as a crucial way to construct knowledge, develop social skills and express their unique ways of seeing the world. It supports play-based learning by prioritising children's agency, encouraging exploration in a stimulating and interactive environment, and facilitating inquiry and expression through diverse forms of play (Hewett, 2001).

While the literature indicates that play-based pedagogy not only enhances cognitive development but also supports the holistic development of the child's socio-emotional and academic wellbeing, it also highlights significant structural and agentic misunderstandings regarding play-based pedagogical practices in both Irish and international contexts. After conducting an extensive literature review, the following research questions emerged:

1. What are teachers' understandings of play-based learning and *Aistear* in the Infant classroom?
2. What are teachers' understandings of the structural and agentic aspects of play-based pedagogy in the Irish Infant classroom?

Methodology

The research was conducted as a single case study situated in a DEIS Band 2 rural primary school. This research focused on teachers' perceptions of play-based learning, with insights drawn from teachers based on their contexts, experiences, circumstances and perspectives. Consequently, an interpretive paradigm was chosen because the goal was not to achieve generalisability or transferability — rather, this research sought to contribute to existing knowledge and offer new understandings that may be relevant in similar contexts (Silverman, 2008).

Data Collection Strategies

Given the conceptual framework and the objectives of this qualitative methodology, semi-structured interviews were selected as the most appropriate tool for collecting data. This method is well suited to a qualitative methodology within an interpretive paradigm (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2009).

The flexible structure of semi-structured interviews allowed for a focus on the interviewees' perspectives while accommodating the direction of the conversation (ibid.) Following the development of an initial draft of suitable questions, a pilot study was conducted to test them. This pilot process provided valuable insights into areas where the data instrument needed improvement.

Data Analysis

An inductive approach to data analysis, characteristic of the interpretive paradigm, was chosen for this research. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2020) six-step framework, as follows:

1. **Phase One: Familiarisation with the Data**

   Manual transcription of the recorded interviews was undertaken, allowing deep immersion in the data. During transcription, non-verbal elements such as inflections, breaks, pauses and tones from both the interviewer and the participant were noted.

2. **Phase Two: Generating Initial Codes**

   The process of coding involved creating concise, descriptive or interpretive labels for segments of data relevant to the research questions. These codes served as the foundational building blocks for developing themes. Codes identified from the interview transcripts were colour-coded.

3. **Phase Three: Generating Themes**

   After coding all relevant data from the five interviews, the focus shifted from interpreting individual data items to analysing the broader meanings and patterns across the entire dataset.

4. **Phase Four: Reviewing Potential Themes**

   This phase involved a recursive review of the themes, examining their alignment with the coded data items and the overall dataset to ensure coherence and relevance.

5. **Phase Five: Defining and Naming Themes**

   The key themes identified (as shown in Figure 1) were:

   - Teacher training, continuing professional development (CPD) and evolving understandings of *Aistear*/play-based pedagogy
   - The role of teachers in play-based pedagogy
   - Teachers' perceptions of the socio-emotional and socio-cultural benefits of play

6. Phase Six: Producing the Report

The final phase involved writing the report, which was presented as chapters in the dissertation (Braun and Clarke, 2020).

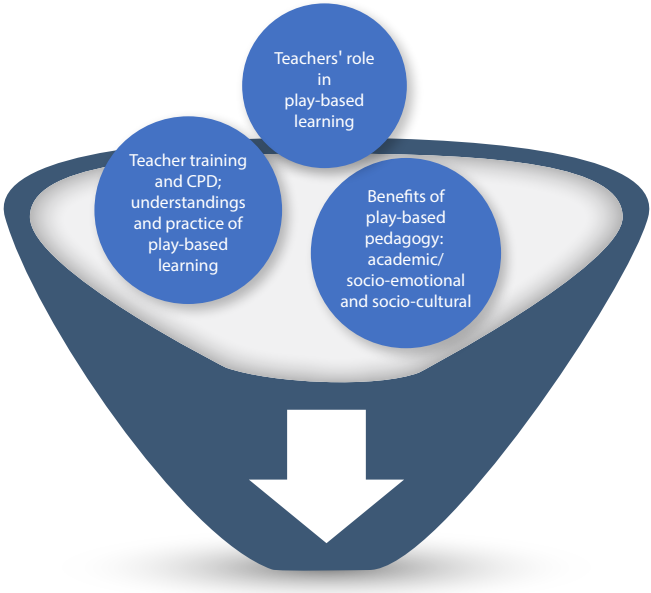

Figure 1: Emergent themes following data analysis

The research process followed the guidelines set out in the British Educational Research Association (BERA) *Ethical guidelines for educational research* (BERA, 2018). All GDPR requirements (*Data Protection Act 2018*) were followed. A clear framework addressing confidentiality, anonymity, data protection, intellectual property rights and the right to withdraw was explicitly communicated. This information was provided in the letters of information and consent to the school principal, acting as the gatekeeper, along with the teachers as participants in the study.

Findings and Discussion

One of the key findings of this research is that play-based learning is still a relatively new pedagogical approach in Infant classrooms, as also noted in the literature. The findings indicate that while teachers

expressed support for play-based pedagogy, traditional, didactic methods dominated daily practice at this school until 2021 — teachers spent only one hour per week in a separate '*Aistear* room'. Findings in this research are also reflective of some of the cohort of Irish primary school teachers in Ó Síoráin, Kernan and McArdle's (2023) small-scale study in which some teachers understood Aistear as something to be 'done' and 'separate'.

The findings align with Gray and Ryan's (2016) research in Ireland, which observed that for many Infant teachers, play was treated as a peripheral aspect of classroom practice. While teachers recognised the value of play, there was limited evidence that it had transformed their teaching practice (ibid.). Similar findings are found in a study by O'Síoráin, Kernan and McArdle (2023), where some teachers understood *Aistear* as an isolated activity rather than an integral part of classroom methodology.

Most participants in this research learned about *Aistear* during their initial teacher education. However, messages from colleges of education and CPD courses were inconsistent, with only one emphasising that play-based pedagogy should be understood as a teaching philosophy rather than a distinct subject. Following the promotion of one participant who strongly believed in *Aistear*, play-based pedagogy shifted from being a weekly activity to a daily practice for an hour in the classroom. However, the approach still did not extend throughout the day for most participants, indicating a lack of awareness that the Irish *Primary Language curriculum* advocates for a play-based approach as a central method for developing language and communication skills (NCCA, 2019).

The current practice of *Aistear* involves one hour of play-based pedagogy each day, with teachers collaboratively establishing a thematic approach. Four stations are set up, and children rotate among them every 15 minutes. This approach reflects principles of Piagetian constructivism and cognitive theory. It also incorporates Montessori's emphasis on meaningful, purposeful play although it falls short of Montessori's focus on fostering functional independence and self-regulation to develop essential life skills. A few participants noted that socio-emotional regulation was incidentally enhanced through play. The research also found that the increased involvement of parents and guardians in play-based pedagogy is consistent with Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, which emphasises the role of social interactions and cultural context in child development (Vygotsky, 1967).

Finally, the findings demonstrated a lack of clarity on the role of the teacher in play-based learning, echoing the literature's diverse perspectives on this issue. Most participants saw their role as facilitators and observers,

while a minority identified themselves as 'more knowledgeable others' — a concept from Vygotskian theory (ibid.). Vygotsky argues that the teacher's role in play should be to guide children in activities that bridge what they can achieve independently and what they can accomplish with support. The conflicting views in this research sample suggest that not all participants fully implemented Vygotskian principles.

Teachers did not reference the *Primary Language curriculum*, which describes teachers' role as 'facilitators', one that scaffolds children's play to support rich language interactions (NCCA, 2019). Findings indicate that teachers' perceptions of their role in play-based learning vary widely, reflecting differing interpretations of play-based pedagogy in the literature (Pyle and Danniels, 2017; McGrath and Kenny, 2022).

Pyle and Danniels (2017) identify three different types of play in education: children's pretend play, adult-guided play and child-led play. They, along with Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff (2013), assert that even when play is adult-guided, if the activity is child-led, the control remains with the child. In this study, children experienced play-based learning for an hour each day at themed stations set up by the teachers. During this time, children led the play, although research by Samuelsson and Carlsson (2008, p.625) suggests that more thorough training is needed to ensure play-based pedagogy dominates the entire school day rather than reverting to traditional or 'teachy' methods after the designated play hour.

O'Síoráin, Kernan and McArdle (2023) call for a more unified understanding of 'structure and agency' in play-based learning. Additionally, Wallerstedt and Pramling (2012) emphasise the need for teacher training to clarify what actions teachers should take, why children engage in specific activities, and how these activities affect learning and development. This research highlights the ongoing ambiguity regarding the teacher's role in play-based learning, including the concept of 'the more knowledgeable other' (Vygotsky, 1967) and the need for clearly defined roles and responsibilities in play-based learning (O'Síoráin, Kernan and McArdle, 2023).

Conclusion

From the outset, this small-scale research did not aim to claim generalisability. Therefore, it is recommended that similar studies be conducted in different contexts, with diverse populations, or potentially using other research paradigms to assess the applicability and

transferability of these findings. Additionally, a longitudinal study examining the ways in which play-based pedagogy evolves over time would provide valuable insights into its long-term impact on teaching practices.

A key recommendation is to ensure that teachers fully understand the requirements for implementing play-based pedagogy, as outlined in the *Primary Language curriculum*. The obligations for teachers should be clearly explained, modelled and detailed within the new framework to provide a coherent understanding of play-based practice, thereby avoiding the misinterpretations associated with *Aistear*.

This dissertation was undertaken as part fulfilment of the Professional Master of Education in Primary Education with the aim of enhancing the researcher's classroom practice. Through this research, nuanced insights have emerged regarding how different teachers implement, engage with and practise play-based learning. The process has underscored the importance of continuous professional development. It has enabled the researcher to become a reflective practitioner, capable of evaluating teaching practices, assumptions and beliefs. Such reflection is expected to contribute to more thoughtful and effective pedagogical strategies, fostering positive classroom dynamics and, ultimately, improving the socio-emotional and academic outcomes for children in the Infant classroom.

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Teachers' Perspectives: Differentiation Techniques Used Within Mixed-Ability English Classes at Junior Cycle and Their Effectiveness

Amy McCafferty

Biography

Amy McCafferty graduated with a Bachelor of Arts (Hons) Degree in English and Geography from the University of Galway in 2021. She started her journey to become a teacher in 2022 and graduated in December 2024 with First Class Honours in the Professional Master of Education in Post-Primary Education from Hibernia College. Amy is passionate about differentiation and the important role it plays in fostering students' growth and learning in the classroom. This enthusiasm informed this research project on differentiation, with a special emphasis on how it may be used to help students in Junior Cycle English classes.

Amy is currently enjoying teaching Geography in a post-primary school in Co. Donegal and is bringing her knowledge from completing this dissertation into her classroom. She believes that differentiation holds great potential in fostering the learning and development of every student in secondary school classrooms, helping them to reach their full potential.

Teachers' Perspectives: Differentiation Techniques Used Within Mixed-Ability English Classes at Junior Cycle and Their Effectiveness

Research supervisor: Marie Sweeney Khalifa

Abstract

This single case study explored what differentiation techniques English teachers in two post-primary schools in northwest Ireland use in mixed-ability Junior Cycle classes and which are the most effective from teachers' perspectives. Using a mixed-methods approach, data was collected through an online survey and semi-structured interviews. Teachers were questioned about the challenges of implementing differentiation techniques within their English classes, in addition to how well resourced and prepared they think they are to use differentiation techniques within their classes. The findings indicate that while confidence levels when implementing differentiation techniques in English classes are high, teachers face many different challenges on a day-to-day basis in their implementation and feel they could benefit with more specific training, extra resources, and collaboration with colleagues. The study concludes with recommendations on how schools can give English teachers continuous, targeted professional development as well as regular time for collaborative planning so they may create differentiated activities and lessons and share resources.

Keywords: differentiation, mixed ability, Junior Cycle, effectiveness, benefits, challenges

Introduction and Background

The researcher was inspired to conduct this study by her own experiences whilst on placement in mixed-ability Junior Cycle English classes. During this time, the researcher observed the varying levels of academic ability and engagement among students, which sparked a keen interest in how teachers can address such diversity effectively. The researcher became especially interested in investigating the significance of differentiation in an English mixed-ability classroom, as well as the benefits and challenges that it presented.

The educational landscape in Ireland over the last two decades has recognised the importance of addressing the needs of students within mixed-ability classes. Within most schools in Ireland, students remain in

mixed-ability classes, for most subjects, up until the final year of Junior Cycle (Department of Education and Science, 2007). This is the case in many schools in Ireland as they are unable to separate students in certain subjects, like English, into Higher and Ordinary Level classes. Teachers are therefore faced with having both Higher and Ordinary Level students within the one mixed-ability Junior Cycle English class. In classes like these, teachers need to use differentiation — a teaching strategy that adapts instruction to meet the needs of students in a class — which has been given a lot of praise in promoting equality in mixed-ability classes and increasing student achievement (Tomlinson, 2001). A study carried out by Kristian Granås (2019) on the Norwegian educational system provides some good insights on how teachers there implement differentiation techniques into their classes. In their findings, they stated that teachers 'arguably always encounter challenges in their attempts to differentiate instruction' (Granås, 2019, p.51). Studies on the Irish secondary educational system in relation to differentiation are sparse; therefore, the background of this study is built off Granås' study of the Norwegian one.

In the context of the Junior Cycle in Ireland, where students of varying abilities are grouped together for English, the challenge that teachers face is to implement effective differentiated instruction that can enhance learning for all students (NCCA, 2011). Even though differentiation makes sense in theory and has been studied outside Ireland, there is not a lot of research that looks at how these techniques are used in mixed-ability English classes at the Junior Cycle level and how effective teachers think they are. Understanding these perspectives is crucial because teachers are at the forefront of implementing differentiation techniques in Irish post-primary schools and can provide valuable insights into the practicalities, challenges, and successes associated with these strategies (Westwood, 2016). This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the differentiation techniques used by teachers in Junior Cycle English classes, their effectiveness in fostering student engagement, and the challenges teachers face in implementing them.

Through reviewing relevant literature on this topic, this study aims to answer the following questions:

- What are the common differentiation techniques used by English teachers in mixed-ability Junior Cycle classes?
- What are English teachers' perceptions about the effectiveness of differentiation techniques in their mixed-ability Junior Cycle classes?

- What are the barriers and challenges to implementing differentiation techniques in mixed-ability English Junior Cycle classes?
- Do English teachers feel adequately resourced and equipped to implement a differentiation technique within their classes?

Methodology

This was a single case study that was conducted in two post-primary schools where the researcher carried out her placement. Both schools are located in rural towns in the northwest of Ireland. The research participants were teachers who teach English at Junior Cycle level in two post-primary schools. The researcher determined that the nature of the questions and the small scale of the project indicated that a mixed-methods strategy would yield richer data after weighing the benefits of using each particular method. According to Malina, Nørreklit and Selto (2011), a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods can be fruitful for obtaining profoundly new empirical insights. A mixed-methods strategy allowed for the flexibility required to gather data and look into the many kinds of differentiation strategies employed by English teachers and their efficacy.

Research Methods

Interviews served as the primary means of obtaining qualitative data, enabling the researcher to observe and gather detailed information (Creswell, 2021). Online surveys, through Google Forms, were used to gather quantitative data from participants, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the research topic. An online survey appeared to be preferable over other quantitative data collection methods for a variety of reasons. The online survey is less expensive than having to print out a hard copy of a questionnaire for each participant; participants can complete it whenever it is convenient for them, from any location; and the researcher can view responses in real time, allowing for immediate analysis instead of waiting to gather questionnaires (Minnaar and Heystek, 2013). Furthermore, they are equivalent to an onion. Similar to peeling off the outer layers of an onion, online surveys serve as the initial layer of data collection. However, interviews are required to get deeper into more complex and in-depth topics, giving researchers access to the inner workings of understanding (Edwards and Talbot, 2014). Therefore, semi-structured interviews provide an examination of unforeseen or unexpected themes or concerns that may surface throughout the

interview process, enhancing the comprehensiveness and depth of the qualitative analysis (Legard, Keegan and Ward, 2003).

Data Analysis

The research study aimed to gain insight into teachers' perspectives on differentiation techniques used within English classes at Junior Cycle and their effectiveness. The data was analysed using both statistical and thematic methods because this study combined quantitative and qualitative findings. The data that was collected through online surveys administered via Google Forms was analysed and conveyed using graphs, charts, and descriptive statistics. The summary feature on Google Forms, which displays participant replies in a graph or chart format, makes it simple to generate them. The researcher used thematic analysis to analyse the open-ended questions, which constituted a small portion of the survey, in the same manner as the interview questions. Thematic analysis enabled the researcher to systematically examine interview transcripts and open-ended questions, identifying recurring patterns and codes within the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This method facilitated the development of themes pertinent to the research topic.

