Irish Teachers' Journal

into

Irish National Teachers' Organisation
Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann

Irish Teachers' Journal

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⟫ Editorial ⟪

Fáilte arís chuig an *Iris Múinteoirí Éireann,* tá ríméad orainn eagrán a trí deág a chur ós bhur gcomhair i mbliana.

The latest edition of the *Irish Teachers' Journal*, Volume 13, once again offers us a view of the rich tapestry of research, reflections, and practical insights into the evolving landscape of primary education in Ireland. Our articles this year span a diverse range of topics and delve into the challenges and opportunities faced by teachers, show some of the innovative approaches being adopted in classrooms, and also reference the broader societal and policy contexts influencing education today. As Irish education continues to evolve, the system has become exacting for our teachers who strive to do their best to serve school communities with limited supports from government.

Since the last issue of the *Journal* we have seen the publication of the long-awaited *Guidelines on Understanding Behaviours of Concern and Managing Crisis Situations*, new SET guidelines, the review of the *EPSEN Act,* new child protection procedures, an *Action Plan for Irish in English Medium Schools*, *Polasaí don Oideachas Lán-Ghaeilge lasmuigh den Ghaeltacht*, and a redeveloped *Primary School Curriculum*, to name but a few. We have also seen the opening of a few new special schools, hundreds of new special classes, and we continue to include pupils with special or additional educational needs in our mainstream classrooms.

The INTO continues to be a voice for teachers, demanding lower class sizes, higher school funding and the resources required to provide meaningful and timely support and professional learning opportunities for all of our members. Our demand for six days of school closures to allow for teacher professional time to facilitate collaboration and planning as we embark on embedding a redeveloped curriculum and various other initiatives, will be a particular priority for us in the coming year.

Political instability has become a fact of life across the globe and the impact in our country both economically and socially cannot be denied. Protests and attacks at accommodation centres have become commonplace and fly in the face of the inclusion we are trying to achieve in our schools.

This year, INTO research continued to highlight teacher shortages and we also placed a spotlight on the level of physical aggression being experienced by our members on a daily basis in schools. While the *Guidelines on Understanding Behaviours of Concern and Managing Crisis Situations* are welcome, until they are underpinned by a comprehensive programme of support and training for teachers and other members of staff in all schools, they will not be effectively implemented.

Despite the many challenges we still continue to deliver the best for our pupils, many of us in overcrowded classrooms, substandard buildings, without the necessary resources and vital therapeutic services.

As outgoing Uachtarán na hÉireann, President Micheal D. Higgins reminded us recently:

> Each day teachers across the country play an essential role in nurturing the minds and spirits of our young people, those who will become the decision makers, creators and activists of tomorrow, the citizens who will be entrusted with addressing the complex challenges of our shared fragile planet.

As we celebrated the 20th anniversary of the INTO LGBT+ Teachers' Group over the last year, we are particularly pleased to publish an article on LGBTQ+ inclusivity in Irish primary schools written by Dr Aoife Neary who has worked extensively in this area.

We are delighted to receive our guest article from Larry Flanagan. Larry, a lifelong trade unionist and former General Secretary of the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) and fellow teacher, explores in his article, *Promoting and protecting professionalism – A core challenge for teaching unions*, the critical role of teaching unions in promoting and protecting professionalism within the education sector. Drawing on his extensive experience, Larry discusses the historical context of teacher unions, the challenges they face in a politically divisive world, and the importance of continuous professional development (CPD) for teachers. The model of CPD provision provided by EIS using 'learning reps', while different from our own, maintained and enhanced the role of the union as an authority in areas such as curriculum development, professional standards, and pedagogical innovation. He notes how the institute has managed to maintain a keen interest in education while still flexing 'trade union muscle'. He also emphasises the need for unions to integrate their workstreams to effectively respond to political challenges while maintaining their mission of delivering quality education.

As noted earlier, in her article *Building a holistic approach to LGBTQ+ inclusivity in primary schools*, Aoife Neary builds on her existing work in the field and presents a comprehensive study on LGBTQ+ inclusivity in Irish primary schools. Based on a national survey and a number of semi-structured interviews with families, Aoife identifies seven key aspects of school life that can foster a holistic approach to LGBTQ+ inclusivity. These include building inclusive attitudes among staff, fostering an inclusive ethos, and addressing age-related assumptions. The study underscores the importance of proactive planning and professional development in creating an inclusive school environment. Her paper, along with the findings from the survey and interviews, also presents an overview of the literature pertaining to the topic of LGBTQ+ inclusivity in primary schools, an extremely useful resource of those interested in establishing an inclusive culture in schools. She concludes that while there are still some challenges to LGBTQ+ inclusivity in our schools, there is a solid base from which to work. We look forward to Aoife's future work in this area.

Say Yes to Languages? Irish primary teachers' beliefs on modern foreign language integration by Julia Collins, Craig Neville, and TJ Ó Ceallaigh investigates the beliefs and perceptions of Irish primary teachers regarding the integration of modern foreign languages (MFL) into the curriculum. This study is particularly timely given the recent publication of the redeveloped *Primary Curriculum* specifications, which include, for the first time, a specification for the teaching of MFL in Irish primary schools. Their study reveals broad

support for MFL provision but also highlights concerns about implementation feasibility and the need for systemic support. The authors emphasise the importance of teacher agency and competence in the successful rollout of MFL initiatives. As the authors reinforce in their conclusion, sustainable MFL integration must be teacher informed, context sensitive and grounded in practice. They also warn against a "one size fits all model".

