Irish Teachers' Journal

into

Irish National Teachers' Organisation
Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann

Irish Teachers' Journal

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The *Irish Teachers' Journal* (www.into.ie/ROI/Publications/IrishTeachersJournal) is a peer-reviewed journal published annually by the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, Vere Foster House, 35 Parnell Square, Dublin 1.

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⚌ Editorial ⚌

Welcome to the first edition of the *Irish Teachers' Journal*. The journal was established to provide an opportunity to teachers to bring their research findings to a broader audience and to stimulate thinking and reflection on current educational issues.

This is a timely publication. With the Haddington Road Agreement in place and with the staffing position of schools clarified for 2014, there may be more space to reflect on core professional issues than would otherwise be the case. The Teaching Profession is ready to lead in such reflection and debate.

While the Journal has been initiated by the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), it is hoped that over time all teachers, primary and post-primary, North and South, will contribute to and read it. The INTO is both a trade union and a professional organisation for primary teachers in the Republic of Ireland and for primary and post-primary teachers in Northern Ireland. It is an object of the INTO "to unite and organise the teachers of Ireland and to provide a means for the expression of their collective opinion on matters affecting the interests of education and of the teaching profession" (INTO, 2009, p. 1). It is also an object "to promote the interests of education". In pursuit of its objects, the INTO engages in many activities, such as annual Congress, the annual Consultative Conference on Education, and the publication of *InTouch*. The publication of a journal, which brings the voice of teachers to a broad audience is a further expression of the Organisation's work in promoting and supporting the interests of education. At a time when the teaching profession is under pressure due to cutbacks, an education journal for and by teachers is a reminder of teachers' commitment to their role as educators, which is at the core of their professionalism.

Teaching in Ireland has traditionally been perceived as an attractive profession and continues to draw high-calibre students to its ranks. Indeed the calibre of the teaching profession in Ireland was commented upon favourably by the OECD in their study on the teaching profession in 1991, and more recently by Sahlberg (2012), in the report on restructuring teacher education. Understandings of teacher professionalism globally are changing as many education systems undergo reform to meet the needs of the knowledge economy. Ireland is not immune to global developments in education, but our strong tradition of teaching shapes how Ireland engages with such developments. The trends towards the deprofessionalisation of teaching, performativity, micro-management and regulation emerging globally have been experienced differently in Ireland, in comparison to other countries. Nevertheless, at a time of financial cutbacks, teachers are experiencing external pressure to engage formally in activities such as school self-evaluation, self-reflection, supporting newly qualified teachers and student teachers, all aspects of core teacher professionalism – and activities in which teachers in Ireland have always engaged in their own way. This journal is a reflection of the intrinsic nature of teacher professionalism in Ireland. The contributors to this journal illustrate how teachers are motivated to enhance their own knowledge of teaching, by engaging in research, for the benefit of their pupils.

Following an open invitation to members, the INTO received a number of articles from members. All articles were reviewed by a member of a panel of experts. Feedback was provided to the authors of the articles, who resubmitted the articles for publication. The INTO appreciates the work of the members of the panel who took the time to read, critique and provide very valuable feedback to the authors. The INTO invited Dr John Coolahan, Professor Emeritus of the National University of Ireland Maynooth to write the first guest article. Professor Coolahan is a former member, a long time friend of the INTO and a major contributor to education policy both in Ireland and in the OECD.

In his article, Professor Coolahan provides a historical context to contemporary policy developments in teacher education. With the keen eye of the historian, Professor Coolahan traces developments from the establishment of the Kildare Place Society, through the Secondary Teachers' Registration Council to the early days of the training colleges and the creation of an all-graduate profession. He refers to the 1990s as a new era for teacher education and for the teaching profession, with the gestation of policies and ideas, which was followed by the establishment of the Teaching Council with extensive responsibilities. He sees the Teaching Council's *Policy on the Teacher Education Continuum* as of landmark significance when viewed from a historical perspective. He acknowledges the challenges faced by the teaching profession today, but urges us to grasp the opportunity to take ownership of reform.

School leadership has received a lot of attention in policy terms in the recent decade. The OECD published a report on *Improving School Leadership* in 2008 while in Ireland the Leadership Development Support Service (LDS) was established to support newly appointed principals and aspiring school leaders. Verena Cunningham's article focuses on preparation for school leadership, and she poses the question whether formal preparation programmes for principal teachers make a difference. She refers to the challenges regarding recruitment to principalships and acknowledges that leadership preparation programmes are relatively new in the Irish context. Her specific focus is the Tóraíocht programme for aspiring principals or school leaders. Her research involved interviewing recently appointed principal teachers about their experiences, comparing the experiences of those who participated in Tóraíocht and those who did not. She raises interesting questions about the lack of information among aspiring school leaders regarding the availability of Tóraíocht and suggests that consideration be given to compulsory leadership preparation. Her article presents plenty to think about in relation to how school leaders are supported – both prior to and after appointment to principalship.

There is no doubt that Ireland's increasing diversity is evident in our primary schools. Government policy supports the development of inclusive schools. Lorraine Duffy, in her article, explores the national policy of interculturalism and provides some practical ideas for its promotion in the classroom. In her critique, she questions the terminology used, explores the meaning of inclusion and criticises the narrow focus on language support for migrant children. She also discusses the differences between multi-culturalism and interculturalism and the need for teachers to be aware of their subjectivity and biases. She offers an overview of the current literature on the topic. She refers to the lack of diversity among the teaching profession and offers her own opinions on how to address this matter. Teachers will find her guide to classroom planning for intercultural education useful.

Literacy is at the core of primary teachers' work. The publication of the *National Strategy* to improve literacy and numeracy in our schools in 2011 sparked a lot of interest among teachers. It is not surprising, therefore, that the journal includes three articles related to aspects of literacy, all based on small-scale research in teachers' classrooms. In the first article, Julie O'Connell describes socio-cultural practices in classrooms and how children learn from their interactions with others. She offers an exploration of the search for meaning, focusing on situated cognition and what is meant by thinking. She refers to Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZDP) and its role in teaching from a social constructivist perspective. But she goes further introducing readers to the idea of the intermental development zone, which is a form of thinking collectively. She argues that it is important to teach children to think. She outlines her research project, which explores the relationship between dialogue and thinking. In doing so, she provides a fascinating insight into her teaching of literacy through thinking, talking and listening and suggests that the English curriculum should be a literacy curriculum.

In the second article on literacy, Collette Dunne considers the topic from the perspective of developing learner autonomy. Using an action research methodology, she traces the development of learner autonomy in her classroom and outlines the challenges for both teachers and pupils in changing their approach to teaching and learning. She describes how she observed her pupils, twenty sixth class girls, her introduction of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) where pupils choose an area of work to improve, and her use of group work. She discusses the challenges of planning, reflecting and developing portfolios. The views of her pupils about their participation in the project make for interesting reading. She argues that developing learner autonomy, in which pupils' learning styles are taken into account, is a long term process, and benefits pupils in to the future.

In the third article on the theme of literacy, Aoife Butler discusses the role of digital and visual literacy. New technologies and media have changed communication and meaning-making. Aoife describes how she used photographs to stimulate children's writing in English. She explains that the children were very enthusiastic in their oral work, which was not always reflected in their written work. She focuses on how children were more able to write about photographs that related to their own experiences, and how they became much more interested in writing about images that they composed themselves. The use of storyboards assisted in scaffolding children's learning, developing their confidence, enhancing their motivation and increasing their capacity to write stories. According to Aoife, the development of children's metalanguage was intertwined with the development of their visual and digital literacy. While acknowledging its short timeframe the project saw sustained gains in children's literacy.

There is little focus on outdoors education in Ireland. In our final article, Pádraig Egan discusses the challenge of risk-taking in the outdoor education environments of Forest Schools which are emerging in the United Kingdom. Facilitating children to explore their outdoor environment challenges teachers' current comfort zones. He explains how children in Forest Schools develop a sense of personal safety as they explore the boundaries of their outdoor learning environment. This article challenges common assumptions about the need to protect children from perceived hazards and encourages teachers to think about devel-

oping children's capacity to assess and handle risk. Forest Schools are not common in Ireland, though Pádraig refers to one such school in Donegal. He suggests that the Forest Schools movement is growing and that Ireland, in the future, may see the emergence of more such schools.

Articles in this journal reflect the views and opinions of the authors, and not necessarily those of the INTO. All authors have provided much to think about for their teaching colleagues. The INTO is delighted to publish this journal in recognition of the fact that many teachers engage in further study and high-quality research. This journal provides an opportunity to such teachers to bring their findings to a wider audience of their teaching colleagues, encouraging debate and discussion and informing professional conversations. The INTO wishes to thank all teachers who contributed articles and hopes that many more teachers will do so in the years to come.

Sheila Nunan
General Secretary

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Author Notes

Professor John Coolahan

Dr John Coolahan is Professor Emeritus at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth. He has lectured extensively in Ireland and abroad. He is author of three books, has published over 120 articles in Irish and international journals, and has edited several educational publications. His public service roles in Ireland include: Secretary General of the National Education Convention (1993); Secretary General of the National Forum on Early Childhood Education (1998); and Chairman of the NESF group on Early Childhood Education (2005). He was adviser to the Government on the 1992 *Green Paper* and on the *Green* and *White Papers on Adult Education* (1998, 2000). Professor Coolahan is author of the *Irish Country Background Reports* for the *OECD Reviews on Teachers* (2003) and *Higher Education in Ireland* (2004). He has served on the governing authorities of a number of higher education institutions and was a member of the Senate of the NUI. Professor Coolahan was chairman of the Forum on School Patronage and Pluralism (2011/12). He is currently chairman of the Implementation Group for *The Charter for the Arts in Education*, and is a member of the International Review Group on Teacher Education in Northern Ireland. At international level, Professor Coolahan has been a consultant to the European Commission, the Council of Europe, the World Bank, and the OECD, for whom he has led a number of international educational reviews.

Verena Cunningham

Verena Cunningham graduated from St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, in 1999 and was awarded the Vere Foster medal for that year. She is currently teaching in St Clare's NS, Ballyjamesduff, Co Cavan. She was conferred with the Degree of Master of Education from the University of Ulster in July 2012 and was the recipient of the Biggar Award in Educational Studies upon graduation.

Lorraine Duffy

Lorraine Duffy holds a Doctorate in Philosophy from Trinity College Dublin (2007) and a Bachelor of Education from Mary Immaculate College Limerick (1996). She has worked as a researcher on the Childhood Development Initiative in Tallaght West, and is co-author of the publication *How are our Kids?* (Childhood Development Initiative and Dartington Social Research Unit, 2004). Lorraine is currently teaching in Galway and is interested in pursuing a career in research in the future. She has conducted several postgraduate and professional development courses. Lorraine was awarded an INTO bursary award in 2002 for her PhD research on cultural diversity in the early childhood classroom in Ireland. Lorraine's research interests include child and family wellbeing, culture and family, immigration and family, immigration and schooling, intercultural education, and migration issues.

Julie O'Connell

Julie O'Connell teaches in North Presentation Primary School, Cork. She has taught various class levels and is currently a learning support teacher. She has an interest in best practice in literacy in schools. She is a First Steps reading tutor and a reading recovery teacher. She also tutors effective use of ICT to enhance literacy for the NCTE. Julie had an article published in *InTouch* magazine on the subject of supporting children's mother tongues in our schools. She is a member of the Reading Association of Ireland and recently undertook a project in her school funded by a Literacy Development Award from the RAI.

Collette Dunne

Collette Dunne has recently been appointed principal of Firhouse Educate Together NS in Dublin, which opened in September 2013. Following a career as an engineering draughts-person, she trained in St Patrick's College of Education between 1983 and 1986. The ideals of critical pedagogy and the role of teachers in motivating students have been central to her teaching practice over the years and prompted the action research study into learner autonomy she undertook with a sixth class in 2009, as part of MEd studies at Trinity College. Her proposal for this research project was awarded the maximum bursary given by the Teaching Council. Collette has a broad experience of differing types of schools in Dublin and Cork including DEIS, special education and youth encounter schools, as well as three schools in France. She has previously held posts as a mentor for students and newly qualified teachers and as an ICT co-ordinator. Currently she facilitates geography inquiry seminars at St Patrick's College of Education.

Aoife Butler

Aoife Butler is a primary school teacher living and teaching in Limerick. In 2011, she graduated with a Master of Education in ICT from Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. Her research explored the effectiveness of integrating visual and digital literacy into the English literacy programme. This work was conducted under the supervision of Brendan Barry. Aoife has just returned from a two year career break in New Zealand, where she worked in Victoria University of Wellington as a project assistant.

Pádraig Egan

Pádraig Egan qualified as a primary teacher in 2005. He has completed a variety of courses relating to his teaching practice, most notably his Masters in Education from Trinity College, Dublin. Pádraig is currently on a career break, pursuing further education in the United Kingdom.

Towards a new era for teacher education and the engagement of the teaching profession

≋ JOHN COOLAHAN ≋

Introduction

We are living in a period where a paradigm shift may be afoot in the duration, design, quality and process of teacher education in Ireland. It is also an era when the influence of the teaching profession on teacher education was never greater and where the scope for its professional engagement as a partner in the process is much enhanced. Following a long gestation, a great deal of change is now being compacted in a short time period. This article aims to give an overview of the multi-faceted changes which are in process. Before going into detail on the recent and contemporary policy developments, it is considered desirable, in the early section, to sketch some of the landmark stages in the development of teacher education. This is to provide some historical perspective to the current emerging era, and the opportunities it affords. The distinctiveness and significance of the reforms being processed are best understood when viewed against the background stages of development.[1] The outline of the development of teacher education indicates that there were periods of breakthrough, promise and serious concern for its promotion. However, these were interspersed with long valley periods of unimaginative, instrumental and inertial eras. We may now be in one of the most creative of the eras, when a constellation of factors, operating concurrently, have the potential to transform teacher education in Ireland and the engagement of the teaching profession with its development.

Early landmarks of development

The beginnings

Teacher education is deeply embedded in Irish history and tradition. In 1815, almost two centuries ago, the first state grants for teacher education were made available to the voluntary education society, known as the Kildare Place Society. Then, following the establishment of the national school system in 1831, the Commissioners established the Central Training Establishment at their headquarters in Marlborough Street, Dublin.

The early 1870s was an eventful era for primary education, including curricular policy, pedagogic approaches and the evaluation of teachers' work. Anticipating such changes, a range of teachers' associations decided to amalgamate into the Irish National Teachers' Association (later Organisation), in 1868.

The Powis Commission of Inquiry of 1870 was very critical of the five month courses being provided by the Central Training Establishments for male and female primary teachers.[2] Following this, the courses were restructured and extended to one year duration. In 1884, the State gave its support to denominational teacher training colleges. The courses were extended to two years for beginning teachers, and the numbers in the various colleges

increased significantly. The two-year training period was to last for 90 years, to 1974. The concept prevailed of the closed, boarding institution with students subject to full-timetable regimes and close supervision. Indeed, following graduation, the career of teaching would also prove to be highly regulated through the Inspectorate for many generations to come.

A quickening pulse of change

The turn of the 20th century was to be another era of significant change for education policy and teachers. Key changes affecting primary teachers included a radically changed, child-centred curriculum, new forms of inspection, new salary scales and significant reforms in the teacher training programmes in the training colleges. From 1 April 1900 training in a recognised training college became essential for appointment as a principal teacher. Arising from the new Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction Act (1900) teacher training was made available for technical school teachers, and for secondary teachers in science teaching. Among the terms of reference for the Dale and Stephens Committee on Intermediate Education (1904) was the issue of "training for secondary teachers". Dale and Stephens favoured a system of training which would be post-graduate and include "a systematic course of study in the Mental and Moral Sciences bearing on Education, and in the Theory and History of Education". This was to be complemented by teaching practice and classroom observation, and, before recognition as a teacher, there should be a probationary period in a recognised school.[3] These recommendations were later to form the core of the requirements of the Secondary Teachers' Registration Council, operative from 1918.

Secondary teachers at the time were well aware of the debate on the reform of education and teacher training. In 1909, they combined to form the Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland (ASTI). The universities responded to the new developments and, in 1905, Trinity College set up the first chair of education in Ireland. Following the establishment of the National University in Ireland, in 1908, the constituent colleges also appointed professors of education – UCD in 1909, UCC in 1909 and UCG in 1915. The one year Higher Diploma in Education course for secondary teachers was established in 1912, and it has remained as a one year course for 102 years, up to 2014. The course was offered by Maynooth College from 1926.

In 1912, the two year training course became obligatory for all primary teachers, but, interestingly, provision was made for the best students to add a third year of university based studies leading to a university diploma in education. It is noteworthy that the INTO had urged closer links between the training colleges and the universities since 1902.[4] From that time until the establishment of the BEd degree, in 1974, the INTO emphasised the importance of university education for national teachers. The third year course for matriculated training college graduates continued to be taken by a small minority of students until about 1950. The ASTI kept up its pressure for the establishment of a registration council which came into effect from 31 July 1918. It believed that this would raise the status of the career of secondary teaching. However, it turned out to be less than the victory it had hoped for, in that teachers could continue to be employed in secondary schools who did not fulfil registration requirements. For several decades to come, both the primary and secondary teaching careers remained open to significant numbers of unqualified personnel.

Policy following Independence

Following political independence, in 1922, renewed efforts were made to establish more integrated links between the universities and the training colleges. A scheme of 1923 for a university degree course for national teachers was not proceeded with because of opposition from the new Department of Education, established in 1924. Both the National University and Trinity College extended some academic credits for graduates of the training colleges who wished to pursue degree studies.

The primary educational aim of the new state was the preservation and revival of the Irish language as a living language. A heavy onus was placed on the training colleges and schools to promote this aim. Irish was to be the medium of instruction and of social life within the colleges. In 1931, recruitment to the colleges became solely based on the levels of performance in the Leaving Certificate examination and in specifically designed oral examinations, and a high level of competition existed for entry. New courses were introduced in the colleges in 1932-33 which were to remain unaltered for 30 years.

The training colleges had very little academic autonomy, with entry standards and numbers being decided by the Department of Education, which also prescribed the courses. Departmental inspectors set and corrected the examination papers, as well as inspected lecturers' work.

Regrettably, the promising moves on educational studies and teacher training in the early years of the century were not improved on, or even sustained, within the universities during the first 40 years of independence. The staffs of education departments remained pitiably small up to the 1960s. Indeed, the very serious situation developed whereby different universities left the chair of education vacant for considerable periods of time. For instance, the chair was vacant in Trinity College from 1916 to 1922, in UCD for 16 years – from 1950 to 1966, in Maynooth College at various times and in UCC from 1962 to 1969. The predominant concern of the small staffs became the teaching of the one-year Higher Diploma course to graduates. This course was conducted under very difficult circumstances whereby lectures had to be given in the late afternoon or evening, up to the 1970s.

While the Higher Diploma in Education was a necessary requirement for registration the fact that for decades almost 50% of secondary teachers were unregistered seriously weakened the status of the preservice studies in education.

While established subjects were being strengthened and some other subjects were being introduced and fostered within the university, education was holding a very tenuous position within the academic community. Education had, in fact, declined from the position it occupied circa 1920. It had reached a very weak position by the early 1960s, just at the time that there was to be a great renewal and development of the Irish education system generally, including a massive expansion in post primary school enrolment. University education departments were in a weak position to contribute to, or indeed cope with the situation.

Following political independence, teacher education for technical/vocational teachers remained under the aegis of the Department of Education until the establishment of Thomond College in the early 1970s.

A decade of development and renewal (1965-1975)

Primary teacher education

The 1960s was a decade of significant re-appraisal of the state of the nation and developments pointed the way towards significant changes in teacher education and educational studies. Several reports were issued which had important implications for education and teacher education such as the *Investment in Education Report* (1966), the *Commission on Higher Education Report* (1967) and the *Higher Education Authority (HEA) Report on Teacher Education* (1970). In line with many other social, economic and cultural changes in society, it became clear that major reforms in teacher education were required. Moreover, a more vibrant national economy provided resources and motivation to move forward.

The teacher training colleges were remodelled and benefited from new buildings and facilities. They now became more generally known as colleges of education, and 'teacher training' was dropped as a term in favour of 'teacher education'. Student numbers in the colleges increased in line with attempts to improve teacher-pupil ratios in the schools. The colleges became more 'open' as institutions, with more personal responsibility devolving on students in the management of their scholastic and leisure time. The single sex colleges gradually gave way to mixed colleges, with female students forming the majority of the student body. The student body also became more diversified by a greater infusion of university graduates and the participation of what was known as 'mature' students (not school leavers) within the student community. A programme of one year's duration was introduced for graduate student teachers.

Staff numbers were expanded in the colleges, and lecturers, more specialised in subjects which would form part of the new primary school curriculum of 1971, were employed. It was also significant that lecturers and teachers were consulted on drafts of the proposed new curriculum. From 1962 the colleges assumed greater scholastic responsibility for their courses and examination, and were less under the control of the Department of Education. An important change occurred in 1963 when, following discussions between college of education personnel and the Department of Education, new courses were devised.[5] Education became more central as a subject with revamped courses in methods and the principles of education. This latter now included psychology and elective courses such as history of education, sociology of education and comparative education. The change was directed at giving a more theoretical underpinning to the students' studies. There was also a shift in course emphasis towards more child centred perspectives. Libraries became better stocked and staffed, tutorials/seminars were introduced, and students were expected to utilise libraries in preparing assignments. A scheme was introduced for the training of existing under-qualified teachers. The establishment of the Educational Research Centre in 1966, located on the campus of St Patrick's College, was symbolic of a new concern that a modern education system required empirical studies on the system. Another very significant innovation was the establishment in 1961 of a Special Education Unit in St Patrick's College, which offered the first Diploma in Special Education.

Teacher education within the universities

With regard to education within the universities, heed was taken of the calls of the Commission on Higher Education (1967) that the university departments should be

expanded as a matter of urgency, and that a more active research role be developed.[6] Each university appointed new professors and all chairs of education were filled. Recruitment of more full-time staff with various specialisms took place. Premises and facilities were also improved, particularly in the areas of audio-visual equipment, resource rooms, microteaching studios, workshop spaces, and library resources. The Higher Diploma in Education was restructured as a one year full-time course, with a better balance between university and school-based experience. Over time, class numbers were reduced and better staff-student ratios were achieved. This allowed for less reliance on mass lectures and more scope for seminar, tutorial and workshop groups. More individual attention was given to students on teaching practice. More emphasis was placed on psychology and sociology of education. Efforts were made to give a more practical emphasis to the courses. In later years, the quality and motivation of entrants increased and, by the 1990s, entry to the Higher Diploma in Education courses had become very competitive.

Since 1970, university education departments have revitalised their postgraduate work. MEd courses were introduced, while MA and PhD degrees in education were expanded. There was an expansion of specialist post-graduate diplomas in education, such as guidance and counselling, special education, and educational management which had many benign effects for the incareer development of teachers. These course developments had a positive influence on and fed in productively to aspects of initial teacher education, helped to establish closer links between education department staffs and experienced teachers, and promoted a greater research orientation for both university staff and involved teachers. For the first time ever, secondary teachers were involved as members of syllabus committees in the design of new school courses in the mid 1960s.

Towards an all-graduate teaching profession

The national teachers' union, the INTO, had long sought a university linked award for primary teachers and a number of reports had suggested that the time was ripe for the establishment of such a degree. Eventually, the Government decided to request the universities to agree to the award of degrees to primary teachers, and a notable landmark in teacher education was the introduction of the Bachelor in Education Degree (BEd) in 1974. The three largest colleges became 'recognised' colleges of the National University of Ireland, while the Church of Ireland College, Marino College and Froebel College became associated with Trinity College Dublin for their BEd degrees. (In the early 1990s St Patrick's College became a college of the new Dublin City University and Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, became a college of the University of Limerick). For the great majority of students the BEd degree has been a three year honours programme, while students in the colleges associated with Trinity College undertook a fourth year to achieve an honours degree. Under the BEd structure, education has become the central subject, and the extended time has facilitated a deeper study of the discipline. The colleges assumed the normal academic freedom traditional within the universities. Methodology involved a range of approaches including lectures, seminars, tutorials, workshops, microteaching, practice teaching, and literary/research studies. Education was seen as both a theoretical and practical discipline, and the emphasis shifted towards developing 'reflective practitioners'. The colleges continued to benefit from

very high calibre student intake, and college lifestyle became attuned to preparing them better for teaching in a fast changing society.[7]

A significant new departure in teacher education was the setting up of the National College for Physical Education in 1970 which, within a few years, developed into Thomond College of Education. Thomond College was to concern itself with the education of specialist second level teachers in areas such as physical education, woodwork, metalwork and rural science. The students followed a four year concurrent course, with teaching practice taking place on the block placement model. The degrees were initially awarded by the National Council for Education Awards. Thomond College was subsequently absorbed into the University of Limerick (UL), following its establishment in 1989. Thomond College also began to offer some postgraduate teacher education diplomas, such as the Higher Diploma in Business Studies.

The National College of Art and Design (NCAD) was restructured as an institution more independent of the Department of Education in the early seventies. In more recent years, the NCAD became a recognised college of University College Dublin. Art and design teachers are trained on a dual model – the concurrent four-year programme, or the consecutive programme where a single year of professional studies followed the attainment of an undergraduate degree. Art teachers are also trained in the Crawford Institute, Cork, in association with UCC. The two colleges of home economics became associated with universities – Sion Hill College, Dublin, with Trinity College and St Angela's, Sligo, with the National University of Ireland, Galway. They too followed a concurrent course model. Sion Hill College closed later. In the late 1960s, the Mater Dei Institute of Education was established by the Archbishop of Dublin for the education and training of teachers of religious education. It follows the concurrent model. Its degrees were for many years validated by the Pontifical University of Maynooth. During the 1990s the Institute became a College of Dublin City University, which now gives the awards for its initial teacher education course, B.Rel.Sc, and its other courses.

Thus, within a short period in the 1970s, the teaching profession became an all graduate one, with a mixture of concurrent and consecutive initial teacher education programmes on offer, and all new categories of teachers having degree status. The changing profile of the teaching profession was also reflected in the establishment of a common salary scale for teachers in 1972, with extra allowances for qualifications and the exercise of responsibility posts. It was also reflective of great change that a report issued in 1974 recommended the establishment of a Teaching Council, which would involve the exercise of considerable self-governing powers by the teaching profession. This proposal was not, however, implemented at that time, and it was to take over 30 years for such a council to be established.

While reforms of initial teacher education had dominated policy concerns in the late 60s and early 70s, a greater awareness of the importance of inservice teacher education was also in evidence. This was signalled, in part, by the setting up of regional teacher centres, beginning in 1972, to support inservice activities for all categories of teachers in the regions.

Initial teacher education was also enriched and deepened by a contemporaneous flowering of educational research, and of scholarly associations with an educational research

interest. Accordingly, one can conclude that the decade 1965 to 1975 was a momentous one for the teaching career and for initial teacher education in particular.

A decade of policy gestation, heralding a new era for teacher education (1990s)

During the 1990s there was a period of unprecedented analysis, appraisal and consultation on education policy and on teacher education issues. A great range of educational legislation emerged from this consultation process. What was most striking about teacher education was the extensive gestation of ideas and policy, but which was also accompanied by a desultory, deferral approach to the implementation of policy. A range of reports from the early 90s made recommendations on teacher education and the teaching career. While there was a high degree of consistency in the reports which seemed to promise national decisions and implementation, the policy ideas generated during that period were allowed to drift.

The *OECD Review of Irish Education* (1991) was largely focussed on teachers and teacher education. The reviewers strongly proposed a lifelong learning approach for the teaching career. They had specific things to say about each stage of the '3I's' – initial, induction and inservice teacher education. They regarded both the consecutive and concurrent models of initial education as having "their place and meeting real needs". Without being specific on modalities, the reviewers favoured closer contact between the teacher education institutions and the schools. The report regarded induction "as an essential component of policy for maintaining quality of schooling and teachers". Significantly, the reviewers stated, "Since induction must be treated as a formal part of the responsibilities of senior staff, it must be built into the definition of their role and provided for in staffing profiles, teaching loads and salaries."

The concept of inservice education was seen as addressing the total teaching career, in all its variety and extending over four decades. The school was envisaged as a learning community and the report urged direct participation by the teachers with their peers in school – based inservice education. The OECD also proposed that a statutory "National Council" be established "to address the issues of teacher selection, initial training credentialing, induction and inservice education". Here, one detects a prefiguring of a teaching council. Overall, the OECD review set out a comprehensive agenda for teacher education policy, based on international research and experience, but tailored to the Irish education context.[8]

The influence of the OECD can be detected in aspects of Ireland's first *Green Paper* on education, *Education for a Changing World* (1992). The paper formally adopted the policy on the continuum stating:

> "Ideally, teacher education should be seen as a continuum in which high quality initial training and properly structured induction are followed by well devised incareer training programmes, available periodically throughout a teacher's career."[9]

The Green Paper also favoured the establishment of a teaching council.