To assess the mixed-methods approach, the data underwent a merging process. Researchers can cross-check results, provide a more comprehensive explanation of the study's conclusions, and triangulate results by merging data (Creswell and Clark, 2017). Thus, this methodology led to the drawing of conclusions and the identification of common themes.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher completed an ethics application form and submitted it to Hibernia College's Ethics Committee for approval before obtaining any data. After seeking this approval, the researcher followed the ethical guidelines established by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2018) and Hibernia College.

Findings and Discussion

Twenty post-primary English teachers completed the online survey via Google Forms (N=20). Of the twenty teachers who took part, 40% had been teaching for 0–4 years (N=8), 30% had been teaching for 5–10 years (N=6), 20% had been teaching for 11–14 years (N=4) and 10% had been teaching for 15+ years (N=2).

Overview of the Differentiation Techniques Employed and Their Frequency of Use

All participants agreed that they employ differentiation techniques in their English classrooms. However, as per Figure 1, of the 20 participants who implement differentiation techniques in their English Junior Cycle classes, 55% implement them on a daily basis (N=11), 40% use them on a weekly basis in their classes (N=8), and 1 participant says that they implement them sometimes. No participant stated that they use differentiation techniques rarely or never.

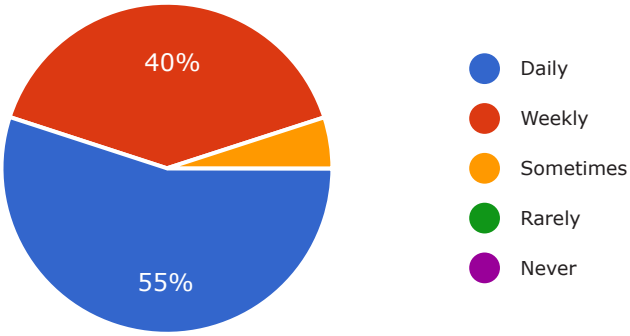

Figure 1: Frequency of differentiation use within English Junior Cycle classes

After further probing this question in the interviews and asking the head of each English department to explain their response, one teacher stated the following:

> *I do try to implement differentiation techniques on a daily basis; however, this is not always possible as sometimes they are not planned how I'd like them to be or I simply do not have the time, so I chose weekly for that question.*

The survey also revealed that questioning through Bloom's Taxonomy is the most common differentiation technique (Figure 2), with all 20 stating that they use it currently in their Junior Cycle English classes. The Primary Professional Development Service (no date) states that teachers do make regular use of questioning on a daily basis; however, it is important that when doing so, they adjust the types of questions according to the child's level of comprehension. Anstee (2014) further stated that questioning is a key differentiation strategy that engages students and caters to individuals within the classroom. In contrast,

Granås (2019) discovered that tiered assignments and class discussions were the most utilised differentiation strategies by Norwegian English teachers.

It can also be noted that 80% of participants (N=16) stated that they currently use a variety of instructional materials in their classes. 40% of participants (N=8) chose flexible grouping as a differentiation technique that they use within their classes, and only 35% of respondents (N=7) stated that they use tiered assessments/homework. The most common combination included varied instructional materials and Bloom's Taxonomy for questioning (N=17). This information can be seen in Figure 2 below.

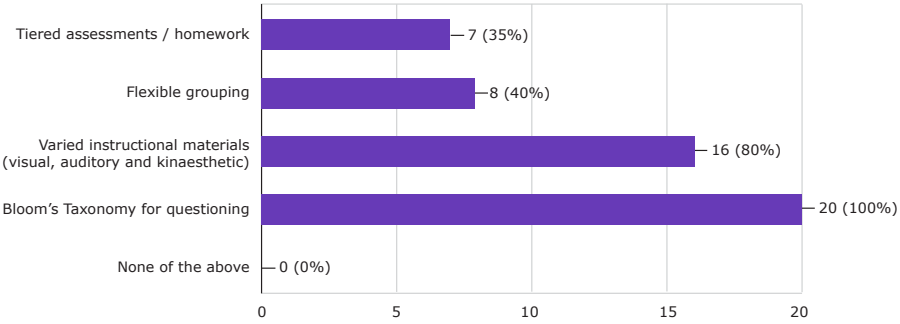

Figure 2: Differentiation techniques used within mixed-ability English Junior Cycle classes

Teachers' Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Differentiation Techniques Within Their English Mixed-Ability Junior Cycle Classes

In the online survey, 20% of participants (N=4) felt their differentiation techniques were very effective, 60% (N=12) thought they were effective, and 20% (N=4) answered neutral. No participants rated their techniques as ineffective or very ineffective. These figures can be seen in Figure 3. Further to this, the researcher wanted to determine what technique teachers thought was the most effective. This was achieved by asking an open-ended question in the online survey and further probing the teachers in the interviews to gain a deeper understanding of why a certain technique is the most effective. The qualitative data was compiled, and it showed that teachers believed tiered homework to be the most effective differentiation technique in their English Junior Cycle classes.

This can be seen when the teacher said:

> *Tiered assessments are effective because I can provide varied levels of difficulty within an activity and cater to my students' different abilities and learning styles while still targeting the same learning objectives.*
>
> *I love giving tiered homework as I see an increase in the participation levels when the students are given a choice.*

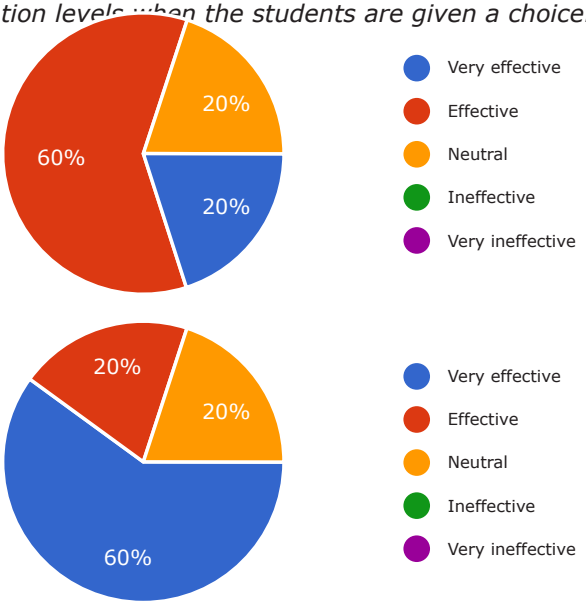

Figure 3: Effectiveness of differentiation techniques in meeting the needs of students in English Junior Cycle classes

Tiered assessments and homework, as highlighted by Tomlinson (2001), help address students' varying skills and learning styles by providing different levels of challenge and support. Research by Olisama et al. (2018) further suggests that these strategies encourage a strong work ethic, independent thinking, and greater student participation. Teachers in this study observed that offering tiered homework assignments led to an increase in the number of students completing their work when given options. This aligns with Olisama et al. (2018), who found that students in their study showed higher participation in Mathematics when provided with tiered homework assessments.

Challenges/Barriers of Implementing Differentiation Techniques in English Mixed-Ability Junior Cycle Classes

The survey asked respondents to state if they face any challenges or barriers when implementing differentiation techniques within their English mixed-ability Junior Cycle classes. 95% of respondents responded yes to this question (N=19). One participant answered no; however, in a later question, they chose time constraints as a challenge. The online survey then asked participants to select the key challenges that they face when implementing differentiation techniques within their mixed-ability English Junior Cycle classes. Table 1 shows the frequency of responses for each of the challenges.

Table 1: List of challenges to implementing differentiation techniques within English Junior Cycle classes

Challenges	Number	Percentage
Time constraints	16	80%
Large class sizes	15	75%
Student resistance/disengagement	15	75%
Lack of resources	4	20%
Limited support/training	3	15%
None of the above	1	5%

According to research, teachers have numerous challenges when trying to effectively implement differentiation into the lessons they teach (Roiha, 2014). Lack of time is a key barrier to implementing differentiation strategies in English Junior Cycle classes. 80% of the respondents (N=16) said that time was a problem for them. Analysis of the interviews also found that time constraints were a significant challenge when implementing differentiation techniques in English mixed-ability classes at Junior Cycle. An interviewee stated the following:

> *I mean, our schedule is jam-packed, and there's barely a moment to breathe, let alone customise each lesson perfectly for every student's unique needs...it also doesn't help that we have limited class time, you cannot get much covered in a 40-minute lesson...sometimes I just want to go home in the evening and switch off from school work.*

This is similar to Granås' (2019) study where all the Norwegian English teachers reported that they had limited time to differentiate instruction. They further mention that one of the teachers called it a 'typical teacher-complaint' (Granås, 2019, p.44). Large class sizes and student resistance were two other significant issues that teachers mentioned in the online survey when implementing differentiation techniques in their English Junior Cycle lessons. Melesse (2015) discovered similar results in his investigation of the same topic, stating that teachers in his study determined that the primary hurdles to implementing differentiated instruction were large class numbers and a lack of enthusiasm and commitment from students.

Professional Development and Training

The researcher started by asking respondents in the online survey if they feel confident when implementing differentiation techniques within their mixed-ability English Junior Cycle classes. As illustrated in Figure 4, more than half the respondents (60%, N=12) indicated that they are only somewhat confident when implementing them, and 40% (N=8) said that they are very confident when implementing them in their classes.

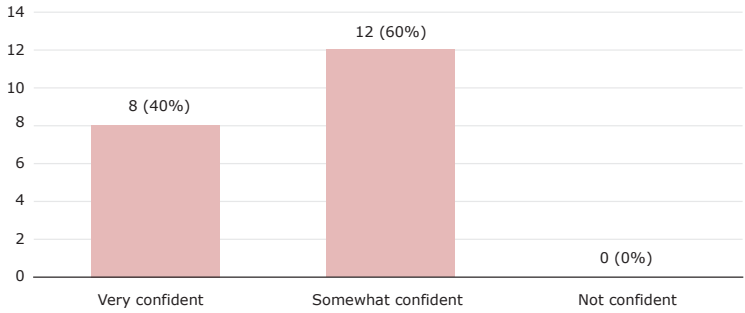

Figure 4: Teacher confidence when implementing differentiation techniques within their Junior Cycle English classes

Respondents were then asked if they had received any professional development training on differentiation techniques within the past two years. 55% of respondents (N=11) said yes, and 45% of them (N=9) said no (Figure 5).

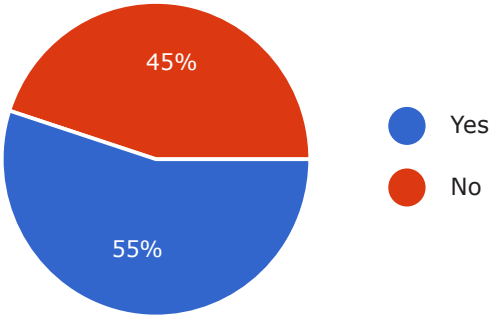

Figure 5: Have you received professional development training on differentiation techniques within the past two years?

If respondents to the previous question in the online survey indicated that they had received professional development training, they were then asked to describe it in an open-ended question. These were some of the responses:

> *'Online CPD on differentiation and dyslexia'*
>
> *'School training day by Oide on differentiation'*

Research indicates the need for continuous professional development and support for teachers to enable them to successfully implement differentiation techniques within their classrooms (Subban, 2006). However, some teachers did not feel sufficiently trained to employ differentiation techniques in their English classrooms and would like further training:

> *I would love to develop a situation within our English department where we have a meeting at the beginning of the month on differentiation. We pick a differentiation strategy to test for the month in our Junior Cycle English classes and at the end of the month meet up and give feedback to see how the implementation went.*

Although it was stated previously that 55% of respondents (N=11) had received training in the past two years, 8 of the 11 (73%) indicated that they still would like to attend a training workshop focused on specific differentiation techniques. Everyone who had answered no to the previous question (N=9) indicated that they would also like to attend training workshops. Further to this, more than half of the teachers

believed that collaborative planning sessions with their colleagues would be beneficial. These numbers can be seen in Figure 6 below. The English teachers in Granås' (2019) study also expressed a need for additional time to share ideas and get support from colleagues regarding differentiation in their English classes. Tomlinson (2017) emphasised the importance of teachers having a range of abilities and a variety of methodologies to draw from to meet the diverse needs in the classroom. 45% of participants said that extra resources and access to levelled texts would enhance their ability to implement differentiation techniques in their English Junior Cycle mixed-ability classrooms. This is consistent with the feedback provided by an English teacher in Granås' (2019) study, who stated that they would also benefit from having extra resources to help them differentiate.

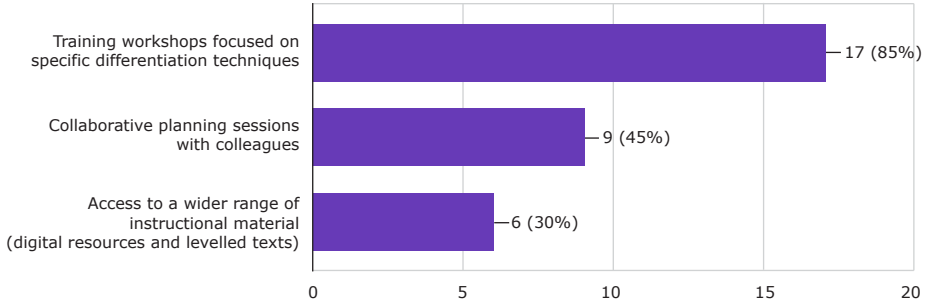

Figure 6: What additional training, resources or support could enhance your ability to implement differentiation techniques effectively within your Junior Cycle English classes?

Conclusion

This single case study enabled the researcher to gain an understanding of the most effective differentiation techniques in English Junior Cycle mixed-ability classes from teachers' perspectives. The study collected quantitative and qualitative data using an online survey (20 respondents) and semi-structured interviews (two interviewees) with teachers in schools. The data was analysed and interpreted to highlight the challenges that teachers had while implementing differentiation for mixed-ability English Junior Cycle classes in two post-primary schools.

A mixed-methods approach enabled the researcher to gain a deeper insight into teachers' views on the effectiveness of differentiation techniques in mixed-level English classes at the Junior Cycle stage. The

semi-structured interviews provided valuable perspectives, experiences, and reflections that enhanced awareness of the topic (Horton, Macve, and Struyven, 2004). Educators working with students of varying abilities found differentiation strategies beneficial, particularly tiered assessments and homework. However, they faced challenges such as time constraints, limited collaboration with colleagues, large class sizes, and resistance from students. Some participants expressed a need for additional training and suggested receiving observer feedback on their instructional methods. One teacher recommended holding monthly departmental meetings to discuss differentiation approaches. The findings highlighted the need for more planning and collaboration time within English departments for implementing differentiation.

They also recommended balancing differentiation with the demands of an overloaded curriculum. Additionally, teacher observation and feedback on differentiation techniques would be valuable for improving practice and professional judgement.

This study fills the knowledge gap on differentiation techniques, their effectiveness, implementation challenges, and professional development for Junior Cycle English teachers. While most techniques were effective, challenges included limited planning time, lack of training, and resources. Additionally, this study may also provide a catalyst for encouraging further research in the schools by stimulating discussion of the topic among the participants.

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The Role of ICT in the Teaching and Learning of Exceptionally Able Students

Dr Sarah Melnyk

Biography

Dr Sarah Melnyk graduated with a PhD in English from University College Cork and has taught English at post-primary and university level. An Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences (IRCHSS) Government of Ireland scholar, she graduated with First Class Honours in the Professional Master of Education in Post-Primary Education from Hibernia College and was honoured with three awards:

Outstanding Performance in School Experience and Professional Practice
Outstanding Research Prize
Overall Student of the Year

Sarah currently works in a post-primary school in Co. Clare and derives tremendous satisfaction from helping promote equity and inclusivity for all learners to help them realise their own individual strengths and potential.

The Role of ICT in the Teaching and Learning of Exceptionally Able Students

Research supervisor: Dr Valerie McGrath

Abstract

This study explores the role that information and communications technology (ICT) plays in the teaching and learning of exceptionally able (EA) students, with reference to the post-primary English classroom. It followed a mixed-methods approach where findings were obtained from paper-based surveys and semi-structured interviews. Findings suggested that it is not a one-size-fits-all approach, and several challenges can impede the effective implementation of ICT in pedagogy for high-ability students, such as diverse definitions of exceptionally able, poor digital infrastructure, teacher and student ICT proficiency and lack of training. Teacher collaboration, strong student-teacher relationships and a learner-centred approach proved key to the effective implementation of ICT in the classroom.

Keywords: ICT, inclusivity, exceptionally able, pedagogy, digital infrastructure, teacher collaboration

Introduction

One of the key problems facing the contemporary post-primary teacher is making learning outcomes achievable for all students in the classroom while simultaneously protecting and promoting the integrity of all students, regardless of their academic ability. While considerable effort is often made to differentiate a lesson for lower-ability students and others with specific learning disabilities (SLDs), relatively less is done to enhance the learning of EA students. Because these students can easily meet learning outcomes, little is done to challenge them — especially within the constraints of a 40-minute class where students present with a plethora of learning needs.