In her article, *From gaps to growth: School leadership, professional learning, and the emerging role of communities of practice in autism special classes*, Linda Dennehy examines the role of primary school principals in supporting professional learning within autism special classes. Through qualitative interviews with school leaders, Linda identifies key themes such as inconsistent preparation, the centrality of leadership in enabling professional learning, and the potential for communities of practice (CoPs) to enhance collaboration and inclusive practice. In the context of the continued increase in the number of special classes across our education system, this paper is also particularly timely. It focuses on the valuable perspectives and experiences of primary school principals and reinforces the importance of their role in fostering inclusive practice. In referring to the dissonance between the vision of national policy and the practical realities faced by school leaders, the study calls for more coherent professional development frameworks to support effective autism education. It also reinforces the important and growing narrative that the learnings from the experience of schools must be taken into account in current and future policy formation on inclusion.

Julie Ann Fleming, Aoife Brennan and Joe Travers in their article, *The role of resilience in sustaining teachers through educational change*, explore the factors that sustain or hinder teacher resilience in the face of systemic changes in the Irish education system. They note that, while there is international literature on teacher resilience, this topic is under-researched in the Irish context. Based on a mixed-methods study involving 137 primary school teachers and principals, key themes such as career-wide resiliency, the impact of leadership, and the importance of collaboration are identified. The study offers insights into how teachers can maintain a sense of commitment and agency throughout their careers. The conclusions state that "teaching by its nature has always required resilience" and note that it can be fostered by providing opportunities to share knowledge and build collaboration in and between schools, while acknowledging the challenges of time and resources to achieve this.

In *Growing connections with nature: A pathway to wellbeing and sustainability in primary education*, Éilish Mc Donagh investigates the impact of a dedicated nature connectedness time slot on the wellbeing of primary school pupils and its role in supporting education for sustainable development (ESD). Placing her study in both the context of UNESCO's emphasis on the capacity for wellbeing, environmental stewardship and critical engagement and the Irish education system's restructured *Primary Curriculum Framework*, through a qualitative intervention involving 28 pupils, Éilish identifies themes such as 'biophilia' (an innate tendency to seek a connection with nature), child autonomy, and caring for nature. She also notes how the children displayed signs of flourishing. In contrast, however, her reference to ecophobia – fearful or paralysing feelings young people may experience when confronted with environmental issues – strikes a more sombre note. The study suggests that nature connectedness interventions can have a powerful role in

enhancing pupil wellbeing and promoting pro-environmental behaviours. Her use of John Moriarty's quote "A return to wonder is the beginning of wisdom" certainly strikes a chord and provides a fitting conclusion to her article.

In *An exploration into the impact of an early literacy intervention programme, Reading Recovery, on pupil wellbeing*, Attracta Williams and Eva Devaney explore the connection between participation in the early literacy intervention programme, *Reading Recovery*, and pupil wellbeing in a DEIS junior school. Both researchers acknowledge the controversy surrounding *Reading Recovery* as an early literacy intervention programme and the substantial criticism it has received in some studies. They are clear in their introduction that this debate extends beyond the scope of the study, which explores the link between participation in the programme and wellbeing. Through semi-structured interviews with pupils, parents and teachers, the study identifies positive relationships as a key protective factor for enhancing pupil wellbeing. The findings suggest that early literacy interventions can have a positive impact on pupils' emotional and social development and suggests that teachers working in similar school settings should take time to reflect on the reported benefits of *Reading Recovery* on pupil confidence and wellbeing.

Sinéad L Halligan examines the benefits of read-aloud story breaks in primary schools in our final article, *Read Aloud Story Breaks: A time for attunement, belonging and connection*. The purpose of the study was to explore if shared reading experiences could cultivate a sense of safety by promoting emotional regulation in the classroom. Based on her experience as a children's therapist, Sinéad discusses how these breaks can foster attunement (awareness and responsiveness to the feelings and needs of others), emotional regulation, belonging, and connection among pupils. She highlights the importance of developmentally-appropriate therapeutic interventions and the role of storytelling in supporting children's mental health and wellbeing. She emphasises the importance of collaborative work with teachers and acknowledges that some interventions, despite their successes, can cause often unspoken curriculum and workload pressures.

All of our articles collectively underscore the dynamic and multifaceted nature of primary education in Ireland. They highlight the importance of inclusivity, professional development, resilience, and wellbeing in fostering supportive and effective learning environments for all pupils. As educators and policymakers continue to navigate the challenges and opportunities of the evolving educational landscape, the insights and recommendations presented in this volume of the *Irish Teachers' Journal* provide valuable guidance and inspiration.

I hope that you enjoy reading this year's *Irish Teachers' Journal*. Sincere thanks to all of the contributors who have taken the time to write for us and for our audience of primary teachers throughout the country.

I also want to acknowledge our reviewers. They have read, reflected, reviewed, considered, edited and provided constructive feedback to our contributors. Their work ensures quality and consistency in the *Journal*. It is greatly appreciated by both the Editorial Board and our contributors.

Mar fhocal scor, a special word of thanks to our own team at INTO Head Office who take huge pride in bringing the project to fruition every November. Particular gratitude is due this year to Claire Garvey and Selina Campbell without whom, the *Irish Teachers' Journal* would not have seen the light of day!

MÁIRÍN NÍ CHÉILEACHAIR, EAGARTHÓIR

Author notes

Larry Flanagan

Larry Flanagan began teaching in 1979. Following a variety of promotions, including a two-year stint as an adviser in muti-cultural and anti-racist education, he settled for the bulk of his career in Glasgow as principal teacher of English at Hillhead High.

A career long union activist, Larry became Convener of the EIS (Educational Institute of Scotland) Education Committee and as such represented the union (Scotland's largest with around 80% of Scottish teachers) on various bodies, bringing the experience of classroom teachers to the policy discussions.