The National Education Convention (1993) gave close attention to issues affecting the teaching career and teacher education. Its report (1994) gave strong endorsement to teacher

education as a lifelong continuum. It recommended that the duration of the teacher educa-tion courses should be extended by a year, and their content be reconceptualised. The report urged closer partnership of the institutions with the schools, with the use of school 'mentors' to assist students on teaching practice. It supported the secondment of skilled teachers for inservice work in schools. The Convention strongly recommended the setting up of a teach-ing council, sketched out a range of functions for it, and regarded such a council as promot-ing "a distinguished future for the teaching profession in Ireland".[10]

The Government took great note of the deliberations of the National Education Convention in its, *White Paper*: *Charting Our Education Future*, published in April 1995. Generally, it endorsed the Convention's recommendations. Although the Convention had not favoured principal teachers adjudicating on the inductees' probation, the *White Paper* favoured this arrangement. There was no commitment to extend the duration of initial teacher education courses. The education centres were to benefit from more fulltime staff and resources. The *White Paper* endorsed the idea of a teaching council and listed an extensive range of proposed functions for such a council.[11]

When one reflects on the reports and policy documents from the OECD report in 1991 to the *White Paper* 1995, one is struck by a number of common features. There is an accept-ance of the importance of the teaching force to the societal needs which were developing. There is an acknowledgement that Ireland has been fortunate in maintaining a high calibre teaching force, still attracting high quality candidates. The older model needed to be replaced by a reconceptualisation of teacher education, involving the continuum of initial, induction and incareer education, throughout the teaching career. The underlying conception of all forms of teacher education is in the liberal education tradition and has regard for the per-sonal, professional and system needs. There is an emphasis on close partnership between the training institutions and the schools. In the induction and inservice provision, school personnel are viewed as being active participants. There is a realisation that long duration, certified courses with a research dimension are important if teachers are to build up their expertise to be catalysts among their peers. The concept of a teaching council is gradually developed and gets its most assured exposition in the white paper. Indeed, as one would ex-pect, the white paper, coming at the end of the process of reflection and discussion, dealt with the issues in a strong, expressive and assured tone. One might expect that, with the help of a buoyant economic context, the stage was now set for early direct action to imple-ment these key dimensions of government policy on teacher education. However, this was not the case and the impressive momentum which had built up on teacher education was allowed to lose its urgency. While there was no withdrawal from the conceptual exposition of the issues, this was not matched by an implementation process.

The last years of the decade witnessed the convening of three committees with a teaching profession/teacher education brief. In November 1997, the Minister for Education set up a technical working group and a steering group to advise on the establishment of a teaching council. The report of the first group was presented in April 1998 and that of the steering group in June 1998. The latter set out the context and rationale for a teaching council, the role and functions of such a council, teacher registration aspects, the professional education of teachers, the composition and structure of the council, administration and finance, and

'Making it Happen'. [12] Chapter four was of landmark importance in spelling out that for the first time the teaching profession, through the council, would exercise a significant measure of control of the continuum of teacher education. The report envisaged that the first meeting of the first Teaching Council would take place in January 2000, a symbolic date for the opening of the new millennium. However, events showed that this was too ambitious. Legislation for the Teaching Council was enacted in 2001, but it was spring 2005 before the first meeting of the Teaching Council took place. This was ten years since the government's decision to establish the Council was announced in the White Paper of 1995.

An advisory group on post primary teacher education was set up in 1998, and a working group on primary preservice teacher education was convened by the minister in January 1999. They were given extensive terms of references, and were to report within six months. Predictably, this time span was exceeded and the reports were not presented to the minister until 2002.

Overall, both reports highlighted the need for reforms in a variety of aspects of the teacher education programmes, commensurate with the social context in which current and future teachers would be operating. They identified areas for attention, most of which were part of informed discourse on teacher education, and they made suggestions for reform. The report for primary had 61 recommendations and that for post primary 56 recommendations. [13] Without costing their proposals it was still clear that they implied a quantum leap in funding, and a great deal of co-operative engagement within the institutions, and between the institutions and the Department of Education and Higher Education Authority. While the original six month time limits for the reviews might suggest that there was an urgency for action within the Department of Education, when the reviews were presented three years later what was most obvious was the lack of urgency, if not lack of interest. There was no formal launch of the reports, and no national debates took place on the recommendations.

Relevant international policy trends on teacher education and the teaching profession

Ireland maintains close reciprocal links with a range of international organisations and, in particular, with the OECD and the EU. Developments in Ireland should be related to thinking within such agencies. Both the OECD and the EU have been devoting increased policy attention, over recent years, to the teaching profession and to teacher education. International influences on education policy have become increasingly evident. In launching its major comparative study, *Teachers Matter: Attracting, Developing and Retaining Effective Teachers*, the OECD forcefully stated:

> "Teachers are central to schooling. They are even more critical as expectations grow for teaching and learning to become more student centred and to emphasise active learning… This calls for demanding concepts of professionalism: the teacher as facilitator, as knowledgeable, expert individual; as networked team participant, oriented to individual needs; engaged both in teaching and in research and development".

Chapter four of the report sets out the "priorities for policy development in educating, developing and certifying teachers". As can be noted, they are highly reflective of the recommendations which had emerged during the policy gestation in Ireland:

◆ The extension of the preservice education courses.
◆ The restructuring of some course content to give a greater sense of integration and foster a reflective practitioner approach.
◆ Closer links with school personnel on teaching practice.
◆ The establishment of a national induction system with appropriate financing for necessary reduction in teaching hours and the support of school mentors.
◆ A more strategic policy agency which would more overtly develop a coherent partnership between all relevant agencies for continuing professional development.
◆ More direct financial support or recognition for teachers undergoing certificated inservice courses.
◆ More flexible support structures whereby other career personnel might be attracted to teaching.[14]

In its final chapter on *Developing and Implementing Teacher Policy,* the report makes the significant point, "Experience from a number of countries indicates that unless teachers and their representatives are actively involved in policy formulation, and feel a sense of 'ownership' of reform it is unlikely that substantial changes will be successfully implemented". Interestingly, the report recognised the value of teaching councils in providing "a mechanism for profession led standards setting". It was also noteworthy that the report drew special attention to the planned role and function of the Teaching Council of Ireland, in this regard.[15]

At a sequence of European Councils held in the new century great emphasis was placed on the importance of the teaching career and quality teacher education for the future wellbeing of European society. As early as 2002, the Barcelona Council emphasised the need "of providing the conditions which adequately support teachers and trainers as they respond to the challenges of the knowledge society, including through initial and inservice training (sic) in the perspective of lifelong learning and securing a sufficient level of entry to the teaching profession, across all subject and levels, as providing for the long term needs of the profession by making teaching and training even more attractive".[16]

This was the first time that the teaching career was highlighted across the member states as an appropriate issue on which to take action in support of the profession.

As recently as late November 2012, following many position papers and much deliberation, the European Commission produced a policy document entitled *Supporting the Teaching Professions for Better Learning Outcomes*, which was endorsed during the Irish Presidency in spring 2013. A comprehensive view of the teaching career is presented:

"The objective has to be the establishment of highly efficient and effective mechanisms to attract, recruit, educate, retain and support throughout their careers teachers, school leaders and teacher educators."[17]

The Commission went on to underline the importance of the continuum for the teaching profession stating:

"In order to attract, educate and retain high quality teaching staff, it is essential to focus on coherent and co-ordinated provision, including high quality initial teacher education, systemic support for beginning teaching staff, and individualised career-long professional development."[18]

The policy document then set out ten key actions to be undertaken by member states and the Commission to support the teaching professions.

A new era for Irish teacher education and the teaching career

Ireland is now well positioned to capitalise on the earlier reports and policy aspirations which have been engendered here, and to draw on best practice international guidelines to shape a truly high quality teacher education system, and to engage the teaching profession in this process whereby it can become a world leader in its professional role. At long last a clustering of key elements of the earlier gestation of policy is occurring and is in the process of policy implementation. This has been evolving over the last few years, and a significant dimension of this was the formal establishment of the Teaching Council in 2006. Earlier harbingers of change included the setting up of a teaching support service, in 1999, whereby in a developmental way cohorts of experienced, skilled teachers were seconded to give inservice support to their peers in a number of specialist areas. The pilot teacher induction scheme was set up in 2002. The Teacher Education Section was designated within the Department of Education and Science in 2004, as a unit specialising in teacher education issues.

The legislation for the Teaching Council of Ireland allocated very extensive responsibilities to the Council, albeit not all sections of the Act were implemented. The Council, comprised of various stakeholders, but with a majority of teacher representatives, set to work in a consultative manner. In 2007, the Council published two bedrock documents for the profession – *A Code of Professional Practice* and *A Code of Professional Conduct*. These set out the parameters expected of teachers in their professional practice and behaviour. The Council began the process whereby it became the registration body for all categories of teachers. It also commissioned research reports to guide its activities, and inaugurated a scheme of research scholarships for teachers. Reflective of a key objective of the INTO at its establishment, as long ago as 1868, which stated; "The activation of a fraternal spirit and professional intercourse with kindred organisations in other countries",[19] the Council fostered close fraternal links with cognate international agencies. In 2009, the Teaching Council drew up a *Draft Strategy for Review and Accreditation of Initial Teacher Education Courses* and between 2009 and 2011 conducted eight pilot course accreditations.

In August 2010, the Department of Education and Skills announced that in the wake of the pilot induction programme, from 2012 a national teacher induction programme would become operative for all future teachers. Building on the pilot experience, a structured plan

was devised involving the DES, the Teaching Council, the teacher education institutions and classroom teachers. Training was provided for 'mentor' teachers, and school leaders were expected to play an active role in promoting the scheme.

In 2011, a more dramatic decision was announced by the Department, in that it authorised the extension of most teacher education courses by one year. This coincided with the publication by the Teaching Council of its *Policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education*, which recommended that "the duration of concurrent programmes should be a minimum of four years, while post-graduate programmes should take place over two years, thereby facilitating an innovative reconceputalisation of current programmes". The changes for the concurrent courses were to be introduced in the academic year, 2012-13, and those for the consecutive courses in autumn of 2014. This was a much awaited, but landmark development, for the teaching career. Significantly, the Council's recommendation led to Ireland's achievement of the long-sought '3Is', a lifelong learning approach to the career involving initial, induction and inservice education. The Council sees the continuum as encompassing "initial teacher education, induction, early and continuing professional development and, indeed, late career support, with each stage merging seamlessly into the next and interconnecting in a dynamic way with each of the others".[20] It adopts a new set of '3I's' to underpin all stages of the continuum, namely innovation, integration and improvement. The policy is built on a set of guiding principles and sets out detailed requirements and quality guidelines for each stage of the continuum. This policy provides a framework of reference, based on research and consultation, which will underpin teacher formation at each stage of the teaching career, well into the future.

The Teaching Council also set afoot planning in relation to the reconceptualisation of the new, extended duration courses. In August 2011, it published *Initial Teacher Education: Criteria and Guidelines for Programme Providers*, and, in September, *Strategy for the Review and Professional Accreditation of Existing Programmes*. Many of the new proposed courses by the HEIs have been, or are in the process of being accredited. All stakeholders have been working hard to ensure that the new planning leads to greatly enriched initial teacher education programmes.

In the new course design for initial teacher education it is envisaged that:

"The foundation studies, professional studies and the school placement should be carefully planned in the light of changing understandings of the nature of learning and the theory practice relationship, so that there is an appropriate balance between them and their inter-relationship is made explicit."[21]

Unlike the parlous position of education as a subject in some other countries as discussed in John Furlong's recent book, *Education – An Anatomy of the Discipline* (2013),[22] in Ireland the education foundation studies are still seen as providing an underpinning role:

The Council's document states that the foundation studies should:

◈ Provide research informed insights into student teachers' understanding of the practices of teaching, learning and assessment.

◈ Illuminate key dimensions of the professional context in which the thinking and actions of teachers are carried out.

◈ Provide the basis for a strong professional ethic in teaching.

◈ Provide the basis for reflective practice.[23]

The focus on the teacher as reflective practitioner is supported by emphasis on small group teaching, tutorials and workshops, and the compilation of professional development portfolios. Student teachers are being oriented towards collaborative collegial engagement in the school as a learning community. Students receive research training and undertake a research project in their course work.

A very striking feature of the new courses is the much greater emphasis on partnership and collaboration between the HEIs and the schools, and the enhanced role beyond teaching practice for student teachers to experience the general life of the school. A much greater role is envisaged for the teaching profession in student teacher formation:

> "Such models would see greater levels of responsibility devolved to the profession for the provision of structured support for its new members and a gradual increase in classroom responsibility for student teachers. Structured support would include mentoring, supervision and critical analysis of the experience as well as observation, and conversations with, experienced teachers."[24]

School placements are to take place in a variety of settings and incorporate a variety of teaching situations and school contexts. Concurrent and consecutive courses of five years duration lead to a Professional Masters in Education.

The traditional providers of teacher education courses have been supplemented by a new private provider, Hibernia. Initially, this agency engaged in teacher education for primary teachers but now also provides it for post primary teaching. It employs a good deal of its provision online.

It is also noteworthy that under the Teaching Council Registrations, 2009, that its remit extends to teachers in further education. In March 2011 the Council approved *General and Programme Requirements for the Accreditation of Teacher Education Qualifications (Further Education)*. From April 2013 all new teacher entrants to the further education sector need to have a teacher education qualification.

This summary of the changes being introduced for initial teacher education clearly indicates that a major transformation is underway. However, it has also been noted that the drive for increased quality in Ireland may be diluted by a significant percentage of newly qualified teachers coming from other jurisdictions, where it is considered that the philosophy and qualitative approach to teacher education may not be in line with that being pursued in Ireland.[25] While the new model of initial teacher education poses a challenge for principals and classroom teachers to take a more pro-active role in the formation of new recruits to the profession, this is also a great opportunity for the profession's self-development. Practitioners in other established professions such as medicine and law engage in the formation of their future members.

Following successful graduation all beginning teachers now need to satisfactorily complete a programme for induction as a requirement for full registration by the Council. The Council also emphasises the role the profession should play in the induction process:

> "Induction should be based on a whole school approach which sees induction and mentoring as the professional responsibility of the whole community of teachers, supported by ITE providers, school leadership and linked to the school's development plan."[26]

Arising from a period of consultation with stakeholders, the Teaching Council, in May 2013, issued a policy termed 'Droichead', which set out a new model for the future for the induction and probation of newly qualified teachers. The Council regards this policy as "a way forward for induction and probation which positions school communities in a professional space where shared responsibility is the norm. In doing so, it supports the growth of collective professional confidence. A fundamental value underpinning the policies is professionally led regulation".[27] This provides an interesting echo to the report of 1974 on a teaching council which envisaged, "the establishment of a teaching council, which would involve the exercise of considerable self-governing powers by the teaching profession".

As regards continuing professional development (CPD), the Council sees this as both a right and a responsibility for all registered teachers. It aims to develop "a coherent national framework" for CPD and, in due course, it is planned that engagement with CPD will be a requirement for renewal of registration, as provided for in the Education Amendment Act (2012) and as is the case for some other professions. Council also favours the school as a planning unit for CPD.

> "In exercising their role as professional learning communities, schools should prepare a professional development plan covering a three to five year period, taking into account teachers' individual needs, the needs of the school and the needs of the system."[28]

Reaping the harvest? The potential of the continuum

Viewed in historical perspective, the policy on the continuum of teacher education is of landmark significance. For the first time, Irish teachers have secured the demands of the '3I's', under the guidance of a teaching council, on which they have majority membership. It is at once, a tribute to the efforts of previous generations and holds out great promise for teacher generations to come. The profession itself is seen as an integral partner in all dimensions of teacher education. While it is a matter of great regret that the policy changes were not arrived at earlier, when economic circumstances were much more propitious for implementation, yet, the opportunity presented must not be missed. It is understandable that some teachers would not welcome change and some new demands on their efforts in the context of severe cutbacks, but it would be shortsighted for the profession to adopt a defensive, negative

stance. It will take time to embed proposed reforms, and it is important that the foundations are well laid. It will be an evolving process, and a long term perspective is desirable. The best strategy for the profession would be to take the high ground of professional responsibility and establish a sense of ownership of the reforms.

A significant contextual factor in relation to the future of teacher education is that, as part of government policy for collaboration, co-operation and integration of higher education institutions generally, major structural changes are planned for teacher education institutions. In her Background Paper, prepared for an International Review Team on Teacher Education in Ireland, (2012), Professor Áine Hyland saw the restructuring "as an opportunity to reconfigure the system of initial teacher education in Ireland to ensure the best possible learning experience for student-teachers that will compare favourably with the best in the world".[29] The International Review Panel, noting that "the academic standard of applicants (for teacher education) is among the highest, if not the highest, in the world", considered that it was incumbent that this "rich resource should be highly valued… challenged and developed to their full potential".[30]

The Review Panel set out its vision for the future as follows:

"The Review Panel's vision for the structure of ITE provision in Ireland is that by 2030 Ireland will have a network of teacher education institutions based on a small number of internationally comparable institutes of teacher education. Each of these institutes will offer research-based teacher education in internationally inspiring environments, provided at Masters level initially or through continuing professional development. Each will also offer further professional development services on the continuum ranging from early childhood to inservice training of teachers and leaders."[31]

The existing 19 institutions providing teacher education were reconfigured into six clusters by the Review Panel in 2012, so as to ensure each cluster has 'a critical mass' and competiveness for good teaching, research and international co-operation.[32] Time will tell how this envisaged major restructuring of the provision of teacher education will evolve, but if planned changes are effected, there is much potential for the enhancement of expertise, co-ordination, quality teacher education for all sectors and for the promotion of educational research.

A striking feature of the development in recent years has been the involvement of teachers as key partners in the whole spectrum of teacher education provision. This is in alignment with another contemporaneous movement in encouraging schools to be learning communities, with teachers taking a lead role in the planning and evaluation of their work. For many generations in Ireland teachers operated within a 'top-down' model of operation, whereby the curricula and timetables were laid down by the centralised authority, and a tight mode of external inspection of their work took place, particularly at primary level. This culture has been changing. The school Inspectorate, itself, has been significantly restructured and has been a proactive partner in promoting the reforms which are underway, as has the TES. Teachers are now expected to take initiatives on curricular design, on innovative forms of

pedagogy, on humane styles of discipline. In many ways, the teacher's role is envisaged as centre stage, in the driving seat of reform. The Festival of Education in Learning and Teaching Excellence (FEILTE), organised by the Teaching Council as an annual event for World Teachers' Day (5 October), can be seen as a public celebration of this role.

School communities are required to devise their own school plans, prioritising issues relevant to their community and environment. Plans are also underway to establish a system of school self-evaluation, whereby school teams critically reflect on their work, plan remedial measures and set targets for the future. The combination of such changes involves a culture change for Irish schools, reflective of a new era wherein the teaching profession exercises more initiative and control over its professional activities. From September 2013, registered teachers have unprecedented free access to a vast range of educational research through the EBSCO Educational Source, under the auspices of the Teaching Council. While the challenges for teachers to operationalise the new opportunities should not be under estimated, in the context of the financial cutbacks, hopefully, the long-term gains involved can be safe guarded. In this context, the achievements of the current generation of Irish teachers may be of historic importance.

Arising from the European Commission's document *Supporting the Teaching Professions for Better Learning Outcomes,* a conference was held, on 19 February 2013, under the auspices of the Irish Presidency of the European Union which focussed on the professional identity of teacher educators. It explored the desired fluidity of roles by various actors in contemporary teacher education, as a continuum. What emerged was how much the policy changes of the recent past in Ireland are in harmony with desired good practice. Collaboration and interplay between school teachers and the teacher educators in the higher education institutions (HEIs), has been advancing greatly. Ireland is well positioned to be a leader in the changing paradigm. The developments in Ireland are also in line with the conclusions of an OECD study, *Building a High-Quality Teaching Profession: Lessons from around the World*, (2011). It concluded:

> "Making teaching an attractive and effective profession requires supporting continuous learning, developing career structures to give new roles to teachers, and engaging strong teachers as active agents in school reform, not just implementers of plans designed by others. It also requires strengthening the knowledge base of education and developing a culture of research and reflection in schools so that teaching and learning can be based on the best available knowledge."[33]

Among Ireland's advantages is the very high quality of entrants to teacher education courses. The teaching career is well respected by the Irish public, who have a high level of trust and regard for it. The teacher education courses are being extended and reconceptualised in qualitative ways. Education studies are well established and regarded within the HEIs. New partnerships are being forged between the HEIs and the schools which involve school principals and staff in a much more pro-active role as mentors and guides to student teachers.

Teacher education as a continuum is now officially established, with each cycle of the continuum benefiting from new definition and guidelines. Induction to the profession is now established for all beginning teachers, as a registration requirement. Members of the profession are being trained to provide induction in collaboration with HEIs. A great variety of forms of continuing professional development is in operation, with many courses leading to formal qualifications. As well as HEI involvement in CPD, a tradition of seconding skilled, experienced teachers to work with their peers is well established. The Regional Education Centres play crucial roles in various aspects of CPD, sometimes in collaboration with HEIs. Many teachers assist the Education Departments of HEIs on a part-time basis, particularly in the areas of pedagogic expertise. The teacher education institutions are being restructured with a view to providing critical masses of expertise, co-ordinated programmes and research. The emphasis on reflective practice and research underpins all features of the continuum. The school is being re-envisaged, with a much greater emphasis on collegiality, whole school planning, and school self-evaluation. Since its establishment in 2006, the Teaching Council has done much to justify the aspirations many generations had for its establishment in the promotion of the teaching profession in Ireland. Much evidence exists that we are in a dynamic new era for teacher education and the teaching profession, to the great benefit of the profession and, ultimately, to the advantage of many young generations of Irish citizens.

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Leadership preparation in the Republic of Ireland

Does it make a difference for the novice primary school principal?

≡ VERENA CUNNINGHAM ≋

Abstract

In the context of an impending global leadership recruitment crisis and the recognition of the critical impact of effective leadership on educational outcomes, leadership preparation has become the focus of educational reform worldwide. The design and delivery of pre-appointment programmes has become a global enterprise and in many countries, a leadership qualification is now mandatory for aspiring principals. In the Republic of Ireland however, where Tóraíocht, an accredited programme of preparation for school leadership was introduced in 2008, leadership preparation is a new phenomenon. The aim of this research study was to examine if leadership preparation makes a difference for the novice primary school principal in the Republic of Ireland today. The chief findings educed indicate certain favourable conclusions regarding the impact of the Tóraíocht programme on graduates subsequently appointed to primary level principalship positions and positive attitudes towards the proposed introduction of a compulsory pre-appointment leadership qualification in the near future.

Keywords: **educational leadership, novice school leaders, leadership preparation programmes, mandatory qualification for principalship.**

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"There is increasing recognition that preparing and developing school leaders cannot be left to chance." (Bush, 2008a, p.307).

Introduction

Identification of school leadership as second only to classroom teaching in its degree of influence on educational outcomes (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris and Hopkins, 2006), combined with concern that the practice of modern leadership requires "specific skills and competencies that may not have been developed with years of teaching alone" (*Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development* [OECD], 2008, p.136) and fears of an impending recruitment crisis (Anderson, Kleinhenz, Mulford and Gurr, 2008), have placed leadership preparation at the heart of educational reform worldwide (Huber, 2008). Entrusting the calibre of those charged with leading our educational institutions to providence is becoming

increasingly rare and provision for leadership preparation has proliferated exponentially over the past decade (Huber, 2008). The design and delivery of such programmes has become a global enterprise (Brundrett and Dering, 2006) and in many countries, a leadership qualification is now mandatory for aspiring principals (Bush, 2008b).

In the Republic of Ireland however, provision for leadership preparation is a novel phenomenon. A re-examination of the role of the Irish primary school principal (Government of Ireland, 1999) led to the establishment of the Leadership Development for Schools (LDS) initiative in 2001 to devise and centrally co-ordinate a range of leadership development programmes. Misneach, an induction course for newly appointed principals, was the first programme established by the LDS (now assimilated within the Professional Development Service for Teachers [PDST]) and was independently evaluated by Morgan and Sugrue (2005). The findings of this research, in concert with criticism by the OECD (2007) of the absence of pre-appointment preparation for aspiring school leaders as a deficiency within the Irish education system and the identification of a steady decline in the number and quality of applicants for vacant principalship positions (McDonald, 2008), culminated in the introduction of Tóraíocht, an accredited programme of preparation for school leadership, in 2008.

Although international research examining leadership preparation is swiftly developing and increasingly evidencing the merits of preparatory programme engagement (Pounder, 2011), domestic research in the area is embryonic and no research exploring the impact of the Tóraíocht programme on graduates subsequently appointed to primary level principalship positions had, as yet, been undertaken. Moreover, although attainment of a leadership qualification is not presently a prerequisite for appointment to principalship in the Irish Republic, the Department of Education and Skills (DES, 2011) has signalled its intention to make such a requirement mandatory from 2018. In light of this imminent reform, an examination of the impact of current provision for leadership preparation seemed an opportune and imperative area for research.

International provision for leadership preparation

As evidenced by the proliferation of and escalating legislation surrounding pre-appointment programmes worldwide, confidence in and commitment to formal preparation for school leadership appears dominant among policy makers (Orr and Orphanos, 2011). Comprehension of the domestic status of leadership preparation is best achieved within a knowledge base that embraces global provision (Walker, Bridges and Chan, 1996) and thus, exploration of the international situation facilitates accurate positioning of Irish provision within this wider global context.

Leadership preparation in the United Kingdom

In the United Kingdom (UK), provision for leadership preparation commenced with the introduction of the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) in 1997 (Brundrett, 2001). Aligned with national competence standards, the NPQH aimed to provide

"appropriate and sufficient preparation for headship" (Bush, 1998, p.321). However, it was the creation of the centrally funded National College for School Leadership (NCSL) in 2000 that intensified attendance to leadership developmental needs (Earley and Evans, 2004). Under its remit, the NPQH was reformed significantly. In 2004, the National Standards for Headship were also restructured and the revised NPQH, which is aligned with these standards, now comprises a six-module programme comprising 'Shaping the Future', 'Leading Learning and Teaching', 'Developing Self and Working with Others', 'Managing the Organisation', 'Securing Accountability', and 'Strengthening Community' (Brundrett, 2006). The Scottish Qualification for Headship (SQH), the NPQH in Wales and the Professional Qualification for Headship (PQH NI) provided by the Regional Training Unit (RTU) in Northern Ireland follow a similar format, amended to reflect contextual variances (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008).

Since April 2004, the NPQH has been compulsory for first-time school principals in England. However, a transitional agreement allowed those with a place on the programme to assume a headship position until April 2009, when attainment of the NPQH became a prerequisite for appointment (National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services, 2010). In Scotland, the SQH has been obligatory since 2005, where an identical transitional arrangement existed until 2009 (Cowie and Crawford, 2009), while in Wales, acquisition of the NPQH has been mandatory since 2005 (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008). In Northern Ireland, completion of the PQH (NI) is, as yet, non-compulsory but is increasingly expected of applicants for principalship positions (RTU and LDS, 2009).

Leadership preparation in the United States of America

In the United States of America (USA), the prerequisites for appointment to principalship are extensive. In the majority of states, three years' teaching experience, a Master's Degree in Education or Educational Administration or Leadership, completion of an administrative internship **and** engagement with a mandated pre-appointment programme granting a licence to serve as school principal, are required (Daresh and Male, 2000). Although long established in the USA, the past decade has seen considerable expansion of provision, with approximately 250,000 pre service programmes now available nationwide (Levine, 2005).

Widespread condemnation of leadership competency and programme quality in the 1980s led to the establishment of the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) which developed the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) *Educational Leadership Policy Standards*. Revised in 2008, the ISLLC Standards are controlled by the profession itself (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008) and to gain licensure, participants must exhibit competencies in six fundamental areas of educational leadership.

Despite individual states reserving the right to establish and control educational benchmarks, by 2005, 46 states had adopted or amended these standards (Sanders and Simpson, 2005) which strongly influence preparation for and inservice development of school leadership (Anthes, 2004). Amidst persistent criticism of inadequate quality (Levine, 2005), radical revision of programme content and delivery has now occurred (Orr and Orphanos, 2011).

Leadership preparation in Europe

Since the establishment of the NCSL in the UK, the development of standards for the practice of educational leadership, the design and accreditation of leadership preparation programmes and legislation mandating such qualifications for appointment to principalship positions is becoming increasingly common throughout Europe (Møller and Schratz, 2008).