Background

A recent report from the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), (2024) published in 2024 states that there was a 714% increase in

special education classes from 2010 to 2022 in the Irish post-primary context. With an ever-growing diversity of special educational needs (SENs) in the classroom, it is critical for teachers to adopt pedagogies that promote inclusivity.

The crucial role that ICT played in teaching during the pandemic encouraged the researcher to consider the possibilities of ICT in delivering highly differentiated lessons that ensure all students can reach their full potential within the constraints of a 40-minute or one-hour class. This study will assess how ICT can be a pedagogical tool for the teacher — not only in developing digital literacy skills that all students need to thrive in today's world but also for enhancing learning outcomes for EA students. The role of ICT in inclusivity has, to date, received little scholarly research. This study seeks to fill some of the gaps in this area of research. While there has been considerable research about inclusivity for learners with SLDs such as dyslexia and dyscalculia, there has been relatively little research in relation to enriching the teaching and learning experience of EA students in the Irish classroom. To enhance professional practice, it is essential that the needs of gifted students should be incorporated into lesson planning.

To discuss the most effective ICT in the teaching and learning of EA students, it is first necessary to examine the legislation that outlines the legal obligations of the State to these students. The *Education Act, 1998* was the seminal piece of legislation that paved the way for the radical transformation of the legal landscape of education in terms of inclusivity and the rights of every individual to education. The part of the Act that is most pertinent to the study of EA students is the reference to the fact that every child should receive a 'level and quality of education' to meet their 'needs and abilities' (*Education Act, 1998*). It is, therefore, the legal obligation of schools to implement a policy that provides for additional educational needs (AENs) of EA students.

The *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004* is more ambiguous in its interpretation of SENs. It interprets SENs as a 'restriction in the capacity of the person to participate in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability, or any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition and cognate words shall be construed accordingly'. The reference to 'any other condition' is vague and suggests that the 'condition' would be considered an impediment to students. The *ESPEN Act 2004*, therefore, equates SENs with 'disability'. This encourages the question as to what

supports are available to EA students. EA students are not always accommodated with additional resources in the classroom, and additional programmes such as the Dublin City University Centre for Talented Youth Ireland (CTYI) are not accessible to all EA students for a variety of reasons, including geographical and economic factors.

While the *Education Act, 1998* provides for the education of 'every' child, schools are required to provide 'appropriate' education 'as far as is practicable and having regard to the resources available'. Due to the variety of needs in a mixed-ability classroom, teachers seldom have the resources available to establish research-informed best practice for EA students in the mainstream classroom. ICT could potentially fulfil these students' needs when used appropriately in the classroom.

According to data published by the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) in 2022, Ireland ranks 5th of the 27 European Union (EU) countries for digital performance. Ireland is surpassed in digital performance by Finland (1st), Denmark (2nd), the Netherlands (3rd) and Sweden (4th) (European Commission, 2022). This success, however, is not reflected in digital strategies for EA students in the classroom. The *Baseline report: towards a successor digital strategy for schools to 2027*, which makes recommendations for the digital strategy for schools, states that it is essential to 'explore the potential' of ICT for the means of 'engagement, representation, action and expression' (Butler and Leahy, 2022, p.59). However, it is unclear from the 2023 government report *Harnessing digital: the digital Ireland framework 2023 progress report* exactly where Ireland is in the implementation of the Digital Learning Framework (DLF) in the contemporary post-primary classroom. The report merely states that it 'continues to be progressed' (Government of Ireland, 2024, p.8).

This research seeks to ascertain the most effective ICT in the teaching and learning of EA students. It will assess the strategies used by teachers — digital and non-digital — in developing an effective pedagogy for these students. It will also explore challenges encountered by teachers in the implementation of ICT in the classroom. With the relevant literature in mind, this thesis will seek to explore the following questions:

- What are the most effective forms of ICT to enhance the teaching and learning of EA students?
- To what extent do the limited resources and technological abilities of teachers impede the learning of EA students?

Methodology

Due to the complex and multi-faceted nature of inclusive education, this researcher adopted a mixed-methods methodology, collecting quantitative data that is measurable and qualitative data that can be interpreted by the researcher. According to Denscombe (2008, p.272), the mixed-methods approach to the research process can increase the accuracy in data by providing a more complete picture of the area of study because it collects positivist 'fact' and interpretivist subjectivity. A mixed-methods approach would provide a more complete understanding of the potential role that ICT could play in the teaching and learning of EA students. Because the project was a small-scale study, the researcher selected one school with over 600 students and 70 teachers.

Data Analysis

Statistical and thematic analyses were employed by the researcher when analysing the data for this mixed-method research project. The quantitative data — a paper-based questionnaire — was examined using statistical analysis. The researcher used Microsoft Excel because it provided graphs to accurately reflect the findings from the quantitative data. The researcher applied the 'six-stage' process of Braun and Clarke (2006, p.86) to extract thematic analysis from interviews and ensure that the thematic analysis undertaken was 'theoretically and methodologically sound' (ibid., p.78). The steps involved are detailed in Figure 1 (ibid.).

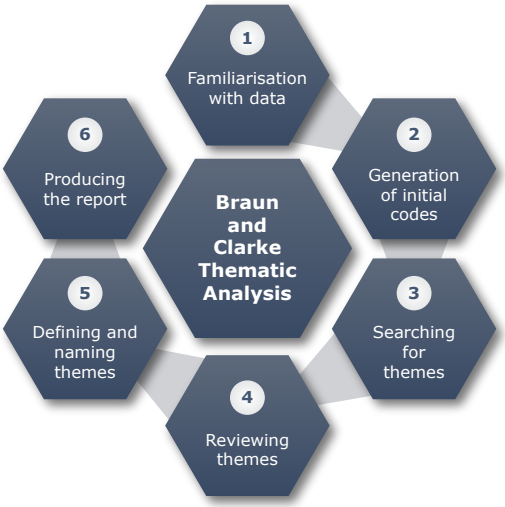

Figure 1: Braun and Clarke thematic analysis

Ethical considerations were always central to the research process. The entirety of the project complied with the British Educational Research Association (BERA) 2018 guidelines. The researcher received ethical approval from the Hibernia College Ethics Committee before commencing the research.

Findings — Paper-Based Surveys

Twenty-two teachers completed a paper-based survey, which allowed for the collection of data from a broad spectrum of respondents — including teachers who might not regularly use ICT.

Teaching Experience and Subjects Taught by Respondents

As demonstrated in Figure 2, the largest proportion of respondents, 36.4% (n=8), had 16+ years' experience, 22.7% (n=5) had 6–10 years' experience, 18.2% (n=4) had 3–5 years' experience, 13.6% (n=3) had less than 2 years' experience and 9.1% (n=2) had 11–15 years' experience.

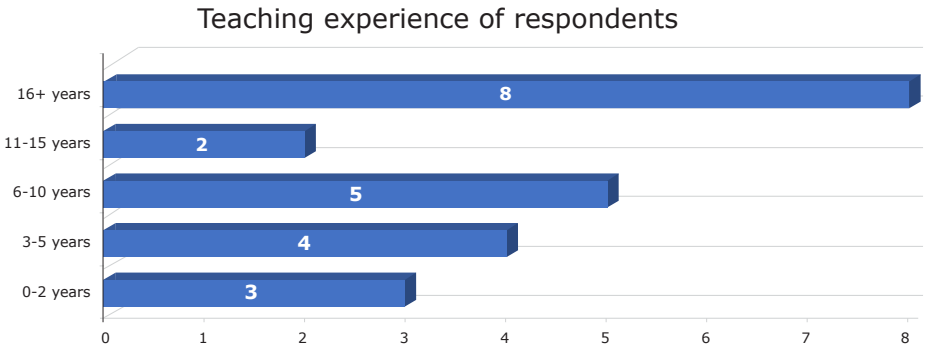

Figure 2: Teaching experience of respondents

Figure 3 illustrates the range of subjects taught by respondents. Eight (36.4%) teach English, six (27.3%) teach History, four teach Irish and CSPE (18.2%), three teach Science and Religious Education (13.7%) and two teach Geography, French, SPHE, Chemistry, Biology and Business Studies (9.1%). Subjects that were represented by one teacher are Home Economics, Spanish, Art, Agricultural Science, Music, Design and Communication Graphics, and Graphics (4.5%). Two teachers who taught both English and History were selected from participants for qualitative data research.

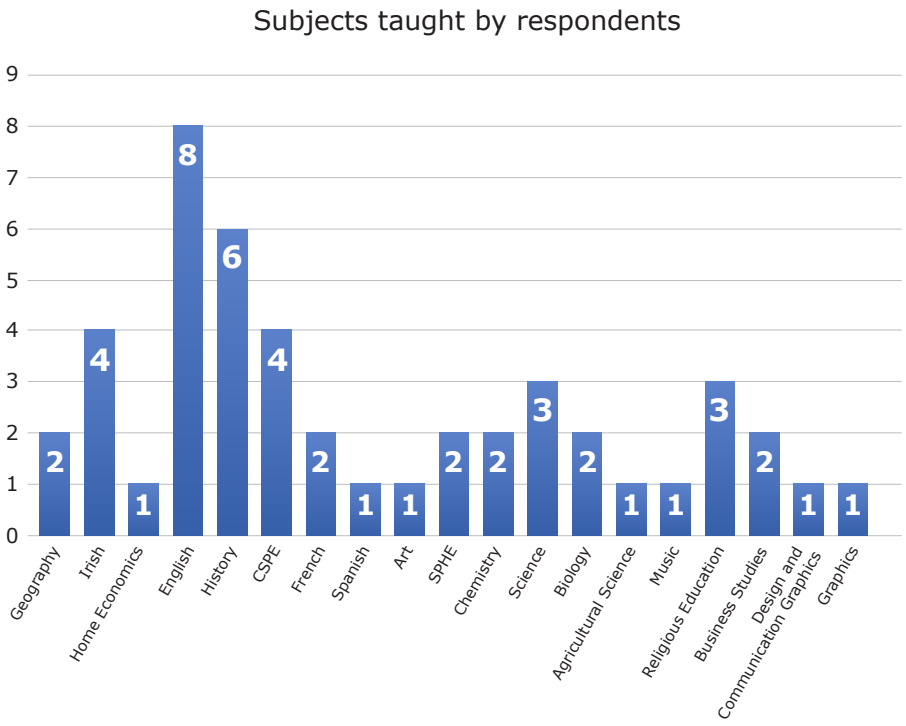

Figure 3: Subjects taught by respondents

Experience of Teaching EA Students and Responses to Difference Between EA and GAT Students

The researcher firstly determined respondents' experience of teaching EA students. See Figure 4.

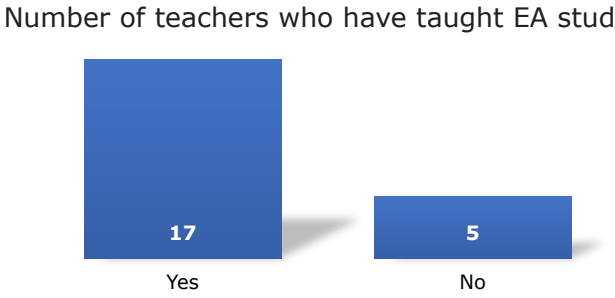

Figure 4: Teachers who have taught EA students

77.3% (n=17) had experience teaching EA students, while 22.7% (n=5) had not encountered EA students during their professional practice. Interestingly, 40% who had not taught EA students had 16+ years' teaching experience. Three out of the five teachers (60%) who had no experience of teaching EA students were English teachers, which was significant to this researcher's professional practice. History, Maths, Science and Business teachers also reported not to have encountered EA students.

Figure 5 analyses respondents' understanding of the terms EA and Gifted and Talented (GAT). 64% (n=14) stated that there was a difference between EA and GAT students, while 36% (n=8) believed there to be no difference.

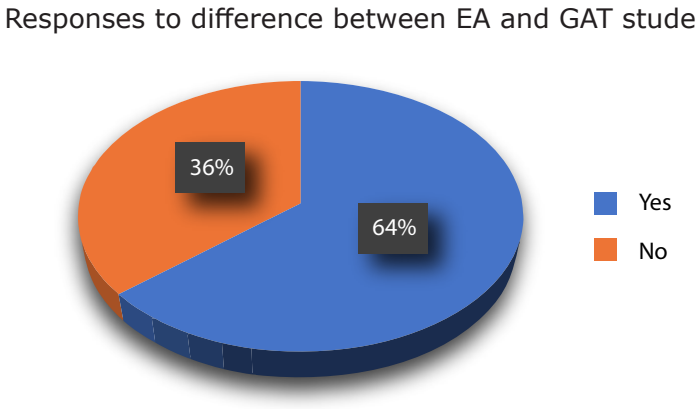

Figure 5: Responses to difference between EA and GAT students

Participants were invited to explain their responses. Figure 6 represents the varied answers. 18.1% (n=4) stated that there was no difference between EA and GAT, while 13.6% (n=3) stated that there was no rubric for distinction between the two. A lack of a standardised rubric may explain why 22.7% stated they have not encountered EA students despite long careers in post-primary education. 13.6% (n=3) believed that GAT is subject specific but that EA students were 'all-rounded'. An equal number of participants (9%) (n=2) expressed contradictory definitions of GAT students. 9% (n=2) defined GAT students as having a natural ability, while 4.5% (n=1) stated that GAT have a learned talent. Another contradiction was identified with 4.5% (n=1) stating that EA students needed direction, while 9% (n=2) stated that EA students do

not require teacher guidance. Such diverse responses may be explained by a plethora of reasons including subject, subjectivity of teachers and no precise definitions of EA and GAT.

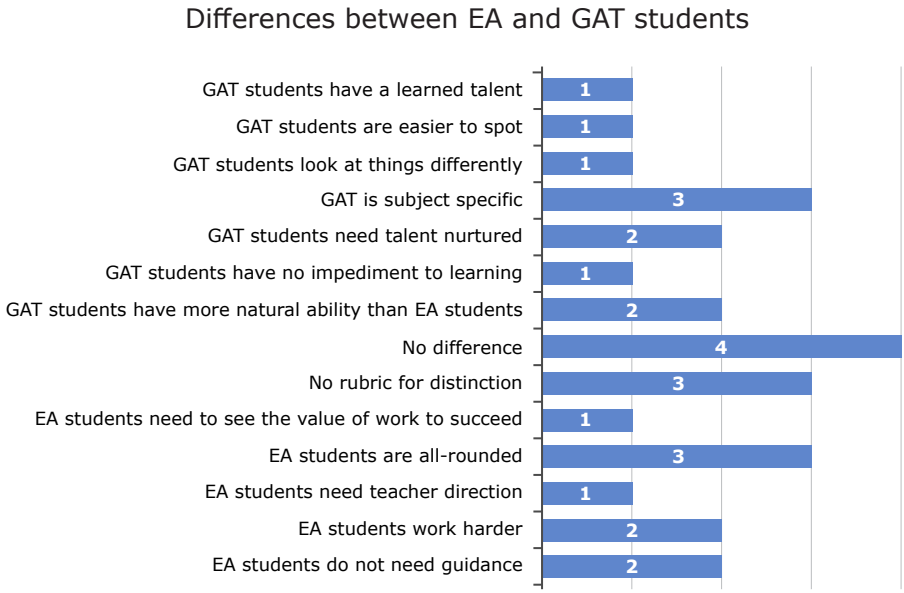

Figure 6: Differences between EA and GAT students

Strategies for Teaching EA Students and Use of ICT

To establish the most effective forms of ICT when teaching EA students, the researcher asked teachers which pedagogical strategies they used when instructing them. Figure 7 represents the various strategies identified by the 77.3% (n=17) who answered yes to having taught EA students during their professional practice.