In 2012 he went straight from the classroom to become General Secretary of the EIS. Larry was also involved in ETUCE (European Trade Union Committee for Education), the European region of Education International, where he became President, serving from 2021-2024. Since retiring from the EIS, Larry has continued to represent EI as Chair of the Trade Union Advisory Committee (TUAC) Working Group on Education and Skills (OECD) and as an adviser on the organisation of the International Summits on the Teaching Profession (ISTP) – jointly organised by EI and OECD. He has also recently served as the teacher union nominee on the Northern Ireland Independent Review of Teacher Workload. Larry remains a registered teacher and does occasional supply work.

Dr Aoife Neary

Dr Aoife Neary is Lecturer in the School of Education, University College Cork (UCC). She joined the School of Education, UCC in 2024, following ten years in the School of Education, University of Limerick, including as Senior Lecturer in Sociology of Education and Assistant Dean Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. Her research explores the politics of gender and sexuality in schools and society, much of which has been funded by Research Ireland. She has been involved in national curriculum development through her membership of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) SPHE/RSE development groups at junior cycle and senior cycle level. Since 2014 she has been leading and teaching teacher education modules that explore equality and diversity from a sociological perspective.

Julia Collins, Dr Craig Neville and Dr TJ Ó Ceallaigh

Julia Collins is a lecturer in the School of Education at University College Cork and a third-year PhD candidate. Her research explores teacher knowledge, plurilingual competencies, and the evolving role of the Irish primary school teacher within the context of curriculum reform. Her work examines how teachers navigate change and foster inclusive, linguistically responsive classrooms in Ireland.

Dr Craig Neville is a lecturer in education at University College Cork, specialising in language education, CLIL, and pluriliteracies across curriculum subjects. His research explores how multilingual learners develop disciplinary literacies through digital and AI-mediated practices, particularly within Irish-medium and DEIS school contexts.

Dr TJ Ó Ceallaigh is an associate professor at the School of Education, University College Cork, Ireland. His research examines teacher education, development and leadership, with particular reference to language immersion and bilingual contexts.

Dr Linda Dennehy

Dr Linda Dennehy is the Director of West Cork Education Support Centre. Prior to this, she was seconded to Oide as a Professional Learning Leader (PLL) within the Leadership Division. A primary school principal, she has extensive leadership and professional development experience, contributing to national educational initiatives and postgraduate leadership programmes. Her doctoral research, completed through the Cohort PhD programme at University College Cork, focuses on the experiences of primary school principals leading autism special classes.

Dr Julie Ann Fleming, Dr Aoife Brennan and Professor Joe Travers

Dr Julie Ann Fleming is a primary school teacher based in Dublin. She has a Masters in Specific Learning Difficulties (Dyslexia) and is a Doctor of Education in Inclusive and Special Education from DCU Institute of Education. She is currently Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENCO), having previously taught from junior infants to sixth class in a variety of school settings. Julie Ann believes in equipping all teachers with the requisite skills and knowledge to support all learners to thrive.

Dr Aoife Brennan is Head of School of Inclusive and Special Education in DCU Institute of Education. She teaches across undergraduate and postgraduate teacher education programmes up to and including doctoral level and has published in the areas of professional learning and inclusive education. She is Chair of the International Professional Development Association (IPDA) Ireland.

Professor Joe Travers is an associate professor in the School of Inclusive and Special Education, DCU. He was the first Head of School (2016-2022). Joe is director of the DCU Centre for Inclusive Pedagogy. He teaches across undergraduate and postgraduate teacher education programmes up to and including doctoral level and has published in the areas of policy and practice in special education/learning support for mathematics, inclusion, leadership and early intervention.

Éilish Mc Donagh

Éilish Mc Donagh is a teaching principal of a rural primary school, with 17 years' teaching experience. After completing a Master's Degree in Wellbeing, Sustainability, and Outdoor Education at ATU Mayo Campus, she was inspired to address the decline in nature-based activities and reconnect children with the natural world and with themselves. Éilish is currently seconded to Oide to work with the social and environmental education (SEE) team, supporting the rollout of the new *Primary Curriculum Framework*. Her practice-based research supports curriculum reform from the ground up. It is her dream that this work brings hope to children growing in a world where they only know of a climate that is in crisis.

Attracta Willams and Dr Eva Devaney

Attracta Williams is a retired assistant principal and primary school teacher. She graduated with an honours Bachelor of Education from St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, in 1983 and she received an MEd in Leadership of Wellbeing in Education from Mary Immaculate College in 2024. She taught in various primary schools in Dublin and Meath before joining an eLearning software company, where she wrote and designed educational training content for digital delivery. She returned to primary teaching in 2004 and worked as a mainstream and special education teacher in an urban DEIS Band 1 school. Her research interests include wellbeing, special educational needs and early literacy interventions in DEIS schools.

Dr Eva Devaney currently works with Healthy UL, a comprehensive higher education approach to student and staff wellbeing. She completed her PhD in sociology at the University of Limerick, having been awarded a Government of Ireland scholarship. Eva also holds an MA in health education and health promotion. Eva has a thorough understanding of teacher education, particularly SPHE areas, having worked, taught and researched at Mary Immaculate College in a variety of roles for over fifteen years. Eva has also engaged in many health and education research activities for over 20 years in public and non-governmental sectors.

Sinéad L Halligan

Sinéad L Halligan works as a children's therapist in a primary school in Westmeath. Sinéad has over 10 years' experience of working and volunteering in the area of childrens mental health and wellbeing through a variety of roles and settings. This includes hospitals, residential, community and educational settings. Sinéad holds a BA in Sociology and Social Studies from the University of Limerick, a Postgraduate Higher Diploma in Social Policy and Practice from Trinity College Dublin, a Postgraduate Higher Diploma in Play Therapy from the Children's Therapy Centre, and an MA in Creative Psychotherapy from the Children's Therapy Centre. Over the past seven years, Sinéad has worked closely with several primary schools to identify the needs of children, and to implement programmes and interventions in response to this. Sinéad identifies developmentally appropriate therapeutic interventions for children, ensuring to align existing research and evidence with schools' policies and procedures to ensure a collaborative, strength-based approach.