Since the 1990s in Austria for example, it has been compulsory for all first time principals to complete a training programme while simultaneously executing their new leadership responsibilities (Møller and Schratz, 2008). In France, aspiring principals are compelled to complete qualification programmes funded by the Ministry of National Education (Rusch, 2008), while application for principalship in Germany now requires completion of a structured preparatory programme (Huber and Pashiardis, 2008). Despite the availability of varied initiatives for preservice development in Switzerland however, there is presently no obligation on school leaders to participate (Møller and Schratz, 2008).

In Norway, Denmark and the Netherlands, although a formal qualification for appointment to principalship is as yet non-compulsory, the development of standards for the practice of educational leadership is progressing in all countries and the introduction of a mandatory qualification is imminent (Møller and Schratz, 2008). In Finland, the prior attainment of a Diploma in School Management and Administration is required (Gayer, 2003), while legislation mandating completion of a governmentally controlled preparatory programme within four years of appointment was ratified in Sweden in 2006 (Møller and Schratz, 2008).

Leadership preparation in the Republic of Ireland

From this global landscape has emerged the Tóraíocht programme, the Republic of Ireland's only endorsed preparatory programme for school leadership. There is evidence of cognisance to similar programmes worldwide, with content and delivery mirroring the pioneering nations of the UK and the USA, yet avoiding the 'national standards' route frequently taken by international counterparts. Instead, Tóraíocht is founded on a generic profile of school leadership that explicates four core interdependent dimensions of the role: personal, transformational, instructional and organisational leadership (LDS, 2003). However, with the Department of Education and Skills (DES, 2011) presently considering the introduction of a mandatory leadership qualification for all future principals from 2018, in this respect, the Republic of Ireland appears ready to imitate global legislative reform.

Tóraíocht is a Postgraduate Diploma in Educational Leadership offered in partnership between the PDST and the Education Department of the National University of Ireland Maynooth (NUIM) that is accessible through five education centres nationwide. The one-year, part-time programme aims to expand leadership capacity in the educational system and support preparation for future senior school leadership positions by developing the knowledge, skills, competencies, attitudes and understanding essential for effective leadership. Available to both primary and second level practitioners, a minimum of four years' teaching experience is required to apply.

Developed in collaboration with experienced school leaders, programme delivery integrates theoretical content with co-constructed learning, reflection and in school project work and employs a blended model that combines face to face sessions with online learning. Prioritised is the engagement of participants as active learners who are guided along a journey that aims to shape an individual vision and style of leadership through the exploration of the six content areas detailed below (LDS, 2009).

1. THE PERSON-HUMAN AND PROFESSIONAL: promotes the practice of self-reflection; the development of self-understanding; and, the significance of emotional intelligence, ethics, care and values in effective leadership.
2. THE ENTERPRISE OF EDUCATION: interrogates the role of leadership in education policy and analyses Irish educational policy from 1958 to the 1990s; the present reality of educational legislation; and, global legislative and policy issues for schools going forward.
3. LEADING LEARNING: explores learning centred leadership; the meaning of quality teaching and learning; leading the learning community; the school as a learning organisation; and, the role and conduct of assessment of and for learning.
4. LEADING PEOPLE: examines the associated issues of values, vision and culture; the role of senior leadership in working with stakeholders; the distribution of leadership; effective communication; the management of critical incidents; and, the construction of relationships with the wider community.
5. LEADING THE ORGANISATION: familiarises participants with the purpose of the school and the development of organisational capacity; the significance of recognising diverse school cultures and the role of leadership in shaping the distinct culture of the school; the nature and impact of change and the leader as change agent; situational awareness; legislation and policies; and, the organisational strategies of planning and evaluation.
6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES: provides a theoretical basis for reflective practice and explores action research and qualitative and quantitative research methodologies to guide participants in their conduct of a leadership focused, school based project.

Although over 500 participants have graduated from the programme to date, no research examining its impact on graduates subsequently appointed to school leadership positions had been undertaken.

International research – the impact of leadership preparation

With a dearth of domestic research, examination of the impact of leadership preparation programmes globally had been deplored as "a research desideratum" (Huber, 2008, p.174). The growing expenditure on and commitment to leadership preparation had been widely criticised as an 'act of faith' (Cowie and Crawford, 2007). While the domain has been slow to develop (Orr and Orphanos, 2011), robust theoretical frameworks to advance such research have recently emerged (Orr, 2011), facilitating deeper exploration of the impact of leadership preparation programmes on those who engage with them (Pounder, 2011).

Leadership preparation and early experiences

Despite the proclamation that prior preparation **can** impact upon the nature of transition to the principalship position (Ribbins, 2008), in nations where leadership preparation is now well established, research reveals inconsistent findings regarding elements of this initial experience that are affected by preparatory programme participation.

Upholding earlier assertions (Earley and Evans, 2004), Cowie (2011) reports novice school leaders who **had** engaged in such formal preparation as feeling ill prepared for the overwhelming nature of the principalship, while other research studies affirm a closer match between prior expectation and the reality of the role for formally prepared incumbents (Cowie and Crawford, 2009). Selected investigations additionally assert pre-appointment preparation as aiding the assumption and validation of the professional identity of school principal (Reeves, Forde, Morris and Turner, 2003; Cowie and Crawford, 2009). However, others refute such a positive association and report programme graduates as continuing to experience difficulty configuring their new identities (Daresh and Male, 2000; Browne-Ferrigno, 2003).

For some, participation in pre-appointment development is less beneficial than expected (Rusch, 2008). However, graduates are found to convey strong command of leadership discourse and heightened knowledge of its associated concepts as a result of programme engagement (OECD, 2008; Perez, Uline, Johnson, James-Ward and Basom, 2011). Moreover, such programmes provide structure to the multifarious responsibilities of headship (Crow, 2007) and address voids in prior experience and expertise (Simkins, Coldwell, Close and Morgan, 2009), enabling graduates to "hit the ground running on appointment" (Cowie and Crawford, 2009, p.15).

A further chief advantage of pre-appointment preparation consistently affirmed is the access to supportive networks (Cowie and Crawford, 2009) that develop during and extend beyond the life of such programmes (Crow, 2007) and are judged invaluable in aiding the transition to and reducing the isolation that often accompanies assumption of the role (Cowie, 2011).

Leadership preparation and performance

The aim of pre-appointment preparation is the inculcation of the knowledge, skills and attributes of efficacious leadership to improve performance in post (Bellamy, Fulmer, Murphy and Muth, 2003). Although examination of leadership efficacy is complex (Lashway, 2003), extensive research to identify the most effectual leadership practices has been undertaken (Orr, 2011). Such studies present a plethora of consistent prescriptions for effective leadership (Orr, 2011), many of which have become the framework for leadership preparation programmes (NPBEA, 2002). For the purpose of this investigation, exploration of effective leadership was derived from the meta-analysis conducted by Robinson, Lloyd and Rowe (2008) of 27 studies of efficacious leadership dispositions. These studies concluded that promotion and participation in teacher learning and development, planning, co-ordination and evaluation of teaching and the curriculum, and the collective establishment of clear goals and expectations yielded the greatest effect on educational outcomes. Although the base of

empirical evidence is limited (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe and Meyerson, 2005), recent investigations assert a positive correlation between preparatory programme engagement and increased employment of the most efficacious leadership behaviours identified in this model in subsequent practice (Orr and Orphanos, 2011; Perez et al., 2011).

Leadership preparation and professional pathways

Despite the proliferation of pre-appointment programmes internationally, minimal research investigating the association, if any, between leadership preparation and subsequent career progression has been conducted (Anderson et al., 2008). Of the studies analysed, suggestions of heightened interest in advancement to principalship (Orr, 2011), the propulsion of greater numbers of applicants towards such vacancies (OECD, 2008), and significantly condensed career trajectories among preparatory programme graduates are posited (Cowie, 2011). Engagement with preparation programmes enhances self-belief in competency to undertake leadership roles (Crow, 2007), while in its absence, many viable candidates lack the self-confidence to apply (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003). Interestingly, also revealed is a long term ambition to attain principalship and a carefully planned ascent to the position among many programme participants (Bush, Purvis and Barallon, 2008; Cowie, 2011), suggesting that perhaps it is personal ambition rather than programme engagement that influences the professional pathways subsequently pursued by programme graduates.

Global perceptions towards mandatory leadership preparation

The decision to pronounce leadership preparation mandatory was borne from an effort to enhance leadership effectiveness and increase the pool of qualified, interested candidates for vacant principalship positions (OECD, 2007). In countries where preparatory programmes are either non-existent or optional, the issue has risen rapidly to the peak of the educational reform agenda. Despite trade union opposition to compulsory preparation for school leadership in Norway (Møller and Schratz, 2008), in other contexts incumbent leaders are now requesting its introduction (OECD, 2008). In Denmark, for example, 90% of principals consider mandatory preparation essential (OECD, 2008), while in Malta, principals also favour its introduction (Bezzina, 2002).

Research aim

Evidently, the incredible global investment in leadership preparation **is** profitable, with some research suggesting a positive impact on progression to principalship, transition to the role and the employment of effective leadership practices. In the Irish Republic however, a research vacuity led this study to examine whether participation in the Tóraíocht programme yields similar reward. Informed by the revelations of international investigations, the ambition of this research endeavour was to explore the impact of leadership preparation on novice primary school principals by comparatively examining the career pathways, early experiences and leadership dispositions of principals, recently appointed following their completion of

the Tóraíocht programme, with a second cohort of principals, also recently appointed but who did not engage in such prior preparation. Furthermore, the research sought to investigate the attitudes of first-time principals to the proposed introduction of a mandatory leadership qualification for appointment to principalship in the near future.

Research methodology

With the project deemed best served through the acquisition of an in depth insight into the history, lived-world, performance and perceptions of novice primary school principals, a qualitative methodological approach from a narrative perspective was employed.

Global research frequently depicts school leadership in a sterile manner (Cowie, 2011). However, a narrative perspective can assuage such clinical representation (Gray, 1998) and admit readers to the reality of the complex world of school leadership (Cowie, 2011). Conducive to research examining the initial stages of school leadership (Muller, 1999), the narrative perspective has been effectively employed in recent studies in the domain (for example, Brundrett 2006; Cowie and Crawford, 2009).

Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with 12 recently appointed principals, six of whom had engaged with the Tóraíocht programme prior to appointment and six of whom had not done so.

- ◈ COHORT A: All graduates of the Tóraíocht programme prior to appointment, this cohort comprised five females and one male. They had served between six months and two years as principal at the time of interview, and are subsequently represented by the codifiers A1, A2, A3, A4, A5 and A6. Principals A1, A2, A3 and A4 held administrative positions in large urban schools, while principals A5 and A6 were teaching principals in smaller rural settings.
- ◈ COHORT B: Of this cohort, none of whom had engaged with a preparatory programme prior to appointment, four were female and two male. All had served between six months and two years in the position at the time of interview, and are indicated as B1, B1, B2, B3, B4, B5 and B6 henceforth. Principals B1 and B2 held administrative positions in urban settings, while principals B3, B4, B5 and B6 were teaching principals in smaller rural settings.

Each interview disclosed the authentic stories of their personal experiences as novice principals, yielding rich and relevant data in the process. Emerging trends, commonalities and differences between the career pathways, early experiences and leadership practices among subjects belonging to the same cohort and between both groups were identified, while perceptions towards the proposed introduction of a mandatory leadership qualification across the entire participant body were assessed.

While every effort was made to reinforce the validity and reliability of the investigation, by virtue of bias in the form of interviewer effect (Bush, 2007), a dependency on self-reported data (Ribbins, 2007), the impossibility of generalisation from a small sample size and the multiplicity of interpretations to which qualitative data is susceptible (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009), the nature of the research design poses certain unavoidable limitations. Despite such

constraints, the primary findings educed are intriguing, providing a tentative, favourable indication of the impact of the Tóraíocht programme on graduates subsequently appointed to principalship positions and positive attitudes towards the proposed introduction of a compulsory leadership qualification for all aspiring to such positions in the future.

Research findings

Key findings emanating from the analysis of collated data were considered against international literature in the domain of leadership preparation and are subsequently presented according to the four core issues explored in each interview, namely, career pathways, initial experiences, leadership practices and attitudes towards the introduction of a mandatory leadership qualification for appointment to principalship in the Irish Republic.

Career pathways

Research proposes that the career pathways of those who engage with preparatory programmes should be significantly condensed (Cowie, 2011), particularly when compared with those appointed without such prior preparation (Daresh and Male, 2000). Conflicting with such revelations however, the pathways to principalship traversed by the participants across **both** cohorts were predominantly characterised by brevity, with little, if no experience at senior management level preceding appointment. It is reasonable to contend that the embargo on recruitment to promoted positions introduced in response to current economic difficulties (DES, 2009) accounts for this contradiction, resulting in the appointment of principals with negligible prior formal leadership experience and accentuating the greater need for specific preparation than ever before. However, although introduced in 2008, cohort B remained largely oblivious to the availability of such dedicated provision, while within cohort A, awareness of the Tóraíocht programme materialised mainly by chance.

> "I just googled leadership courses for education and Tóraíocht came up. I hadn't heard about it before." (A1)

> "I didn't do any formal preparation or a course or anything like that. I didn't actually know about any courses that were available." (B5)

Amongst the participant body, aspiration to advance to principalship was predominantly emergent, with only B2 articulating a longstanding desire to achieve such an appointment. It is of significant concern that the factor that steered four of the six participants within cohort B towards the principalship was the present embargo on recruitment to permanent teaching positions. Although these participants were content teaching, personal circumstances necessitated redeployment, and despite lacking definitive desire to accept ultimate leadership responsibility, all four advanced hesitantly and ambivalently to assume principalship positions, as these were the only vacancies available.

"We needed to move out of Dublin but then the jobs embargo came in. I never really wanted to become a principal, but I thought that I could handle it, if I really had to." (B3)

"It was time to move home but with no permanent jobs this year, I felt that I had no option other than to apply for principalships." (B5)

Contravening the proposition that those who engage with preparation programmes harbour long term ambitions to ascend to principalship (Bush et al., 2008), common to cohort A was a former disinclination towards and improbability of appointment to principalship. However, the gradual entrustment of greater responsibility at a subordinate level afforded the opportunity to collaborate with their former principals and savour the professional satisfaction gained from such heightened responsibility. This awakened a tentative appetite for further leadership involvement which, when combined with completion of the Tóraíocht programme, categorically propelled its graduates towards principalship with commitment, confidence and passion. This revelation has also been borne out in similar global investigations (OECD, 2008; Orr, 2011).

"For me, Tóraíocht just forged the way. I came to see that the principalship was what I wanted and that I would be able for it. Before Tóraíocht, I thought I needed to be a few years older, that I needed more experience." (A2)

"Tóraíocht affirmed that I had the skills and the knowledge to do the job and filled the voids that were there. It gave me a good grounding to look for a principalship with more knowledge and confidence than I would have had otherwise." (A6)

Concurring with recent disclosures (Perez et al., 2011), Tóraíocht graduates conveyed self-belief in capability to assume principalship positions and in contrast to the smaller school settings largely sought by cohort B, enhanced confidence to seek and accept inaugural leadership responsibility in larger school contexts.

"I thought it was a relatively small school and that I wouldn't be biting off more than I could chew." (B3)

"I thought a smaller school wouldn't be too bad to start off with. I wouldn't have taken on the role in a bigger school anyway." (B6)

"I wanted an administrative principalship but if I hadn't completed Tóraíocht, I wouldn't have had the confidence to apply for the principalship here." (A5)

Surprisingly, whether they had engaged with the Tóraíocht programme or not, most of the participants were appointed on their first application. This reinforces the diminished competition for such positions reported within the Irish Republic (Drea and O'Brien, 2002) and intimates that Tóraíocht may have failed, as yet, to bolster the plummeting pool of

applicants for primary level principalship positions vacated in large numbers in recent times (Nunan, 2010).

Initial experiences

Negotiating the transition to the principalship was distinctly less difficult for those who had engaged with the Tóraíocht programme in advance of appointment to the role. Concurrent with international research, excluding A4, the formally prepared principals conveyed greater awareness of the reality of the position (Draper and McMichael, 1998), enhanced readiness for the role (Hewitson, 1995), augmented ability to assail their new responsibilities with immediacy (Cowie and Crawford, 2009), reduced difficulty reconfiguring their professional identities (Reeves et al., 2003) and access to a broader support network than their lesser prepared counterparts (Ribbins, 2008).

> "It has run smoothly so far. I have found it very easy to adapt to the role. Everyone says that it's as if I have been in the job for years but from Tóraíocht, I knew what I was heading into. I was ready for the role on day one and I was able to hit the ground running." (A2)

> "In those first weeks, I was waiting for all hell to break loose but it has been exactly as I expected it would be. Tóraíocht opens your eyes to exactly what the principalship is all about." (A5)

> "From Tóraíocht, you get a huge insight into the role so I knew in a stereotypical sense what was involved, but my own school environment was so challenging, so outside of the norm, that was where the discrepancy arose." (A4)

> "There is so much support for principals now. When I have a query about anything, there are so many places to turn. One of my tutors from Tóraíocht has been very supportive and I would often ring her. Also, I have stayed in contact with students from the course who were appointed to principalships around the same time and we have been a great support to each other." (A3)

In stark contrast to their formally prepared counterparts, with the exception of B2, the early experiences of first time principalship for cohort B were markedly less positive, with the majority reporting an arduous transition and a lack of critical knowledge and skill that left them ill-prepared for their new positions. Prevalent among this group was a difficulty in assuming their new professional identities combined with a mismatch between the principalship as anticipated and as in reality. In addition, despite identifying various sources of support, the majority conveyed feeling inadequately supported in their new roles.

> "Those first months were very hard – it was all a bit chaotic. You are a teacher one day and principal the next, with nothing to bridge the gulf between. It was very hard to adapt and I didn't get much support." (B4)

"I survived but I wasn't ready for it at all. There was so much I had to learn and still have to learn. There is a certain loneliness attached to the job. You have no-one else to ask." (B1)

"It was overwhelming initially. The physical demands are huge but it's a lot more mentally demanding than I expected. Also, you never have the same relationship with your colleagues as you did when you were a teacher." (B3)

"I found the first months really tough. It was a steep learning curve and I wondered if I would ever settle in. In week three, I had a total breakdown. I questioned why I had taken this on." (B5)

"I wasn't surprised by anything. I fully understood what I was getting into." (B2)

While there were exceptions within both groups, attributable to uniquely critical contextual circumstances in the case of participant A4 and lengthy and vast pertinent experience for principal B2, such deductions echo Ribbins (2008, p.72) who asserts that "the quality of transition is shaped by contextual variables and also by factors such as self-belief, depth, breath and relevance of previous experience and the breath, depth and relevance of prior preparation and training". With a successful transition dependent on a strong sense of self-efficacy (Gronn, 1999) and an ability to adjust to place, people **and** personal self (Wildly and Clarke, 2008), it is reasonable to conclude that relative to the participant body, the Tóraíocht programme positively impacts upon the "making of a principal" (Lane, 1984) by kindling the manifestation of these critical preconditions.

Leadership practices

A significant disparity in the reported performance of aspects of the most efficacious leadership practices identified in international research was uncovered in this investigation.

Across all narratives, informal encouragement of regular participation in continuous professional development was articulated. Echoing research findings emerging from the USA (Orr and Orphanos, 2011) however, Tóraíocht graduates revealed greater commitment to the systematic promotion of and maximisation of provision for professional development than those who had advanced to the principalship without such formal preparation.

"In terms of promoting it, I haven't done much other than leave the pages lying around and mention what class level it is for. I haven't done anything more on it as yet but I would encourage them to do anything they can." (B5)

"I upskill regularly and I encourage my staff to do likewise. If I feel that there is a gap with a teacher's particular methodology in a subject, I try and seek out support for them. I also put it on the staff meeting agenda every month. I always inform the staff of anything that is available and I approach those who I think it most suits or may be

most interested. They're so willing to engage and always give feedback to the rest of the staff afterwards." (A1)

Among cohort B, reflection on professional competencies and shortcomings yielded a wide range of identified strengths, with little pattern detectable among the narratives expressed. For cohort A however, all testimonies cited ability to empower and nurture leadership in others through delegating responsibility and encouraging participation in the Tóraíocht programme, as a significant competency.

"I'm very strong on delegation. I try to share the responsibilities and give others the chance to lead." (A1)

"One of my strengths would be my ability to motivate people; to make them realise that everybody has a certain skill; and to have that skill utilised, not only for the benefit of the school but to boost their confidence as well. It's very important that other staff members get to develop their leadership skills, particularly those who have leadership potential within." (A4)

"Some of my staff members have come to me about Tóraíocht. They are very interested in furthering themselves, particularly as regards leadership. With the current situation, the only positions that are available are principalships and I have encouraged them to complete the programme." (A6)

This view concurs with Blossing and Ekholm (2005) and Perez et al. (2011) who conclude the distribution of leadership responsibilities and enhanced commitment to the development of leadership capacity in others to be direct outcomes of preparatory programme engagement.

A collaborative approach to goal setting and curricular planning was voiced with unanimity across both cohorts and contravening the avowal that formally prepared principals utilise data with greater consistency and efficiency than their lesser prepared peers (Perez et al., 2011), **all** principals reported the regular monitoring of pupil performance and the habitual employment of such data in guiding future organisational improvement. In relation to the appraisal of teacher performance however, cohort B expressed discomfort at engaging in such practice. Comparatively, and complying with international evidence (Orr and Orphanos, 2011), all participants within cohort A professed increased attendance to the improvement of teacher performance, engaging in the instructional leadership activities of classroom visitation, proffering pedagogical feedback and assisting staff members in the enhancement of teaching strategies with greater frequency and regularity than their counterparts in cohort B.

"We are all professionals and evaluating the staff is the primary remit of the Inspectorate. It would be unfair to expect a principal to evaluate colleagues." (B4)

"Staff appraisal is probably one of the hardest aspects of the principalship. It has to be done very delicately. I wouldn't be comfortable with it to be honest." (B1)

"I wouldn't dream of telling my staff how to teach." (B5)

"I monitor quite closely. I do a lot of class visits. I observe teachers teaching. If there's a gap or I think there's an area needing improvement, I'll speak to the teacher about it and suggest methodologies could be used." (A4)

"I constantly check in with the staff, either individually or in small groups. I regularly pop into the classrooms but I encourage the teachers to come to me too if they are having any difficulties." (A6)

With cohort A emerging as more accomplished in enacting significant elements of the most efficacious leadership practices identified by Robinson et al. (2008) and employing distributive and instructional leadership practices, the two leadership models endorsed as most effective by the OECD (2008), more readily and consistently than cohort B, for the graduates partaking in this investigation, the Tóraíocht programme engenders "increased ability to enact specific leadership practices aimed at improving learning results for students" (Perez et al., 2011, p.218) in their subsequent performance as principals.

Attitudes towards a mandatory leadership qualification

Corresponding with studies conducted in contexts where pre-appointment preparation has not been traditionally commonplace (Bezzina, 2002; OECD, 2007), reflection on their pre-liminary experiences of the primary principalship led the participants to recognise the potential benefits attainable from and the acute need for formal preparation for contemporary school leadership. Recurrent arguments supporting the introduction of a mandatory leadership qualification included the need for prior leadership experience and insight into the role, the rudimentary knowledge and skill that such a programme would impart and the bank of committed, prepared and suitable future applicants that such a programme would produce.

"It's a great idea. There is so much that is generic to all principalships that would be great to have a grasp of before starting in the job." (B6)

"A formal qualification requirement would enable a new principal to go in with a definite skill set and a solid base line of knowledge to draw from." (A4)

"It's badly needed and although it might limit the pool of candidates initially, it would limit it to the right people. In the future, there would be a bank of teachers who really want to become principals, who know what's ahead and already have basic leadership knowledge and skills." (B4)

Although concluding overwhelming support for the prospective introduction of a mandatory leadership qualification for all aspiring to future principalship positions, this support was moderated by several caveats. Suggestive of an approach similar to that in the USA (Cowie, 2011), consultation with and involvement of practising principals in the structuring of such a qualification was advocated, along with an interview based admission process and the need for the attainment of certification in advance of appointment. Furthermore, while Tóraíocht **is** the only officially sanctioned leadership preparation programme in the Irish Republic, formally prepared incumbents considered it, albeit with modification, as suitable for the implementation of such legislation.

> "I don't think it needs to differ hugely from the Tóraíocht programme but there is scope for further development of areas like legislation and communication. Extending the programme from Postgraduate certification to a Master's Degree would allow for that." (A4)

> "If this legislation were to go ahead, Tóraíocht would be ideal. All the areas we studied were so important. However, the role of the teaching principal wasn't really addressed and should be as the majority of principals are teaching rather than administrative." (A6)

Therefore, it appears reasonable to conclude that if endorsed, the proposed legislation will be greeted with strong but qualified approval.

Implications

Generating a valuable insight into the impact of the Tóraíocht programme on the novice primary school principal in the Republic of Ireland today, the implications of the tentative conclusions derived in this study are significant.

In the current climate whereby novice principals are appointed with less formal leadership experience than their predecessors, the need for widespread accessibility to dedicated preparation for the primary principalship is patent. For the PDST and NUIM who jointly offer the Tóraíocht programme, expansion of current provision, which would also yield increased graduate numbers and may intensify interest in and competition for principalship vacancies nationwide, should be considered. With ignorance of the availability of a dedicated preparatory programme for school leadership prevalent, enhanced and continual advertisement of the Tóraíocht programme is a matter of urgency. Moreover, a review of the admission procedures to and the content, duration and accreditation of the Tóraíocht programme should be duly undertaken.

This inaugural study concludes that preparatory programme engagement impacts positively on subsequent leadership performance and discerns strong support for the planned introduction of a compulsory leadership qualification. Therefore it is recommended that DES imminently commission further domestic research in this domain and, if similarly favourable in outcome, solidify commitment to the proposed legislation and embark upon

efforts towards this end. With DES (2011, p.41) presently deliberating legislating for the attainment of a leadership qualification "either as a prerequisite for appointment or as a necessary condition of confirmation as principal within a defined period", novice principals judge requirement to do so in advance of appointment to principalship the optimal approach in terms of preparation for effectiveness. Policy makers should heed this counsel. Furthermore, if endorsed, consultation with practising principals must characterise the developmental process while, the Tóraíocht programme requires examination and modification prior to the implementation of the proposed legislation.

Finally, for educators considering progression to principalship in the future, the merits attainable from formal pre-appointment preparation are extensive. Participation in the Tóraíocht programme is emphatically recommended and aspirants are advised to consider engaging in such professional development prior to their pursuit of an inaugural principalship position.

Conclusion

In the Republic of Ireland, leadership preparation is a novel phenomenon. Dedicated provision for the needs of the aspiring principal materialised in 2008 in the exclusive form of the Tóraíocht programme, the impact of which remained an enigma until this research was undertaken. Although small in scale, the contribution of this investigation is significant. While further examination is required, a domestic research vacuity has been penetrated and the positive influence of leadership preparation on the neophyte primary school principals sharing their personal testimonies as part of this study, educed. Within the Irish Republic, leadership preparation will no longer be relegated to an 'act of faith' (Cowie and Crawford, 2007) but represents a promising pathway to securing the expert school leadership that is the clarion call of modern times.

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Practising intercultural education and cultural inclusiveness in the primary classroom: An Irish perspective

⇒ LORRAINE DUFFY ⇐

Abstract

This study provides an examination of the theory behind intercultural education in the primary school. Cultural diversity education is explored from the multicultural approach to the intercultural approach. The paper focuses on the intercultural approach, with its meaning and relevant national policies being examined. It also gives an extensive guide to classroom planning for intercultural education from the early years' classroom and beyond. The paper provides an in-depth look at available intercultural education guidelines for primary school teachers in Ireland. A guide to classroom planning for intercultural education including the physical environment, the social environment, choosing classroom resources and integrated thematic planning is provided. In essence, the study explores the theory and practice behind the development of a culturally inclusive learning environment in primary classrooms.

Keywords: **intercultural education, planning, policy, inclusive, diversity.**

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Introduction

The economic boom of the 'Celtic Tiger' years in Ireland, which lasted from the mid 1990s until the global economic downturn of 2008 brought with it increased immigration. For example, 12% of the total population (4,588,252 residents) in the 2011 census was non-Irish nationals, while in 2002 this figure was recorded at just 5.8% of the total population. The nationality with the largest increase between 2006 and 2011 was the Polish nationality, showing an increase from 63,276 persons in 2006 to 122,585 persons in 2011 (Central Statistics Office, 2012). The rise in immigration resulted in an increased focus on interculturalism and anti-racism in Irish society and the education system (Bryan in Drudy, 2009, p.226). For instance, the first official intercultural and anti-racist strategies and policy documents came into existence in Ireland in 2005, mainly as a result of immigration, but also due to the rise in public concern for the negative attitudes towards migrants in Ireland (Bryan, 2012, p.602). The table below shows the increase in reported racially motivated incidents in Ireland from 2003-2012 which influenced the need to address the lack of anti-racist policy in Ireland beginning in 2003 when statistics first became available.