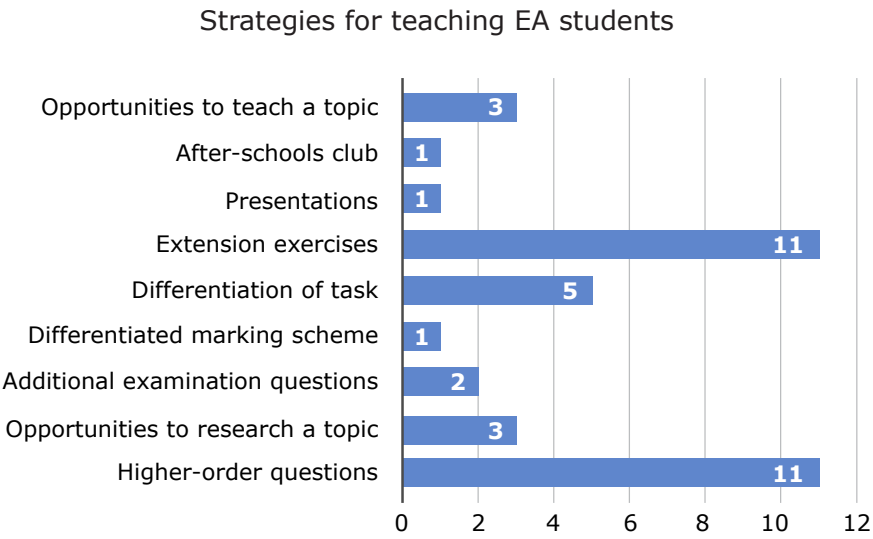

Figure 7: Strategies for teaching EA students

64.7% (n=11) of participants cited extension exercises and higher-order questioning as effective strategies. 29.4% (n=5) answered differentiation of task, while 13.6% (n=3) offered EA students opportunities to teach in class. 11.8% (n=2) gave students additional examination questions, while 5.9% (n=1) cited after-school clubs, presentations and differentiated marking schemes as strategies for teaching EA students. While the use of ICT may be implicit in these findings, Figure 7 does not demonstrate explicitly the use of ICT as a pedagogical tool.

Figure 8, however, reflects that 50% (n=11) of participants used ICT in every class, with a further 31.8% (n=7) using it in most classes. 9.1% (n=2) stated that they used it in some classes. A further 9.1% (n=2) gave spoiled responses. This leads the researcher to question if ICT is used for pedagogical or administrative purposes in the classroom.

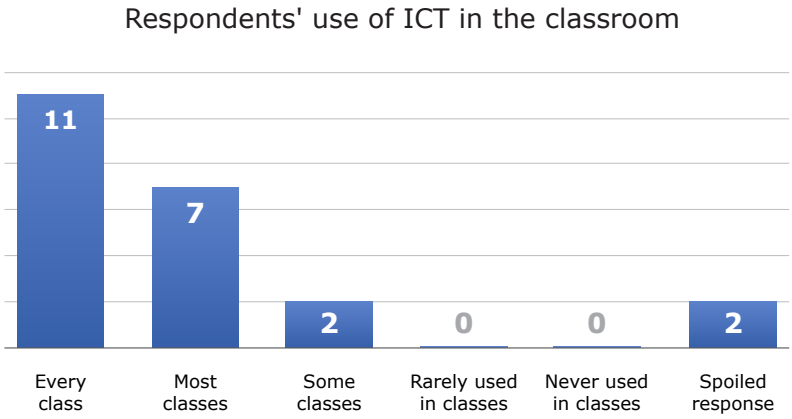

Figure 8: Respondents' use of ICT in the classroom

Figure 9 demonstrates that 90.9% (n=20) use ICT for differentiation and 9.1% (n=2) do not. This suggests that the strategies listed in Figure 7 use ICT as a pedagogical resource in some form.

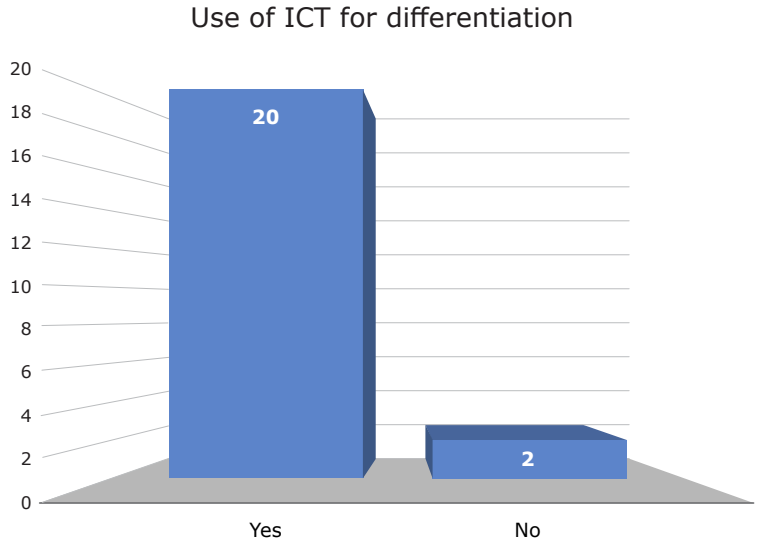

Figure 9: Use of ICT for differentiation

While 90.9% (n=20) use ICT for differentiation, 100% (n=22) of participants cite challenges using ICT in the classroom (Figure 10).

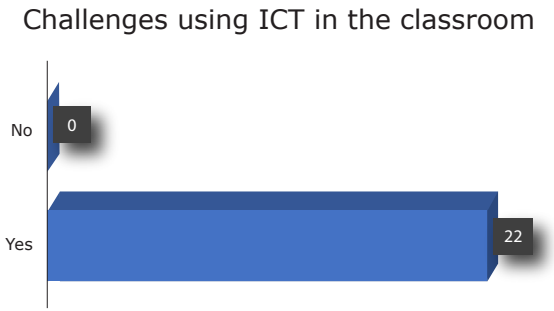

Figure 10: Challenges using ICT in the classroom

The researcher sought to establish teacher confidence in using ICT as a pedagogical resource because this issue could potentially be linked to challenges in using ICT. Figure 11 demonstrates that 0 participants were not at all confident, 4.5% (n=1) were a little confident and 18.2% (n=4) were completely confident. Interestingly, 59.1% (n=13) stated that they were very confident in using ICT as a pedagogical resource. 9.1% (n=2) did not respond. This suggests that ICT challenges in the classroom were not due to competence but rather technical issues.

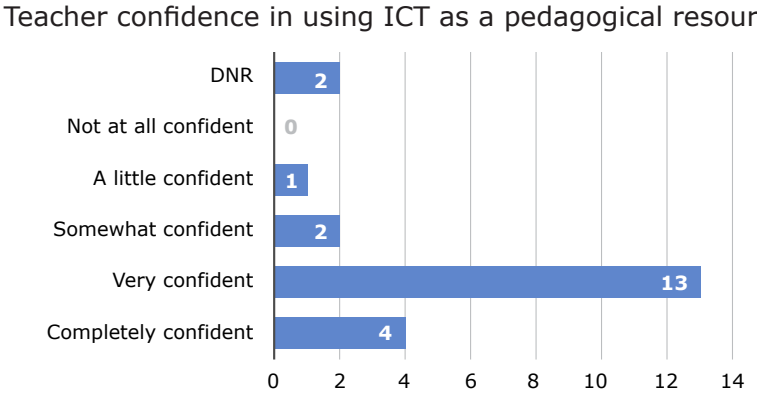

Figure 11: Teacher confidence in using ICT as a pedagogical resource

As Figure 12 reflects, 40.1% (n=9) cited poor wi-fi/Internet connection, 36.3% (n=8) mentioned student access to devices and 27.3% (n=6) stated that poor equipment were challenges encountered when using ICT in the classroom. 9% (n=2) cited restricted access to platforms. 4.5% (n=1) mentioned student access to ICT packages, lack of resources, student proficiency, student online safety and the classroom setting as challenges. Lack of resources and ICT assistance suggest — either implicitly or explicitly — the need for further teacher training.

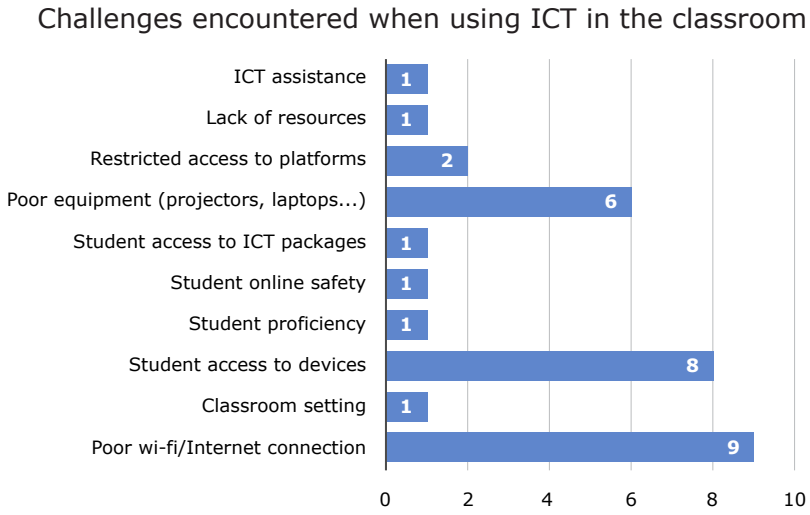

Figure 12: Challenges encountered when using ICT in the classroom

Qualitative Results

Two interview participants were selected because they teach English and History. Common themes emerged from the qualitative data. The various, and sometimes contradictory, definitions of EA and GAT have an impact on selecting the most effective form of ICT to enhance the learning of gifted students. Without an agreed definition of these terms, it is more difficult to pinpoint the most effective form of technology. It emerged from the quantitative research conducted that 40% of those who stated that they had no experience of teaching EA students had 16+ years' teaching experience. The researcher considered why this may be the case. Firstly, this is a small-scale study focusing on one post-primary school, and a larger sample may yield a different result. However, it is also possible that the lack of a standardised definition of EA and GAT

hinders identification of these students. Without a rubric, it can be harder to find technology to meet their needs. In addition to this, the research conducted would suggest that the definition of EA and GAT in the English classroom is more difficult than in other subjects because it is not a scientific subject with correct and incorrect answers. The researcher considered the subjectivity of the subject as a possible reason for respondents not encountering EA students during their careers.

While there is no standardised rubric for exceptionality in English, it can be argued that creating a suggested criteria — even at a subject department level — can assist in the identification of exceptionality. Collaboration with other teachers would be key in not only the identification of EA students, but also in the selection of appropriate ICT to encourage students to fulfil their inherent potential. Teacher collaboration, according to contemporary research, is critical to inclusive education and differentiated instruction in terms of assessment, preparation, implementation and reflection (Pozas and Letzel-Alt, 2023). Teacher collaboration in the implementation of EA identification in English would assist colleagues and trainee teachers in the teaching and learning of EA students. However, while teacher collaboration is ideal from a theoretical perspective, there can be impediments to its effective implementation in practice. Personality clashes, different opinions on best professional practice, accountability and hesitancy to give and receive critical feedback to and from colleagues are reasons cited for ineffective teacher collaboration (Ní Bhrion and King, 2020). This highlights the importance of school management in creating a collaborative and safe environment that nurtures open communication and collaborative practice.

In addition to teacher collaboration, a comprehensive school policy on digital strategy is essential in the effective implementation of ICT for all students — including EA learners. While documents such as the *Digital strategy for schools to 2027* refer to the role of ICT in inclusivity, stating that it provides the opportunity for 'multiple means of engagement, representation and action' (Department of Education, 2022, p.28), they do not give advice on the implementation of ICT for the inclusion of EA students. Butler and Leahy (2022, p.57) suggest that as school management and teachers begin to embed a Digital Learning Framework (DLF), tools such as SELFIE (Self-reflection on Effective Learning by Fostering the use of Innovative Educational Technologies), named after a 'selfie' to suggest taking a snapshot of the current DLF in an individual

school, may be of benefit in opening a meaningful dialogue about the role that ICT plays in the teaching and learning of all students. By an anonymous reflection from all stakeholders of areas such as school strategies, infrastructure, teaching practices, curriculum and student experience, SELFIE enables schools to work on a whole-school dialogue and action plan that best suits the specific needs of the individual school.

Research Question 1: What is the role of the teacher in the implementation of effective ICT for the teaching and learning of EA students?

Relationships, attitudes and support were three key pillars that underpinned the evidence that emerged from the study. The role of the teacher and their relationship with students is a theme that occurred — directly and indirectly — throughout the existing literature and the research completed in this study. The role of the teacher is crucial — from identification to adopting appropriate pedagogy for giftedness. Therefore, the most effective form of ICT can only be ascertained with the pedagogical expertise of a teacher who:

- Has assessed an individual student's needs
- Has an inherent understand of their learning preferences and abilities
- Can effectively select an appropriate form of ICT for the successful completion of the learning task that best suits the technological abilities of the student within the resources at the school's disposal

Knowing the individual means that a teacher can differentiate the lesson successfully to ensure that each student is reaching their potential in an engaging and meaningful manner. The researcher concluded that without a strong student-teacher relationship, ICT cannot be an effective pedagogy for the teaching and learning of EA students.

As stated in the *Digital strategy for schools to 2027*, the recommended approach to ICT in the classroom is 'pedagogy first technology second', and it is paramount that ICT serves to 'enhance teaching, learning and assessment' (Department of Education, 2022, p.22). This echoes qualitative findings in citing best professional practice that ICT be used with more traditional methods of differentiated teaching. With this practice, a teacher can prepare a highly differentiated lesson where ICT enhances — but does not supplant — traditional pedagogies.

Research Question 2: What is the impact of limited resources and a teacher's technological abilities on the teaching and learning of EA students?

One of the key issues in the effective implementation of ICT as a pedagogical resource was the need for teacher training. Competency and proficiency can be subjective, and this is an area of the study that requires further research. The digital landscape is mutable and ever-changing, and teachers need to keep informed and educated about best practice relating to the implementation of ICT in the differentiated classroom. As stated in the *Digital strategy for schools to 2027* (Department of Education, 2022, p.14), 'continuous professional learning' for teachers and school management would be essential, and a key element of this is teacher collaboration by sharing digital pedagogical resources and strategies. This will need to be a nationwide initiative facilitated by the Department of Education.

However, it is also crucial that students themselves can access ICT. Although contemporary students are digital 'natives', they are, as demonstrated by the quantitative and qualitative data collected for this study, still unable to navigate certain virtual learning environments (VLEs) and ICT packages that are used in the post-primary classroom. Policies have been put in place for this, such as the *Digital Media Literacy* short course that teaches students to use ICT to participate in 'self-directed enquiry' and to engage 'safely and effectively in an online environment' (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2024). Having up-to-date digital literacy skills would potentially allow EA students to engage in learning beyond the established Junior and Senior curriculum.

All teachers who participated in the study reported issues while using ICT. The most common issues cited were in relation to poor equipment and wi-fi connections. In the *Digital strategy for schools to 2027* (Department of Education, 2022, p.43), Pillar 2 of the proposed strategy is concerned with establishing funding for the 'purchase and maintenance' of digital technology and to provide 'technical support solutions' for schools to effectively embed ICT into teachers' 'teaching, learning and assessment'. This strategy will serve to appease the limited resources that were a consideration in the second research question. However, while this is reassuring in theory, its effectiveness in terms of implementation remains to be seen. Thus, there is a complex nexus between policy and practice. This, once again, demonstrates the importance of teacher collaboration

and input from senior management about the effective implementation of a digital technology strategy.

Educators could use ICT to overcome geographical issues in EA students' attendance of CTYI in Dublin. According to Cross, Riedl Cross and O'Reilly (2018, p.184), while CTYI is 'outstanding' to attending to the needs of EA students, the modules are available only in Dublin. This researcher suggests that bringing exceptional students from across the State together in a single VLE would be the most effective use of ICT in the teaching and learning of higher-ability students.

Conclusion

As discussed earlier, changes in law pertaining to education over the past two decades has made the role of the teacher a complex and multi-faceted one. The *Education Act, 1998* states that 'every person concerned in the implementation of this Act' shall provide 'as far as is practicable and having regard to the resources available' an education that is 'appropriate to meeting the needs and abilities' of 'every' child in the State. It can be argued that it is the legal obligation, therefore, of all concerned in the teaching and learning of EA students to provide an education that is most appropriate to their own unique and inherent potential. As stated in the *Digital strategy for schools to 2027*, it is the intention that all learners will be supported to 'reach their full potential' (Department of Education, 2022, p.10). ICT, therefore, could be one of the most 'practicable…resources available' (*Education Act, 1998*) to teachers and schools in fulfilling their legal obligations to EA students.

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The Role of the Teacher in Fostering Student Autonomy in the Modern Foreign Language (MFL) Classroom

Olivia Moylan

Biography

Olivia graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in History and German from the University of Galway in 2022. Passionate about languages and language learning, Olivia was drawn to teaching as an opportunity to use and promote the German language as well as to help students develop confidence and autonomy in their language learning journeys. Olivia aimed to explore strategies that empower students to take ownership of their learning, driven by her belief that autonomy is a vital component for effective language acquisition.

Having graduated with a First-Class Honours in the Professional Master of Education in Post-Primary Education from Hibernia College in 2024, Olivia is currently working as a German and History teacher in Portumna Community School, Galway.

The Role of the Teacher in Fostering Student Autonomy in the Modern Foreign Language (MFL) Classroom

Research supervisor: Dr David Mulrooney

Abstract

Learner autonomy has gained momentum within the context of language learning in the last two decades. The movement towards learner-centred approaches has resulted in more emphasis on autonomy and students taking control of their own language learning process. This study explored Irish MFL teachers' views on the importance of autonomy and effective pedagogical approaches to foster it. The sample size comprised of twenty participants for an online questionnaire and two external participants for two semi-structured interviews. The participants were MFL post-primary teachers with a minimum of five years' teaching experience. The mixed-methods data revealed that teachers employ diverse strategies daily and highly value autonomy. However, they face challenges implementing it at the Senior Cycle level due to curriculum constraints.