Acknowledgements

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Promoting and protecting professionalism – a core challenge for teaching unions

≋ Larry Flanagan ≋

Background note

Larry Flanagan served as General Secretary of the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) from 2012 to 2022, and as President of European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) from 2020 to 2024. Prior to these posts, Larry worked as a classroom teacher for 33 years and authored a number of English textbooks. A lifelong trade union activist, he has been a council member of the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC) and the Trades Union Congress (TUC). He is a recipient of the Robert Owen Award for his contributions to the education sector. This guest article draws on his decades of experience and offers his insights on the future of the role of education and educators in a politically divisive world dominated by technological changes.

Keywords: **Artificial Intelligence (AI), continuous professional development (CPD), Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), status of teachers, teaching unions.**

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On 18 September 1847, around 600 teachers from all parts of Scotland attended a meeting in the hall of the High School, Edinburgh, to give birth to the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS). Although several local teacher associations predated this event, the creation of a national teacher union, the EIS – a global first – was a momentous step.

In the sole written history of the early days of the EIS, *A Centenary Handbook of the EIS*, AJ Belford, past president and future general secretary, described the year in the following terms:

> 1847! A year when men and women were suffering and brooding; when wild passions were fermenting under a peaceful exterior. Politicians and statesmen failed to gauge the destitution and despair of the population; in vain the plaintive voices and wasted forms of people appealed to despots and monarchs.
>
> Hardly had 1848 opened when the streets of Europe were streaming with blood.
>
> It was in those days that the Educational Institute of Scotland was founded… but not merely for mutual benefit did those teachers associate; believing in the worth of human personality, they wished to proclaim the necessity for education and to establish the value of sound learning.

Those two ambitions, "the promotion of sound learning and the benefit of teachers", have endured through the years as the organising principles of the EIS, an institution

which I have been a member of since 1979 and had the privilege to lead for a decade.

I reference the founding history of my union purposefully. Amid turmoil, political chaos and conflict, a group of teachers heroically clung to the notion, the lofty ideal, that education offered the best hope for the future. In our world, at least as fractious and as dangerous as those times past, educators might again assert the truth of our mission – to nurture a better future, to sustain hope, and to proclaim the necessity of education as the bedrock of community whilst the maelstrom of modern society swirls all around.

In the introduction to Education International's (EI) *The Global Status of Teachers 2024*, EI General Secretary David Edwards underlined the "growing academic and research consensus internationally that schools and their teachers underpin social stability, wellbeing and economic health" in our societies, but he also highlighted the very real challenges faced by education systems as evidenced by the findings of the report. These included: the global teacher shortage; teacher rights and social dialogue; the status of teachers; working conditions and wellbeing; and the resourcing of education.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's (UNESCO) *Global report on teachers: addressing teacher shortages and transforming the profession* (2024) estimated that by 2030 there would be a deficit of 44 million teachers worldwide. It identified similar challenges as those cited by EI – inadequate pay, poor career progression and high attrition rates, which it linked to the low status of the profession.

In many countries for teachers, and more particularly teaching unions, the challenge is more pernicious, more sinister, than simply low status. The EI report also highlights the growing political persecution of teachers and their representatives. This is evident today in President Trump's United States where both the National Education Association (NEA) and American Federation of Teachers (AFT) face concerted political attack by a cabal of right-wing interests. But the same phenomena can be observed across the globe, as detailed in the EI report.

There is clear interplay between these areas of challenge. Teacher unions must integrate their workstreams to effectively respond to them all. Understandably, political challenges demand an immediacy of response, but it is important that we don't lose sight of our underlying mission of delivering quality education. This revolves around the issue of the status of the profession and more particularly around the importance of education unions adopting a direct role in elevating said status, enabling professional growth and embracing pedagogical development.

For some union activists there can be a perceived dichotomy between the industrial role of teacher unions – defending members, improving salaries and conditions, and being part of a broader social movement – and the 'professional' challenges of influencing effectively curriculum and assessment, classroom practice, and engaging critically in research. This tension was observed by Nina Bacia in her studies of American teacher unions across the earlier part of this century (2008). Both the NEA and AFT, in the face of a highly politicised debate on education, sought to embrace 'new unionism'.

I distinctly remember making a speech at a union event in the 1980s, in front of the then EIS general secretary John Pollok. As a young radical socialist I declared that I had no desire to be part of a professional association, I wanted to be part of a trade union! As Mr Dylan commented, times change!

For the EIS a fuller engagement around the twin roles of trade union and professional association really began to take shape following the landmark *21st Century Agreement* (2001), which was the negotiated outcome of the *McCrone Report* (2000).

Across the late 1960s and the 1970s, the EIS had very definitely found its feet as a trade union, affiliating in that latter decade to both the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC) and the Trades Union Congress (TUC). The 1980s saw its mettle tested in an epic battle with the Tory Government, led by then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, which was seen, ultimately, as a win for the union. David Ross, in his history of that dispute *An Unlikely Anger: Scottish Teachers in Action* stated: "From 1984 to 1986 Scottish teachers were involved in the most sustained campaign of industrial action in the history of Scottish education – a dispute which had implications for the trade union movement in Thatcher's Britain."

Although the trade union muscle of the EIS had been reinforced through industrial action, the institute maintained its keen interest in all aspects of education. With the delivery of the *21st Century Agreement*, a new area of activity opened with the agreement's establishment of teacher responsibilities and entitlements to continuing professional development (CPD). This was a challenge to some union members as it included a commitment to an additional 35 hours annually devoted to professional learning and included an annual professional learning review.