Table 1: Number of reported racially motivated incidents in Ireland, 2003-2012.

2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
64	68	100	173	214	172	128	127	142	97

(Source: CSO)

According to the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), "education holds the key to developing an inclusive society where social diversity and cultural differences can be respected, promoted and practised" (INTO, 2002, foreword). Diversity encompasses many different facets and spans across many domains in life such as society, education, family and so on as indicated by Townsend and Fu (1998) who indicate that diversity in an educational context is multifaceted and includes language, religion, socio-economic status, gender, sexual orientation, and age, as well as physical, mental, and emotional exceptionalities. There have been different terms used to describe non-Irish nationals attending schools in Ireland since 2002 some of which include 'international children', 'new migrants', 'foreign national', 'non-Irish national children', 'children for whom English is not their first language (Kitching, 2011, p.309). 'Newcomer pupils' is currently the term used by most national agencies to describe children whose mother tongue is not English, even though they may be Irish nationals (ESRI, INTO, Department of Education and Skills, NCCA). Is there a need for terminology such as 'newcomer children'? Does this create a sense of 'them' and 'us', 'Irish' and non-Irish', 'mainstream' and 'marginalised'? This study examines the issue of cultural diversity in primary education, with particular emphasis being given to the Irish context.

An overview of intercultural education

It can be argued that education is one of the elements that helps to create a culturally inclusive society, and that it is vital to begin the process of positive cultural awareness as early as possible in a child's life (Gillborn, 1995). Research shows that children aged 8-11 years are already developing an awareness of racism, and that it is through schools that anti-racism education, in conjunction with a critical multiculturalism approach that children learn to "reflect upon their attitudes and misconceptions and to understand the open, fluid and complex nature of identities" (Connolly, in Vincent, 2003, p.167). A key element of culturally inclusive learning environments is equality for all involved in the educational process, such as pupils, teachers and parents, regardless of ethnicity or race. Two varying approaches to cultural diversity education include the multicultural approach and the intercultural approach. Both of these terms are often used in reference to cultural diversity in schools; however there is a significant difference between the two. Multicultural education "is best understood as an overview and framework for creating an educational environment where opportunity is equal for people from diverse backgrounds" (Murray and O'Doherty, 2001, p.59). This approach celebrates difference, but it tends to see children from minority cultures as the less important group. According to Murray and O'Doherty (2001, p.73) the multicultural approach tends to "ignore the critical issue that children of the dominant ethnic group

also need to develop awareness about themselves in relation to people from different cultural and other backgrounds". Multicultural education tends to view minority cultures in an exotic light, and thus creates a distance between both the majority and minority cultures.

Murray and O'Doherty (2001) indicate that intercultural education (which is relevant to children from both the majority and minority cultures) "aims to develop understanding among children and adults from different cultural and ethnic origins" (ibid, p.60). Intercultural education is therefore about respecting individuals from other cultural backgrounds and supporting anti-racism (INTO, 2002, foreword). Intercultural education empowers pupils to show empathy to others who are discriminated against (NCCA, 2005, p.21, cited by Bryan, 2012, p.603). Siraj-Blatchford states, "in modern, diverse societies, it is essential children learn social competence to respect other groups and individuals, regard less of difference. This learning must begin in the earliest years of a child's education" (Siraj-Blatchford, 2000, p.96).

In the NCCA's *Intercultural Guidelines for Schools* (2005) some of the benefits of intercultural education include the following:

◈ It encourages the child's curiosity about cultural and social difference.
◈ It helps to develop and support the child's imagination by normalising difference.
◈ It helps to develop the child's critical thinking by enabling the child to gain perspectives on, and to question, his/her own cultural practices.
◈ It helps to develop sensitivity in the child.
◈ It helps to prevent racism (NCCA, 2005, p.21).

By adopting and implementing intercultural education guidelines such as those previously outlined a school can create a culturally inclusive learning environment for all once done so through the medium of a whole-school approach.

The inclusive school

Both 'integration' and 'inclusion' are terms, which contribute significantly to contemporary education and are very different concepts. According to the Oxford English Dictionary integration means "to desegregate", especially racially, for example a school, while inclusion means "to regard or treat as part of a whole". The term 'inclusive education' was not used until the late 1980s. Prior to that, the term integration was widespread (Thomas, Walker and Webb, 1998, p.10). Hegarty, cited by Thomas, Walker and Webb (ibid, p.11) acknowledge the connection between integration and assimilation, which require the minority community to conform to the majority culture. For example, Kitching (2010, p.221) highlights the fact that by focusing solely on language support as a means to address the needs of migrant children sends the message that they must learn English as part of their responsibility to integrate into Irish society. Inclusion as opposed to integration respects all cultures and individual differences.

The majority of literature, for instance (Daniels et al., 1999; Hull, Goldhaber and Capone, 2002 and Thomas, Walker and Webb 1998) refers to inclusion in a particular way, i.e. in

reference to children with disabilities and developmental delays in mainstream classrooms. This is a very narrow view of the term inclusion as it ignores many other reasons why children may experience exclusion, for example, race, class or ethnicity (Felicity Armstrong in *The Inclusive School*, INTO, 2004, p.25). Thomas, Walker and Webb (1998, p.6) refer to inclusion as the way in which mainstream schools include and teach all children equally. The reference to all children is key in the Thomas, Walker and Webb (1998) definition as it eliminates the restricted view of inclusion in educational terms referring only to the inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream classrooms. However, what is the purpose of inclusion in society itself? Inclusion in society involves school, local community, and society as a whole. Each has its role to play when a society claims to be truly 'inclusive' (ibid). It can be argued then that the term inclusive curriculum includes children with different abilities, children who are at risk of leaving school, children from minority groups and cultures, children who are socially disadvantaged, and children with basic or no English skills. Why should schools develop and incorporate an inclusive curriculum as part of their overall school ethos? Firstly, the school curriculum itself is important, as it "should aim to provide opportunities for all pupils to learn and to achieve and promote pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and prepare all pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life" (www.qca.org.uk). The curriculum is therefore subject and child centred and is a valuable instructional and inclusive tool for teachers and schools as it "sets out not only what is to be taught, but how, and how learning in the particular subject area is to be assessed" (www.ncca.ie).

In the Republic of Ireland the *Primary Curriculum* (1999) seeks to be inclusive by responding to and incorporating the elements of *The Equal Status Act* (2000), which prohibits discrimination on nine grounds:

- Gender.
- Marital status.
- Family status (having children, being a carer).
- Age (between the ages of 18 and 65).
- Disability.
- Race.
- Sexual orientation.
- Religious belief.
- Membership of the Traveller community.

If a school professes itself to be culturally inclusive it is important that the educators in the school teach in a culturally relevant way and that the school environment welcomes cultural diversity in a respectful and opening manner. According to Pang (2001, p.192) "culturally relevant teaching is an approach that responds to the socio-cultural context and seeks to integrate cultural content of the learner in shaping an effective learning environment".

Some research (Kenny and McLaughlin, 2004; Tomlinson, 1983; Siraj-Blatchford, 1994; Bryan, 2009) shows that before a teacher can teach in a culturally relevant way he/she needs to examine his/her own cultural values, and to learn to respect the cultural values of each

child in his/her care, which clearly indicates the anti-bias model should be understood and accessed by both teacher and pupil if it is to be implemented in a successful manner. The NCCA (2005) recommend that teachers, children, parents and other community members examine their own attitudes and values and learn how to deal with their emotions, thus developing their personal, social and educational attainment. Staff development is therefore a key element in educating teachers to examine their own attitudes towards other cultural groups. According to Crowley (INTO and the Equality Authority, 2004) the inclusive school "has a particular commitment to staff development and supporting staff to develop under-standings, skills and awareness to effectively respond to pupil diversity and to the objectives of learning and participation of all pupils". Kenny and McLaughlin (2004) who conducted a two-year research project in schools in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to ascertain the difficulties facing teachers and children in areas of conflict, tension and misunderstanding on both sides of the Irish border, found that teachers in the study felt that their initial teacher education did not prepare them for current Irish classrooms (ibid, p.iv). As a result of its research the study recommends "promoting teachers' awareness of their own attitudes and the reality of racism, sectarianism and other forms of exclusion" (ibid) through the means of "an experimental approach involving self-reflection as well as exposure to diversity on teaching practice" (ibid).

Lyons and Little (2009, p.2) found that only 57% of the 85 second level language support teachers surveyed in their study were happy with the progress their newcomer pupils were making in school. Tomlinson (1983, p.133) in her review of literature into ethnic minorities in British schools between 1960 and 1982 found that teachers lack knowledge about the minority children they teach and that their own attitudes towards and expectations of these children is low and inappropriate. Tomlinson relates this lack of knowledge to a lack of prepa-ration in teacher training institutes for teachers to work in culturally and racially diverse societies (ibid p.134). This is a similar finding to that found in the Kenny and McLaughlin study 20 years later. Siraj-Blatchford correctly points out that teachers are not "objective, value free beings", but are in fact subjective, value laden individuals (1994, p.150). Teaching in multi-ethnic schools can be challenging work for teachers. Diversity in schools can often be addressed by representing the culture of the ethnic minority school population in an exotic way (Chan, 2006, Connolly, 2008, in Devine, 2009, p.87). Although teachers feel they are celebrating diversity, their expectations for ethnic minority children are often lowered because they are different culturally, socially, and ethnically to teacher norms (Devine, 2009, p.88). The majority of primary teachers in Ireland tend to be white, Irish nationals and Catholic, meaning there is very little ethnic diversity in the primary teacher population (Devine, 2009, p.88). This in turn leads to a lack of perspective of the diverse pupil population who differ from this highly homogenous group of professionals (Devine, 2009, p.88). An increase in the ethnic diversity of primary teachers could add an international dimension to education in Ireland that would benefit society as a whole. One of the barriers to creating a more culturally diverse teacher population in Ireland is the fact that teacher training providers are predominantly Catholic colleges. In addition, it is a requirement for all those undertaking a Bachelor of Education in Ireland to have proficiency in the Irish language (Devine, 2013, p.409). The latter fact clearly limits the possibility for immigrant representa-

tion in the primary teaching profession in Ireland. This needs to be addressed if the Irish primary school is to truly represent the cultural diversity of its population. As an experienced primary teacher I have long since experienced the homogenous aspect of the teaching profession in Ireland. In my opinion the need for proficiency in the Irish language excludes a high cohort of qualified, talented individuals, both from Irish and immigrant backgrounds, who could become influential primary teachers if this requirement were abolished. What would happen if the Irish proficiency requirement was abolished? One possibility is that teachers could exchange classes, so that teachers proficient in Irish could teach Irish to a class of a non-proficient Irish language teacher, while the non-proficient Irish teacher could teach a subject of his/her strength to the class of the teacher proficient in Irish. This system would be very easy to implement and would benefit both the pupil and staff population of all denominations of primary schools in Ireland.

Devine (2013, p.407) in her research on the leadership practices of three principals in newly multi-ethnic primary schools in the Republic of Ireland found that the need to change the profile of the diversity of school staff was evident with one principal stating:

> "It's all white Irish teachers… if there was more diversity among teaching staffs it might be easier." (Ms Hannigan, Beechwood Primary).

The need for an increase in the cultural diversity of school staff was also highlighted by Devine (2009) in her findings from interviews with 41 children from primary schools who had undergone a cultural shift in pupil population due to increased immigration in the local community. One pupil named Samuel commented:

> "It would be better to get teachers from different countries… if the child speaks the same language as the teacher then they can help them better… also the African children would fit better." (Devine, 2009, p.531).

Devine (2009, p533) highlights the need for "a provision of an education for all children, both indigenous and immigrant, that values difference and educates all children to embrace the diversity that arises from increasing human mobility and broader processes of globalisation".

According to Bryan (2012, p.622) "learners – whether children or adults – can be deeply resistant to the kinds of knowledge which demand that they engage with different truths about themselves and their world that can be very difficult to tolerate or accept". The global community should be reflected in our schools, not just in the pupil population, but also in the staff population.

A guide to classroom planning for intercultural education

This section will outline the classroom planning from a teacher's perspective that is necessary to ensure a culturally inclusive learning environment, for instance the physical learning environment and the emotional needs of young children. The following section follows the

recommendations provided by the NCCA guidelines *Intercultural Education in the Primary School* (NCCA, 2005).

Physical environment

The physical environment of a school contributes significantly to the overall ethos that is presented to pupils, parents, teachers and community members. According to the NCCA "intercultural classrooms are characterised by learning environments that reflect and show pride in the language, ethnic, and cultural diversity that characterises Ireland" (NCCA, 2005, p.40). Both the Irish and English languages have long been part of the physical displays in primary schools in Ireland. To truly represent the cultural diversity of present day Ireland, the physical environment of schools should extend beyond the use of Irish and English displays to include the vast variety of languages that are spoken by pupils and others living in the community. Such an extension in the characteristics of school displays would act as a means to support the positive self-image of all children in the school, regardless of their ethnicity, and would present diversity in an accepted and respected light (ibid: 40). There are a number of issues to consider when planning the physical environment of an intercultural classroom, which includes the following:

- Representing diversity as a normal part of Irish life and human existence.
- Ensuring that representatives of minority groups do not focus on 'spectacular' or 'colourful' events.
- Ensuring that all children irrespective of their colour, ethnic group, or ability can feel at home in and represented in the classroom (NCCA, 2005, p.40).

Many authors and organisations, such as Derman-Sparks (1989), Saderman Hall (1999), York (1991), Siraj-Blatchford (1994), Kenny and Mclaughlin (2004), INTO (2002) and the NCCA (2005) have all suggested similar ways to develop the physical attributes of a culturally inclusive/anti-bias classroom, some of which will be listed below. The areas of play, visual displays and art materials will be explored below. Some of the materials/resources include a home/dramatic play area which could contain multiracial dolls, food containers representing items from different cultures with labels in different languages or clothing and shoes, which could include traditional holiday clothes from a variety of countries (Saderman Hall, 1999, p.11).

The NCCA (2005) provide a similar list to that above and also suggest that other toys such as dolls, homes and jigsaws should represent the diversity of ethnic groups in Ireland, for example, white, black, Asian and Mediterranean. Both male and female dolls should be provided, while toy trailers and halting sites should be provided to reflect elements of the Traveller way of life (NCCA, 2005, p.41). Displays of various languages, representing children in the class and in the wider community should be part of the visual environment, for instance, Polish, English, Irish, French or Romanian (ibid). Reading dual language books are excellent ways for children to learn a new language while at the same time remain up to date with reading in their home language. Dual language books also allow for greater participation at home from parents. IBBY Ireland (2001) provides a selection of intercultural books for

children, which include dual language books. According to Siraj-Blatchford (1994) children will volunteer words in their home language if they feel secure in the learning environment. However, it is important not to force children to speak in their home language if they do not wish to do so (ibid, p.79). Multilingual posters, labels and notices provide a valuable message of respect for diversity to the children, their families and the wider community (ibid, p.79). Development Cooperation Ireland (2004) provide a wide ranging selection of resources useful as teaching aids in culturally inclusive classrooms. York (1991, pp 64-66) suggests that display materials should include artwork and artefacts from existing cultures, for example, fabric, rugs, musical instruments, photos (from magazines or bought), paintings or bead-work. Photographs of the school neighbourhood or visitors to the school would show a true reflection of the various ethnicities that live together.

Social environment

A social environment which is conducive to learning, and which reflects inclusiveness for all, for instance cultural diversity, language diversity or special educational needs, should impact positively on a school's pupil population. Building inclusive social environments in schools results in pupils feeling welcome and accepted in their learning environment. According to the NCCA (2005) there are a number of ways that school staff can impact positively on a pupil's social development in his/her new school, for instance:

◈ Focus on the pupil's capabilities as opposed to their weakness, for example, 'Maria speaks Spanish fluently', as opposed to 'Maria doesn't speak English very well'.
◈ Encourage collaborative work amongst pupils who have the same first language, for instance during activity time or other group activities. If there is no shared language other subjects, such as music, art or drama are excellent activities to provide suitable engagement amongst pupils.
◈ Each child should feel included in all aspects of their learning environment.

Devine, Kenny and McNeela (Deegan, Devine and Lodge, 2004, p.198) in their study of children's perspectives of racism in primary schools in Ireland connected "the centrality of children's social relationships to their school lives and to a sense of belonging and security which emerged as a result of their friendships in school". As part of the process of ensuring an inclusive learning environment it is important for the principal and school staff to learn as much as possible about a newcomer child, for instance, is the child's name correctly spelt and pronounced? Are there subjects which the child will not be taking? Is the child's religion different to that of the school ethos and if so how will this affect classroom interaction? What is the child's first language? (NCCA, 2005, p.43) Language varieties are now a significant aspect of school life in Ireland and English language support is necessary for pupils with English as a second language. This support could be in the form of in class or out of class support. Children are constantly learning, and are therefore liable to respond to new situations or words in an inappropriate manner because of a lack of understanding. For instance, children often respond to diversity in an uncomfortable way which can manifest itself in name calling or aggression. Teachers should embrace such responses as an opportunity to

engage in intercultural work with their pupils (NCCA, 2005). Anderson (2004) suggests a number of interventions that could influence the social environment of a school and its approach to cultural inclusiveness in a positive manner. Although Anderson focuses specifically on the needs of refugee children, the interventions could be implemented, or adapted where required, in order to create a culturally inclusive learning environment for all pupils by ensuring, for instance, that there is a caring adult or mentor available, that local information is made readily available to alleviate some of the stress associated with relocation, which could possibly be made available in a variety of languages. Anderson (ibid) also suggests that the school environment should be 'tolerant' of refugee children. It could be stated that tolerance is not such a positive approach to recommend when creating a culturally inclusive environment. It implies to the reader that it is recommended that refugee children should be 'put up with'. These suggestions highlight the fact that, in order for newcomer children to feel accepted and welcome as part of a school community, there should be input from different social networks, as opposed to the school alone, for instance local sports clubs, information centres or parenting classes.

There are many significant contributors that come together to define a person's social identity; for instance, children develop and learn within many different social, cultural and language environments. Consequently, an important aspect of classroom planning is to recognise such diversity, which has always been an aspect of Irish society. For example the presence of Irish Travellers has long since provided social, cultural and language diversity within Irish society. However, the intensity of this diversity has increased dramatically in recent years due to a high level of immigration from both EU and non-EU countries. Language is a significant aspect of a person's identity and it is imperative that a child's first language is appreciated and allowed to flourish in educational settings, while at the same time supporting further language learning. A learning environment that supports first and second language learning helps children to develop a positive self-image (NCCA, 2005, p.45). In conjunction with social and cultural changes, Ireland has also undergone changes within family structures. Thus, considering the significant changes that have occurred within social, cultural, language and family structures within Irish society in recent years, it is important for teachers to ensure that classroom planning incorporates these changes in order to be inclusive of the children in their care. Lodge, Devine and Deegan (Deegan, Devine and Lodge, 2004, p. 6) suggest that "there is a need to bring to the fore the realities of living and learning in an increasingly diverse Ireland and the role of primary schooling (as a key aspect of the education system where all young people are required to attend) in shaping and contributing to such change".

Choosing classroom resources

The resources available in a classroom play a vital role to add to or improve intercultural education. This section outlines possible sources from which teachers can choose useful educational resources to implement a culturally inclusive learning environment for their pupils. Children are regular explorers in their classroom and therefore the resources available reflect what the teacher considers important or not important (Derman-Sparks, 1989). In turn the pupils view the presence of appropriate intercultural resources in the classroom as

an accepted part of their learning environment. The results of a survey of 1,200 primary and second level schools as well as 12 case studies of 12 schools in Ireland in 2009 suggests that distinguishing the allocation of resources between newcomer and Irish students should be avoided by "promoting a positive school climate and teaching to the range of abilities in the class will benefit both newcomer and Irish students" (Smyth, Darmody, McGinnity and Byrne, ESRI, 2009). This ideology could equally be applied in primary schools. There are a number of sources from which educators in Ireland can choose intercultural resources, which will assist in creating a culturally inclusive learning environment. Intercultural materials in Ireland have become more widely available in recent times because of the notable increase in cultural diversity amongst the population. It is fair to say that intercultural education was not viewed as an important part of the *Primary Curriculum* prior to the increase in immigration.

An example of available and useful resources for intercultural in Ireland include the *Primary Curriculum* (1999), The Development Education Unit of Development Co-operation Ireland, Pavee Point (Traveller organisation). Non-governmental organisations such as Trocaire or Oxfam are also appropriate sources for intercultural materials. Integrate Ireland Language and Training was an organisation, which, up to 2008, supported primary teachers in the delivery of English as an additional language through the means of useful resources, guidelines, pupil lessons and also training workshops for teachers. Its resources are now available on the NCCA website. The Department of Education and Skills in conjunction with the NCCA, National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism, Irish National Teachers' Organisation and UNICEF all provide resources and support for teachers who wish to add to, or improve upon their knowledge of intercultural education and best practice for its implementation in the classroom.

It is worthy to note that the sourcing, use of and importance given to such resources are the responsibility of the class teacher, while at the same time adopting a whole school approach.

Integrated thematic planning of curriculum

An integrated thematic approach to intercultural education results in cross-curricular planning which integrates intercultural education content across all subject areas, where feasible (NCCA, 2005). For instance, language, which is central to a child's overall development, provides children with an opportunity to explore the world they live in and to learn to express their emotions. Language is also a strong contributor to a child's self-identity. Similarly arts education allows for the child to explore differences in cultures through self-expression and discovery. Arts education is also a very diversity showing subject because of its global dimension. Such an approach helps to ensure that intercultural education becomes a natural aspect of the children's learning environment, as opposed to being taught as a specific subject area for two hours per week. The NCCA (2005) suggest a number of themes from which teachers can incorporate intercultural education subject matter across areas of the curriculum and as such provides pupils with "a more coherent and richer learning environment". The themes include:

- identity and belonging;
- similarity and difference;
- human rights and responsibilities;
- discrimination and equality;
- conflict and conflict resolution.

A brief insight into the possible approach to develop appropriate lesson content for intercultural education within each theme will now be given. Firstly, the theme of identity and belonging plays a key role in the overall delivery of intercultural education content. The NCCA (2005) view this theme as a significant contributor to an inclusive curriculum by defining identity and belonging as follows:

> "Identity refers to the identifying characteristics, behaviours and understandings which children may have, sometimes uniquely, and sometimes shared with others. Shared identities enable children to develop a sense of belonging or close relationship with or affinity to a particular group."

Positive self-identity and belonging is viewed by many researchers as a significant aspect of early childhood education, for instance, Derman-Sparks (1989); York (1991); Siraj-Blatchford (1994); Connolly (1998); Deegan et al., edited (2004) and Lodge and Lynch, edited (2005). For instance, Siraj-Blatchford (1994) cites Lawrence (1987) and Burns (1982) by stating that a positive sense of identity and self-esteem is learned and has even been linked to high academic achievement.

From an Irish perspective the *Primary Curriculum* (1999) highlights the development of a sense of Irish identity as a key issue, giving children the opportunity to understand and partake in all the cultural aspects of an Irish heritage, for instance, a diversity of languages, music and diversity in communities (NCCA, 2005). Hence, identity in an Irish sense incorporates characteristics of contemporary Ireland, which in conjunction with the diversities of being Irish also include a wide variety of other cultural and social aspects, such as dual/multi language learning. In addition *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009) provides an opportunity for teachers in infant classes to incorporate intercultural education planning into the classroom. The framework has four themes: 'Exploring and Thinking', 'Well-Being', 'Identity and Belonging', and 'Communications'. Through the theme of 'Identity and Belonging' teachers can give pupils the opportunity to learn in a culturally inclusive environment (NCCA, 2009, p.26).

The Ireland of today is very much part of a growing European community, and therefore a European dimension is a significant aspect of the identity of a child growing up in Ireland. Secondly, the theme of similarity and difference refers to the recognition in all learning environments of the uniqueness of all children. Children differ in many ways, for instance in terms of skin colour, abilities and economic/social background. While these differences are clearly evident and research shows (Siraj-Blatchford, 1994 and Connolly, 1998) that children become aware of differences from a young age, it is therefore imperative that children learn and respect one another's similarities and differences in a positive way. In essence, we

are all similar in terms of our physical human being; however our differences are what make us unique. Thirdly, the theme of human rights and responsibilities is important because of the need for children to understand that humans are all equal, regardless of personal traits such as nationality, religious affiliation or skin colour. Both the *United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) and the *United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989) state that all humans are equal universally, that rights should be recognised equally and should not to be taken away from individuals (NCCA, 2005). It is important that all children realise their rights and their equal status within a community. The classroom environment should portray this message through its physical, social and curricular aspects as outlined earlier. The following theme refers to discrimination and equality. York (1991) defines discrimination as "the practice of giving different treatment to a person based on race, sex, religion, ethnicity, age, mental capacity, physical ability, and/or sexual preference". The theme of discrimination and equality should be recognised as an important aspect of primary education in Ireland simply because under the *Equal Status Act* (2000) it is against the law to discriminate against a person on nine different grounds as outlined earlier.

Finally, peace and conflict refers to the way in which the differences between people, whether they are physical, social or cultural, can often become a source of conflict. Early childhood education focuses on making and maintaining friendships, talking to one another, being kind and appreciative to one another. In essence, children learn from a young age about the importance of getting along with one another, and that differences are not an excuse to hurt another person's feelings, for instance name calling (York, p.1991). York suggests themes such as 'Let's be Friends', 'Alike and Different' or 'I'm Me and I'm Special' as being useful in the delivery of peace education. According to Derman-Sparks (1989) if conflict arises in a classroom the teacher should not ignore the situation but should in fact help the children concerned to address their misconceptions and guide them in exploring their feelings and opinions of others. This can be done through discussion during circle time, use of relevant social stories, or other activities such as the exploration of skin tones by allowing children to examine their skin colour in a mirror or by using skin tone crayons/paints (skin tone colours should be present in all classrooms, both mono-cultural and intercultural).

Technology in the classroom

Technology offers a wealth of resources and teaching material for teachers who want to incorporate intercultural education in an interactive learning environment. The internet allows teachers to communicate with teachers, pupils and communities around the globe. Teaching resources, articles, social networks and discussion groups based on cultural diversity and intercultural education are readily available on the internet. The following are some educational social networks that teachers can control to get pupils learning in exciting, interactive ways: educlipper (educlipper.com), TeachAde (www.teachade.com), Twiducate (www.twiducate.com), Twitter (twitter.com). TED Talks (www.ted.com/talks) provides an extensive number of talks that can provide teachers with ideas to create a culturally inclusive classroom, while Google Scholar (scholar.google.com) provides extensive literature on many disciplines including all aspects of education. Edutopia (www.edutopia.org) and Edudemic

(edudemic.com) provide excellent ideas for teaching tools and resources in the field of intercultural education and education technology. The use of Skype (www.skype.com) as a teaching tool provides unique opportunities to explore cultural diversity, for example, meeting other classrooms from around the world, practicing foreign languages, exposing pupils to their first and second language through poetry, book clubs, stories or pupil exchanges. Music from around the world can be played by pupils from classrooms around the globe. In addition, YouTube and TeacherTube are excellent tools for educators in exploring cultural diversity in the classroom. Technology is a tool which teachers can use to help develop exciting, interactive, culturally inclusive classrooms.

Concluding discussion

This study has shown that there are many ways to develop positive cultural attitudes in the primary classroom, with the school setting and educator both being very influential in this goal. Once the child enters the education system in the early years, the teacher becomes an important influence in his/her overall development and continues to be until the child leaves primary school. Thus education is an invaluable contributor to the overall development of all children in society. Devine (2009, p.524) in her interviews with parents from multi-ethnic schools in the Republic of Ireland found that all interviewees "had a positive disposition to education, and recognition of its value to their children's long term future".

In summation, it is imperative that all educators "examine their own attitudes and prejudices and learn to deal with them in positive ways" before they can deliver a culturally inclusive, anti-bias curriculum (Siraj-Blatchford in Pugh, 2001, p.105). In addition, all pupils should come to understand the value of having a positive sense of self-identity, respecting the differences in others, knowing their rights as a child and being fair to their peers. The *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (Article 29) states that:

> "Education shall prepare the child for an active adult life in a free society and foster respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, and for the cultural background and values of others."

In conclusion, I would argue that a combination of language support, anti-racist teaching and policy, intercultural education, the promotion of both first, second and third language use amongst pupils, an increase in the ethnic diversity of the teacher population, and inservice/preservice training in intercultural education for teachers would benefit the learning outcomes of all pupils in all primary schools in Ireland.