Keywords: learner autonomy, student-centred learning, language acquisition, pedagogical strategies, constructivist teaching, language proficiency, facilitator

Introduction and Background

The aim of this research study is to examine the role of the teacher in fostering student autonomy in the Modern Foreign Language (MFL) classroom. Autonomy is an essential element in language learning, and teachers must help students become autonomous so they can have ownership and responsibility for their own learning process. As Benson (2013, p.1) stated, 'when learners succeed in developing autonomy, they not only become better language learners, but they also develop into more responsible and critical members of communities in which they live'. The role of the teacher is crucial in facilitating student autonomy for effective language acquisition. A teacher must guide the learner in

fostering autonomy while also helping them acquire the desired linguistic and communicative abilities (Little, 2012).

Autonomy is a multidimensional concept with various definitions developed by researchers. The most frequently used definition was formulated by Holec in 1981 where he stated that autonomy was 'the ability on the part of the learner to take charge of own's learning' (Boyadzhieva, 2016). The concept of autonomy is a significant contribution to the field of foreign language education and is an integral part of the Council of Europe's strategies regarding education. Autonomy in language learning has been broadly described as 'learning practices involving learners' control over aspects of their learning' (Benson, 2013). Although learners play a crucial role in this process, it is essential that a teacher creates a learner-directed environment that can encourage students to keep control of their own language-learning process (Dam, 2003).

Constructivist learning environments enable students to learn meaningfully, based on their own prior knowledge and through their own personal experiences. Constructivist teaching promotes learner autonomy, responsibility and active learning and, therefore, a teacher must aim towards constructivist practice (Panhwar, Ansari and Ansari, 2016). This method, which places more emphasis on learning than teaching, also promotes learner autonomy and encourages student participation in the learning process. Traditional approaches to language teaching have evolved as there is a growing shift from teacher-centred instruction to student-centred approaches. The role of a teacher in an autonomous classroom is more of a facilitator aiding students to take responsibility (Al Asmari, 2013). Autonomy is a student-centred approach that develops independent language learning, whereby the learner is at the centre of the language-learning process. Using their roles and practices in the classroom, teachers can take responsibility for the autonomous development of their students. However, there is an increasing concern in the field of language learning regarding what approaches and strategies can be employed by teachers to foster language learners' autonomy.

The purpose of this research is to gain insight into the role of post-primary teachers in fostering student autonomy in the MFL classroom. The study explores the perceptions of MFL teachers regarding this topic. Insight is gained by investigating the different pedagogical strategies and approaches employed by teachers in fostering student autonomy.

As a German MFL teacher, I find it challenging to empower my students to become independent language learners. I believe my students may lack the confidence or skills necessary to manage their own learning. Students may also be more accustomed to traditional, teacher-centred environments, with little to no student autonomy occurring. The findings of this study will allow the researcher and fellow language teachers to explore new techniques that could be used to help benefit students. By identifying effective techniques and common challenges, teachers can enhance their pedagogical practices to better support language learner autonomy. Arising from an extensive literature review, the following research questions have emerged:

1. Do Irish MFL post-primary teachers value the concept of autonomy?
2. What pedagogical strategies do Irish post-primary MFL teachers believe are most effective for fostering language learner autonomy in their classrooms?

Methodology

This chapter describes the mixed-methods approach of using qualitative and quantitative data collection methods in order to answer these questions. Mixed-methods research has been noted as the 'third methodological movement' and the 'third research paradigm' (Johnson et al., 2007, cited in Cohen, Morrison and Manion, 2011, p.22). This paradigm recognises that research should not be exclusively quantitative nor qualitative as both may be needed to answer the research questions fully, leading to a pragmatist paradigm approach. Pragmatism is 'outcome-oriented and interested in determining the meaning of things' (Shannon-Baker, 2016, p.322).

To get an insight into the role of the teacher in fostering student autonomy in the MFL classroom, qualitative data can capture the depth of teachers' views, while quantitative data can provide statistical data and trends. Qualitative research can entail background information on the context, while quantitative can strengthen gaps in the qualitative study if needed. Triangulation is the term for this technique, which involves using two or more approaches in this manner to try and confirm the accuracy of the information being gathered (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 2010). Purposive sampling was utilised during this study whereby participants consisted of qualified language teachers. The teachers within these schools were required to have at least five years of teaching experience while also being a mainstream language teacher.

Mixed-Methods Approach

The researcher employed semi-structured interviews and self-completion questionnaires as two methods of data collection to effectively address the research topics. Questionnaires were given to a larger sample size of thirty participants, allowing an overall perspective. Prior to conducting research, the researcher utilised a piloting process to ensure the questionnaire was relevant and contained no errors. Instruments frequently require 'piloting with smaller or different groups and are then revised before they are fully ready for use' (Babione, 2015, p.157). This was carried out by sending the questionnaire to the supervisor as well as to a smaller group size of three. When consent was obtained, questionnaires were individually circulated in electronic format using Google Forms and sent to MFL teachers from both School Experience and Professional Practice (SEPP) placements.

Two semi-structured interviews were also utilised to gather more in-depth and personal thoughts. Qualitative interviews tend to be more open-ended and use less-structured questions (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). A pilot interview was carried out to allow the researcher to investigate possible issues. The interviews conducted were 15–20 minutes long and were recorded on the researcher's iPhone using Voice Memos before being transferred to the researcher's laptop and encrypted. In the interviewing process, one must be aware of 'social desirability bias', where the participant may distort the truth to impress the researcher (Firth, 2020). Additionally, the interviewee may not have knowledge surrounding the answer, leading to prejudices, assumptions and false memories (ibid.).

Data Analysis

Data analysis is a 'process of addressing how interpretations are made and the way key concepts evolve, often using critical-thinking and creative problem-solving skills of comparisons, categorisation, evaluation, and synthesis of new information' (Babione, 2015, p.137). The information gathered from the questionnaire was evaluated using quantitative methods to identify participant trends, and the qualitative data was subjected to thematic coding in order to extract further information. Statistical data was visually presented using Microsoft Excel charts. Following the two semi-structured interviews, the conversations were transcribed into Microsoft Word. Content analysis was used to identify themes and topics.

The Hibernia College Dublin Ethics Committee provided ethical approval prior to the commencing of the research to ensure the highest ethical standards were followed. The researcher sought informed consent from school principals and participants. Participants were informed about their right to withdraw, allowing them to pull out at any time throughout the research process. Participants were protected using anonymity and confidentiality. The essence of anonymity is that 'information provided by participants should in no way reveal their identity' (Cohen, Morrison and Manion, 2007, p.65).

Findings and Discussion

In this chapter, the findings from the online surveys and interviews will be presented and discussed. A total of 20 online questionnaires were submitted and returned by qualified language teachers, all with a minimum of at least five years of teaching experience. Interviewee A is an Irish and EAL post-primary teacher, who has fifteen years of teaching experience. Interviewee B is a French post-primary teacher, who has six years of teaching experience. Both participants work full-time in a mixed community school.

From qualitative research using two semi-structured interviews, it became evident that goal setting, self- and peer assessment, and reflection are common strategies employed by MFL post-primary teachers to foster language learner autonomy. Interviewee B emphasised the role of goal setting with the additional use of assessment: 'Setting goals and then assessment…they can see then how they fared at that.' Interviewee A highlighted the integral role of reflection and stated, 'By reflecting on their learning, students can become aware of their strengths and weaknesses and put a plan in place to improve.'

The quantitative data from the online questionnaire highlighted that 'collaborative learning' emerged as the most frequently utilised strategy, which is in line with the constructivist viewpoint whereby meaningful learning occurs when students participate in social activities (Kameda, 2017). This outlines the importance of social interactions in fostering autonomy. The survey participants also emphasised the importance of 'choice', which is in line with the goals of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). The NCCA (2023, p.10) aims to give students 'opportunities to explore options and make choices as they engage in communicative activities and become increasingly more autonomous learners'.

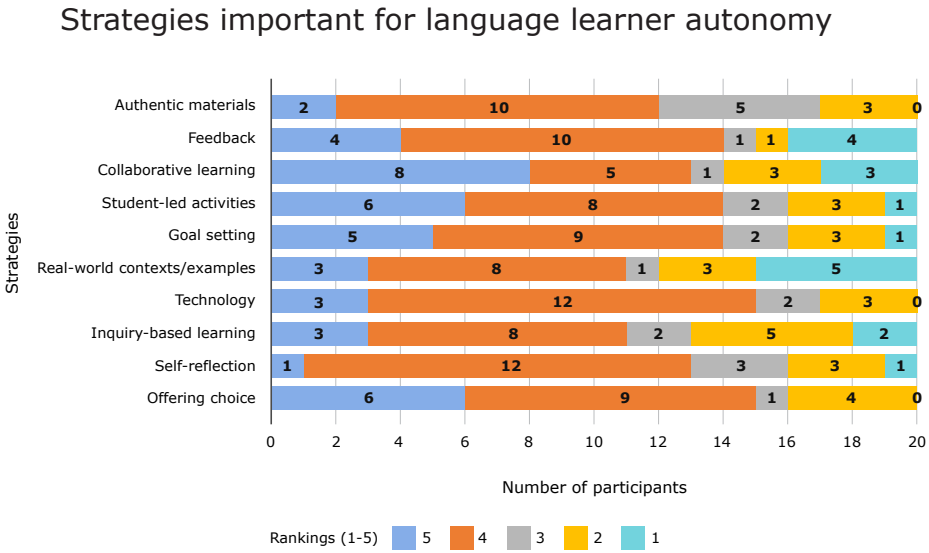

Figure 1: The most important strategies for promoting student autonomy

From qualitative research in the two semi-structured interviews, it was evident that a facilitative approach was key to fostering student autonomy in language learning. Both the interviewees and the survey respondents highlighted the necessity of creating 'student-centred environments that empower learners to take responsibility for their learning'. A constructivist teaching approach promotes learner autonomy, responsibility and active learning (Panhwar, Ansari and Ansari, 2016). This constructivist approach places more emphasis on learning than teaching, allowing the students to be actively involved.

Quantitative data highlighted the integral role of both teachers and students in fostering autonomy. 90% of survey respondents emphasised the reliance on both parties (as seen in Figure 2).

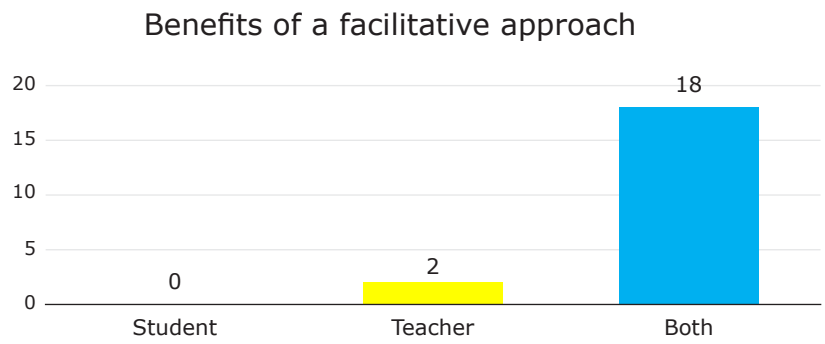

Figure 2: The roles involved in fostering student autonomy

This highlights the collaborative nature of autonomy development. According to Dam (2018), it is the role of the teacher to ensure students are actively involved in their own learning and this can be done with the cooperation of both parties. This involves a capacity to act independently and cooperatively as a socially responsible person (ibid.).

Quantitative data also highlighted that the majority of survey participants (90%) adopted a mixed approach to teaching, whereby they incorporated both facilitative and teacher-led instruction as seen in Figure 3.

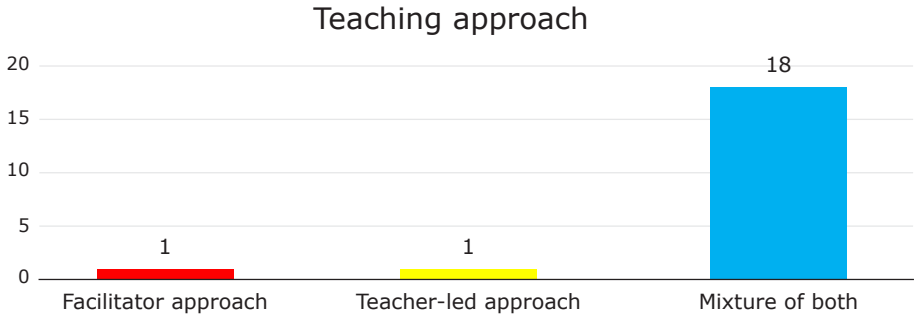

Figure 3: Teaching approaches adopted in the MFL classroom

The two interviewees noted many benefits of promoting student autonomy. One prominent benefit was the enhancement of social skills and participation. The interviewees stated that classroom engagement increased as a result of student autonomy, and interviewee A noted that 'quieter students working in pairs or groups get a chance to use their voice'. The participants noted that providing students with autonomy can

facilitate the development of stronger relationships with peers, as well as increase participation in class activities. This finding is again in line with Dam's (2018) view that autonomy involves acting independently and cooperatively within a social context.

From quantitative research, it became evident that there are many benefits in fostering student autonomy. Data showed that the most important benefit was independent learning. Autonomy is a student-centred approach that develops independent language learning. Increased confidence and motivation both emerged as two important benefits of student autonomy. According to a study conducted by Deci and Ryan, there is greater intrinsic motivation, self-esteem and perceived competence for students with autonomy-supportive teachers (Egel, 2009). Increased creativity emerged as the least important benefit, which is interesting as the new Junior Cycle framework promotes eight new key skills — one being the skill of creativity, which centres around students being autonomous learners.

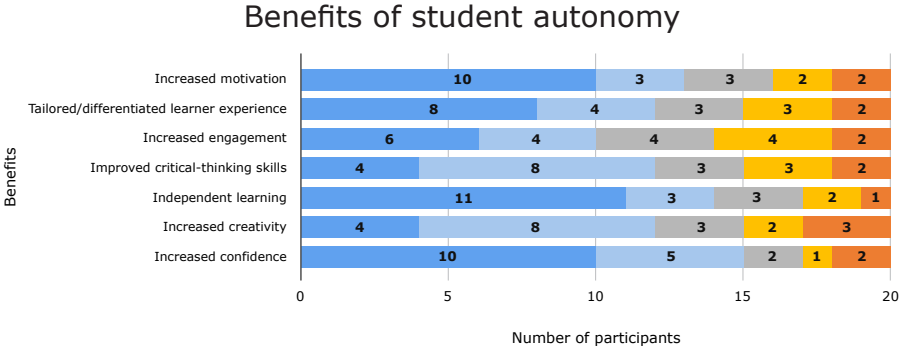

Figure 4: The benefits of student autonomy

The research participants in the two semi-structured interviews highlighted that the new Junior Cycle curriculum promotes student autonomy due to the implementation of the Classroom-Based Assessments (CBAs). Interviewee A stated, 'The new Junior Cycle is very much focused on group work, pair work, and student-led activities, leading to a greater choice available for students in terms of assessment. E.g., CBA.' However, the interviewees indicated that there is a culture of rote learning due to the high-stakes exam at the end of Senior Cycle. Interviewee A stated, 'Rote learning is 100% down to the curriculum, 100% down to directed learning.' Interviewee A also suggested, 'In the teaching of Irish, there is little or no promotion of autonomy. There is

a set curriculum…the teaching strategy which produces the top exam results is learning by rote.' Both interview participants emphasised the curriculum and how assessment methods can affect autonomy. Interviewee A stated, 'The curriculum is so broad there is so much you have to do and it's so rigid you can't go off…If our whole education is points focused it will lead to rote learning.' According to Gleeson (2024), the Irish 'assessment and examination systems have remained largely unchanged in an environment where entry to higher education is determined by Leaving Certificate performance.'

The findings of the quantitative data reveal a mixed view regarding the promotion of autonomy in the Irish curriculum, as seen in Figure 5. While 8 out of 20 participants agreed with the idea that the curriculum promotes student autonomy, indicating some level of support for the current approach, only 1 participant strongly agreed. Additionally, 7 participants remained neutral, suggesting uncertainty about the degree of autonomy encouraged by the curriculum. On the other hand, 2 participants disagreed and another 2 strongly disagreed, highlighting a minority view that the curriculum does not effectively foster student autonomy in language learning. Quantitative findings indicate that while student autonomy is well integrated into the Junior Cycle, it is less effectively promoted in the Senior Cycle. While 90% of participants recognised autonomy in the Junior Cycle, 12 out of 20 reported its absence in the Senior Cycle. Significant challenges remain within the Irish education system, particularly at Senior Cycle, where there is a strong focus on the high-stakes exam and a long-rigid, theory-heavy curriculum to follow.