Despite initial reticence, even hostility, on the part of some members the union largely embraced this new agenda and soon launched a new initiative around the recruitment and appointment of a network of learning reps. Although the EIS project was a subset of a wider agenda around workplace learning reps being promoted by the Tony Blair-led Labour government, which many unions utilised as a further means to deepen membership engagement, the initiative still represented a radical approach from the union.

EIS learning reps are not part of the union's formal policy structures. The role of a learning rep is solely directed at supporting the professional learning of colleagues. Some learning reps are also union activists, but most are not. The promotion of a CPD workstream within the union, often working with partners such as universities, local authorities, and the General Teaching Council, has proved to be a significant factor in member engagement. It also enhances the authority of the union in areas such as curriculum development, professional standards, and pedagogical innovation.

The union also offers grant incentives to members to support classroom-based action research projects. Funding is provided from a mixture of sources: the EIS itself, the Scottish Government, and the Scottish Union Learning Fund administered by STUC. The most recent Conservative Government had scuppered the UK-led union learning initiative by cutting funding but fortunately the Scottish Parliament, re-established in 1999, chose a different path.

The political context of Scottish education was favourable to the EIS agenda of asserting authority over the professional learning majority. As well as the contractual entitlement to CPD opportunities and the framework of professional update, the General Teaching Council for Scotland had an elected teacher majority on its governing body and sought to work collaboratively with teaching unions around its three professional standards (full registration, middle leadership and headship). There was an established mechanism and

protocol for social dialogue between the Scottish Government, local authority employer Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA), and teaching unions.

That is not to say that there was universal acceptance of developments. I remember vividly speaking at many member meetings with a *PowerPoint* entitled *CPD - Friend or Foe?* The answer was not a given for many teachers.

In an early study of the EIS turn towards professional development as a tool for member engagement, Alexander and O'Brien (2007) commented:

> The EIS is a long-established traditional representative body that has its own historical way of doing things and traditional structures and systems in place but has now stepped out of its comfort zone with the radical (from its perspective) introduction of learning representatives. How they are accepted and assimilated into the union at all levels will be a mark of how successful this initiative will be.

In the end, however, there was a recognition of the centrality of professional development to the effective delivery of teaching and learning. A view of CPD emerged as an entitlement and not a burden, and an understanding that the teaching profession needed to assert control over this agenda to avoid the phenomena which Andy Hargreaves had described when he commented that "too many developments are done to teachers, not for them or by them."

One of the sharp selling points of institute-led CPD is that most often it is teachers talking to teachers. The practical take aways from such approaches are greatly appreciated:

> It was a good balance of informative pedagogical input and practice activities that were engaging and food for thought. There was a good atmosphere in the room. (*Drawing as a Pedagogical Tool for Inclusion* participant)

> I loved this course and felt uplifted afterwards. It was a great group size, and the course leader was enthusiastic and engaging. It blew me away when nine people who barely knew each other were able to get up and sing so well together. I enjoyed what I learned and took some great ideas away from the day. (*Exploring Wellbeing Through Music* participant)

The 'professional' voice of the Institute was most certainly amplified by its active engagement in all aspects of education delivery, and it is simply a matter of course that the EIS is involved in every workstream and development initiated in Scottish education .

Such social dialogue is not a universal norm, however. As EIS general secretary I was involved in European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE), the European section of Education International, latterly serving as ETUCE president. It was an illuminating experience. ETUCE organises 122 education unions across 51 countries, so variation in how education systems operate is not unexpected. In terms of the tension between industrial robustness and professional sageness, circumstances and history can dictate where the balance lies.

Across Europe we range from Nordic examples, notably Finland, where the societal status of teachers is certainly high and professional practice is enabled and enhanced, to countries in central and eastern Europe where teaching unions can be engaged in fundamental battles around basic salaries and conditions in the most challenging of political circumstances. Entry into the teaching profession in Finland is highly competitive as teaching is regarded as a positive career choice. *Teaching and Learning International Survey* (TALIS) data for Finland (2018) shows 58% of serving teachers either agree or agree strongly that their profession is valued in society – a sharp contrast with the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) average of 26%.

In Romania, by way of contrast, the education law has just been amended to allow teachers to work until the age of 70, as a means of tackling the teacher shortage. Last year the unions won a 50% wage increase, following a four-week strike, but the challenge of recruitment and retention of teachers remains ever present.

It is of little surprise to note that systems perceived as high achieving also see teaching as being a highly valued profession. Singapore is a global example of this.

During my time as president of ETUCE, we launched a significant campaign around raising the status of teachers. It included 10 key demands, with the hope that unions across Europe would be able to focus on the issue(s) most relevant to them:

- Promote professional autonomy.
- Deliver decent competitive salaries.
- Support effective career start to ensure retention.
- Ensure quality professional development.
- Embed equality and diversity.
- Sustain safe and secure working conditions.
- Ensure workload control and a work-life balance.
- Create democratic school cultures.

These areas will be familiar territory to Irish teachers. Indeed most of the demands correlate with high-level statements regarding teachers from many governments and political bodies such as the European Union (2025): "Initial education and continuous professional development need to be of the highest quality and access to professional support throughout their careers is essential. A decline in the prestige of the profession and staff shortages may be hampering the quality of school education in many EU Member States."

The OECD's *Education Policy Outlook 2024* suggested that two thirds of respondents prioritised the 'raising of the status of teachers' as one of the pathways to greater recruitment and retention of staff. The reality, however, is that there exists a perennial gap between policy and practice, rhetoric and reality. At the heart of that gap is an absence of trust – trust in teachers by those with power.