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Shared search for meaning

Improving literacy through talk, thought and interaction

⇒ JULIE O'CONNELL ⇐

Abstract

"Meaninglessness can be a nightmare. To be puzzled is to know that an answer lies somewhere" (Lipman et al., 1980). I would rather my students be puzzled than for them to consider education as meaningless. Through the exploration of a meaningful education for my students I am endeavouring to create an environment that values their participation and dialogue. This research wishes to explore a broad meaning of literacy, a shared search for meaning. I, as the researcher believe that if we are to allow children to reach their full potential academically and if we strive for excellence in literacy, children need to learn the ability to become deep and meaningful thinkers and communicators. My exploration of socio-cultural practices in the classroom has convinced me of the need for students to learn through their interactions with others.

Keywords: **literacy, dialogue, communities of practice, reflection.**

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"The limits of my language are the limits of my world." Ludwig Wittgenstein (1922)

Introduction

Research and studies of adult-child relations support the view that growing up is an "apprenticeship in thinking" and ways of thinking are achieved through dialogue (Wells, 2009). This research highlights the importance that other people play in helping children learn and the reciprocal relationship between individual thinking and the collective intellectual activities of groups. Language itself can provide a means for people to actively test their understanding against that of others and use this understanding to elicit relevant information from others about what they know and want to know.

An exploration of the search for meaning

Situated cognition

Situated cognition (Brown et al., 1989) proposes that learning is a process of enculturation that is supported through social interaction especially in groups, through the circulation of

narrative. The social interaction between learners is achieved both in and out of school through a social construction of knowledge. For maximum learning to be achieved, opportunities must exist for students to engage with collective problem solving, display multiple roles, confront ineffective strategies and misconceptions and develop collaborative work skills (Brown, Collins and Duguid, 1989).

What do we mean by thinking?

"It is not much good thinking of a thing, unless you think it out." H.G.Wells.

As Nisbet (1990) suggests, the concept of teaching thinking is not new. From the ancient Greeks onwards improving the intellect was perceived to be a prime aim of education. But what do we mean by thinking? And more importantly, what do we mean by good thinking? Fisher (1998) states that good thinking can be both critical and reflective.

Elements of Thinking		
Everyday Thinking	→	Critical Thinking
Guessing	→	Estimating
Preferring	→	Evaluating
Assuming	→	Justifying
Associating/listing	→	Classifying
Accepting	→	Hypothesizing
Judging	→	Analysing
Inferring	→	Reasoning

Thinking can also take the form of being 'reflective' thinking, as pioneered by the American philosopher, Dewey (1910).

"…active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends… it is a conscious and voluntary effort to establish belief upon a firm basis of reasons." (Dewey, 1910, p.6)

Reflective thinking for Dewey involves a search for new answers. Dewey's conception of reflective thinking has influenced many leading theorists in the development of what they conceive as critical thinking. Fisher (1998, p.31) views critical thinking as embodying a number of values and attitudes: it "encourages reflective questioning in an effort to achieve fair-mindedness and intellectual integrity. It is being open to self-criticism and self-correction".

According to Fisher, improvement in thinking can be viewed as a move from the routine to the reflective and a move from the unconscious to conscious thought. Engaging children in both critical and reflective thinking is a process that I believe will positively help this move from unconscious to conscious thought.

As thought moves from the unconscious to the conscious it is important to keep the views of Roche (2010) in mind, that "it is more important for a child – and her teacher – to learn to **be** a critical thinker rather merely to learn how to acquire, or to have skills of critical thinking skills". (Roche, 2010, p54).

In order for one to learn to be anything, one must be involved and learn from others. This learning can be understood by looking at social-constructivist theory.

Learning together – a social-constructivist perspective on learning

Children learn in a variety of ways and the study of the complexity of how children learn and how children should learn has dominated educational research for decades.

Social-constructivist theory is one which resonates with the study presented in this paper. The social aspects of learning and the role that culture plays in a child's development enhanced by dialogue and interaction with others is an extremely important aspect of this model.

Vygotsky (1978), a pivotal figure in the development of social-constructivist theory, proposed the idea of a close link between the use of language in social interaction and the use of language as a psychological tool for organising one's own individual thinking. Suggested by him was the idea that involvement in joint activities can generate new understandings which are internalised as individual knowledge. His social-constructivist theory of the development of the mind is set out in broad terms, when he states that "any function in the child's cultural development appears twice, or on two planes. First it appears on the social plane, and then on the psychological plane" (Vygotsky, 1978, p.163).

For Vygostky the connection between the two planes is found in the mediating function of signs, in particular speech. Interaction with others helps speech be experienced first, and then it gradually becomes internalised and subsequently becomes a means for self-directed mental activity.

In developing this theory he focused on the "social situation of development". His concept of the 'Zone of Proximal Development' is to account for the role of teaching in a child's learning. Vygotsky defined the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as:

> "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers." (Vygotsky, 1978, p.86).

The class discussion is itself a perfect model of ZPD in action. Students, without realising it, provide scaffolding for each other in classroom dialogue. In social constructivism, learning is seen as social as well as individual. According to Donnelly (1994), Vygotsky (1978) suggests that learning itself stimulates the awakening in the child of various internal development processes that can only become possible when the child interacts with other people. We only become ourselves through other people. The social aspect of learning is crucial, all higher

cognitive functions begin with social interactions. Social interaction, claims Donnelly, can only exist with language and dialogue.

From the zone of proximal development to the intermental development zone

Dialogue and Dialogic Inquiry

'Dialogic Inquiry' provides an extended analysis of crucial Vygotskian concept of a language based theory of learning. Wells (1999) states the need for students to express their individual opinions but also to comment on and question those of others. This 'Dialogic Inquiry' as he terms it will contribute to progress in both individual and collective understanding. While the sharing of opinions is worthwhile, this is not enough. Knowledge building must also result in progress and must lead to new understandings. Progressive discourse as outlined by Bereiter (1994) is that which comprises the belief that participants work collaboratively to improve collective knowledge.

> "The important thing is that the local discourses be progressive in the sense that understandings are being generated that are new to the local participants and that the participants recognise as superior to their previous understandings." (Bereiter, 1994, p.9).

According to Lotman (1988), discourse at the dialogic end serves as a thinking device. Several people considering a problem together are likely to generate new meanings. Because dialogic discourse assumes that thinking is thinking together, it is ideally placed to take different opinions and positions into account to determine an outcome, thought or course of action to be followed. Mercer (2000) advocates the need to go beyond Vygotsky's idea of the relationship between language and thinking and focus our attention upon using language for thinking collectively, a process he calls 'interthinking' (Mercer, 2000, p.16). Using the term 'intermental development zone' (IDZ), as the multiperson classroom equivalent of the one-to-one interpersonal relationship Vygotsky had in mind, Mercer (2002, p.6) argues that IDZ is a 'mutual achievement' dependent on the interactive participation and commitment of both teacher and learner. Through engagement in 'interthinking' with teacher and peers, learners appropriate the 'linguistic tools' for intermental thinking on their own.

An important feature of Mercer's work is the central role he gives to thinking together in small group activities, which are designed to create opportunities for exploratory talk without the continuous involvement of the teacher. Engaging in this sort of language-based thinking together, students were able to use the same strategies for problem solving on their own. The prime aim of education should be to help children learn how to use language effectively as a tool for thinking collectively. True dialogue and classroom involvement in a culturally based way has the power to contribute significantly to a child's intellectual development. In order for this to happen, a community of practice must exist that fosters collective thinking and inquiry.

From social constructivism to socio-cultural theory

Wenger (1998) adopts a modern interpretation of social constructivism in his 'Social Theory of Learning'. In this theory the components of practice, meaning, community and identity are essential to characterise social participation as a process of learning and knowing. These components embody the concept 'Community of Practice'.

Communities of practice are the prime contexts in which common sense can become common knowledge and worked through by mutual engagement. Through mutual engagement, mutual relationships develop. Participants can be connected in ways that are deep. In these relationships, harmony and disagreement can exist side by side as knowledge is explored and negotiated. As this social perspective of learning values engagement, it is essential that the learners have opportunities to contribute actively to the practice of the community in ways that are valued. As they do so, they integrate their enterprises into their understanding of the world and make creative use of their respective repertoires. This model of learning believes that learning can change who we are by changing our ability to participate, to negotiate meaning. According to Wenger (1998, p.48) "we all have our own theories and ways of understanding the world, and our communities of practice are places where we develop, negotiate and share them".

In order for communities of practice to be successful, there needs to be a 'Community of Inquiry' in existence. This is a community in which children are given opportunities to develop good thinking practices in a social constructivist environment. One such model of a community of inquiry can be created through philosophical discussions with children. Lipman (Lipman et al., 1980) states that when children are encouraged to think philosophically, the classroom is converted into a community of inquiry. Such classrooms should be committed to the procedures of inquiry and an openness to evidence and reason.

A community of inquiry can boost self-esteem, intellectual confidence and the ability to participate in reasoned discussion by helping children to learn to develop their own views, explore and challenge the views of others (Fisher, 1998). It can assist children in clarifying their thinking. They are required to listen to and respect each other.

Questioning the answer – our own community of inquiry

Recent work drawing on socio-cultural theory looks at the field of New Literacy Studies (NLS), which emphasises the way in which literacy is a social practice that is located within a wider social, economic and political context (Street 2001, in Kennedy et al., 2012).

To facilitate the practical use of theory to inform social constructivist practices in the classroom and to make an effort to adopt a New Literacy Study view the work of Lipman et al. (1980) and Fisher (2008) are used as inspiration and guidance for my research project entitled *Talking and Thinking Time*. Though varying in their techniques, they all advocate classroom practices that encourage children to talk, think and interact in their own environments in social constructivist dialogic practices. Central to this is social interaction in the shared search for new meanings. With practice and through the observation of each other's dialogue, the children progress in their own thinking, gradually needing guidance

less. They begin to inquire about concepts, not just those solely chosen by the teacher. They become aware of the acceptance of questioning and the necessity of questioning the answer.

Lipman (Lipman et al., 1980) argues that children bring a natural curiosity to the classroom but during time spent in school this curiosity and impulse to know and understand can fade.

Using philosophy, a subject traditionally reserved for adults, he was determined to teach children how to think thoughtfully and skilfully by exploring ethical and logical questions in the classroom. Through the harnessing of wonder in children, he felt it was possible to get children to think for themselves. Central to the success of this movement was the role that a community of practice and dialogue played in getting children to think well about things that matter.

He believed that engaging children in dialogue is one of the best ways to stimulate thinking; "when one internalises dialogue, we produce not only the thoughts that we have just heard the other participants express, but we also respond in our own minds to those expressions" (Lipman et al., 1980, p.23).

The crucial role of dialogue to the social constructivist theory of learning is one which gives the 'Philosophy for Children' movement credibility as a context for thinking in the classroom. Through the ponderings of 'big' thoughts in dialogue, reasoning is attacked and criticised, it is not allowed to pass unchallenged. Critical attitudes are developed by the participants of the discussion but these critical attitudes are then turned upon one's own reflections. Drawing on the work of Lipman, Fisher (2008) advocates teaching thinking based on principles by Dewey; "All which the school can or need do for pupils, so far as their minds are concerned is to develop their ability to think" (Dewey, 1916, p.152).

Bringing the research into focus

Fisher (1996, p.16) describes how a community of inquiry develops:

> "...the children take some thinking time to devise their own questions and to discuss them. The group meets regularly. The questions get deeper and more thoughtful. The pupils' discussions get more disciplined and focused, and yet also more imaginative".

Within the community of inquiry that I formed in my class, a context was created to address my research aims.

My first aim was to explore how I develop my students' confidence and competence in listening and speaking through the exploration of the strand 'Developing Cognitive Abilities through Language'. I hoped to create a structured and usable model to explore this strand of the English curriculum. I hoped to create a shared search for meaning that involves the ability to **discuss, respond, interpret, reflect, confirm, evaluate, deduct, argue** and **prioritise**. This article explores these processes in as far as they can be explored, placing a social constructivist lens on shared experience.

Secondly, I explored my understanding of the relationship between dialogue and good thinking. I observed my students during our shared group interaction time and I outlined

my own understanding and emerging theory of the relationships that exists in my socio-cultural environment.

Finally, my third research aim asked the author and reader to consider how giving my students opportunities to engage in meaningful dialogue contributed to their development as autonomous, lifelong learners? While wanting my research to have an immediate positive effect on my own learning and that of my students, I was most eager that my students would take something from it that would stay with them long after they left my classroom.

Research design

In order for my research study to take place, I needed to have a plan in place that allowed time for ongoing reflection and consideration of the study. My entire study took place over the school year starting in September and completing in May. I undertook this project with my group of fifth class girls.

	Time	Focus of study
Phase One	September 2011 – October 2011	Identification of area of focus.
		Initial reflection of my practice in literacy.
	October 2011 – December 2011	Research of literature.
		Development of community of practice of inquiry within my classroom.
Phase Two	January 2011	Purchasing of resources.
		Planning of classroom intervention.
		Acquiring appropriate permission for study.
	February 2011 – April 2011	Facilitating 'Talking and Thinking Time' sessions in my classroom.
		The development of our thinking box.
		Ongoing reflection and evaluation of progress.
		Writing of literature review and methodology chapters.
Phase Three	May 2011	Conclusion and evaluation of 'Talking and Thinking Time'.
		Writing of research findings chapter.

Analysing dialogue

In order to complete my research aims it was necessary for me to analyse the dialogue that my students engaged in during 'Talking and Thinking Time'. Analysing any dialogue, especially that in the classroom can be an intricate and complicated process and much relies on observer judgement. I used a tool employed by Reznitskaya (2012). A 'Dialogic Inquiry Tool' (DIT) (Appendix A) is an anchored classroom observation scale specifically designed to help practitioners examine and rethink the quality of talk. I analysed the data using three indicators – authority, explanation and collaboration.

In what ways am I developing my students' confidence and competence in listening and speaking through the exploration of the strand 'Developing Cognitive Abilities through Language'?

WHAT IF WE HAD NO FEELINGS? 22 MARCH 2012

> "**I agree** with Lynne, 'cos we would just be like a blank sheet of paper, no one knows what you feel or they can't see you."

> "**I kinda disagree** with Orna because sometimes when you feel, wouldn't feel anything so if you didn't have any feelings you wouldn't be able to be feeling dull."

> "**I agree** with Vera 'cos being dull is kinda like a feeling as well and... we would all be the same."

My students' confidence and competence in listening and speaking

Where does this discussion rate on a Dialogic Inquiry Tool? Can I claim that my students' confidence and competence is improving over the year? My analysis of this dialogue confirms that it approaches the dialogic end of the continuum with possible scores of three or four on the DIT indicators of authority. As a teacher, I did not have exclusive authority over the flow of discussion, students shared the responsibility for advancing their inquiry (indicator no. 1).

During the discussion, students provide elaborate explanations of their thinking (indicator no. 2). They state their positions and support them with reasons.

> "**I agree** with Lynne, 'cos we would just be like a blank sheet of paper, no one knows what you feel or they can't see you."

Their contributions are also marked by levels of collaboration, as indicated by statements such as 'I agree/I disagree'.

This discussion echoes research by Wells (1999) who reminds us of the need for students to express their individual opinions but also to comment on and question those of others.

What is it about the dialogue that helped it go from monologic to dialogic? Why did this happen? After studying numerous transcripts and video recordings I think my students felt comfortable with the openness of the questions. Perhaps they felt that there was no correct answer. Perhaps they felt there would be no judgement should they give an answer deemed incorrect by the teacher or make a silly comment. This as a result made them more confident and competent about engaging in dialogue. I noted the following in my research diary:

> "The girls loved adding their own suggestions to the thinking box. 'H' asked can she add more than one a day." (Reflective journal, 10 March 2012).

As I look at questions posed by them in our thinking box, an idea used by Roche (2000), it seems they mostly favoured abstract type topics.

"What if the world was black and white?" (A topic added to the thinking box).

As a result they were able to take the discussion into their own hands and benefit from a flow of conversation that was provided within the group's shared dialogue. Looking back at the video recordings I remarked that they appeared like anyone with a common interest would, eager to keep the conversation going, rather like a group of friends gossiping over a cup of coffee.

I believe that their ability to agree and disagree with each other like that in a group setting showed growing confidence and competence. Observations from my critical friend during this session included how she thought the students' conversation was "eloquent and insightful". She also commented how they seemed more confident to speak about things or people in the abstract rather than relating it to themselves personally. Through our conversation we decided the girls are very impressionable. They care very much for what their peers think of them. I am happy that they are willing to talk and even happier that it is through a medium that they are comfortable with.

What is my understanding of the relationship between dialogue and good thinking?

What is beauty?

BEFORE – 5 FEBRUARY 2012

Brookfield (1986) suggests that thinking is a lived activity, not an "abstract academic pastime". In order for thinking to be 'lived' it needs to exist and can only thrive in a socio-cultural environment. Here my participants engaging in a dialogic discussion collectively defend, scrutinise and live each other's viewpoints which resulted in a negotiation and construction of new meanings.

Vygotsky, Mercer, Wells, Fisher and Lipman all convinced me of the importance of social interactions to improve the quality of dialogue and learning in the classroom. What is it about social interactions that produce good dialogue and as a result good thinking? What is my understanding of this?

We can see a very standard response to beauty. This student is making it clear that beauty is something that you can see, a very superficial way of looking at it. Look how the same student responds to the same question after a group discussion on this topic.

after – 6 february 2012

Her post discussion response shows a much deeper insight into beauty. She has moved from believing that beauty is something external to something that can felt or heard. According to the Dialogic Inquiry Tool, this approaches a scale of five or six on explanation (indicator 2). The ability to take a personal response to an issue is what moves language from monologic to dialogic. The discussion around this topic really stretched my students, encouraging them to ask and say things that weren't typical.

"Teacher everyone thinks different people are beautiful. We all have different opinions." (In response to 'What is beauty?' 5 February 2012).

"The girls were great today. A discussion like this really pushes boundaries. I really want them to be broad well-rounded individuals." (Reflective diary, 5 February 2012).

This deeper insight has only been possible through a shared exploration of this topic. Not one of my students came up with a non-superficial meaning of beauty in their before mind maps. They were unable to think about beauty being anything more than "pretty, nice, gorgeous, good looking, handsome" even "unugly" (adjectives on some mind maps, 5 February 2012).

I was also heartened about the way their vocabulary and language seemed to be improving. They were immediately becoming exposed to more vocabulary than I could ever have

hoped to teach them. How is this language helping them to think well? They were automatically developing a wider range of words from which to select in discussions, hence enriching their dialogue. This had to be good. Is this what Vygotsky meant when he said that language can be used as a psychological tool for organising one's own individual thinking?

How does giving my students opportunities to engage in meaningful dialogue contribute to their development as autonomous, lifelong learners?

When my students began to request to participate in 'Talking and Thinking Time' I became more convinced of their engagement with it.

> "Can we do TTT again? We haven't done it since before Easter." (Request from student, 17 April 2012).

> "Can we watch the video straight away?" (Request from student, 24 April 2012).

> And the requests continued. Why did they like it so much? What was it that made them want to do it? What made them value this educational activity more than many of the others?

> "It's fun. We can think about things other than school work." (Informal conversation with student, 18 April 2012).

> They didn't always see the educational benefit in it. With my effort to deliver an ever-increasing curriculum I may at times have forgotten the importance of giving my students time to talk.

> "Did I have them so programmed to believe that learning only happens in their school books? I must really work on this in the future." (Reflective diary, 23 April 2012).

But the value of talk and the value of dialogue must not be underestimated. They want to talk. They want to ask questions. They are seeing questioning as a way of exploring new answers, searching for new meanings. Learning at its best! Philosophical discussion according to Fisher (1998) "makes thinking relevant to children's personal needs and quest for answers. It is less a curriculum and more a way of life".

This quest for answers, a new way of life that they are developing through engagement in our 'Talking and Thinking Time' sessions has in some part contributed to their journeys as lifelong learners.

My students have become more dialogic, really showing signs of authority over discussions, regularly approaching a scale of five and six on the Dialogic Inquiry Tool. They were beginning to show preferences for what they were learning.

"What is a good friend? Can we talk about that tomorrow teacher during TTT?" (Informal conversations with students about being a good friend, 23 April 2012).

And they were showing clear signs of collaboration, linking their ideas to the ideas of another. I think they are also becoming conscious about their thinking as Fisher (1998) believed was possible.

"It is better to think with someone than do it by yourself because you get ideas." (What does thinking mean? 15 March 2012).

These instances of authority, explanation and collaboration as measured by the Dialogic Inquiry Tool are those that make students move from monologic to dialogic. My study has shown that if students are dialogic, they are becoming conscious and more involved in their learning. They are true participants. It is this engagement with learning, this involvement that becomes less of a curriculum and more of a way of life.

I believe that our own theories and ways of understanding the world are those elements that make learning autonomous and life long. However, as my study explores, it is the community of practice that was created in my classroom that gave and will continue to give my students a forum and environment to reflect, discuss, argue, analyse and comment on their own understandings now and in the future.

Putting it all together – some findings

It can be difficult to put into words many of the insights that I have come across in a qualitative study such as this but for the purpose of this study I feel it is necessary to be specific about my new claims to knowledge analysed under each research aim. I came to these findings through analysing and reflecting on the conversations, questions and interactions during and after our 'Talking and Thinking Times'.

In what ways am I developing my students' confidence and competence in listening and speaking through exploration of the strand 'Developing Cognitive Abilities through Language'?

1. Children like to talk, especially if they feel their responses will not be judged.
2. Acknowledging the importance of culture and environment to the learning process will make students confident in speaking and listening. This context is important for new literacy practices to flourish.
3. A teacher's tone and style has the power to dictate classroom dialogue positively and negatively. In order to give credit to a true socio-cultural way of learning the teacher should not suppress literacy development by imposing power and ignoring context (Street, 2005).
4. A change in authority in discourse from student to teacher reflects confidence and competence in listening and speaking.
5. Every teacher needs opportunities to reflect and gain clarity on his or her practice.

What is my understanding of the relationship between dialogue and good thinking?

1. Social interaction and group practices generated good practice in thinking and reflecting, prioritising, explaining and collaboration.

2. Dialogue produces vocabulary. As dialogue grows so too does language. It is this language that serves as a powerful thinking device.

3. Discourse should not just be about sharing opinions, it has to be progressive for knowledge building to occur. This view aligns with Bereiter's (1994) theory of progressive discourse.

4. It is possible for people to participate silently. Through listening one still has the ability to internalise the conversations and re-organise one's own thinking. This act of silent participation is one which needs further research.

5. If students are interacting socially they are behaving as real participants in their learning.

6. Dialogue can encourage unconscious thought to become conscious (Fisher, 1998).

How does giving my students opportunities to engage in meaningful dialogue contribute to their development as autonomous, lifelong learners?

1. Allowing children to develop authority in a discussion helps them to engage with learning.

2. Motivation is the key to learning. Providing motivating learning opportunities for students will undoubtedly have positive implications for their persistence and academic success (Kennedy et al., 2012)

3. As children engage in dialogue they generate knowledge. They become participants of learning, not just receivers.

4. Lifelong learning will only become possible if the community of practice supports this. The role of the teacher is essential to the formation of a community of practice in a classroom underestimated in Wenger's theory.

5. In order to be a lifelong learner, children need to become theorists themselves.

6. In order to be lifelong learners, teachers themselves need opportunities to engage in true professional and personal development.

Theory development

As I conclude I look back to my original three research aims and discuss my answers and new understandings of them as well as my own emerging theory.

In what ways am I developing my students' confidence and competence in listening and speaking through the exploration of the strand 'Developing Cognitive Abilities through Language'?

I am developing their confidence and competence by creating a community of practice that nurtures shared interaction and a language based search for meaning. Through reflection of my own practice and role in the classroom I am providing my students with classroom practices that have been well thought out and deeply understood. I acknowledge the contri-

bution of Vygotsky's social model of learning to the development of my own theory but found it did not provide me with all the answers, it didn't account for those students that challenged me. The silent participants will become my new focus. I can only hope that the positive environment I have created in the classroom will have some impact on their confidence in listening and speaking but I am not naïve enough to think this is enough.

What is my understanding of the relationship between dialogue and good thinking?

I understand without any doubt that dialogue is essential in the classroom, in the learning process. The work and theory of Wells and Lipman provided me with a sound knowledge to allow me to focus my thoughts on the importance of dialogue. I know children will not learn unless they are actively involved, true participants in knowledge building. I have come to the understanding that dialogue is essential for everyone's learning. My thinking has moved though in relation to those children not actively participating in this dialogue. I believe these children still have the ability to internalise the conversations they hear. Their interactions do not always have to be vocal. To listen to the dialogue and to be a silent participant is equally as effective to the development of one's thinking.

How does giving my students opportunities to engage in meaningful dialogue contribute to their development as autonomous, lifelong learners?

If my students are involved in dialogue they are behaving as true participants in their learning. I believe listening to dialogue can be as important as contributing to it. Dialogue can be a very motivating factor, simply because human nature is such that people like to talk, chat, gossip even eavesdrop. I have come to appreciate the value of language in helping children find their own way in their own world. It is my belief that language itself can provide a way for children to actively test their understanding against that of others and use language to come to new and personal understandings – understandings that are relevant to them. It is this relevance, this motivation that will help children develop as lifelong learners. Prior to my research I could never have articulated how to help children develop as lifelong learners. I believe whole heartedly in Wenger's community of practice to developing a community of learners. I perhaps, acknowledge more than he did the role of the teacher in developing this community.

Conclusion and recommendations

Significance for my practice and my students

The personal engagement I had with this study reflects how I am changing and evolving as a practitioner. The interpretive paradigm that I situated myself in allowed me to "think professionally and reflect on my practice" (McDonagh et. al. 2012, p.107).

I now value beyond words the importance of social aspects of learning. Learning cannot and will not happen in my classroom without the interaction of students. I now place an important significance on the value of dialogue in my classroom. To enable children to use dialogue as a means of inquiry is a powerful tool that I want to encourage in all aspects of my practice. I think about my students differently. I appreciate their responses.

I am confident that my practice in this study is supported by educational theory. I value the new found awareness I have of Vygotsky's theory of the use of language in social situations to organise one's own thinking. I value that I understand it, can attempt to put it into practice in my classroom and can explain it to colleagues. I now more than ever appreciate the feedback and clarity that conversations with my colleagues bring. I believe in looking at my practice from all angles.

I value my ability to develop my own educational theory. I am confident that I can research and inquire into the many educational theorists and use their knowledge and my own insights and practice to develop my own critical understanding and theory. I trust what the great educationalists have to say but I am learning to trust myself more. I am filled with enthusiasm to learn more.

Significance for the wider educational field

The study I undertook has its basis in the *English Primary School Curriculum*. Through addressing and encouraging cognitive abilities through language I feel I am giving attention to this vital area of the curriculum. The aims and objectives of the *Irish Primary Curriculum* (Government of Ireland, 1999) gave me a foundation to begin my study.

I think that by providing opportunities for students to engage in real 'Talking and Thinking Time' with their peers I am addressing the aims and objectives of the *English Primary School Curriculum* and *Cognitive Abilities through Language* in a valid way but I am moving beyond the curriculum. I am using my own theory to come to new understandings. I have highlighted an area that teachers can neglect. Students need each other to learn. They will only become learners and build knowledge through engagement in social interactions.

I hope to use my findings from this study to have an immediate effect in my own school. I value what I have learned and I plan on sharing this work with my fellow colleagues.

Within our education system, attention to good practice in literacy has become an ever increasing aim. Our *National Strategy Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life* (2011) shows that this attention needs to continue in the future. I am particularly heartened by a very recent report by Kennedy et al. (2012) which stresses the importance of the teacher in promoting cognitive interaction. The scaffold that I as a teacher provide, this "delicate balancing act" is crucial. I am glad that the attention I have given to the teacher's role has contributed to this learning. I am also confident that I am aware of the importance of dialogue in the classroom. My work will allow me to convince other educationalists of this importance. I hope my study contributes in some small way to the growing body of knowledge that exists in the teaching of literacy in our classrooms.

Through my research, my classroom study and my participation in both I have come to the understanding that in order to try to develop my students' confidence and competence in listening and speaking, in order to understand dialogue and the necessity for this I need to create opportunities of shared interaction for my students to engage in cognitive tasks in socio-cultural and socio constructivist processes.

Future recommendations

Through my engagement with this study I feel confident about making the following rec-ommendations. I would love to see opportunities for every teacher to participate in true professional development that allows them to look, reflect, react and engage in dialogue about their own practice and place in the classroom.

I would also recommend that our own *English Primary School Curriculum* be renamed as literacy. This I feel would be a start in acknowledging the broad definition that is needed for our teachers to understand what is possible once students open their mouths to speak.

I think dialogue should have a definite place in our curriculum. Its importance at every subject level must be emphasised and given due place.

Limitations of this study

This study is about one particular teacher in one particular classroom. This is a very small scale qualitative study. What has been achieved and is relevant in this classroom may not be achieved in others. Though there are common themes and lessons to be learned there are certain limitations to my work.

This study assumes that good relationships exist between teacher and student and students with each other. Without the formation of good relationships and the comfort and ease with which the children felt to speak the dialogue and social interactions may not have been so rich.