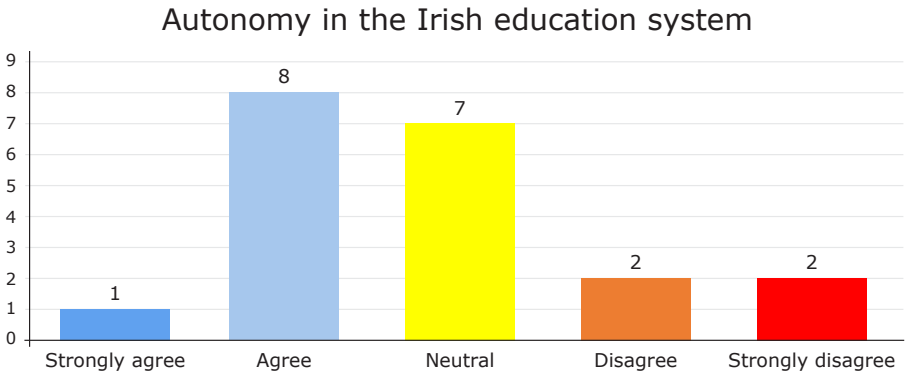

Figure 5: The promotion of student autonomy in language learning within the Irish education system

Conclusion

This mixed-method research study explored MFL teachers' perceptions of the concept of student autonomy. Additionally, it enabled the researcher to gain an understanding of the most effective pedagogical strategies to foster language learner autonomy. The findings revealed how current Irish post-primary MFL teachers value the concept of student autonomy and utilise a wide variety of pedagogical approaches to foster language learner autonomy daily, such as goal setting, self- and peer assessment, and reflection. However, there is an acknowledgement of the need for curriculum reform due to the strong contrast between the embedding of student autonomy in the Junior and Senior Cycle curricula. The participants noted that there was too much emphasis placed on the high-stakes exam, which, in turn, resulted in a culture of rote learning.

The findings emphasised the need for curriculum reform in Senior Cycle. This may include a review of the assessment methods that are currently in place. The NCCA conducted a study on teacher, parent and student perspectives on the current Senior Cycle and potential directions for change. All groups emphasised the workload, with teachers and students under pressure to 'cover the course', leading to rote learning for the Leaving Certificate exam (Smyth, McCoy and Banks, 2019). Schools should collaborate with programmes such as Languages Connect and Post-Primary Languages Ireland (PPLI) to enhance professional development, improve the quality of language teaching and effectively promote learner autonomy.

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Exploring the Relationship Between Team Teaching and an Inclusive Practice — Teachers' Perspective

Sharon Murphy

Biography

Sharon Murphy graduated with a Bachelor of Business in Recreation and Leisure Management in 2018 and a Bachelor of Business (Hons) in 2019 from Cork Institute of Technology. She then went on to achieve First Class Honours in the Professional Master of Education in Post-Primary Education at Hibernia College in 2024.

Sharon is currently teaching Business, Accounting and Special Educational Needs (SEN) at St Colman's Community College in Cork. She is passionate about fostering inclusive learning environments and believes that equipping students with the fundamental skills and knowledge to manage their personal wellbeing is paramount in contemporary education. She is committed to developing innovative teaching strategies that meet her students' diverse needs, promoting both academic and socio-emotional growth.

Exploring the Relationship Between Team Teaching and an Inclusive Practice — Teachers' Perspective

Research supervisor: Katie Crowther

Abstract

This thesis investigates the intricate relationship between team teaching and inclusive practices in post-primary education. It explores educators' perceptions of collaborative teaching methods through a comprehensive literature review, qualitative and quantitative data collection, and thematic analysis. The sample comprises four teachers: two student teachers and two full-time teachers. Findings reveal team teaching's potential benefits and challenges in fostering inclusivity, accentuating collaboration, tailored instruction and support for diverse learners. The research provides insights into integrating inclusive practices within team teaching, contributing to a deeper understanding of effective pedagogical strategies. The study's recommendations offer actionable insights for educators, policymakers and stakeholders to enhance inclusive education.

Keywords: team teaching, inclusive practices, post-primary education, collaborative teaching, educators' perceptions, differentiated instruction, diverse learners, pedagogical strategies, inclusive education, qualitative and quantitative data, thematic analysis, educational stakeholders

Introduction and Background

This research explores the relationship between team teaching and inclusive practices, with a specific focus on educators' perspectives. The inspiration for this study arises from firsthand observations of the challenges posed by traditional solo-teaching methods, particularly when faced with a growing diversity in student needs. These challenges have led to a deeper investigation into how collaborative teaching approaches can enhance inclusivity in the classroom. By examining the experiences of educators in varied socio-economic and cultural settings, this research aims to provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of team teaching in addressing diverse learning needs. Data will be gathered from four teachers working across different schools in County Cork, focusing on post-primary educators who implement team teaching in classrooms with diverse student demographics.

In recent years, post-primary schools in Ireland have seen a marked shift from traditional solo-teaching methods towards more collaborative approaches, such as team teaching. This transition reflects an increasing recognition of the benefits of working together to meet the diverse needs of students. As outlined by Ó Murchú and Conway (2017), post-primary schools in Ireland have recently experienced a significant shift towards adopting team teaching as a pedagogical method, moving away from traditional solitary teaching approaches. This shift highlights a broader recognition of the benefits of collaborative teaching methodologies, which include increased student engagement, tailored instruction, and a more inclusive educational environment. Concurrently, O'Sullivan (2011) discusses how inclusive practices have gained prominence within this evolving educational landscape, driven by a commitment to ensuring equitable educational opportunities for students of all backgrounds and abilities.

The intersection of team teaching and inclusive practices is, thus, a significant area of focus, as collaborative teaching methods can help create more supportive learning environments that cater to diverse student needs. This is particularly relevant in the context of post-primary education, where students come from various socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, making inclusivity even more essential.

Despite the growing attention to team teaching and inclusive education, there is a notable gap in the literature regarding the specific relationship between the two. While research has shown that both team teaching and inclusive practices are beneficial on their own, there is limited empirical evidence exploring how these approaches work together to improve teaching and learning outcomes.

Hattie (2009) underscores significant deficiencies in the current literature regarding the correlation between team teaching and inclusive practices within educational contexts. Despite the growing recognition of collaborative teaching methods and the importance of inclusivity in education, there is a scarcity of empirical research investigating how these two areas intersect. To address this research gap, the present study aims to delve deeper into the teacher's perspective on the subject matter through:

- Investigating the relationship between team teaching and inclusive practices in post primary schools
- Understanding how educators perceive and implement team teaching as an inclusive pedagogical strategy

- Identifying team teaching potential benefits and drawbacks in fostering an inclusive educational environment

By achieving these aims, the study hopes to advance the conversation on inclusive education by providing insightful information on the potential advantages and challenges of co-teaching as an inclusive pedagogical strategy. The anticipated outcomes of this study are expected to enrich future endeavours in professional education. Additionally, it is hoped that any subsequent publications resulting from this research may also enhance the pedagogical practices of fellow teachers.

Methodology

This study exploits a qualitative research framework to explore the relationship between team teaching and inclusive practices in Education and Training Board (ETB) and Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) educational settings. By examining educators' experiences and perspectives, it aims to contribute to the literature on inclusive education. The participants included qualified post-primary teachers from both schools, selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in perspectives and experiences. Etikan, Musa and Alkassim (2016) outline that purposive sampling involves selecting interviewees based on distinctive characteristics or criteria relevant to the research question. This method warrants that the sample includes individuals who can provide rich, relevant and diverse data. This study adopts a qualitative research design supplemented by a small quantitative component. The decision to employ qualitative methods aligns with an interpretive paradigm, emphasising an in-depth exploration of human experiences, attitudes and beliefs. By utilising semi-structured interviews, this approach facilitates a nuanced understanding of the participants' perspectives within the context of the research topic. This interpretive paradigm accentuates symbolic interactionism and aims to uncover the underlying perspectives driving empirical observations and individual actions based on these perspectives.

Mixed-Methods Approach

The primary research instrument used in this study was a semi-structured interview guide. This tool was designed to facilitate in-depth discussions with participants while allowing flexibility to explore emergent topics. The semi-structured format combines predefined questions with the freedom to probe further based on participants' responses, enabling

the collection of rich, detailed data (Kallio et al., 2016). The interview guide was developed through a rigorous process, beginning with a review of relevant literature to identify key themes and issues pertinent to the research topic. This informed the creation of a set of initial questions aimed at exploring these areas comprehensively. The questions were open-ended to encourage participants to share their experiences and perspectives in their own words, fostering a deeper understanding of the subject matter (Patton, 2014). The interview guide included a mix of qualitative and quantitative questions. The qualitative questions focused on participants' experiences, attitudes and beliefs, while the quantitative questions aimed to gather specific, measurable data to complement the qualitative insights. This mixed-methods approach provided a more holistic view of the research phenomenon, aligning with the pragmatic stance adopted in this study (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was chosen as the primary method for analysing qualitative data. Thematic analysis is a widely used method in qualitative research that allows for the identification, analysis, and reporting of patterns (themes) within data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). One of the main advantages of thematic analysis is its flexibility. It can be applied across a range of theoretical frameworks. It can accommodate both inductive and deductive approaches to data coding and theme development. This flexibility is beneficial for this study, allowing the researcher to explore the data in depth and identify emergent themes without being constrained by a rigid analytical framework. Moreover, thematic analysis is particularly effective for research that seeks to understand participants' experiences, perceptions, and motivations (Clarke and Braun, 2013). It enables the interpretation of data in a manner that captures the richness and complexity of participants' responses and is particularly complementary for qualitative research focused on generating detailed and nuanced insights.

Table 1: Interviewees

Interviewee	Gender	Qualification/ education level	Subject(s)	Years' experience	Team-teaching subjects
1 (student teacher)	Female	Professional Master of Education in Post-Primary Education (Hibernia College)	Business and Accounting	2	Maths, Business and Accounting
2	Female	BEd (Hons) Sports Studies and Physical Education. Received AP post in 2023	Physical Education and Irish	10	Irish
3	Male	Professional Master of Education with the University of Limerick	Business and Accounting	6	RSE in SPHE and Maths
4 (student teacher)	Male	Professional Master of Education in Post-Primary Education (Hibernia College)	Business, Accounting and Digital Media Literacy	2	English and Accounting

Findings and Discussion

Drawing on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews, this section addresses the central research question: What are the perceptions and practices of post-primary teachers regarding the implementation and effectiveness of team teaching to foster inclusivity in contemporary classrooms? By comparing these findings with existing literature, this section provides a nuanced understanding of the complexities of team teaching, including its benefits, challenges and connections to prior research. The section further offers recommendations for future practices in team teaching within post-primary education, highlighting the significance of collaborative teaching strategies for inclusive education.

Collaborative Instructional Approach

Murawski and Dieker (2008) emphasise team teaching's potential to leverage the diverse skills and knowledge of multiple educators, thus enriching students' learning experiences. Interviewees echoed the concept of co-teaching as defined by Bauwens and Hourcade (1997), where co-teachers share responsibility for planning, instructing and assessing students. One interviewee stated, 'Team teaching is when two educators come together to ensure that the level of teaching is to a higher standard.'

These views reflect the collaborative nature underlined by Scruggs, Mastropieri and McDuffie (2007), who suggest that co-teaching enhances instructional effectiveness and student outcomes. While collaborative approaches offer significant benefits, potential challenges arise when

roles are unclear or there is a lack of mutual respect among co-teachers. Research by Keefe and Moore (2004) highlights the significance of clear role definitions to prevent power struggles. The findings of this study support the idea that effective team teaching requires a shared vision and clear communication, as advocated by Friend and Cook (2013).

Inclusivity as a Core Principle

Inclusivity emerged as a central theme, with educators emphasising the importance of 'Creating an environment where all students feel valued, respected, and supported'. This finding aligns with UNESCO's (2005) definition of inclusive education, which advocates for adapting teaching methods to accommodate diverse learning needs. The significance of differentiation, as highlighted by the interviewees, aligns with Tomlinson's (2001) framework for differentiated instruction, which aims to tailor teaching to meet individual student needs. The commitment to inclusivity also resonates with Florian and Black-Hawkins' (2011) work, which underlines the role of inclusive pedagogy in ensuring all students can participate in the learning process.

While the commitment to inclusivity is commendable, it is essential to consider the practical challenges of implementing such an approach. Research by Forlin and Lian (2008) indicates that achieving dedicated inclusivity requires significant shifts in teacher attitudes, adequate resources, and continuous professional development. The findings of this study highlight a gap between the ideal of inclusivity and the practical realities faced by educators, necessitating systemic support and resources. Moreover, the study suggests that inclusivity in team teaching is not merely about accommodating diverse learning needs but also about fostering a sense of belonging among all students. Creating such a classroom environment involves celebrating diversity and promoting equity. As outlined by Armstrong, Armstrong and Spandagou (2010), inclusive education should aim to dismantle barriers to learning and participation, ensuring that all students have equal opportunities to succeed.

Contextual Considerations

The study revealed that the impact of team teaching on inclusivity varies depending on the specific needs and dynamics of the classroom. This supports Friend and Cook's (2007) assertion that co-teaching must be adapted to fit the unique context of each educational setting. The

literature review emphasised the importance of contextual adaptation in team teaching, which is echoed by Villa, Thousand and Nevin (2013), who stress the need for flexible co-teaching models tailored to different classroom environments. The findings suggest that team teaching can be customised to meet diverse student needs, but its effectiveness is contingent on careful consideration of factors such as teacher compatibility, classroom composition and administrative support (Hang and Rabren, 2009).

The study also highlights the importance of understanding the cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds of students in team-teaching settings. Culturally responsive teaching, as discussed by Gay (2010), is vital to ensuring that instructional practices are relevant and respectful of students' diverse cultural contexts. This approach not only enhances inclusivity but also promotes better student engagement and learning outcomes.

Challenges and Opportunities

Significant barriers such as time constraints, trust issues, and resistance to change were noted. However, there were also recognised opportunities for enhancing student engagement and providing personalised support. The challenges identified in this study are consistent with the findings of Zigmond and Magiera (2001), who reported that time constraints and interpersonal dynamics often hinder the effectiveness of co-teaching. Conversely, the opportunities for improved student outcomes align with Murawski and Swanson's (2001) meta-analysis, which found that co-teaching can positively impact student achievement when implemented effectively. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach. Scheduling coordination, professional development, and fostering a culture of trust and collaboration are essential components.

Furthermore, the study underlines the value of building a supportive professional community among educators. Creating opportunities for regular team meetings, joint planning sessions, and collaborative professional development can help address time constraints and foster trust among co-teachers. This approach supports the work of Fullan (2007), who emphasises the role of professional learning communities in driving educational improvement and innovation.

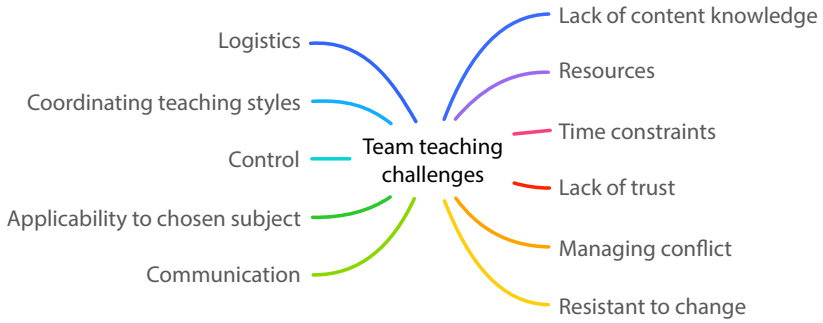

Figure 1: Team teaching challenges

Figure 2: Opportunities within team teaching

Importance of Training and Continuous Professional Development

Limited training in team teaching emerged as a significant concern, particularly among student teachers. This finding underscores the importance of professional development to equip teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge for effective collaboration. Pugach and Blanton (2017) emphasise that effective co-teaching requires specialised training in collaborative practices, inclusive education and subject-specific pedagogy. The findings of this study align with this perspective, stressing the need for comprehensive training programmes. Experiential learning is valuable but insufficient on its own, as research by Villa, Thousand and Nevin (2004) indicates that structured professional development programmes are essential for preparing teachers for team-teaching complexities.

The study suggests that a combination of formal training and experiential learning is needed. Professional development should focus on collaborative planning, communication, classroom management and inclusivity. Educational institutions should establish comprehensive programmes, including collaborative workshops, regular training sessions on new strategies and mentorship programmes pairing experienced team teachers with novices. This would help build confidence and improve collaborative practices.

Measurement of Success

The study accentuates the significance of observation and reflective practice as primary methods for evaluating the effectiveness of team teaching in fostering an inclusive environment. These methods align with existing literature that underscores the value of qualitative measures in assessing educational outcomes (York-Barr et al., 2007). Reflective practice, as highlighted by Schön (1983), plays a crucial role in professional development by enabling educators to evaluate and enhance their teaching continuously. Observational techniques, as discussed by Danielson (2007), offer insights into student engagement and inclusivity, helping teachers identify areas for improvement.