I attended a seminar in Finland, linked to an International Summit of the Teaching Profession (ISTP), where the speaker was questioned about the absence of a formal inspectorate in the Finnish education system. He was being asked how things were monitored without an inspection regime. Slightly bemused by the question, his reply was that in Finland, "We trust our teachers!" How many systems could echo that sentiment? In

a world where financial challenges are acute, there is a simple riposte: trust costs nothing.

Empowering teachers, of course, requires that those with power relinquish some of that power which constantly proves to be a step too far for employers and politicians. An empowered system requires accountability, also, but ultimately the single biggest duty of care is to the children in our classrooms. Teachers understand the critical importance of the dynamic of classroom relationships. We know that we are nurturing the growth of children as well as educating them. I think that's the truth which keeps many of us going and which many policymakers, divorced from the reality of the classroom, often pay only lip service to.

Looking forward to a world that will be influenced and shaped by ever-expanding technology and Artificial Intelligence (AI), I would suggest that as a profession we anchor ourselves to the human aspect of teaching.

The OECD recently published *Introducing the OECD AI Capability Indicators* (OECD, 2025). It's a fascinating document and children will certainly be growing up in a world very different to even the one we experience today. How it will shape their cognitive processes, what skills it will validate most, how it might lessen or deepen the inequalities children face – all of that is worthy of significant debate for educators.

AI is a reality. Ultimately it should only be seen as a tool to be deployed as teachers see fit – and already many teachers are deploying it around areas such differentiation, resource preparation, and routine administration. But there are persistent voices which see a potential to reduce the teacher role and ultimately reduce costs. There is a very real need for teachers, and teaching unions, to step up the pace in relation to harnessing the power of AI in the classroom. I am unconvinced that we are ahead of the curve on this issue which means we are vulnerable to others setting the tone, taking the lead, and exploiting the moment. The provision of training in the use of AI and new technology is necessary but we need greater mastery of the topic throughout our structures if we are to fulfil the role of co-creators and equal partners in how AI is deployed in our schools. At times it feels that we are deploying analogue solutions in a digital world.

The EI-OECD joint paper *Opportunities, guidelines and guardrails for effective and equitable use of AI in Education* (OECD, 2023) offers some high-level approaches to managing equitably and ethically the use of AI in education. However, it is worth noting that no sooner was this document published than *ChatGPT* began to sweep across the globe, underlining the exponential nature of AI and the urgency for teaching unions to grasp the nettle.

Interestingly, this summer the AFT announced a new National Academy for AI Instruction. As well as working with its largest affiliate, New York-based United Federation of Teachers (UFT), the partnership also includes *Microsoft, Open AI,* and *Anthropic.* Commenting on the launch, AFT President Randi Weingarten said:

> AI holds tremendous promise but huge challenges – and it's our job as educators to make sure AI serves our students and society, not the other way around. The direct connection between a teacher and their kids can never be replaced by new technologies, but if we learn how to harness it, set commonsense guardrails and put teachers in the driver's seat, teaching and learning can be enhanced.

The academy is a place where educators and school staff will learn about AI – not just how it works, but how to use it wisely, safely and ethically.

This December, EI will be holding a global conference on AI and education, *Shaping Our Future: Education Unions Leading for a Human-Centred AI.* This will be another step in ensuring that teachers and teaching unions are prepared for the future.

AI presents both challenge and opportunity, for teachers and their unions. Big tech and private enterprise will quickly seize any space left vacant by a failure on our part to lead in this area and to ensure that even the most brilliant AI tools remain just that – tools to be deployed as the teaching profession sees fit.

I return to my opening, to that lofty ideal from 1847, that education offers the best hope for the future. Outside of family, teachers are the single biggest influence on children. We nurture their growth, shape their understanding, cultivate their curiosity and give them the critical thinking tools they need to navigate the world. School should be fun for pupils, so hopefully we will provide that experience too.

Almost by definition schools are places of optimism; they invest in the future. That is not to diminish or ignore the realities of inequality, poverty and prejudice but simply to have faith in our mission to create a better future. As a teacher, you are part of that mission.

Go raibh maith agat.

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Building a holistic approach to LGBTQ+ inclusivity in primary schools

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Abstract

This paper responds to the question, "what might a holistic approach to LGBTQ+ inclusivity look like in primary schools?" Drawing from a national survey with 1,031 primary school staff and interviews with 21 families who have LGBTQ+ parents/guardians or LGBTQ+ identifying children aged between 10 and 12, this paper maps out seven key aspects of school life through which a holistic approach to LGBTQ+ inclusivity has the potential to be realised.

Keywords: **LGBTQ+, inclusion, holistic inclusivity, primary schools, teachers, leaders.**

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Introduction

A small body of research exists internationally related to LGBTQ+ inclusivity in primary schools. However, there has been a lack of large-scale insight into primary school staff perspectives on LGBTQ+ lives in Ireland. Whilst there has been some research exploring how parents with trans and gender diverse children are navigating primary schools in Ireland in recent years (Neary, 2024; Neary, 2021a; Neary, 2021b; Neary & Cross, 2018), there has been a lack of in-depth insight into how LGBTQ+ parented families are navigating primary schools. It was in this context that the study on which this paper is based emerged.

Belong To Primary: New Foundations for LGBTQ+ Inclusivity (Neary & Power, 2024a; 2024b) was conducted between 2022 and 2023 in partnership with Belong To LGBTQ+ Youth Ireland and was funded by a Research Ireland 'New Foundations: Engaging Civic Society' grant. A national survey disseminated to all primary schools was completed by 1,031 primary school staff. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 21 families who have LGBTQ+ parents/guardians or LGBTQ+ identifying children aged between 10 and 12. Drawing from these data, this paper is an exploratory roadmap for what LGBTQ+ inclusivity could look like in Irish primary schools.