The self-reflection of the teacher in this study is what has made it so insightful. If this self-reflection and openness to learning did not exist it is unlikely that it would be as easy to encourage the students to develop as lifelong learners.

This study does not give attention to the importance of parents and the home life for providing extended literacy opportunities for students. The presence or absence of such can have considerable effects on the development of children's discourse.

This study does not give adequate attention to the importance of developing vocabulary in order to enhance the dialogic process.

This study is limited to the extent which it presupposed teacher flexibility in tailoring the curriculum to her educational setting. This flexibility allowed me to put the needs of both teacher and student first and not necessarily have to deliver an already predetermined curriculum that many other educational jurisdictions have imposed.

Conclusion

I have come full circle in this study, from reading about the importance of students being participants in their own learning, to believing this participation and living this participation. We are social, communicative creatures who gain much of our knowledge from others. Our thoughts and actions are shaped by our interactions. It is through these social interactions, we learn.

I had hoped to have a positive effect on the development of my students as lifelong learners. I truly hope this has happened. I have however had a remarkable and deep effect on my own learning, my own participation in this world.

It is appropriate I think to leave the last word to the children – the true inspiration for this study.

Thinking Time for the Little Ones!

In the school of North Pres.
Where children learn to think.
They use the letters TTT
They share ideas and link.

In the time of TTT
Fifth class recording it.
On a camera to write a book
Maybe even a thinking kit.

They used the six thinking hats
And talk about it too.
They learn things from each other
And most of it is new.

They hear poems and stories
From books that the teacher reads.
And after talking and thinking
Everybody leaves.

By H P and R A

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Appendix A – Dialogic Inquiry Tool

	Ratings		
Indicator	**Monologic 1,2**	**3,4**	**Dialogic 5,6**
Authority	The teacher has exclusive control over discussion content and processes. She or he nominates students, asks questions, initiates topical shifts, and evaluates the answers.	There are occasional opportunities for students to freely engage in the discussion. These are rare and involve only a few students. Most of the time, the teacher controls turn-taking, prescribes topic choice, and reshapes the discussion to align with specific fixed content.	Students share major responsibilities for the process and substance of the discussion. They manage turns, ask questions, react to each other's ideas, suggest topical shifts, and propose procedural changes.
Explanation	Students do not explain what they think and why. Their responses are brief and factual, consisting of a word or a phrase.	Students occasionally share opinions and provide good justification for them. Longer student responses may represent simple retelling of events from the story.	Students take personal positions on the issue (e.g.'I think,' 'I believe', 'I feel') and support them with reasons and examples. They make elaborate, lengthy contributions, explaining their thinking to others.
Collaboration	Student responses are short, disjointed, and unrelated to each other. Students primarily 'report' about established, known facts.	Students occasionally build on each other's ideas. The collaboration often involves sharing of similar experiences, rather than a critical analysis of each other's ideas (e.g. 'This happened to me, too! I was...')	Students engage in critical and collaborative 'co-construction of ideas'. Their responses are 'chained together,' as they react to each other's ideas.

Developing learner autonomy in primary school students to improve English literacy levels

≋ COLLETTE DUNNE ≋

Abstract

This study investigated how to develop an effective method for using individual education plans and portfolios in conjunction with co-operative, collaborative, autonomous learning principles to facilitate students in planning, monitoring and evaluating their own learning. The aim of the intervention was to motivate students to improve their literacy skills through interacting with their classmates and gaining an understanding of the learning process.

A case study approach within action research was used to firstly observe how students learn and to teach some of the new skills required, followed by an intervention phase of two cycles enabling changes to be made to the action plan between cycles. Using teacher observations, class and informal discussions, reflective notes by students and questionnaires the study looked at students' perceptions of the autonomous learning process and specifically how they used the strategies implemented.

Keywords: **learner autonomy, planning, portfolios, collaborative, co-operative, group work, literacy.**

⁘⁘

Introduction

The growth in diversity within Irish primary schools poses major challenges for teachers, pupils and their parents as traditional differences in levels of learning, special needs and socio-economic backgrounds are accompanied by students of different cultures, speaking diverse languages. The task is immense and it prompted this research, into how class teaching can be re-organised through the development of learner autonomy, to improve the English literacy levels of all children in Irish schools and thus promote better communication for the integration of pupils of new cultures and ensure greater respect between all pupils.

Action research methodology

Research design

The questions posed by this study, as to how and why children learn and how their teachers can best develop learner autonomy, match Yin's (2003) recommendations for a case study structure within the action research approach which is most suited for studies in real life

contextual conditions. A qualitative design was therefore chosen based on inductive logic (Cresswell, 1994) where contextual data from the students, enables the researcher to form links between categories that lead to pattern theories (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) which in turn help explain the research questions. Accordingly, this study explored how students can be motivated to improve their literacy skills by planning and building a portfolio of their work based on their own preferences and learning requirements while concurrently undertaking projects to find out more about their world and the worlds of their classmates. To facilitate the students' progression towards learner autonomy, the study incorporated the students' ideas (Stiggins and Chappuis, 2012) and reactions to the challenges of learning autonomously and also investigated how teachers can manage the use of individual learning plans, portfolios and co-operative, collaborative learning, most effectively within mainstream classes.

The qualitative data was collected using mixed methods of observations with checklists, questionnaires, discussions, written feedback, reflection and testing for both data triangulation (Yin, 2003) and for a more in depth study (Shank and Brown, 2007).

The focus of the research was on a mainstream sixth class of 20 female children, in a single sex school with high, middle and low literacy levels. For purposes of validity the research involved two periods of 12 school weeks' duration where the first consisted of observation, followed by two cycles of intervention in the second period.

Observation period

Reasons for the observation period:

◆ To note the students' strengths, weaknesses, interests and preferences for learning in order to devise an effective plan of work for the intervention period.
◆ To begin teaching the skills necessary for the students to cope with a whole new way of learning autonomously.

The observation period involved:

◆ Testing of students' reading ability using the NARAII (Neale Analysis of Reading Ability II) test for assessment of reading accuracy, comprehension, and rate.
◆ Introduction of checklist for written work.
◆ Observation of students' work habits using checklists.
◆ Questionnaires and discussions to elicit the preferred learning styles and preferences of students with the intention of promoting better group work, a greater motivation to learn as well as providing an indication of the skills the students needed to improve their learning.
◆ Observation of group work using a checklist to ascertain each student's attitude and behaviour: focus on tasks; work habits; listening, questioning and discussing; research and sharing; problem solving as well as co-operative and collaborative skills.
◆ Discussion of issues relating to roles, role rotation, checking one another's work and how to solve conflicts in groups.
◆ Constant review of all skills with students.

The information from this process was helpful in ascertaining the students' learning strengths and weaknesses, and in providing information relevant for grouping students.

Intervention period: First cycle

Individual Education Plans (IEPs) were used in this study to list learning objectives and specific criteria for assessment for and of learning (Stiggins and Chappuis, 2012).

- IEPs were introduced and students chose an area of work they would like to improve. Their goal, steps they would take to achieve it and how much time they might need were written down. Specific ways the students could self-assess their progress were also recorded.
- Students made notes during the learning cycle on what they learnt, how they learnt it, what help they required and the time taken to achieve their targets.
- Students were encouraged to self-assess their own learning and provide written feedback on progress achieved by using a feedback sheet, which evolved with use and student input.
- When students felt they had mastered a learning target, it was assessed by the teacher with written feedback which was compared to their self-assessment. This process was then extended to students assessing their peers' work.
- The planning notes were regularly compared to students' progress and assessments of learning, to promote reflection and to use the outcome in designing a new and more effective plan for the next cycle. The design of IEPs therefore changed almost weekly in accordance with the views and needs of the students.

Groupwork

- Students were asked to keep the groupwork rules, undertake roles and use the steps for conflict resolution if a problem arose.
- Charts explaining all such rules and roles were displayed in the classroom.
- Class discussions were held after each session to wholly involve the students in the process of finding ways to improve their group work in line with the objective of facilitating autonomy through meaningful motivation, co-operation and collaboration.

Cross-curricular literacy exercises

- Cross-curricular literacy exercises were undertaken in groups, pairs or alone with emphasis on presenting work in visual, auditory and kinaesthetic ways. These activities were sourced from Garnett (2002) following the findings of the observation period, which showed a need for the majority of students to understand and capitalise on their learning style preference while also being stretched to use other ways of learning (Stiggins and Chappuis, 2012).
- MIR, the Multi-layered Interactive Reading (Devitt, 1997) process was used as mixed-ability groups of four, made up stories using the words of their spelling list typed out on

small pieces of paper. Markers, glue and a large sheet of paper were provided for presentation. Guidelines for this exercise were as follows:

a) Use a dictionary to find the meanings of words.
b) Brainstorm and discuss a story that would include all of the words.
c) Take turns to write the story on the chart, sticking down all of the spelling words.
d) Remember your role in the group.

◈ Full use of the MIR (Devitt, 1997) process was used to become familiar with the language of a newspaper article on human rights by Jennifer Johnston (2008) entitled *I Have Desired to Go*. This was undertaken in four sessions by five groups of mixed ability.

◈ Students chose a country for a cultural project and decided whether to work alone, in pairs or in groups.

◈ Pleasurable reading on a daily basis for which students chose their own reading material. The students' attitude to these sessions was noted.

◈ Portfolios were used to motivate students and for assessment.

Intervention period: Second cycle

Intervention in the second cycle followed the same structure as the first, with the exception of new topics of work and adapted work practices which evolved out of discussions and written feedback in the first cycle. The design of IEPs continued to change and grow more concise as the intervention progressed. Feedback sheets became integrated in the IEPs. Portfolios of work developed more rapidly and they attracted the students' interest. Groupwork continued to be a challenging factor as it changed and developed. The cross-curricular literacy exercises continued to be undertaken in groups, pairs or alone with presentations of work on:

'Biographies' (Garnett, 2002) with options for:

a) Kinaesthetic: a wall display.
b) Auditory: hot seating.
c) Visual: making a wanted poster.

'News Reports' (Garnett, 2002) with options for:

a) Kinaesthetic: preparing a radio report.
b) Auditory: conducting an interview.
c) Visual: writing a report.

Full use of the MIR (Devitt, 1997) process was used to become familiar with the language of a newspaper article, this time chosen by the students, on *Wildfires in Australia*. A second cultural project was undertaken by all students who compiled a list of questions to interview students from different countries in the school and displayed their findings (Bucknall, 2012). Daily reading for pleasure continued and any changes in attitudes towards same were

monitored. Students', parents' and teachers' feedback was collected on all aspects of the intervention by observation, discussions, feedback sheets, journal notes and questionnaires.

Data collection

Due to the inductive nature of the methodology used in this study, data were interpreted as they were collected (Marshall and Rossman, 2006) thereby informing the researcher of any necessary adjustments to make in the following cycle of learning. In this way the study was directed by the students' views and actions, to the extent of the researcher's openness to same (Stiggins and Chappuis, 2012). Finally the data were analysed using Marshall and Rossman's (2006) reduction and interpretation process which entailed reducing the collected information into categories and then interpreting the emergent patterns to give a broader analysis perspective.

Students' views on the research proposal

It is interesting to note the students' response to their proposed involvement in the research project. They questioned if it would entail having to do 'more work' which was something they did not want. Sisamakis (2006) also found some students opposed autonomous learning for the same reason. The notion that anything requiring extra work could possibly be interesting was shunned by the majority of the class. One student was quick to interpret the idea of planning one's own work as self-teaching and questioned if that was not what the teacher was for. Kohonen and Korhonen (2007) had similar responses from secondary school students who considered teacher controlled learning to be better. It was explained to students that independent learning was one of the long term aims of the research, as one wouldn't always have a teacher to help as easily as is the case in primary school. Gradually the students began to understand what might be of value to them from the research and they agreed to participate. Such discussions became a trademark of this action research highlighting the students' pattern of initial resistance to amending their learning practices and displaying their ability to defend their preferences. Thus from the outset the students became involved in the process of autonomous learning this study set out to develop.

Discussion of research findings

Findings for IEPs come under the following headings:

- Learning styles.
- Planning.
- Reflective evaluation.
- Teachers' views.

Learning styles

The results of observation period questionnaires in Figure 1.1 show the preferences of students for kinaesthetic activities. Figure 1.2 shows a majority of the class preferred interpersonal rather than intrapersonal activities and like to talk while they work.
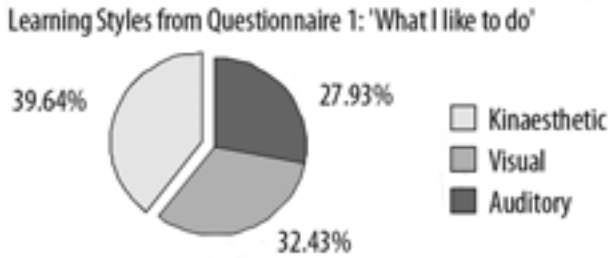
Learning Styles from Questionnaire 1: 'What I like to do'

39.64%   27.93%

☐ Kinaesthetic
☐ Visual
■ Auditory

32.43%

Figure 1.1: Pie chart of learning styles from questionnaire one.

Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Learning Styles from Questionnaire 4

10.00%

☐ Interpersonal
☐ Intrapersonal

90.00%

Figure 1.2: Pie chart of learning styles from questionnaire four.

The findings from teacher observations and the deeper contextual understanding, gained by discussing learning styles with individual students, found 13% of students prefer to do work that is specifically guided by the teacher, as per Figure 1.3.

Class Learning Style Preferences from Discussion

26.80%   21.60%

☐ Logical Mathematical
☐ Interpersonal Kinaesthetic
■ Guided Structured
■ Intrapersonal Verbalistic

13.20%

38.40%
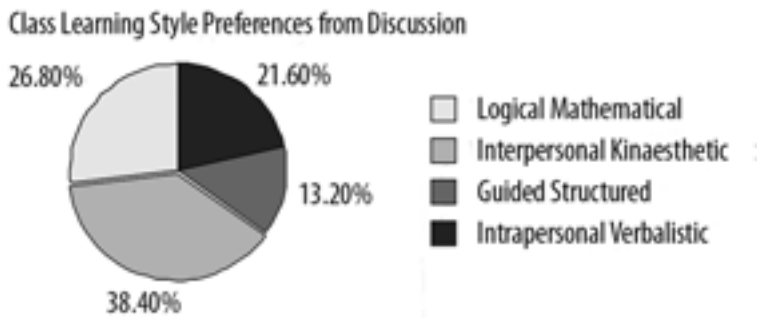
Figure 1.3: Pie chart of learning styles from observation and discussion.

The pie charts on page 87 show a majority of the students stated and were observed to prefer, learning by making, doing and talking. This tied in very well with former teachers' observations of a carefree attitude to work in the class that led to undisciplined, unstructured work practices. It was also noticed that high achieving students had a more balanced result in their learning preferences, whereas students who leaned towards one particular learning style tended to be doing less well at school, which is supported by Ridley's (1997) description of underachieving students being non-reflective and lacking in metacognitive skills. This trend implies the need for teachers to encourage students to engage in different styles of learning as well as their own preferred style (Coffield, 2006). Many students knew what they liked to do in class but had never connected their preferences to ways of learning. Awareness of learning style preferences through discussion in the class, was observed to contribute to the successful incorporation of reading and writing as part of making, doing and talking activities daily.

Planning

The findings show students resisted written planning and evaluation elements as is evident from journal entries where 100% of students state their dislike of filling in IEPs, despite the importance of same in the development of autonomous learners (Dam, 1995). In total, 45% of students referred to the satisfaction of having achieved goals, showing they didn't reject the planning process completely. While oral planning for projects and group work was undertaken willingly, writing objectives, particularly in relation to specific learning, was most difficult for students. They stated their dislike of IEPs was based on one or more of the following:

- too much writing;
- boring;
- useless.

This information tells us the students had:

- no motivation to write something they saw no benefit in; and
- little interest in learning how to use planning and evaluation tools and strategies.

A lack of understanding of planning principles could well have contributed to the students' lack of motivation to use IEPs (Kohonen and Korhonen, 2007). Stiggins and Chappuis (2012) emphasise the need to involve students in devising their own tasks in order to increase their motivational levels. Accordingly, the students were involved in revising the IEP format through discussion and the integration of their feedback sheets. This caused the IEPs to change and grow more concise as the intervention progressed. The students' consideration of planning as a waste of time implied their dependency on, and belief in, teacher controlled learning and highlighted the need for even more explicit instruction in identifying and writing goals for their learning as well as success criteria. Such students,

according to Ridley (1997) require teachers who, within a scaffolding and modelling context, can let go, who can listen to their students and trust them to make decisions about their learning and accept responsibility for same.

The students' poor skills in making decisions regarding their learning probably resulted from the lack of opportunity in class to do so, particularly for core subjects. Despite the teacher's aim to run a democratic classroom prior to this action research project, it became clear that situations requiring the students to make meaningful decisions co-operatively and collaboratively had rarely been set up. Decision making, setting meaningful objectives, following one's own plan through, evaluating progress made and areas to be improved, are skills for life that Eisner (2004) argues, education needs to address and this is supported by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA, 2007).

Reflective evaluation

Regarding reflective evaluation of one's own work the students fared slightly better. Unlike in planning they at least knew what piece of work was to be reflected upon. The most keenly embraced task was that of evaluating their peers' work. At first, students mimicked teachers' comments they had received over the years. Assessment frameworks (NCCA, 2007) and checklists (Stiggins and Chappuis, 2012) for written and project work were used to prompt students to reflect on specific criteria for giving authentic feedback. Having been puzzled when first asked to reflect on their work, students displayed varying degrees of reflectivity at different times during the study. This corresponds to Ridley's (1997) finding that reflectivity cannot be taught but rather develops over time if it is encouraged. The students' diaries, written evaluations, along with class discussions showed some progress in reflective processing was made by most students (Stiggins and Chappuis, 2012) as is evident from students' comments at the end of the research:

> "It's annoying doing IEPs. I like discussing the work with others. I enjoy doing projects in twos or alone and would like to have more time for them. I only like working in groups with people I know I can work with."

> "I find it easier being able to work on at my own speed instead of waiting for teacher to explain everything and then do some writing. IEPs have been difficult to do but I prefer having choices and projects to do and group work to normal work and textbooks."

Teachers' views

IEPs were very useful for managing students' individual progress. Helping students formulate objectives for their learning, in all subjects of the curriculum, provided a greater insight into areas of weakness than would otherwise have been gained. For example, it was discovered one student had no knowledge of the whereabouts of the world's major countries on a map. By helping students overcome such problems, an improvement in teacher-pupil relationships was observed, particularly in students' confidence and openness to talk about their work,

both when they needed help and when they had new ideas for learning.

The most effective way to implement IEPs in a mainstream class, was by agreeing and listing each student's objectives and the specific tasks to achieve same on the IEP kept in the student's portfolio. The tasks are ticked off on the IEP as they are written into the homework journal. Every week, a short evaluation is written by the student in the homework journal which can be used to compile a final review. The students considered this final IEP system to be quite useful and renamed it *My Learning Plan*.

As in all areas of the research the issue of making decisions was less of a problem when concerned with topics and ideas of interest to the students. There were difficult, frustrating days when half of the class did very little, but eventually, the students adjusted to the many changes involved in what Dam (1995, p.6) considers to be the "long, difficult and often painful process" of developing learner autonomy.

Findings for portfolios

The use of portfolios in the primary school classroom was found to be easy to implement, functional and motivational. Checklists for written and project work were used to select items from any subject for inclusion in portfolios (Stiggins and Chappuis, 2012), supporting the flexibility of portfolio use as discussed by Johnson, Mims-Cox and Doyle-Nichols (2006). Their consideration that portfolio use is beneficial in shifting from passive learners to active, reflective and self-evaluative learners was also evident during the latter stages of this study, as students' interest in their portfolio work increased. The students' extra work on their portfolios, adding drawings and revised work, showed signs of greater learner motivation, self-confidence, self-esteem and self-directed learning as was also found by Integrate Ireland Language and Training (IILT, 2005) and Stiggins and Chappuis (2012). This was particularly beneficial for lower achieving students whose portfolios were, because the goals were based on their individual levels, needs and interests, comparable to those of all their classmates.

Findings for collaborative and co-operative work in groups

In structured lessons students showed an initial dislike of group work, which stemmed from both a lack of understanding of the process and the skills required to negotiate same. When rules, roles and skills for negotiating and resolving conflict were discussed and practised, students learned how to operate within a group and their focus shifted to the task in hand. The students then realised the benefits of collaborating and discovered who they could work well with and for what type of work, considered by Dam (1995) to be the aims of group work in an autonomous classroom.

The clear rules agreed by the students and displayed in the classroom contributed greatly to their understanding and use of same. The rules included giving 100% attention to the person who was speaking; facing each other and making eye contact with the speaker; respecting other students' opinions; taking turns around the group to speak (no one to be under pressure to speak); speaking in turn; asking for an explanation when something wasn't

clear; and respecting the roles within the group. The involvement of students in creating rules was a major motivating factor as per Kohonen (2007) and Stiggins and Chappuis (2012).

Regarding roles, the majority of students stated they were not necessary. Lower achieving students were keener to undertake their roles, a discovery supported by Oxford's (1997) finding that roles positively affect students' self-esteem. Leaders rarely allocated tasks. Regardless of their level of achievement, it was necessary to take leaders aside to ensure they understood how to allocate tasks within their group.

The relationship between high achieving students and metacognitive awareness is noted by Ridley's (1997) account that such students can think about what they are learning and how they are approaching it while involved in the task. This corresponds to the high achieving students in this study who were found to be most actively and productively involved in group work from the outset. Lower achieving students, who lacked the confidence to share ideas, were active in group work by doing what others said needed doing but made less progress than their metacognitive aware classmates. The difficulty for such students, according to Ridley (1997), lies in their inability to reflect upon how they are learning. Regardless of their varying levels of metacognitive awareness, all students made progress in collaborative and co-operative work by increasing their focus on the task, participation and productivity, as measured by teacher observation checklists summarised in Figure 2.1.

Behaviour observed during various group work sessions	% Score in October 2008	% Score in May 2009	% Score Increased by
Focus on task	55%	85%	30%
Equal contribution to work in a group	45%	72%	27%
Researching and sharing of information	47%	73%	26%
Meeting deadlines	57%	83%	26%
Problem solving	65%	82%	17%
Helping group members	52%	68%	16%
Listening/questioning/discussing	72%	88%	16%
Completing tasks well	72%	87%	15%
Roles and quality of input	50%	65%	15%
Positive attitude to work/others' input	72%	85%	13%

Figure 2.1: Improvements recorded from teacher observations of class during group work.

This finding is in line with Vygotsky's (1978) and Dewey's (1910) constructivist theories that social interaction and talking about approaches to tasks improves the learners' reflectivity and problem solving ability. Some lower achieving students were seen to benefit from the informal guidance of higher achieving students which is in line with Bruner's (1986) idea of scaffolding (NCCA, 2007).

As this study included all subjects it was found that the better students were at mathematics the less they collaborated, except to compare answers. In discussions these students exclaimed their dislike of being held back by explaining mathematics to others but were happy to do so in other subjects. The lower achieving students in this research achieved a

sense of wellbeing and greater confidence when they worked with children of similar ability. That students didn't tend to ask for help from classmates of a higher achievement level than their own could be linked to fear of failure and learners being "fossilised in their learning behaviour" (Ridley, 1997, p.41). Hallam, Ireson and Davies (2004) found students' preference for mixed ability grouping increased in relation to the amount of experience they gained of it because the benefits of working together, as well as equality of opportunities became apparent. The need to ensure students understand the underlying principles of a new concept was a recurrent theme (Stiggins and Chappuis, 2012). Early comments during discussions and notes in students' journals, reported 60% of them disliked group work:

"Group work takes too much time when you have to wait on others to speak and answer and then no-one agrees." (Six students made similar comments.)

"Group work is useless and boring." (Three students made similar comments).

"Group work is annoying as you have to explain everything to each other." (Five students made similar comments).

The idea of planning the group work and allocating roles and tasks, led some students, who were initially enthusiastic about group work, to lose interest when they realised it wouldn't be free time to do as they please. Yet, once familiar with basic group work skills a turnaround in the students' attitudes to group work evolved. Seventy per cent of students wrote favourably about group lessons in the intervention period. As the study progressed, all students developed some positive attitudes to group work, with the majority realising its benefits for making greater progress in a shorter space of time. Their journal entries changed dramatically:

"I like group working with my group, we have fun and get more done." (Similar comments from all girls).

"Group work is fun and you get much better ideas." (Nine students made similar comments).

"We get more done when everybody is helping each other in groups." (Twelve students made similar comments).

It also emerged that if a group had many strong characters, stalemate or conflict ensued and this was often highlighted in students' journal reflections where all but two students stated they only wanted to be group leaders. Such situations were ideal for developing the students' conflict resolution skills. Sometimes students became frustrated and even angry, but their relief and sense of empowerment when they managed to overcome the difficulties in the group was phenomenal. In so doing the students practised what Hattie (2009) and Oxford (1997) consider to be social and communicative life skills:

"…asking for clarification, checking the understanding of others, explaining, paraphrasing, acknowledging contributions, asking others to contribute, praising others, verifying consensus and mediating conflicts". (Oxford, 1997, p.446).

Findings for cross-curricular literacy activities

These activities aimed to give students opportunities to use the strategies of planning, monitoring, evaluating, collaborating and co-operating. Students chose their own learning methods, resources and presentation styles from a wide ranging list, as well as whether to work alone, in pairs or in groups. Dam (1995) found choice to be a fundamental element of autonomous learning as it promoted responsibility in learners which led to greater involvement, better learning and more understanding of evaluation. At first, the pupils didn't believe they could actually choose for themselves but every 'yes' answered to a student's choice brought more varied and imaginative requests. Choice was observed to motivate and empower the students (Kohonen and Korhonen, 2007) and caught the interest of the ten percent of students with low metacognitive awareness, who were so keen to do well, they began asking meaningful questions. This showed they were at times reflecting on aspects of their work. Ridley (1997) describes such students as being autonomous at particular times and states that it is up to teachers to increase the frequency by noting what triggers the autonomous behaviour and how best to facilitate it.

The findings on the cultural projects involving interviewing students in other classes from abroad gave the greatest signs of the development of autonomous learners:

"I enjoyed getting to know the foreign students from other classes." (Nineteen students made similar comments).

"I would really like to do another interview for projects as I learnt lots." (Nineteen students made similar comments).

"I learned a lot from interviewing our foreign student." (Seventeen students made similar comments).

"Interviewing other students is a fun way of learning and making friends." (Eleven students made similar comments).

Even though the partners were teacher selected for this activity, the experience gave all students more confidence in themselves and their interactive, communicative abilities (Slavin and Oickle, 1981).

As a teacher it was often difficult not to interrupt as students made some odd choices such as the inclusion of modern day wedding attire in a project on ancient Egypt. The students later explained their aim to compare ancient and modern Egyptian wedding styles. Such episodes relate well to Dam's (1995, p.78) argument that "letting go and trusting in the learner's ability to take hold" is one of the main problems for teachers in the process of

developing learner autonomy. The results of doing so in this study are reflected in the following requests from students:

> "Teacher, can our three groups work on in the computer room during break as we want to get some work finished on our projects?" "Please." "Oh yes, teacher, please say yes."

Another pupil, who was disinterested in learning before the intervention period, announced loudly:

> "I'm getting a great buzz out of this project work with my partner. Look at what we did last night. I hope you're going to give us lots of time to work on our projects today teacher."

These reflections along with teacher observations show the students' listening, speaking, reading and writing skills were being practised in meaningful ways. This supports Christie and Misson's (1998) consideration, that the most successful literacy levels are achieved when students interact freely with both reading and writing within a sociocultural framework, as influenced by Freire (Irwin, 2012).

Findings for multi-layered interactive reading (MIR)

Several students found the interactive processes in reading authentic texts to be slow, boring and frustrating depending on the subject matter which again is in line with the findings by Dam (1995) and Kohonen and Korhonen (2007) that student choice of learning material has a major effect on their motivation and learning.

The majority of students considered MIR (Devitt) to be difficult and challenging but said it was helpful in remembering the meaning and spelling of words. Observations showed most students were easily able to use lower level subprocesses such as "word recognition, orthographic processing, phonological decoding, and the generation of local semantic structures" (Devitt, 1997, p.459). However, difficulties and challenges arose when use of higher-level sub-processes including "propositional units, schemata, and integration of new information with prior knowledge" (Devitt, 1997, p.459) were required. Due to the layers of oral interactivity between the students, in addition to their interactivity with the text, each student was stretched to expand her personal processing capacity in relation to both form and meaning. Students' diaries and teacher observations found the process took less time and was more acceptable to students as they gained familiarity with it:

> "MIR got easier and faster to do over time." (Twelve students made similar comments).