To provide a comprehensive assessment, it is recommended that schools integrate both qualitative and quantitative data. This could include student performance metrics, attendance records and feedback surveys. A mixed-methods approach would provide a fuller understanding of team teaching's impact. Regular review and analysis of such data would help schools make informed decisions about instructional strategies, professional development needs and resource allocation.

Conclusion

This thesis embarked on an exploration of the transformative impact of team teaching on fostering inclusivity within educational environments, employing both qualitative and quantitative analyses of educator interviews. The primary findings illuminate team teaching as a collaborative instructional approach that profoundly enhances educational quality and inclusivity. Educators emphasised the benefits of collaboration, improving classroom management in ETB schools and addressing varying learning needs in DEIS schools. Inclusivity emerged as central to the research, with educators stressing the importance of creating environments where all students feel valued and supported, particularly in diverse settings.

A cornerstone of this research was the acknowledgement of inclusivity's central significance. Educators emphasised the imperative to cultivate environments where every student feels valued and supported, particularly resonant in diverse settings such as DEIS schools where tailored support is paramount. In ETB schools, team teaching notably facilitated effective classroom management, while in DEIS schools, it adeptly addressed the challenges posed by varying learning needs.

Based on these findings, several key recommendations are made to improve the implementation of team teaching and inclusivity. First, there is a need for continuous professional development (CPD) focused on collaborative planning and deepening pedagogical knowledge, as advocated by Friend, Reising and Cook (2010). This ensures that teachers are equipped to collaborate effectively and meet diverse student needs. Second, revisions to scheduling are recommended, allowing dedicated planning time for team-teaching preparation, as suggested by Scruggs, Mastropieri and McDuffie (2007). Mentorship programmes and peer networks, as highlighted by Murawski and Swanson (2001), play a crucial role in cultivating confidence and efficacy among team-teachers. By pairing experienced educators with student teachers and establishing collaborative platforms for sharing best practices, schools can create nurturing environments where educators feel supported in implementing innovative teaching strategies. This supportive environment not only bolsters professional growth but also enhances overall job satisfaction and retention rates among teachers.

Collectively, these recommendations underscore the value of systemic support and strategic investment in educator development to realise the full potential of team teaching in fostering inclusivity. By aligning policy initiatives with practical measures that empower educators and nurture collaborative practices, educational institutions can cultivate inclusive learning environments that cater to the diverse needs of all students.

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Exploring the Role of Philosophical Inquiry on Critical Thinking in Irish Post-Primary Classrooms

Vladan Petkovic

Biography

Vladan Petkovic graduated with a Bachelor of Arts (Hons) Degree from the University of Limerick, where he specialised in French and Linguistics before obtaining a Professional Master of Education in Post-Primary Education at Hibernia College. Vladan has a deep passion for languages and culture, which is evident from his multilingual background, where he delved into translation work, international business and teaching. Vladan's enthusiasm and love for language is deeply tied to culture. By integrating philosophical ideas from different cultures, he provides context for language use, helping students understand not just how to communicate but also the values and beliefs that shape that language.

Vladan is currently enjoying teaching French and CSPE in Portlaoise College, Laois. He teaches both subjects through the lens of critical thinking and discussion thanks to his experience of researching and engaging in philosophy. This allows students to improve their critical thinking at a cross-curricular level.

Exploring the Role of Philosophical Inquiry on Critical Thinking in Irish Post-Primary Classrooms

Research supervisor: Dr Niamh Gavin

Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the role of philosophical inquiry (PI) on students' critical thinking skills in the post-primary environment. It investigated potential benefits of implementing PI and Philosophy as an optional or mandatory subject in the post-primary Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle environment.

This study used qualitative methods — primarily semi-structured interviews (n=5). The data was examined using thematic analysis. Examination of the qualitative results revealed extremely positive student outcomes and classroom experiences using PI. However, limitations also appeared in the context of Philosophy as a difficult subject to assess at Senior Cycle level and an overall decline in critical thinking and student autonomy in the modern post-primary environment.

Keywords: PI, philosophy, critical thinking, differentiation, teaching and learning strategies, developing minds

Introduction and Background

The genesis of this dissertation lies in the researcher's long-standing interest in both philosophy and education and the commitment to understanding the transformative potential of these fields when merged. The researcher's personal academic and teaching journey was shaped by probing questions, critical analyses and spirited debates, often benefiting from the critical thinking skills honed through PI. This personal engagement inspired the researcher to explore whether the skills they found to be invaluable could be systematically cultivated in the post-primary educational environment.

The researcher's motivation also stems from their professional experiences. Working in educational settings, the researcher found a significant gap in the promotion and nurturing of critical thinking skills

among students. Despite the clear necessity of these skills, traditional curricula often fail to explicitly address them effectively. This led the researcher to question whether or not a more structured inclusion of PI in the post-primary classroom could bridge this gap.

'All schooling aims to bring about cognitive growth. However, few schools anywhere teach thinking as a demonstrably discrete element of the curriculum' (Millett and Tapper, 2012, p.8).

Being educated involves developing our minds. To this view, education is primarily responsible for teaching children how to think critically, creatively and effectively (Fisher, 2013). Based on this idea, this research explores whether students can become more critical thinkers through PI. It also further explores the proposal of implementing Philosophy as an optional or mandatory subject in the Senior Cycle curriculum, which was first proposed to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) by the Royal Irish Academy (RIA) in 2016. After all, it is in the national interest of the Irish education system to value critical thinking as an essential skill for student development and success (NCCA, 2009). Ultimately, this research demonstrates the powerful, positive influence that the inclusion of Philosophy and its associated inquiry can have on students in the post-primary environment. It also further strengthens the proposal made by the RIA to implement Philosophy as a Senior Cycle subject.

Because creative and critical thinking skills are to be considered as essential skills in the post-primary environment, more and more emphasis is being placed on the need to develop and nurture these skills in students from the start of school. The NCCA encourages students to become independent thinkers through inquiry-based educational approaches. Therefore, the need for more critical thinking education and critical pedagogy becomes more evident as they evolve together. Similar empirical research studies investigated the effects of PI on critical thinking skills in primary classroom settings such as Lipman's Philosophy for children (P4C) (Işiklar and Öztürk, 2022). However, there has been no significant research carried out on the potential effects of Philosophy and its associated inquiry in the post-primary environment in Ireland.

The implementation of Philosophy as a mandatory subject has been effectively implemented in a variety of educational settings worldwide at post-primary level. The possible educational benefits for students from such curricular decisions are renowned so we must ask ourselves at a national level why it can't be the same on a post-primary level (O'Connor, 2012).

This research aims to explore the impact PI has on critical thinking skills by examining the role of the teacher in facilitating PI in the post-primary classroom. It seeks to validate the importance of Philosophy as an individual subject to further strengthen the proposal of implementing Philosophy at Senior Cycle level. Finally, the dissertation aims to ascertain the Irish and global standpoint of having Philosophy appear in the post-primary education system.

Methodology

This chapter outlines the qualitative research methodology employed to gather data, addressing the necessary requirements for data collection. Selecting effective methods within the constraints of a small-scale self-study was crucial. The chapter begins with the research paradigm, followed by the theoretical framework, justification of methods, limitations, sample, data analysis and ethical considerations. The research paradigm represents the 'worldview' of the researcher, influencing the interpretation of data (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). This study adopts an interpretivist paradigm, allowing for contextual understanding of teachers' perceptions, beliefs and experiences regarding PI within the Irish curriculum. The researcher's subjectivity is acknowledged, and thematic analysis enhances the interpretation of interview data, aiming to identify patterns and themes that reflect participants' viewpoints.

A qualitative approach was chosen, employing five face-to-face semi-structured interviews. This method aligns with Patton's (2002) perspective that qualitative research seeks to understand distinct situations and interactions within a setting. The phenomenological approach was selected to capture the lived experiences of teachers, emphasising that reality is a subjective experience (Vishnevsky and Beanlands, 2004). While this approach enriches understanding, it also raises concerns about researcher bias (Hepburn and Potter, 2004).

The study was conducted at the researcher's mixed secondary school, using convenience sampling. Participants included qualified teachers with substantial experience in teaching Philosophy elements. Efforts were made to include a balanced group of male and female teachers from various departments, specifically those with expertise in policy development within the Irish education system. With approximately 1,000 students and over 80 teaching staff, the researcher accessed five suitable participants, ensuring geographic proximity and availability

(Etikan, Musa and Alkassim, 2015). Excluding students and less experienced teachers was intentional to focus on educators' perspectives regarding PI.

Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), plays a crucial role in qualitative research by identifying patterns related to participants' lived experiences. The researcher transcribed interviews to familiarise himself with the data. Following Braun and Clarke's (2017) six-phase strategy, the data was analysed thoroughly: coding key features, searching for themes, refining them, naming themes and composing an analytic narrative that interweaves data extracts with existing literature.

To ensure credibility, the researcher adhered to Braun and Clarke's (2017) strategy by recording interviews, taking detailed notes and transcribing interviews verbatim. This approach captures the nuances of participants' experiences. The dependability of the sampling method was enhanced by following Stratton's (2021) guidelines, ensuring the interview questions were clear and unbiased. Triangulation was employed, incorporating various data sources to bolster the reliability of findings (Natow, 2020). Reflective journals were used to promote transparency through critical self-reflection (Ortlipp, 2008).

While semi-structured interviews require less time investment, their smaller sample sizes may hinder generalisability (Adams, 2015). The potential for bias arises from the non-representative nature of the sample and the open-ended format of the interviews, which can lead to observer and social desirability biases (George, 2022). The subjective nature of thematic analysis may result in varying interpretations of data (Joffe and Yardley, 2003).

An ethics application was submitted to Hibernia College's Ethics Committee, adhering to the Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (British Educational Research Association (BERA), 2018). Written consent was obtained from the school principal before approaching participants. Participation was voluntary, with participants assured of confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time. Data handling complied with the *Data Protection Act, 1998*, ensuring anonymity through pseudonyms.

This study employed a qualitative approach within the interpretivist paradigm, aiming to minimise personal bias through anonymity in interviews, triangulation of data and ongoing self-awareness of potential biases.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings from qualitative research conducted through five semi-structured interviews, focusing on the impact of PI on students' cognitive development and personal growth. The data was analysed thematically, revealing four central themes that address the research questions regarding the integration of Philosophy in the curriculum.

Emergent Themes

1 Cognitive Development

The influence of Philosophy on students' critical thinking skills emerged as a primary theme. Teachers reported noticeable improvements in students' abilities to reflect and engage with complex concepts when philosophical questions were incorporated into lessons. One educator noted that discussions about sophists' views on justice allowed students to draw parallels to contemporary issues, enhancing their understanding of critical thought and moral reasoning.

Participants highlighted that students became more capable of analysing literature and historical texts, linking PI with enhanced communication and writing skills. For instance, discussions around novels like The Outsiders prompted students to explore characters' motivations deeply, facilitating lively debates and diverse perspectives. A teacher observed that participation in a Philosophy club significantly improved her students' research and analytical skills over three years, fostering greater self-awareness and personal connections to the material. When looking at the beginning of Philosophy in Senior Cycle Religion, one teacher commented that:

> *Students have been able to draw comparisons between these sophists who claim that 'justice is simply the interest of the stronger', and powerful figures in the world today who make decisions on behalf of others, convincing them of justice too. They then grow to see the power and value of critical thinking, and the search for truth and wisdom.*

This cross-curricular application of Philosophy supports cognitive development across subjects such as English and Religion, enabling students to approach discussions from multiple perspectives and encouraging critical thinking and writing proficiency.

2 Empowerment and Personal Development

Philosophy also serves as a tool for personal empowerment, helping students navigate life's complexities and develop informed perspectives. One participant expressed concern about students living 'distracted lives', emphasising the need for critical thinking to foster meaningful inquiry. Another teacher noted that many students struggle to think independently, often relying on rote responses rather than developing their own insights.

This lack of autonomy in learning can be addressed through philosophical methodologies, which encourage reflective writing and critical engagement. By integrating these approaches, students can cultivate resilience and a more profound understanding of themselves and the world around them.

3 Assessment

The assessment of PI within the school curriculum remains contentious. Several teachers expressed scepticism about quantifying philosophical understanding in the same manner as language or literature. One educator remarked on the challenge of assessing individual opinions, while another emphasised that philosophical concepts naturally intertwine with subjects like English, where critical thought is essential. Another participant noted that:

> *Because the system remains so heavily influenced by the CAO points race, it's very hard to see how the Irish education system can be changed to capitalise on Philosophy and critical thinking skills for the good of students and society.*

Despite the difficulties, three of the five participants acknowledged the need for Philosophy in the curriculum, arguing that it equips students with critical skills that are often lacking when they transition to higher education. They noted that many students arrive at college unprepared to question the validity of their sources, highlighting the importance of philosophical training in fostering analytical skills that transcend academic boundaries. For example, another participant noted that:

> *Many students arrive at third level with no prior experience of questioning sources, validity and credibility of material. For a student of Philosophy these things become second nature.*

4 Fear of Declining Autonomy and Critical Thinking

A recurring concern among teachers is the observed decline in students' autonomy and critical thinking abilities over the years. One experienced educator in the study with 25 years of experience explained that while students have more resources than ever, they often struggle with basic tasks like engaging in discussions or independent thinking. This trend of low motivation and engagement is alarming, with many students exhibiting a lack of curiosity.

Another participant described her efforts to introduce philosophical elements in her Religion classes, noting that even minimal engagement was sometimes the best outcome. The pervasive attitude of merely meeting minimum requirements reflects a broader issue of student disinterest in subjects that promote critical inquiry, raising questions about the future of Philosophy as a viable subject in the post-primary curriculum.

The findings highlight the critical role of PI in fostering cognitive development, personal empowerment and the necessity of critical thinking in education. Despite challenges in assessment and declining student engagement, the insights from educators underscore the value of integrating Philosophy into the curriculum to enhance students' analytical skills and personal growth.

Discussion of Findings

This chapter explores the outcomes from the qualitative research on PI and its implications for critical thinking in post-primary education. By synthesising these findings with existing literature, we highlight the need for Philosophy in school curricula and recommend practices to enhance educational outcomes.

New Emerging Themes

The Effect of PI on Critical Thinking in the Post-Primary Environment

The research confirms that PI significantly enhances cognitive skills, such as reasoning, reflection and communication. All teacher participants observed improvements in their students' critical thinking abilities, consistent with previous studies, indicating that engagement with Philosophy leads to better evaluative and reasoning skills (Pala, 2022). The call for Philosophy to become a mandatory subject aligns with the NCCA's vision, emphasising the importance of critical thinking in

education (O'Connor, 2012; Quay et al., 2018). This suggests that integrating PI into the curriculum could address critical thinking deficits and empower students for future challenges.

PI's Effect on a Cross-Curricular Level

Participants noted that PI fosters transferable skills across subjects such as English, Religion and History. Teachers observed that PI enhances students' reflective abilities, enabling them to analyse literature and engage in meaningful discussions. This cross-curricular engagement underscores the potential for Philosophy to unify learning experiences, helping students make sense of their education and navigate life's complexities (O'Connor, 2012; Leng, 2020). The emphasis on fostering student autonomy and critical thinking is crucial in today's educational landscape, which often prioritises rote memorisation over deeper understanding.

Causes of Decline in Autonomy and Critical Thinking

The findings echo concerns about a perceived decline in student autonomy and critical thinking skills, attributed to factors such as increased distractibility and a lack of curiosity (O'Brien, 2024). Teachers reported a drop in emotional resilience and motivation among students, further complicating the educational landscape. This reflects the need for PI and critical thinking to be prioritised in curricula because they can counteract the stagnation often seen in educational settings (Lee, 2010).

Ireland's Standpoint on Philosophy in Education

The potential implementation of Philosophy as a subject in Irish post-primary education highlights existing concerns about assessment methods for philosophical concepts. Teachers expressed difficulty in quantifying subjective understanding, suggesting that traditional assessment may not adequately capture the depth of learning from PI (Burgh, 2018). Some educators believe that philosophical skills enhance students' abilities to engage as competent citizens, reinforcing the argument for Philosophy's inclusion in the curriculum.

Considerations Regarding Philosophy in Education

The current educational system emphasises memorisation, potentially diminishing Philosophy's relevance as a mandatory subject. If not addressed, this could lead to 'stuck schools' — institutions struggling with academic performance and engagement (Lee, 2010). Integrating PI into the curriculum may counteract this trend by promoting critical thinking

and ethical reflection, thereby supporting holistic student development. Moreover, insights from the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) indicate a disconnect between schooling and societal preparation, further underscoring the need for philosophical education to address these deficits.