To that end, this paper maps out seven key aspects of school life whereby a holistic approach to LGBTQ+ inclusivity has the potential to be realised. A holistic approach to LGBTQ+ inclusivity refers to a proactive, whole-school, embedded approach whereby LGBTQ+ lives are reflected in the fabric of primary school life. This paper is not intended as a prescriptive or exhaustive list of actions to achieve holistic LGBTQ+ inclusivity. Rather, it builds from the design of this study and the evidence produced therein, to frame and discuss some of the central ways that a holistic approach to LGBTQ+ inclusivity could be embedded in primary schools.

This paper presents an overview of literature pertaining to the topic of LGBTQ+ inclusivity in primary schools internationally. This is followed by a summary of the primary methods employed in this study. The main body of the paper draws on key findings from the survey and interviews to signpost seven key aspects of school life through which a holistic approach to LGBTQ+ inclusivity could be embedded.

LGBTQ+ inclusivity in primary schools: research with staff, parents and children

A small body of research internationally has focused specifically on primary school staff perspectives on LGBTQ+ inclusivity. While factors such as gender, religious conviction and political orientation can have a negative impact on teacher attitudes to LGBTQ+ inclusivity (Bartholomaeus, Riggs and Yarrow, 2017; Amigo-Ventureira, Duran and DePalma, 2023), primary school staff internationally generally have positive dispositions towards enacting LGBTQ+ inclusivity. Indeed, Leonardi and Staley (2018) and Mangin (2020) outline the transformative work being done by many school leaders. Carlile (2020) illustrates how policy and legislative frameworks gave teachers the confidence and courage to deliver LGBTQ+ inclusive programmes in primary schools. Payne and Smith (2014) found that while educators largely felt unprepared and fearful, they saw themselves as having a professional responsibility to 'accommodate' trans and gender diverse children, albeit with a resistance to changing school culture. Research across contexts highlights how school leaders are central in determining a school's approach to LGBTQ+ inclusivity (Leonardi and Staley, 2018; Farrelly, O'Higgins-Norman & O'Leary, 2017). Research also counters assumptions about children's capacities related to gender and sexuality. The work of Martino and Cumming-Potvin (2016), Ryan, Patraw and Bednar (2013), and Atkinson (2021) all underscore how children were more than capable of discussing and learning about LGBTQ+ lives through carefully scaffolded use of resources with LGBTQ+ characters in primary schools.

Research internationally also highlights the challenge of teacher knowledge and confidence in relation to LGBTQ+ inclusivity. For instance, Bartholomaeus, Riggs and Yarrow (2017) found a lack of comfort and confidence amongst primary school staff and pre-service teachers in relation to working with trans and gender diverse students in particular. They also found that those staff who had access to education, support and expertise were more confident in their ability to be LGBTQ+ inclusive and they argue for further education, training and resourcing of professional programmes and initiatives for primary school staff in this area. Van Leent (2017) emphasises the need for comprehensive teacher education, while Leonardi and Staley (2018) argue that truly LGBTQ+ inclusive primary schools require professional development that addresses both emotional and intellectual dimensions to build educator confidence.

Another challenge lies in vague, evidence-poor assumptions about 'age-appropriateness' and how they can constrain the LGBTQ+ inclusivity work that primary school staff can do (Robinson, 2013; Neary & Rasmussen, 2020). Because of mischaracterisations of LGBTQ+ lives in purely sexualised or even deviant terms (Gray, Reimers & Bengtsson, 2021), adults can sometimes demonstrate negative, reactionary, protectionist responses when it comes to the question of making LGBTQ+ lives visible with children (Ferfolja et al., 2024; Neary

& Rasmussen, 2020; Jones, 2011). Primary school staff become reluctant to enact holistic LGBTQ+ inclusivity – or avoid it entirely – due to discourses of childhood 'innocence,' assumptions about impressionable children, and uncertainties about parental approval (Malins, 2016; Ferfolja et al., 2024; Neary & Rasmussen, 2020).

Currently, across the globe, bullying frameworks are one of the central ways that LGBTQ+ lives are made visible in primary schools. However, some researchers have identified that primary school staff can lack education and consensus around what exactly constitutes LGBTQ+ based bullying (Farrelly, O'Higgins-Norman & O'Leary, 2017). For instance, anti-LGBTQ+ slurs are often dismissed as joking, or 'harmless banter'. Anti-bullying measures are crucial but there is a fundamental problem when bullying is the only frame of reference through which children are coming to understand LGBTQ+ lives (Ging & Neary, 2019; Formby 2015; Gilbert et al., 2018; Payne & Smith, 2013). In the Irish context, in one study with staff and parents in six primary school communities, there was a certain comfort amongst primary school staff in dealing with LGBTQ+ based bullying as part of anti-bullying frameworks, but considerable discomfort and reluctance in relation to educating about or representing LGBTQ+ lives (Neary & Rasmussen, 2020; Neary, Irwin-Gowran & McEvoy, 2017). Such work draws attention to how anti-bullying work can fail to disturb the very conditions which give rise to the bullying in the first place (Payne & Smyth 2013; DePalma & Atkinson, 2010; Bailey, 2016).

There is a small body of emerging research internationally exploring how families who have LGBTQ+ parents/guardians or LGBTQ+ children are negotiating primary school life. A recent Australian survey investigated LGBTQ+ parent relationships with their children's teachers and found that inclusive microsystems, such as parent/teacher relations and school administrative forms, were the most important and beneficial factors for creating inclusive environments for LGBTQ+ parents (Mann et al., 2024). Qualitative research with parents/guardians and families in the UK confirm that LGBTQ+ parents are being open and broadly welcomed at school, but highlighted difficulties related to the systemic workings of cis-heteronormativity (McDonald & Morgan, 2019; Carlisle & Paechter, 2018). Parents describe the necessity to do extra layers of work to be involved in the school community and come out to other parents to ensure that their child's life was represented at school, and to help build their confidence. Research with parents/guardians of trans and gender diverse children in Ireland (Neary, 2024; Neary, 2023a; Neary, 2021a; Neary, 2018; Neary & Cross, 2018) also explicates the workings of cis-heteronormativity in primary schools, highlighting the onus on parents/guardians to advocate and educate school staff around gender identity.