> "This is much faster and more fun now that I've got the hang of it." (Two students made similar comments).

When applied to a human rights article by Jennifer Johnston (2008), *I Have Desired to Go*, the process was observed to be most successful and to involve every student. Although several girls complained the task was boring, teacher's observations were of all groups working well together, reading what they'd compiled repetitively and trying out lots of ways of constructing meaning. Their comments were:

"The Jennifer Johnston words were difficult to use." (Nine students made similar comments).

"It was difficult to make up stories with the Jenny Johnston words but it was fun." (Nine students made similar comments).

"I like doing this as we don't have to think of words to put in." (Two students made similar comments).

"I like doing this as it's challenging for my mind." (One student).

Most of the students didn't see any connection between using the collaborative process on a text and their subsequent understanding of the actual article:

"MIR helped me understand the Johnston story." (Five students made similar comments).

"MIR didn't help me to understand the story." (Fifteen students made similar comments).

"The words didn't make any difference when reading the story. Why didn't you just give us the story without all the words work?" (Five students made similar comments).

Teacher's observations disagree, as when reading the actual Jennifer Johnston (2008) article, the students were totally engrossed in their reading and they understood much of what is a complex text. The multi-layered process of reading, constructing, re-reading, revising, reading, unscrambling, reading, editing, re-reading, writing, reading, elaborating and reading again was found to reinforce the meaning of the words in a way that straight forward vocabulary teaching and subsequent reading of a text does not.

The collaborative nature of the process helped as students listened to others figuring out the different uses of words and everyone contributed to building new meaning from them. MIR (Devitt, 1997) certainly motivated students to work deeply with language, tackling the cognitive tasks of word perception and comprehension, in a way they otherwise wouldn't have done. However, there is no way of measuring how much working with authentic texts improved students' literacy levels but their comments are encouraging:

"Making up stories from the words was fun and it helped me because now when I see those difficult words again I know what they mean."

"I was reading the newspaper at home and three of the words from the newspaper article we read in class were in it and my mum was amazed I could understand them."

Findings for Neale analysis of Reading Attainment II and reading attitudes

The results of the NARAII tests showed students' literacy levels improved throughout the year with little difference between the observation and intervention periods. The graph in Figure 3.1 shows the average class scores, from all three NARAII tests administered at the beginning, middle and end of the research. Improvements on the accuracy mean score after the intervention cycles are shown to be slightly greater than after the period of observation.
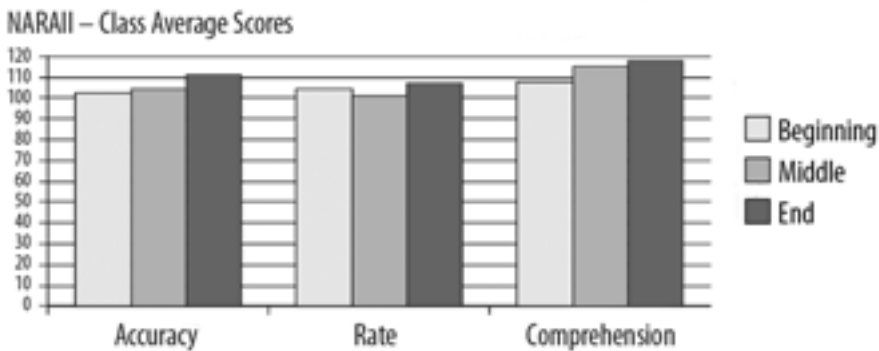
Figure 3.1: NARAII class average scores for reading in September, January and May.

For reading rate, most students slowed down during the study and then picked up again. This is positive in that the students began taking more care of what they were reading.

Average comprehension progress was shown to have increased more during the observation period than thereafter. Given that in January, 80% of students had surpassed the nationally standarised above average score of 110 in reading comprehension, it is natural that the rate of progress should slow down in relation to the level of difficulty.

Some lower achieving students made excellent progress and this fact was supported by observations of their increased involvement and confidence in their work. Any link between these NARAII test results and the intervention is tentative, as it cannot be shown how the students' literacy levels might have accelerated without the implementation of the strategies in this study.

Immense positive changes in the attitudes of the students to the literacy process were highlighted by teacher's and parents' observations including individual differences in reading development (Afflerbach and Cho, 2010). That the students found ways to enjoy literacy learning, lays the foundation, as Eisner (2004) asserts, to positively affect their future progress in this area and to living life more fully all round.

Impact of the research on students and their teacher

Interestingly the research required more involvement from students and more stepping back from their teacher. The students were frustrated when things wouldn't work out for them or the teacher wouldn't tell them exactly what to do. Being responsible for their own learning and decision making was a challenge for all students but a greater one for those who were lower achieving and teacher dependent (Hattie, 2009).

Having experienced this process there is no way one's reflective development as an autonomous teacher can be stopped. This is supported by Kohonen's (2007) finding that teachers promoting learner autonomy changed their views of themselves as educators as they gained a greater understanding of the process. The changing role of teachers in learner autonomy is set out by Dam (1995) as follows:

◈ ...the teacher will focus on learning rather than teaching;
◈ be engaged in the learners' learning process;
◈ be open to learners' ideas and suggestions;
◈ support learners' initiatives;
◈ initiate or encourage further activities;
◈ observe and analyse learning behaviour for later evaluation with learners;
◈ map out working methods and ways of evaluating progress in collaboration with the learners;
◈ be a consultant as well as a participant and a co-learner in the learning process (Dam, 1995, p.5).

This shift in focus from teaching to learning and how to learn can be difficult (Stiggins and Chappuis, 2012). An understanding of the highly structured work and specific aims involved in the strategies used to promote learner autonomy is necessary. Collaboration with students must be extended to include parents and all teachers in the school if learner autonomy is to be fully achieved. This is a major challenge, and as Little (2007) argued, is one that depends on the development of teacher autonomy.

Conclusion

The findings show that the students in this particular study required most help with planning and setting objectives for their work. Decision making about their learning was also found to require specific attention. These students were better able to plan, for themselves or for the group by discussing things rather than writing them down. Therefore, in this study, collaborative and co-operative learning became the foundation stone on which to build all the other skills necessary to promote autonomous learning.

Major changes were enforced during the short time scale of this study and at times proved too much for the students. A more gradual introduction of the learning strategies over a longer time frame would allow for consolidation of the skills required to become autonomous learners.

Overall the findings conclude that facilitating students in planning, monitoring and evaluating their own learning is a long-term process, posing many challenges to students and teachers (Hattie, 2009). While little progress was made in terms of students actually planning their learning and giving truly reflective evaluations, an awareness of these concepts was initiated.

On a personal and professional level teachers need to develop their own understanding of autonomous learning principles, share them with colleagues and start adding them to classroom practice. Consequently, teachers must trust students to choose, plan, monitor and evaluate their own learning in collaboration with others, from an early age, by listening to them more carefully (Bucknall, 2012). Parents also need to be familiar with what is expected of their children in an autonomous learning environment.

It has to be remembered that each child, group of students, teacher and school ethos will have different requirements. Therefore, the plan presented here is only a guideline for further development of the autonomous process in primary school classrooms. Autonomous learning is similar to Freire's (Irwin, 2012) critical pedagogy in that it is a process shaped for and by the participants and not a product created by using a method.

While this was a very small scale study, conducted over a short space of time, its importance lies in asking ourselves, as educators of highly impressionable young people, what we are really teaching them that will be of greatest benefit to them throughout their lives in what is currently a very uncertain world.

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Beyond the moment photographed: From visual to text

≋ AOIFE BUTLER ≋

Abstract

Rapid changes in digital communication and the multimodal world we live in have led to the need for reading and writing to be combined with various aspects of visual and digital media. This paper examines how the integration of visual and digital literacy through the means of the digital camera can impact on English writing and oral language development. It is an action research project that was conducted, by the teacher as researcher, over a four month period with children in a mixed first and second class (six to eight years). Examples of children's engagement in multimodal literacy are presented to demonstrate how classroom literacy practices of oral language, reading and writing can be integrated with digital and visual literacy.

Keywords: **writing, motivation, visual literacy, digital literacy, metalanguage.**
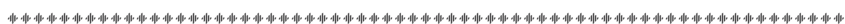
Introduction

Within the framework of education it has become broadly accepted that because of the advent of new technologies and media, communication and meaning making skills are developing along multimodal paths (Yamada-Rice, 2011). Advances in information and communication technology have been so substantial over the last two decades that they have "challenged our understanding of the very nature of literacy" (Larson and Marsh, 2005, p.68) and have led to much talk of the so called "new literacy" in relation to the information age (McFarlane, 1997). Kress (2003, p.1) suggested two very specific factors for this change. They are, firstly, the move from the dominance of writing to the dominance of the image and, secondly, the move from the medium of the book to the medium of the screen. This ever changing literacy landscape has meant that being literate is more than being able to read and write but involves being communicatively competent across different contexts (Barton, 2004; Kress, 2003). The term 'multimodal literacy' evolved from this environment to encapsulate different ways in which meaning can be created and communicated in the world. It incorporates print, verbal (McLean, 2007) and visual literacy (Van Horn, 2008). McFarlane (1997, pp108-120) proposes that we now need to consider where the use of images, video and audio come in children's developing literacy.

Visual literacy

Research by Siber (2005) on visual communication has highlighted many of the current discourses surrounding the visual mode on literacy education. Siber emphasises that the vi-

sual mode is now an important part of communication; written text is often created and received in connection with the visual mode. Significantly he found that, when separated, the impact of visual communication is greater than that of the written text. Mirzoeff (1999, p.9) considers that the linguistic is being replaced by the visual as our principal means of communication and of understanding our "postmodern world". While Pahl and Roswell (2005) contend that the use of visual media in many domains of public life has led to a cultural shift regarding means of expression.

Visual literacy has been described as an understanding and critical analysis of all visual imagery presented to us (Golubieski, 2006). It is neither new in definition or practice (Brown, 2004) but it is "controversial by definition" (Raney, 1999, p.41) with definitions incorporating areas such as visual representation (Clarke, 1997), visual communication (Debes, 1968) and semiotics (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996). Nonetheless, "no one appears to doubt the ascendency of the image" (Duncum, 2002, p.16).

Due to the cultural dependence on visual media, students now require visual literacy skills to communicate effectively (Roblyer and Bennett, 2001). The importance of integrating these visual structures into teaching literacy has been highlighted in educational research over the past decade (Callow, 2005; Kress and Van Leuwen, 1996; Unsworth, 2001; Van Horn, 2008). Visual literacy entails a finer understanding and interpreting of images (Brown, 2004) and a creation of images that can effectively create meaning (Raney, 1999).

Recent curriculum changes in Australia emphasise the importance of developing creativity through visual literacy and using visual and digital media. The Australian Government prioritised visual literacy in the *Australian Curriculum for English* (ACARA, 2010). In its rationale it states that "literacy also takes account of visual literacy and the rapid changes that have occurred as a result of new technologies in the ways that communication takes place" (ACARA, 2010).

Visual literacy and writing

The most standard way of incorporating visual literacy into the classroom is through the use of the photograph. The positive role of photography in English literacy has been well documented. Van Horn (2008) used photographs to enable children to write with meaning and purpose. Good (2008) fostered language development through the use of photographs. Yamanda-Rice (2011) used digital photography and Google Street View to compare visual media and its relationship with the written mode in Tokyo and London. Van Horn (2008), in her research into using photographs in the literacy class, found it played a positive role in motivating children to engage in writing lessons.

Photographs, because they are remarkably evocative, are somewhat open to interpretation (Fasoli, 2003) and appeal to all ages. They allow children to construct their individual views of the world (Clarke, 1997) and chronicle behaviours, events and locations (Moran and Tegano, 2005, cited in Van Horn, 2008). They can evoke past memories, feelings and experiences (Pahl and Roswell, 2005) in the child, thus giving them a starting point for their writing. Photographs can help children to focus their thinking (Ewald, 2001) and deepen their understanding of a topic (Evans, 1998). Van Horn (2008, p.5) goes as far as to state that

students can "become writers by exploring the photographs and their meanings through writing".

The construction of meaning through visual means requires visual literacy skills (Pranayama, 2006). Like reading and writing these skills are not merely acquired (Brown, 2004) but must be taught. For children to use photographs effectively especially in their writing (Van Horn, 1998) they must be taught what there is to be seen in the photograph (Nikolajeva and Scott, 2000). Children need to refine their visual perception and focus on the contents and context of the image (Callow, 2006). They must be taught the metalanguage (Ewald, 2001) of visual literacy; language used to talk about texts – "their purpose, their construction and their meanings" (Zammit, 2010, p.263). Zammit suggests that developing metalanguage provides a base for children and teachers to critically analyse their work. It allows children to talk with clarity about what they can or cannot see in a photograph (Ewald, 2001). It is also one of the primary evaluation tools for assessing visual literacy development in children (Brown, 2004).

The OECD (2011) in their report *The Case for 21st Century Living* found that education is about preparing students to live in a multi-faceted world as active and engaged citizens. It states that "because of rapid economic and social change, schools must prepare students for jobs that have not yet been created, technologies that have not yet been invented and problems that we do not yet know will arise" (OECD, 2011). It also acknowledges that education today is about incorporating ways of working, communicating and collaborating, as well as recognising and exploiting the potential of new technologies. This report by the OECD (2011) challenges us to question the extent to which the world around us could or should be reflected to a greater extent in our curriculum and classrooms.

The study

In the research study the use of the digital camera was incorporated into the English literacy programme in a mixed first and second class setting. The action research study was conducted over a four month period. It utilised a mixed methods approach in order to provide a comprehensive analysis of the impact of the visual image on stimulating writing. Data gathered included teacher as researcher observations, research journal, interviews with children as well as student digital and print work samples. Data was collated and analysed to answer two research questions:

- How does the use of the digital camera in the English writing lesson impact on children's motivation to write and writing attainment?
- What bearing does the project exert on the development of children's visual and digital literacy?

Description and analysis of the project: Phase one and two

In both phases the researcher planned to embed the use of the digital camera into the English writing programme. In phase one children were required to write stories based on digital

images taken by the teacher. In phase two children were given access to the class digital camera to take their own images and subsequently write stories based on these images.

Phase one: Teacher composed digital images

Pre-test questionnaires were conducted by the researcher in order to ascertain children's motivation to write both at home and at school. The results based on their attitudes and perceptions of writing indicated 60% of children in the class truly enjoyed writing both at home and at school. The remainder of the class displayed negative feelings towards writing with 14% stating they did not like to write anytime, anywhere. They thought of writing as a routine activity only to be engaged in at school.

For the purpose of motivating the children to write the researcher introduced the concept of using digital images as a stimulus to writing. Conscious of Freeman's (1998, p.25) statement that, "elaboration is directly proportional to how much a writer knows about its subject" the researcher took photos of *Toy Story* characters in a junior infant classroom in order to provide both first and second class children with a lived experience that bore some relevance (Berg, 2003) to their past experiences. (Figure 1.1)

Figure 1.1: Toy Story, *teacher composed images, 2011, set of two digital photographic images.*

Displaying the images on the interactive whiteboard (IWB) in the English lesson generated a lot of excitement in the classroom, a finding also recorded by Van Horn (2008) in her research on photographs in literacy. Comments such as: "This was better than our books," and "Am, Miss, can we do this again? This is cool," were recorded by the researcher.

All of the children, even those that did not like to engage in class discussions, wanted to say something about the photographs. Extensive oral work was done on generating possible story lines. Children were encouraged to draw on their own experiences of 'The Infant Room', first day of school feelings and their thoughts on the *Toy Story* movies and character adventures.

Unfortunately, the enthusiasm observed by the researcher during oral language work did not transfer into the written work of a number of children. Analysis of their work demonstrates that they were unable to develop the story beyond the surface of the image. Charac-

ters' names and the location of the characters were evident but no further storyline development was included.

In a focus group discussion with a random sample of children there was general agreement that the photographs "looked like exciting things to write about" but further discussion revealed a difficulty for the children the researcher had not foreseen.

"It was hard to think of them in school because they weren't in school in the film," and "they were in our school in the photos but I kept thinking of them in the *Toy Story* movies," were just some of the feedback comments received. The children could not connect with the photographs as the characters were out of context to them. Because the photograph did not "draw on the perspectives of the writers" (Steiner and Mahn, 2003) many children were not able to elaborate on the photograph in their writing (Freeman, 1998) or engage fully with the task and thus motivation diminished.

Aware of this fading motivation the researcher ensured the next set of photographs in phase one drew directly from the experiences of the children. Research by Sealey, Sealey, and Millmore (1979) found that children's motivation to write arises naturally as a result of their feelings about their own experiences. The *Fianna* picture was taken by the researcher at the end of a project the children had completed on Irish mythology (Figure. 1.2).

Figure 1.2: Fianna*, a teacher composed image (2011).*

When children saw photographs of themselves enacting the *Fianna* stories the material became personally related and meaningful to them. Other areas of the curriculum were drawn upon during this particular project including Irish, visual arts, drama, history and geography. Reference to these previous activities in many of the children's written work reiterates Bizzell's (1982, cited in McArthur, Graham and Fitzgerald, 2006, p.19) assertion that "we can know nothing but what we have words for, if knowledge is what language makes of experience".

Analysis of children's scripts (Figure 1.3) showed a marked improvement in the word count of their stories compared to the previous *Toy Story* pieces they produced. The most notable increase was made by Paul whose word count increased by 140% from 71 words to 197. The results show clearly that "elaboration is directly proportional to the amount a writer knows about his subject" (Freeman, 1998, p.25).

In the following focus group discussions there was unanimous agreement by the children that the *Fianna* images were easier to write about. The following comment by Paul (first class) gives an explicit reason why:

"Because I knew what I was talking about, we did it in school and all I had to do was think – what happened? Then I could write it. I liked writing it."

The uninhibited nature of the response to using a set of images from the children's own environment clarified the importance of Cowley's (2004, p.3) advice "make writing real, make them want to write".
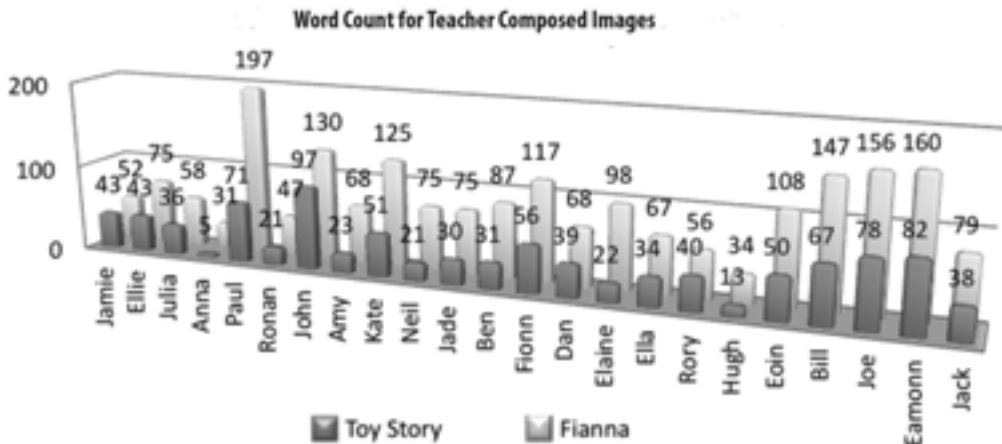
Figure 1.3: Word count comparison for teacher composed image (pupils' names were changed).

Phase two: Children's ownership of their digital images

Based on the findings in phase one the emphasis shifted from teacher composed images to student composed images to stimulate writing in phase two. As "learning is only possible by doing" (Somekh and Davis, 1997, p.23), children were given access to the class digital camera. The novelty of this motivated all children in the class to take an active part in the activity. The camera was available for use from the teacher's desk. The only restrictions set for the children were that the subject matter had to be of their own choice and the photo had to be taken by them.

Children were allowed to photograph anything that captured their interest inside the school building or from the school yard. Children's use of the camera was not allocated time slots; it was available for use from the teacher's desk anytime. They were reminded regularly that they needed to be collecting images in order to write a new story every two weeks.

Acquiring the skills to use the camera did not take long as children were very keen to help each other and more often than not the teacher was left out of this learning process completely. It was clear that using this technology was empowering the children to take con-

trol of their own learning and the teacher's role was changing to that of facilitator. This is one of the fundamental aims of the *Primary School Curriculum* (Government of Ireland, 1999a) and of the NCTE (2009).

By observing the uploading of images onto the computer and by being shown how to do this in class the children were enabled to upload their own images independently from the camera onto the computer. Children displayed an understanding of uploading photographs through their ability to explain the steps of the process and through using the appropriate language to do so. The researcher noted that a word wall of ICT vocabulary composed by the children near the computer was frequently referred to by the children during the project.

Scaffolding writing through storyboards

Analyses of data showed substantial gains were recorded in children's writing when they used self-composed photographs as a stimulus. However, the researcher found that many children found it very difficult to move intellectually from taking a photograph to writing about a photograph, thus, writing experiences needed to be constructed with a strong focus on scaffolding students' learning especially at the prewriting/planning phase. Storyboards were used to bridge this gap for children and proved to be a very successful strategy in this research. They allowed all children, regardless of writing ability, to develop their thinking and creativity without having to write and rewrite. Hugh stated during a focus group discussion: "I like them because when I draw the pictures I know what the pictures are about so it's easy to remember what to write." Ella commented: "They give you time to think and if you can't spell the word you can still draw it then just ask you (the teacher) to spell it." Ella was able to plan her story (Figures 1.4, 1.5) without the added pressure of adhering to grammar and the constructs of language. Examination of the storyboards distinctly showed the ideas children had for their stories and the progression from one picture to the next in terms of development of the story line. Children now had a clear beginning, middle and end to their stories which gave good structure to the written draft.

Figure 1.4: The Trunchbull's Apartment Block, *Ella, 2011, digital photographic image.*

Figure 1.5: The Trunchbull's Apartment Block, *story board, Ella, 2011, scanned image.*

The children displayed increased motivation to engage with class work and exhibited improved confidence with their perceived writing ability. As a variety of literacy activities must be engaged in to produce a written piece i.e. talking, listening and reading the project also exerted an impact on these areas of the English curriculum.

The researcher observed that the majority of children were discussing, comparing and analysing their photographs both incidentally and formally throughout the project, with both their classmates and their teacher. This finding sustains the recommendation from the *English Language Curriculum* (Government of Ireland, 1999, p.28) which states that children "should be enabled to experience an abundance of oral language activity when preparing a writing activity". The researcher affirms that the introduction of the metalanguage: the language used when describing images (Unsworth, 2001) played a central role in this increased use of language.

Developing metalanguage

In order to use the photographs effectively in their writing children were taught to focus on the contents and context of the image; the placement of objects/people, expressions, gestures, colour and items in the background/foreground. As the project developed the children's use of this descriptive language showed gradual improvement. Observational records and recorded conversations between children reinforced the notion that children discussing their images led to greater communication as children tried to explain what was happening in the pictures, and the others eagerly asked questions. The transcript of Anna (second class) and John's (first class) conversation about Anna's image (a photograph of the classroom window) illustrates this. Metalanguage/descriptive language is italicised.

John: "Why did you take this photo?"

Anna: "They are the *flowers* I planted with Mrs Ryan. They grew up and look *pretty* now. They are *yellow and purple.*"

John: "Ha! I can see our *lighthouses* in the *background.* Look in the *window* Anna."

Anna: "Oh ya! And look at the *flag* in the window too."

John: "Ya it's the *green* flag."

Anna: "Look at the *bottom...* there... *Miss's car.*"

Throughout this dialogue it is clear that a finer understanding and interpretation of the digital images proved to be an important feature of the children's oral language development. When John pointed out the lighthouse to Anna her attention was also drawn to the flag in the background. For the duration of the conversation they identified and described the placing of most of the objects in the image. They were learning from each other and this was contributing to their oral language development. Anna and John were able to think aloud while at the same time being stimulated to discover other areas may not have been obvious to them. This finding was further enhanced with similar comments made by children in post-project interviews on whether it is easier to write a story after you have discussed it with someone else. Ronan (second class) suggested:

"It's way easier because you don't have to think of all the stuff on your own. Your friend can help you."

Jamie (second class) concurred by stating:

"Ya (sic) sometimes you can use your friends' ideas about your photo or you can give them ideas too."

The influence of oral language in the prewriting phase emerges here. The way children spoke to each other, the connections they created with their verbal reasoning and questioning generated ideas and helped in the development of storylines. These accounts help illustrate how writing and oral language develop simultaneously in formal and informal contexts and highlight the importance of studying them both in situ.

Visual literacy

The development of children's metalanguage was intertwined with the development of their visual and digital literacy. However, this did not happen instantly and training the children to make the transition from just taking a photo of an object to capturing an image that can create meaning was a slow process. The researcher infers that the interlinking of the visual, digital, oral and written modes influenced this process.

Allowing children take ownership of their photographs gave them the power to retake their photographs if they were not happy with the image produced. The researcher found that, over time, some children became the biggest critics of their own work. They showed

the ability to analyse their digital images and change the composition of them to become more visually appealing. Eamonn (second class) decided, after reviewing his photograph of *The Crow* that he wanted to take image again. When asked the reason for this decision he stated:

"I don't like the background it's (sic) all wires and stuff and I want it closer up. Look."

When Eamonn's two photographs were compared (Figure 1.7) it was observed that there was a significant difference between the two images. Eamonn had a clear idea in his head of what he wanted and had the determination to produce such an image. He displayed the ability to look beyond the characters and objects of his photograph and looked deeper into the set-up and composition of his image, a key skill of visual literacy according to Duncum (2002).
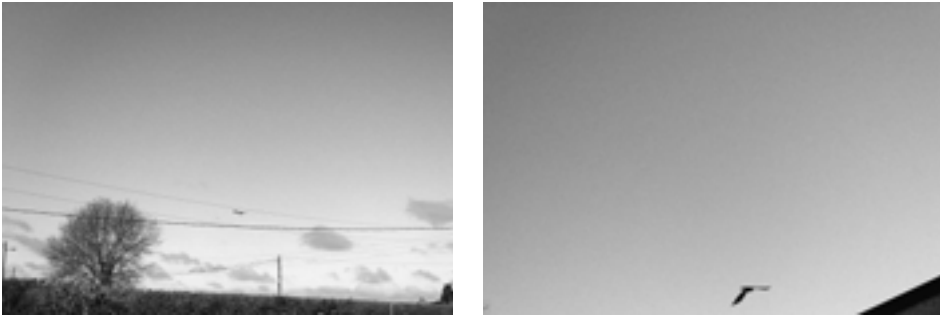
Figure 1.7: The Crow, *Eamonn, 2011, two digital photographic images*

This finding was further enhanced with similar comments made by other children.

"I want to zoom in more; I don't want any of the walls in my photo."

"Can I take mine again outside now because I want it sunny (in the photograph)?"

The influence of their awareness of photographic composition emerges here. The children were putting thought into their images and taking ownership of them and their environment. This finding resembles that of Gardner (1999) who found that active learning carefully integrated with multimedia can lead to children becoming more visually perceptive.

The researcher is aware that not all of the children in the class displayed this high level of interest in editing their photographs or in expressing their ability to critically analyse their own images. Nonetheless, many of the children did display an enthusiasm in their willingness to discuss the photographic work of others, which is also an important feature of the development of visual literacy and further enhances oral language skills.

Within the framework of this research project children were exposed to a variety of literacies. The multi-modal approach to teaching literacy in phase one and phase two incor-

porated print, verbal, visual and digital literacies. From the outset, it was obvious to the researcher that the children were more enthusiastic about engaging with the visual and digital literacies than the conventional print and verbal literacy they were accustomed to. They perceived them as "more exciting to use" and "way more fun than just writing" as proclaimed by Jade. This enjoyment factor, while significant to their motivation to engage in the project, filtered its way slowly into their written and oral language work. Over the duration of the project children began to see how all these literacies could be intertwined together and used to produce a piece of written work that "they had control over" (Freeman, 1998, p.25) from the outset.

Figure 1.8 displays the comparative results of both the pre-project and post-project questionnaires based on the children's attitudes and perceptions towards writing. Results of the pre-project questionnaire were discussed at the beginning of the article and showed 40% of children had negative perceptions of writing. Examination of the comparative results shows a significant shift in the children's attitudes towards writing both at home and in school after the completion of the project. An increase of 15% was noted in the number of children that now enjoy writing both at home and at school. Only 13% of children viewed writing as something to be engaged in during school time while 2% of children stated they still did not like to write at all after taking part in the project.
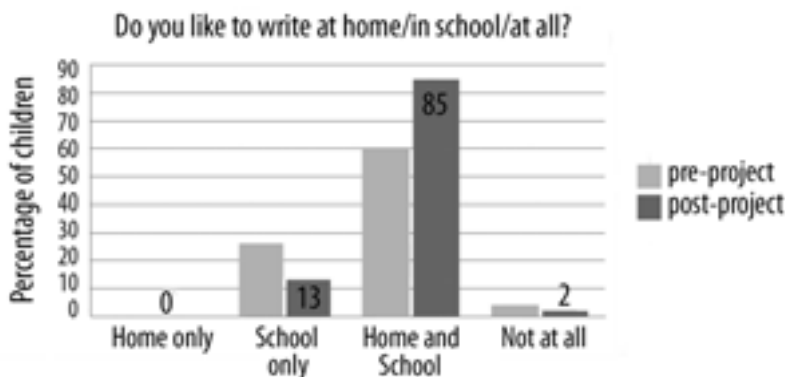

Figure 1.8: Comparative results of pre project and post project questionnaires.