Conclusion

The research findings highlight the significant benefits of PI for students, particularly in enhancing cognitive abilities and interpersonal skills. The thematic analysis revealed four key themes, emphasising the positive impact of PI on students' development while also pointing to a troubling decline in critical thinking and autonomy among learners. Teachers expressed concerns about students' disinterest in critical thinking and the challenges of assessing PI within the Junior and Senior Cycle curricula. Despite these challenges, the potential educational advantages of integrating Philosophy into the curriculum are evident. Prioritising PI in educational policy and practice is essential for fostering students' academic success and personal growth. Overall, the study calls for a revaluation of Philosophy's role in education to better support critical thinking and holistic development.

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Teachers' Perspectives on the Use of Reward Systems to Support Classroom Management in Primary School Classrooms

Ellen Sheehan

Biography

Ellen Sheehan completed her Professional Master of Education in Primary Education with Hibernia College in 2024. Before this, she graduated with an Honours degree in Applied Psychology from University College Cork (UCC) in 2021, where her interest in the study of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation first developed. Her experiences as a special needs assistant, student teacher and substitute teacher further deepened this interest, highlighting motivation as a significant factor influencing classroom behaviour and management. This focus shaped her research project, which explored the use of reward systems to support classroom management in primary school classrooms.

Ellen is currently enjoying her role as an English as an additional language (EAL) teacher in a DEIS primary school in Cork.

Teachers' Perspectives on the Use of Reward Systems to Support Classroom Management in Primary School Classrooms

Research supervisor: Joey O'Gorman

Abstract

Effective classroom management is a key skill for primary school teachers to create a productive learning environment (Baumert and Kunter, 2013). This study investigated teachers' perspectives on the use of reward systems as a strategy to support classroom management. A qualitative methodology was employed using semi-structured interviews with five primary school teachers (n=5). Thematic analysis, informed by Braun and Clarke (2006), identified four key themes: Implementation of reward systems, Impact on pupil behaviour, Influence on motivation and Challenges associated with reward systems. Analysis of the teachers' perspectives demonstrated a shared belief that reward systems can reduce disruptive behaviours and enhance motivation, thereby positively influencing classroom management. However, teachers also expressed concerns about potential challenges, including the risk of undermining children's intrinsic motivation and negatively affecting classroom social dynamics.

Keywords: classroom management, reward systems, behaviour, motivation, intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation

Introduction and Background

Research into the use of reward systems as a classroom management strategy dates back to the 1960s (Grieger, 1970); however, there remains no clear consensus on their overall effectiveness (O'Donnell, Reeve and Smith, 2012; Lungu, 2019). This study explores mainstream primary school teachers' perspectives on the use of reward systems to support classroom management. Through semi-structured interviews, the research examined teachers' views on reward systems, investigating how their own professional experiences and beliefs shape their approaches and perceptions.

Effective classroom management has been shown to positively influence academic learning, social and emotional growth, academic productivity and the reduction of negative behaviour (Kratochwill, DeRoos and Blair, 2010). In the Irish context, increasing emphasis has been placed on the promotion of positive attitudes and behaviours in the classroom (Hyland, 2014). Within this framework, reward systems — including response cost strategies (Conyers et al., 2004), token economies and self-monitoring techniques (Zlomke and Zlomke, 2003) — are among the methods employed to support classroom management in primary school (Infantino and Little, 2005). While some studies acknowledge that the use of reward systems can help children who struggle with motivation (O'Donnell, Reeve and Smith, 2012) and to promote learning (Cameron, 2001), several studies also criticise reward systems, arguing that they can diminish internal motivation (Deci, Koestner and Ryan, 1999) and negatively impact children's development (Ryan and Deci, 2017).

This study aimed to examine whether mainstream primary school teachers perceive reward systems as having a positive or negative impact on classroom management. Despite extensive debate in educational literature regarding their effectiveness, teachers' voices have been largely absent from this discourse. As Hoffmann et al. (2009, p.843) observe:

> *The question of how or even if rewards should be used in educational settings has been a topic of debate…yet it is ironic that this dialogue has rarely included the voices of classroom teachers*

Understanding teachers' perspectives is essential as research suggests that classroom management is closely linked to individual teaching styles and underlying beliefs (Deci, Nezlek and Sheinman, 1981). Arising from an extensive review of the literature, the following research questions emerged:

- What are teachers' perspectives on the use of reward systems to support classroom management?
- What are teachers' perspectives on the impact of reward systems on student behaviour in primary school classrooms?
- What are teachers' perspectives on the impact of reward systems on student motivation in primary school classrooms?

Methodology

Research Paradigm

This study adopted an interpretivist research paradigm, prioritising the understanding of phenomena through participants' perspectives within their specific contexts (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). Interpretive approaches are particularly well-suited to qualitative research, allowing for the exploration of the complexities of human behaviour and social dynamics through methods such as semi-structured interviews (Richards, 2003; Rehman and Alharthi, 2016). While positivist research is effective for examining natural phenomena (Rehman and Alharthi, 2016), it has been criticised as inadequate for studying individuals' perceptions and social experiences (Richards, 2003; Griz, 2004; Gage, 2007). As Richards (2003, p.6) notes, positivism is 'not designed to explore the complexities and conundrums of the immensely complicated social world that we inhabit'.

Qualitative Approach

A qualitative methodological approach was chosen to investigate teachers' perspectives on using reward systems to support classroom management. This methodology was selected for its capacity to generate rich, detailed insights into social phenomena (Maxwell, 2012; Queirós, Faria and Almeida, 2017). Semi-structured interviews provided flexibility, allowing the researcher to probe participants' responses and capture nuanced perspectives (Leedy and Ormrod, 2013).

Consideration of Alternative Methods

Quantitative methods, such as surveys, were considered for their capacity to provide concise and measurable data (Queirós, Faria and Almeda, 2017). However, a qualitative approach was deemed more appropriate due to the study's small sample size and the need for an in-depth exploration of subjective experiences. A mixed-method approach was also evaluated but dismissed as quantitative data would not have aligned with the study's primary aims (Creswell et al., 2006).

Data Collection Methods

Sampling

Five primary school teachers (n=5) from three rural schools in the south of the country were selected using non-probability sampling, specifically criterion sampling (Patton, 2015). Participants were recruited through

school principals, who acted as gatekeepers. Letters and research information sheets provided detailed explanations of the study's objectives and procedures. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (TA), as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed to identify codes and interpret patterns within the interview data. An inductive approach was adopted, allowing themes to emerge directly from the data rather than being theory-driven (Thomas, 2006). TA involved several phases: data familiarisation, coding, theme development and refinement (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Howitt and Cramer, 2008). Participant quotations were incorporated to strengthen validity and reliability.

Rigour was maintained through ongoing reflexivity. A research journal was used to document observations and reflections, helping to identify and mitigate potential research bias. Additionally, impartial colleagues acted as critical friends, providing feedback to further reduce subjectivity (Bell, 2010). Credibility was enhanced by pilot testing the topic guide with two critical friends. This process ensured clarity and feasibility, leading to revisions that added structure to complex questions and reworded closed questions into open-ended formats to elicit more elaborate responses (Leedy and Ormrod, 2013). Member checking was also conducted, with interview transcripts shared with participants for verification and refinement, thereby improving accuracy (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Hibernia College Ethics Committee prior to commencing the study. The study adhered to the *Ethical guidelines for educational research* (British Educational Research Association (BERA), 2018), ensuring the highest ethical standards were upheld. Participants provided informed and voluntary consent after meeting with the researcher to discuss the study's purpose, procedures and their rights. Potential participants were fully informed of their entitlement to confidentiality and anonymity, their right to withdraw from the study at any stage up to one month after data collection and the data handling protocols. Each participant received an information sheet outlining the project aims and completed and signed a consent form before participating. Measures were taken to safeguard confidentiality

and anonymity. Identifying information, including participant and school names, was omitted. Data were used exclusively for research purposes in accordance with the *Data Protection Act 2018*. Findings were presented in summary form, and all participant quotations remained anonymous. Interview recordings and transcripts were securely stored in password-protected files.

Limitations

Despite these measures, the study's findings are limited by the small sample size and rural context, restricting the generalisability of the conclusions to the broader population. However, the data provide valuable insights into teachers' perspectives on reward systems, offering a foundation for further research. Additionally, although researcher bias and subjectivity are inherent in qualitative research, steps were taken to minimise their impact through reflexivity, critical feedback and credibility-enhancing measures.

Findings and Discussion

Data collected through semi-structured interviews revealed a range of nuanced perspectives on the effectiveness, challenges and broader implications of reward systems in classroom management. While teachers acknowledged the positive impact of reward systems on children's motivation and behaviour, they also expressed concerns about social dynamics, fairness and the potential undermining of intrinsic motivation. Thematic analysis of the transcripts identified four major themes: Implementation of reward systems, Impact on pupil behaviour, Influence on motivation and Challenges associated with reward systems.

Implementation of Reward Systems

Participants emphasised that the successful use of reward systems requires mindful implementation, with their effectiveness varying depending on the class group dynamics, teacher's consistency and system design.

Participant 1 described maintaining 'an expectation of good behaviour' rather than relying heavily on rewards. She recommended consulting teachers as colleagues to ensure that 'anything you were planning on implementing would be suitable for those children'. Participant 2 advocated for a points-based token economy, finding it 'really effective' when the teacher is 'clear' on 'expectations at the beginning of the year'

— an approach supported by Wheatley et al. (2009) and Boniecki and Moore (2003). Conversely, Participant 5 criticised ClassDojo, a digital points-based system, describing how managing the reward platform could detract from learning because 'by logging into it, adding all the points, it was taking a good bit out of class time'. This concern aligns with Cook et al. (2017) and Stronge, Ward and Grant (2011), who underscore the importance of time management in supporting teaching and learning outcomes.

Participant 1 stressed the importance of reward systems that avoid excessive administrative tasks — that which does not involve a lot of 'extra work in tallying points and ranking children'. Instead, she advocated for systems focused on 'positive reinforcement, restorative and supportive practice, as opposed to punishment', reflecting Conyers et al.'s (2004) critique of negative reinforcement. Both Participant 5 and Participant 3 highlighted the necessity of context-sensitive implementation, considering 'particular behavioural problems and things like that' (P5). Participant 3 observed that 'younger classes buy into it more' in engaging more with reward systems but pointed out that they may not be essential for every class. Similarly, Participant 4 stressed that it depends on 'the class you have, that influences the success of such systems'. These perspectives support O'Donnell, Reeve and Smith's (2012) view that reward systems can be particularly beneficial for certain children but require flexibility in application.

Impact of Reward Systems on Pupil Behaviour

Participants presented mixed views regarding the behavioural impact of reward systems, reflecting the tension between the behavioural and internal control approaches to classroom management (Wubbels, 2011). Several participants acknowledged improvements in classroom behaviour when using reward systems. Participant 2 noted that her system has proved 'really effective' in reducing conflicts and blame amongst pupils, without which, the class would have 'a lot more issues with people kind of bickering with each other or people blaming others and things like that'. Similarly, Participant 5 reported that rewards positively influenced behaviour in classes that are 'quite challenging behaviour-wise', which aligns with behavioural approaches that use extrinsic motivators to reinforce desired actions (Elias and Schwab, 2006).

Participant 2 provided a specific example of a child who displayed aggressive behaviour but, through the reward system, began demonstrating remorse and behavioural improvement. She recounted

how one child, who previously behaved 'irrationally' and would 'push another student…just because', later 'really apologised', motivated by the desire to 'work up to get the points'. This example highlights the potential use of rewards to support 'the positive impact' that can aid behaviour modification, particularly for children with behaviour difficulties, and aligns with findings from O'Donnell, Reeve and Smith (2012) on the benefits of rewards for struggling students.

Impact of Reward Systems on Pupil Motivation

The study revealed contrasting teacher perspectives on the influence of reward systems on pupil motivation. Participant 4 uses reward systems 'as a motivator' and views them as a valuable opportunity 'for children to see a reward for the hard work they put in every day'. This participant identified the positive impact on motivation as the main benefit of supporting classroom management, 'if used effectively'. Participant 4's belief in the motivational potential of reward systems, when applied appropriately, is echoed by Participant 5, who finds visual reward systems particularly effective, stating:

> *It's something that they're excited about, and they're looking forward to it and they're trying really hard to get there by the end of the week.*

This perspective aligns with research demonstrating the motivational utility of token economies (Boniecki and Moore, 2003; Zlomke and Zlomke, 2003; Reitman et al., 2004; Cameron et al., 2005). Such systems serve as practical tools for fostering extrinsic motivation, enabling students to meet immediate behavioural or academic goals (Bilouk, 2015). However, participants raised concerns regarding the potential negative impact on intrinsic motivation. Participant 1 articulated both positive and negative views, noting that while reward systems can motivate students by showing them 'what they put in, they'll get something back for it', they can also discourage students who feel unable to meet behavioural expectations. She described how these particular children may:

> *deliberately engineer that they won't be in the running for any rewards because they feel that there was no way that they were ever going to get one in the first place*

Similarly, Participant 2 observed that some students 'just don't engage with (reward systems), don't care about them'. These perspectives reflect

Deci, Koestner and Ryan's (1999) findings on how extrinsic incentives can undermine intrinsic motivation. This concern aligns with broader critiques suggesting that reward systems may inadvertently shift pupils' focus from internal satisfaction to external validation (Brophy, 2006; Ryan and Deci, 2017). Participant 5 further expressed reservations about over-reliance on rewards, stating that she does not believe children 'should be receiving a sweet or whatever for every little bit of good work that they do'. Participant 3 reflected on the changing attitudes of 'children these days', highlighting that 'they feel like they need a reward for everything', which in turn can lead teachers to feel that they 'have to use' a reward system for effective classroom management. These perspectives resonate with research suggesting that excessive dependence on extrinsic incentives can hinder the development of self-regulation and internalised values (Brophy, 2006; Ryan and Deci, 2017). Such observations underscore the importance of balancing extrinsic rewards with strategies that nurture intrinsic motivation, promoting personal growth and genuine engagement within the mainstream classroom.

Challenges Associated with Reward Systems

Participants identified several challenges related to fairness, equity and unintended negative consequences when using reward systems. Participant 3 shared an example where a behavioural issue with one child negatively affected the wider group, explaining that 'the children were depending on everyone else at their table to be good', but the pupils seated at the table with the disruptive pupil were 'definitely at a disadvantage'. She elaborated that this dynamic adversely impacted 'five or six children at a table, instead of just one child, because they're all at her table' and, consequently, they would never receive a reward. Similarly, Participant 5 voiced concerns about fairness, particularly regarding how 'some children who are really good all the time' end up 'losing out, because some people in the class were acting out'. She described how this situation is 'not fair on the children who were so good all week', reflecting that 'whole class rewards can be both positive and negative' as pupils who behave well 'could potentially lose out due to other children's negative behaviour which is discouraging for them, as it'd be unfair'. Participant 1 also noted the issue of equity, describing how problems arise when a child receives a reward 'because they haven't for the whole year. It devalues the nature of the reward'. This concern was mirrored by Participant 4, who suggested that 'a whole class reward system works better, in terms of fairness' because with individual reward systems, 'you have to try and make sure everyone wins'.

These perspectives highlight the complexities of balancing individual achievement with collective harmony — a critical aspect of effective classroom management (Kratochwill, DeRoos and Blair, 2010). The findings underscore the necessity for thoughtful implementation of reward systems to prevent perceptions of favouritism and ensure fairness. This aligns with Yamoah's (2013) emphasis on fairness as a cornerstone of a positive classroom environment. Ultimately, while reward systems can enhance motivation and behaviour, they must be carefully managed to support the social and emotional wellbeing of all children.

Conclusion

This study explored teachers' perspectives on the use of reward systems for classroom management, with a particular focus on their impact on pupil behaviour and motivation. Semi-structured interviews revealed that all participants recognised the positive influence of reward systems in reducing disruptive behaviours and enhancing motivation. However, concerns were raised regarding potential drawbacks, including the risk of undermining intrinsic motivation and negatively influencing classroom social dynamics. Some disruptions were perceived as potentially detrimental to pupils' emotional and social development. While two participants endorsed points-based token economies as effective motivators, others expressed reservations about fairness, equity and the practical challenges of implementing these systems within time-constrained classroom environments.

Recommendations for Future Research

Further research should incorporate pupil perspectives to gain deeper insight into their experiences and perceptions of reward systems. Additionally, future studies might examine alternative classroom management approaches, particularly those designed to nurture intrinsic motivation to broaden the understanding of sustainable and effective practices.

Implications for Teaching Practice

Findings from this research indicate the need for a balanced and reflective approach to the use of reward systems. Although they can be effective in managing behaviour and enhancing motivation, teachers must remain mindful of potential adverse effects, such as disrupting social dynamics or diminishing intrinsic motivation. Prioritising strategies

that support self-regulation, intrinsic motivation and social-emotional development is essential for children's long-term growth and wellbeing within the mainstream classroom.

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