It was clear to the researcher from analysis of both the qualitative and quantitative data that children were more motivated to engage in the writing process after taking part in the project. The positive influence of the structured environment created during this research project complements the research of Beriter and Scardamalia (1987) which emphasised children's self-perceived confidence is closely related to the stimulating features of an instructional environment.

Recommendations

It is necessary to acknowledge that the study was conducted in a first and second class of twenty four children over a short timeframe of four months. However, it is the researcher's

belief that the project has demonstrated that the proposed model of intensively using the digital camera in the English writing lesson and indeed across the curriculum, can be an effective strategy in improving the writing and oral language of children while simultaneously improving their visual and digital literacy. The significance of allowing children to choose their own stimulus and capture it on camera themselves was identified as a central outcome of the research. In addition to this the importance of children drawing their stories before writing begins is vital to enhance the flow of children's thought process and planning.

The researcher recommends that, whenever possible, allow children to choose their own stimulus to capture with the digital camera. The immediacy and appeal of the visual image allows children to access learning that engages them, to discover a purpose to their writing and essentially maintain their motivation to write.

An important result of the children's heightened engagement of the writing process was their increased tendency to plan and discuss their work with their peers. In the prewriting stage of the writing process the teacher must place emphasis on the creation of ideas and development of storylines by encouraging children to give clear explanations and express ideas about their images in class presentations, pupil/pupil conferences and teacher/pupil conferences. Through learning to use metalanguage in the description of images children are strengthening their oral language skills. Following this stage the use of storyboards further enhances the creation of the storyline before writing.

While most children have a basic understanding of visual and digital literacy due to the increased prevalence of media and technology in their daily lives it must be noted that visual literacy is not learned by exposure to images alone. Higher order skills such as metalanguage or using images to present information must be identified and taught by the teacher.

Conclusion

Teachers cannot be expected to replicate, in class, all of the multimedia experiences that children engage in outside of school. However, discussion of this project has shown the impact that a single digital camera can have on creating meaningful learning experiences in the classroom. The significance of allowing children to choose their own stimulus and capture it on camera themselves was identified as a central outcome of the research. It is clear that it is a methodology that can be accessed by all children in the class regardless of ability and that it affected positively the writing abilities and visual literacy of all the children in the class, albeit at differing skill levels. The study illustrated that not alone did the children's motivation and planning to write increase over the course of the project, their oral language, visual perception and digital literacy also developed. Although the relatively brief timeframe of the project may have negated against those who made modest improvements in their writing abilities during the project, significantly they demonstrated progression in their motivation to write, which is accepted as a key indicator of future success.

While a great deal of further research into visual and digital literacy is needed, this paper has exemplified how a simple change in classroom practice can be beneficial for both the students and the teacher. Learning experiences that were active and cohesive occurred within the research study without radical changes to classroom or teacher practice. These changes

were made within curriculum requirements and done in a way that can be sustained within the realities of limited school resources and varying student development. The project is evidence that any classroom with children of any age can be a place where 'traditional' literacy can be successfully integrated with 21st century visual and digital literacy.

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Risk taking in Forest Schools

≋ PÁDRAIG EGAN ≋

Abstract

There has been a significant decline in the amount of time that children are able to spend outside in recent years. As a result, a formal link has been created between education and the outdoor environment in order to provide children with outdoor opportunities and it is clear that these opportunities are supporting their academic, personal and social development in a number of ways. However, there is evidence to suggest that the benefits associated with outdoor opportunities are being overshadowed by a concern to eliminate risk. As Forest Schools are beginning to become more widespread throughout Ireland, the phenomenon that is Forest Schools is already well established in the United Kingdom. This article will explore the meaning of risk in an outdoor learning context, and looks at how different perceptions might be affecting the opportunities that children are given to take risks. In addition, primary research was carried out in a Forest School in the United Kingdom in order to examine risk taking.

Keywords: **Forest Schools, risk taking, primary education, outdoor learning.**

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"A child today can tell you about the Amazon rainforest – but not about the last time he or she explored the woods in solitude, or lay in a field listening to the wind and watch the clouds move" (Louv, 2010, p.1).

Introduction

Forest Schools are based on a Scandinavian approach to teaching that highlights the importance of children having contact with nature from an early age (Dietrich, Jacobsen, Mygind and Stelter, 2007). A report for the National Foundation for Educational Research (Dillon, Morris, O'Donnell, Reid, Rickinson, and Scott, 2005) suggests that learning outdoors can have a range of impacts including cognitive impacts, interpersonal, social and behavioural impacts. Learning outdoors in nature is a very different experience from being indoors in a classroom environment. This paper highlights the importance of learning outdoors and suggests that it can potentially be an important factor in life long learning, health and well-being and in ecologically sustainable societies (Sustainable Development Commission, 2007). The paper also examines the potential for risk taking within Forest Schools.

Forest Schools are inspirational and offer all ages regular opportunities to achieve and develop confidence through hands on learning in a woodland environment (Murray and O'Brien, 2005, p.11). While the majority of Forest Schools are run for children and young people in full-time education, this does not have to be the case. The Forest School approach

is also used on a more limited basis with teenagers and adults who have emotional and behavioural difficulties.

Woodlands and green spaces hold much potential as education resources and can benefit children, including those on the autistic spectrum; those with emotional and behavioural difficulties and those with learning problems (Kahn, 1999). The research project that is the subject of this paper was inspired following the introduction of Forest Schools into Ireland. The Forest School approach is well established in the United Kingdom. The research was conducted in the Midlands region of the United Kingdom. The research was participatory involving teachers, Forest Schools leaders and community members.

The importance of Forest Schools

"The best classroom and the richest cupboard are roofed only by the sky" (McMillan, 1914, p.80). Margaret McMillan founded the United Kingdom's first open air nursery. She attributed huge importance to the role of the outdoor environment in allowing for a holistic approach to children's development and her work had significant influence on both early years and outdoor education during the first half of the 20th century.

Almost one century later, there is evidence to suggest that there has since been a significant decline, not only in opportunities for outdoor learning, but in the amount of time that children are spending outdoors. This is emphasised by Palmer (2006, p.47-48), who argues that children are increasingly being "denied the opportunity to play outside or be lured away" from "grassy places to some kind of virtual unreality", to the detriment of their emotional, physical and social development. Although Palmer (2006) discusses the nature of childhood in a broader sense, it would seem that her ideas about the importance of engagement with the outdoors resonate specifically with recent developments in educational policy. For example, the UK government's manifesto for *Learning Outside the Classroom* states that "every young person should experience the world beyond the classroom as an essential part of learning and personal development" (Department of Education and Skills, 2006, p.2), and seeks to promote the academic, personal and social benefits of outdoor learning. It would therefore appear that the education system in the UK is now playing a major role in providing children with the opportunities to spend time outdoors, something which would have been part of everyday life in the past. This development is emphasised by Knight (2009, p.2), who acknowledges that these "formal links between education and the outdoor environment" have not always been necessary.

One response to this push for increased opportunities for outdoor learning has been the development of a widespread network of Forest Schools across the United Kingdom. Although many different definitions of Forest Schools have been developed, Knight (2011) argues that this approach should instead be characterised by eight key elements; a wilder setting, a safe enough environment, the planning of sessions with a distinct beginning and ending over a significant period of time, sessions in all weather conditions and the central roles of child initiated learning, trained Forest School leaders and trust. Maynard (2007a)

advocates that the realisation of these aims is partially dependent upon allowing children to play freely and take risks, and there is evidence to suggest that a "cultural feature of protectionism" may be limiting such opportunities (Maynard, 2007b, p.26). The Forest School movement has drawn inspiration from the Scandinavian approach to outdoor education but on her return from a Forest Schools study trip to Denmark, Yates (in Eskesen, 2006, p.9) felt that "the kind of real life opportunities" seen in Denmark are exactly what is missing in a society that has a 'safety first' mentality... "we cannot take out all the dangers for children". It would therefore seem that contrasting attitudes towards risk embedded within society may be affecting the intended outcomes of the Forest Schools approach in the UK.

It is clear from the *Early Years Foundation Stage Framework* that teachers are being encouraged to incorporate opportunities for risk taking across the curriculum, for example "safety without stopping reasonable risk taking" and "children should learn to assess risk with help from adults" (Department for Education, 2011). This idea is reinforced more specifically by the Council for Learning Outside the Classroom (2010), which suggests that outdoor education can "provide wonderful opportunities for children to be actively involved in risk management". It would thus appear that there may be inconsistencies between what teachers are being expected to do and what is happening in reality in the case of outdoor education. Although this suggestion is not discussed in detail within the above documents, there are many ideas about what constitutes 'risk taking' within outdoor learning, and specifically in a Forest School context. Many of the theories seem to focus on the physical side of risk taking, and this is explored by Sandseter (2009, p.439) who defines 'risky play' in this context as play "involving a risk of physical injury". There are six categories of risky play considered to be typical of a woodland environment; play with great heights, play with high speed, play with dangerous tools, play near dangerous elements, rough and tumble play, and play where children can disappear or get lost. This categorisation is based upon the idea that certain features of the environment will 'afford' certain behaviour or 'invite' children to do something; for example, features such as trees afford climbing (Sandseter, 2009, p.441). However, there is also evidence that additional construction of risk is significant. Sharp (in Barnes and Sharp, 2004, p.92) claims that risk "can cause physical, psychological and social connotations", whereby factors such as the feelings of anxiety experienced by a child are also significant. This idea is taken further by Stephenson (2003, p.36), who suggests that defining elements may include "attempting something never done before", feeling on the borderline of "out of control and overcoming fear". It is therefore clear that the concept of 'risk', and the meaning of 'risk' within the *Early Years Foundation Stage Framework*, is open to a range of interpretations.

In addition to varying understanding of what constitutes 'risk', Barnes and Sharp argue that it is important to differentiate between 'real' and 'perceived' risk. It is suggested that "challenges are being diluted and potentials reduced by an excessive concern to eliminate risk" (Barnes and Sharp, 2004, p.91) with consideration largely being given to the negative aspects of risk taking. In the light of this, Bailie (in Barnes and Sharp, 2004, p.142) developed the 'Triangle Model of Risk'.
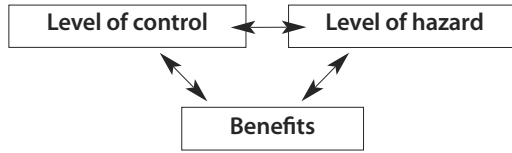
Figure 1: The Triangle Model of Risk.

Lewis (2005, p.15) reinforces the point of view that risk should not be seen as a completely negative term in an outdoor learning context, suggesting that as "risk is given a balanced airing in very few arenas… it is an opportunity to review the balance of potential outcomes in terms of the positive in negative".

Palmer (2006, p.2) emphasises the need for an approach "that accepts that a degree of risk – properly managed – is not only inevitable, but positively desirable". In line with most of the literature, this highlights that there are positive aspects to risk taking within an outdoor learning environment. It is important that teachers identify situations that might be dangerous but, as White (2008, p.82) advised, they should be trying to create "an environment that is safe enough, rather than one completely without risk" if the aims of the Forest School are to be accomplished. The headline of an article by Bennett (2011, p.33) reads "Forest Schools end cotton-wool culture for children", which would seem to suggest that an environment of this nature is being successfully created. However, as demonstrated by the literature, it is unclear whether this is happening in reality.

What happens at Forest School and how does learning take place?

Schools that participate usually send specific classes or children with special needs to Forest School for a morning or afternoon session. These can take place every week or fortnight in term time and can run from two to 12 months depending on the school. At Forest School the children get involved in a range of activities. For example, they might use tools to create art works, or listen and respond to a range of stories in order to improve language and communication skills (Murray and O'Brien, 2005). Learning about habitats, plants and animals as well as carrying out teamwork, in which they can learn to take turns and share, are also part of Forest School sessions.

Dillon, Morris, O'Donnell, Reid, Rickinson, and Scott, (2005) suggest "the experience and quality of learning outdoors can have an effect on what is learnt". Kahn (1999) highlights the importance of "standing through interaction with the physical and social world". The Forest School ethos might be said to involve this type of learning approach. Adams (2006, p.247) suggests, for a social constructivist pedagogy, the following principles:

- Focus on learning not performances.
- View learners as active co-constructors of meaning and knowledge.
- Establish a teacher pupil relationship built upon the idea of guidance and not instruction.

◆ Engage learners in tasks seen as ends in themselves and having implicit worth.
◆ Promote assessment as an active process of uncovering and acknowledging shared understanding.

This type of approach focuses on learning by doing, with teachers posing questions to the children while they are engaged in carrying out activities in order to promote child reasoning. While knowledge entails fact and behaviour, more fundamentally it entails understanding, and children actively construct their understandings through interaction with the physical and social world (Kahn 1999, p.50). There are many theories of learning and a social-constructivist theory is put forward as particularly appropriate to the Forest School approach.

Methodology

The methodology for this research was developed in a school in the British Midlands and was used for the case study in the school in the same region. The methodology involved a three stage sequence.

1. A workshop was undertaken to discuss and establish the link between Forest School activities and the impacts on the children who take them. The team included four members of staff including a head teacher.
2. Data collection was undertaken by observation of the Forest School session. Self-appraisal templates based on the propositions developed in the workshop were also undertaken. Field notes and photographs were also used to illustrate the features noted.
3. A reflection workshop brought practitioners together to explore results for the observation stage and to identify any unexpected impacts or key learning point that could be incorporated into best practice.

Primary research was carried out at a community primary school in the Midlands. The school has a strong link with Forest Schools and many of the school's staff are Forest School leaders. The research participants were children from the early years foundation stage. When collecting the data a qualitative method was deemed appropriate, given the aims of this research project. Observations of a Forest School session were carried out on two occasions. The first observation was relatively unstructured, which enabled the researcher to become familiar with the Forest School routine at this school and in turn, the children became used to the researcher's presence. The second observation became more focused on the development of specific examples of risk taking that occurred. The observations were followed by interviews with both groups of children and a Forest School leader. The main aim of the interviews was to develop a greater understanding of the observation by exploring attitudes and perceptions in more depth. The voices of the children and their experiences were not the main focus of this study and would warrant a separate study.

Findings

Theme 1: Freedom within the Forest School environment

During the observations it became clear the physical environment and the way in which the Forest School leaders had chosen to make use of its features played a significant part in shaping the children's experiences at the Forest Schools. The first session observed was the children's initial visit to the Forest School. The teacher who led the session explained how the main objectives were linked to 'the setting of boundaries', which she suggested would allow the children to enjoy increased freedom and independence in future sessions. This progression started to become apparent over the course of the two sessions that were observed.

During the first session, the children became 'Forest Explorers'. Before entering the Forest School site, the teacher explained to the children that there were posts marked with a 'B', which meant a boundary and that they should not go past because it might be unsafe. It would therefore seem that the children were able to start associating being inside the boundary with being safe from the outset. The children were then actively involved in setting the site boundaries; they explored together as a group to find the boundary posts for themselves which enabled them to take a degree of ownership of their learning. In addition, the teacher introduced the circle of logs as the base that the children should return to on hearing their class name being called and they were then able to explore independently. An adult remained at each boundary post during this free exploration. This fact, in conjunction with activities such as digging that incorporated the call back, seemed to reinforce the boundaries whilst allowing the children to familiarise themselves with the Forest School site at their own pace.

During observations of free exploration, it became clear that some of the physical characteristics of the site played an important part in generating opportunities for risk taking. Prior to the session, the teacher explained that the children had the freedom to go anywhere within the congeries of the Forest School and this notion of freedom would appear to be particularly significant when considered in relation to these physical features. For example, there were logs and tree stumps, patches of nettles and a number of slopes within the boundary that the children encountered when exploring. It was clear that there was potential for the children to engage in 'risky play', as defined by Sandseter (2009, p. 439). To a certain extent, for instance, the environment 'invited' them to climb on the logs and run up and down the slopes. The site was not enclosed so it was theoretically possible to get lost. However, the author suggests that these actions can either be inspired or constrained by others, and the role of the Forest School leaders in shaping children's ability to take risks was explored throughout the data collection and coding processes.

After the boundary posts had been introduced during the first session only two adults went out to the boundary during the free exploration in the second session, while the leader and other adults stayed at the base. The children were encouraged to explore away from the base and, at times, they were completely out of sight. Other children were watched from a distance and only one case of adult intervention was observed when a group of children discovered some long branches leaning up against a tree. They were allowed to play underneath them, but an adult explained how they could do so safely first and then watched the children more closely. Other examples of 'risky play' were also seen, which included running

fast and balancing on logs. In addition, the year four children remembered "marking this little swing out of wood that we used to sit on" which further supports the idea that potential opportunities for 'risky play' were being actualised. It would thus appear that the children were being encouraged by the Forest School leaders to explore and engage in 'risky play' afforded by physical features of the site, rather than having their actions constrained.

In terms of providing the children with opportunities to take risks while exploring, it became clear that the Forest School leaders created an environment that was enabling on two levels. This concept is similar to a theory offered by Kytta (2004), who developed four hypothetical types of environment based on the interrelationship between 'independent mobility' and 'actualised affordances'. This Forest School would seem to resemble Kytta's (2004, p.138) 'ideal' environment, whereby "possibilities for independent mobility reveal many affordances and the actualisation of affordances motivates further exploration and mobility in the environment". A site with a diverse range of features had been chosen and developed in a way that enabled risk taking: for example, logs and tree stumps that invited the children to engage in 'risky play' had not been removed. In addition, the children were given the freedom to explore and discover these affordances independently, rather than having their mobility restricted and this combination of a stimulating environment and the ability to move around freely would seem to have been crucial in creating opportunities for risk taking of this nature.

Although a number of children embraced the freedom to explore during the first two sessions, it was clear from the interviews that some of them preferred to stay close to the base. This reluctance to explore is discussed by Maynard (2007, p.325), who claims that "when children feel they are controlled by others then their natural curiosity is – reduced or eliminated", which indicated that some children may have developed different perceptions of the adult involvement. However, interviews with Forest School leaders and year four children suggest that anxiety and low levels of confidence were more likely to be responsible. By setting clear boundaries during the first session, it would seem that the Forest School leaders had been able to give the children more control and freedom, and in turn, increased opportunities for exploring and taking the risks at their own level that were created as a result.

Theme 2: Understanding danger and keeping safe

Through the two visits to the woodland setting, the children became familiar with the environment and acquired an understanding of danger and a knowledge of keeping safe.

The first context concerns the environment surrounding the children, and is therefore closely related to the previous theme. It was clear that the children understood that they should not go past the boundary posts. There is also evidence to suggest that they were developing an understanding of why this was the case. A number of reception children talked about the 'B' during their interviews and this understanding was reflected in some of their answers; for example, "don't go past it because there's a danger" and "it can be a bit dangerous if a lorry was coming and it was too close". By talking to the children about potential dangers and putting in boundary posts, rather than establishing an enclosed area, it would seem that the Forest School leaders encouraged them to take responsibility for their own safety. This

idea was supported by the gradual decrease in supervision at the boundary posts. Instead of being constantly watched and having decisions made for them, the children had to begin to use their understanding to make their own choices. White (2008, p.81) claims that "the turning point comes when practitioners view the outdoors as a place where children can learn how to keep themselves safe through recognising potential harm and knowing how to deal with it", and the attitudes of the Forest School leaders towards risk management would appear to reflect this. They helped the children to use their senses to develop an awareness of what was around them, not only in relation to the boundary posts but also in relation to 'hazards' such as nettles and brambles that they may have encountered when exploring.

The second context is connected to the more structured activities that took place at the Forest School and, while some of these involved child led exploration, they were predominantly adult led. The children were split into four groups, which were rotated between four activities during each session. The activities that were observed during the first two sessions included making leaf crowns, making name badges out of wooden discs and whittling, and many of these activities involved using tools such as drills and vegetable peelers. The whittling can be used to illustrate how the structure of these activities and the learning that this resulted in, were significant in the development of this theme, Before the first session, the teacher explained that "they would be whittling with root vegetables this time as it requires less control but they will progress on to branches" and the two observations provided an insight into the nature of this progression. The teacher started the first session by demonstrating the action involved and showing the children why it was important to use the peelers in a particular way to 'keep safe'. The children then whittled a carrot with one to one help from an adult, before working more independently to whittle branches of elder to make bug houses during the second session. Their ability and willingness to discuss the safe use of the tool and then put this into practice, with a little bit of support, would seem to demonstrate that they had developed an understanding not only of how to whittle in a certain way, but also why, as a result of the approach used. This idea is supported by Williams-Siegfredsen (2012, p.56), who argued that "if we presuppose that children will harm themselves or others by using natural materials or tools, we are disabling them, which has the effect of making them feel unsure, frightened and incompetent". In contrast, the first hand approach to the use of tools at this Forest School seemed to be 'enable' the children to develop their competence and confidence in a safe way.

In discussing the 'culture of fear' in the UK, Sharp (2004, p.95) argues for a change of focus so that children should be provided with the tools of risk management rather than have the outcomes "of risk management imposed upon them". And it was clear that the experience of risk taking at this Forest School was going a significant way in making this happen. The children were helped to develop an understanding of the potential dangers they might encounter as a result of certain actions and, in turn of how they could keep themselves safe. The emphasis placed on understanding became apparent not only during the observations, but also during the interview with a second Forest School leader that followed; for example, when discussing the risk of fire, importance was attributed to "making sure that they understood the danger of fire" (Forest School leader, personal communication, 2012). Rather than making all the decisions for them, the adults encouraged the children to make

their own choices and learn from the consequences of their actions. As a result, it would seem that they began to take responsibility for their own safety and in doing so, develop strategies for risk management that they would be able to apply to other areas of learning in the future.

Theme 3: Overcoming fears and growing in confidence

While the two previous themes have been related to physical risk, this section will explore some psychological aspects of risk-taking that emerged from the data collection and coding processes. The interviews with both the children and the Forest Schools leader played a major part in highlighting the significance of some of the behaviour that was observed during the two Forest School sessions.

During the two sessions that were observed, it was noticeable that some children were consistently exploring near the boundary posts while others tended to stay closer to the base. This difference was clarified by the interviews with the class. Some talked with great enthusiasm about how they liked to "go exploring", while others said that they preferred "staying near my teacher" (child, personal communication, 2012), and there was evidence to suggest that this largely reflected the children's varying levels of confidence. This connection between confidence and readiness to explore was emphasised by the Forest School leader (Forest School leader, personal communication, 2012), who explained how "they wanted to stay secure with the adults to start with, but when their sense of adventure took over they became more confident". There were only three weeks between the two Forest School sessions that were observed and as a result it was initially difficult to consider whether and how these changes might be happening in reality. However, the children were able to reflect on the feeling that they experienced over the course of a whole year, and their responses supported the idea that many of the reception children would become happier to explore independently as their confidence in the Forest School environment grew.

This finding demonstrates that for these children becoming confident enough to explore away from the adults involved overcoming certain fears. They formed a close association between being near an adult and being safe, and it could be argued that the adults consequently played an important part in helping them to confront these fears. Reflecting on the two sessions that were observed, it would seem that the Forest School leaders supported the children in two key ways in this respect; they enabled them to take control, as discussed earlier, and therefore explore in a way that they felt comfortable with, whilst carefully encouraging them to confront their fears. For example, one child became anxious about walking along the path in between the nettles during the first session. A leader recognised that the child needed some support but encouraged her in a way that gave her the time to take this 'psychological' risk at her own pace. During the second session, the child chose to run along the path independently to get back to base. This example clearly illustrates how the children were encouraged to take these 'psychological' risks at a level that allowed them to grow in confidence rather than frightening them, which would in turn appear to develop their desire and willingness to explore independently.

This idea of enabling children to attempt new things at their own pace was also linked to the more structured activities. The 'integrated' approach that was outlined earlier, whereby

the children rotated between four activities during each session, had been introduced this year due to staff numbers and the head teacher maintained that this was "not ideal… compared to previous years when the children could choose activities when they felt ready". However, despite this reservation, the children were all happy to participate fully during their first two Forest School sessions and no anxieties were conveyed about any of the activities during the interviews. On the contrary, there is evidence to suggest that such an approach may actually be more effective in developing children's confidence, particularly in relation to the use of tools. This is highlighted by Williams-Siegfredsen (2012) who also draws on Vygotsky's concept of the 'zone of proximal development', in order to explore the role of social interactions in facilitating children's learning in this context; that is, a process whereby "a more competent person collaborates with a child to help him move from where he is now to where he can be with help" (Miller, 2011, p.175). While this process primarily concerns cognitive development, Williams-Sigfredsen (2012) argues that this collaboration between the children and Forest School leaders is as important in developing their confidence as it is their competence. This point was demonstrated by the whittling activity where the children took a risk by trying something new that was often initially slightly beyond their capabilities but, due to the nature of the support, they appeared to grow confident enough to enjoy using the tools more independently instead of becoming anxious at the prospect.

It is clear that the Forest Schools leaders played an important part in providing the children with opportunities to take reasonable 'psychological risks', in a way that in turn enabled them to become more confident in their environment, creating 'a snowball effect' resembling what Knight (2011, p.39) described as "as confidence grows so the children find more exciting things to do, which they will succeed at, thus improving their sense of self-esteem even more". By encouraging the children to take risks of this nature at a level that reflected their capabilities, the leaders were able to strike an effective balance; rather than becoming anxious at one end of the spectrum or bored at the other, the children appeared to respond to the challenges that they were presented with, which allowed them to grow in confidence and engage more fully with the environment as a result.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper outlines a participatory research process exploring the impact of risk taking in Forest Schools. According to Kawagley and Barnhardt (1998) "participatory research, which aims to involve local people in the research process to focus research efforts on locally relevant issues, has the potential to shift knowledge creation from a one way creation to a two way co-learning model". Through this research the experience of teachers, parents and Forest School leaders was seen as important in understanding the potential impacts of risk taking in Forest Schools on children.

Outdoor learning is an important part of a child's development and the many opportunities for risk taking are evident. It would seem that the main factor determining whether or not these risks materialise is the children's confidence, as the approach and attitudes of the Forest School leaders have been key in creating the widespread growth in confidence that was observed. Although the children's confidence was paramount, it is clear that there

was also a network of interdependent factors underpinning its development. Their interaction in this specific Forest School context has allowed the majority of children to feel comfortable within the environment from the outset. The children were presented with appropriate challenges and learned to take responsibility for their own safety in an environment that they felt happy in. This development seemed to help them see opportunities for challenge and reasonable risk taking as exciting, rather than something to feel frightened about.

The data collection and analysis processes have provided a significant insight into the attitudes towards risk that underpin the approach at this Forest School, and as a result, an environment has been created which shaped the children's experiences. It has become evident that a 'risk benefit' approach to risk management has been developed, which reflects a mindset that associates the concept of risk with positive outcomes as well as negative consequences. As Gill (2010, p.16) suggests, this approach "focuses on making judgements and identifying measures that manage risks while securing benefits" and as a result an environment was created that allows the children to explore challenges and take risks without being in a position of danger. Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that the Forest School leaders influence the children's ability and willingness to engage with these opportunities in a positive way; they were encouraged to take risks and supported in a way that enabled them to become more confident, rather than anxious or frightened. Sharp (2004, p.92) argues that it is important that "everyone operates within their challenge zone and flounder in their comfort or panic zones" if the children are to benefit fully from the different risks that they take, and this would seem to support the suggestion that the Forest School leaders also play a significant role in this respect. The balance between child led and adult led activity allows the children to begin to develop their understanding of risk management and to take responsibility for themselves. It would therefore seem that, in terms of risk, the children's experiences at the Forest School in this study are successfully contributing to the outcomes of the three significant UK national strategies; the *Learning outside the Classroom* (2010) manifesto, the *Early Years Foundation Stage Framework* (DfE 2011) and the 'stay safe' outcome of the *Every Child Matters* agenda (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2003).

Increased interest from government, non-governmental and other organisations has highlighted the demand for research on the educational use of natural and green spaces. Outdoor learning can complement, and be an important supplement to classroom learning. A key aim of Forest Schools is to inspire lifelong learning through contact with natural settings. Forest Schools have much potential and the recent establishment of a Forest School in Donegal and the impending establishment of other Forest Schools throughout Ireland suggests that the Forest Schools movement is one that is growing.

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