The most recently available research from Ireland indicates that the age of knowing one's LGBTQ+ identity and of first telling another person about their LGBTQ+ identity or 'coming out' has changed in recent years. In 2016, the average age for an LGBTQ+ person in Ireland to know their LGBTQ+ identity was 15 years, and the average age of first telling someone they identified as LGBTQ+ was 19 (Higgins et al., 2016). In 2024, however, the average age of knowing one's LGBTQ+ identity had decreased to age 14; the average age of first telling someone they identified as LGBTQ+ remained unchanged at age 19 (Higgins et al., 2024). Among the younger cohort of LGBTQ+ people living in Ireland, the age of realising one's LGBTQ+ identity and first coming out to another person as LGBTQ+ is

lower (Higgins et al., 2024). The average age of both knowing and telling of their LGBTQ+ identity was lowest among people aged 14-18 years. For this group, age 12 was the average age at which 14-18 year-olds first knew their LGBTQ+ identity, and age 13 was the average age at which 14-18 year-olds first came out, or told another person about their LGBTQI+ identity. Within this context, primary school emerges as a crucial time for children in the development of their self-identity. Mirroring research internationally (Horton, 2020), research in Ireland also documents how children as young as three years old are clearly and vehemently articulating a gender identity that is different from their birth-assigned gender (Neary, 2021a, 2021b, 2019, 2018; Neary & Cross; 2018).

Methodology

This study received ethical approval from the Faculty of Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of Limerick. Data were collected from a survey with primary school staff (n=1,031) and interviews with families (n=21).

Primary school staff survey

The survey instrument was designed to explore primary school staff experiences, attitudes, knowledge levels, practices, and professional needs with regard to LGBTQ+ inclusivity in their primary schools. It included a combination of Likert scale, closed and open questions under the following section titles:

- About You.
- About Your School.
- Your School's Approach to LGBTQ+ Inclusivity.
- Your Opinion Regarding LGBTQ+ Inclusivity in Schools.
- Your Professional Knowledge and Practice.

The survey was first piloted and refined with the Belong To LGBTQ+ Youth Ireland Primary Education Sector Advisory Group[1] and a convenient sample of four primary school teachers. The survey was then distributed to all 3,231 primary schools in Ireland and was open from 27 March to 9 May 2023. A total of 1,031 primary school staff took the survey, a sample size which comfortably exceeds the minimum sample size of 382, based on the most recent available national data relating to total primary teaching and special needs assistant (SNA) posts (Forsa, 2021). The sample size is broadly representative of the primary school staff population in terms of gender, age and career length.

As Table 1 illustrates, a spread of age groups responded to the survey. The majority of primary school staff were in the 40-49 age bracket (35%; n=361), with the 30-39 (27.5%; n=284) and 50-59 (21.8%; n=225) age brackets falling relatively closely behind.

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[1] All major education stakeholders were invited to become a member of the advisory group. The group included representatives from those organisations who expressed willingness to take part: Educate Together, the Education and Training Board, the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, and the National Parents Council.

Table 1: Age of participants.

What is your age? (n=1,031)		
	N	%
20-29	108	10.5%
30-39	284	27.5%
40-49	361	35.0%
50-59	225	21.8%
60+	41	4.0%
Prefer Not to Say	12	1.2%

As illustrated in Table 2, the majority of survey primary school staff were women (76.1%; n=785). This is reflective of the population of primary school staff nationally. In 2022/2023, 84.5% of all primary school teachers (including principals) were women.

Table 2: Gender of participants.

What is your gender? (n=1,031)		
	N	%
Woman	785	76.1%
Man	222	21.5%
Non-Binary	5	0.5%
Prefer not to say	15	1.5%
Other	4	0.4%

As illustrated in Table 3, respondents held a spread of role types with 40.1% (n=413) identifying primarily in the 'mainstream class teacher' category; 23.3% (n=240) identifying primarily in the 'principal/deputy' principal category; 20% (n=206) in the 'special class teachers/special education teachers' category; 14.5% (n=150) in the 'support staff' category (SNAs, administrators/secretaries, language support, home-school liaison); and 1.9% identifying primarily in the 'Other' category (board of management member, substitute teacher, care-taker/cleaner, retired, student teacher, other)[2].

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2 For a detailed breakdown of the sample, please see the full research report (Neary & Power, 2024a, p. 18-26).

Table 3: Role of participants.

What is your role? (n=1,029)		
	N	%
Mainstream Class Teacher	413	40.1%
Principal/Deputy	240	23.3%
Special Class/Special Education	206	21.5%
Support Staff	150	14.5%
Other	20	1.9%

As Table 4 illustrates, the spread of school types in which the respondents worked somewhat aligns with the spread of school types in the country, in that the majority of respondents were working in Catholic schools (59.2%; n=610). However, the population of those in Catholic schools is somewhat underrepresented when compared with the population of Catholic primary schools in the country (88.5%) (Department of Education, 2022). In addition, respondents from multi-denominational schools (23.8%; n=245) are overrepresented in the survey as 4.8% (n=150) of primary schools in Ireland are multi-denominational.

Table 4: School type of participants.

What is your school type? (n=1,031)		
	N	%
Catholic NS	610	59.2%
Educate Together NS	245	23.8%
Catholic Gaelscoil under religious patron	22	2.1%
Catholic or Inter Gaelscoil under An Foras Pátrúnachta	10	1.0%
Multi-denominational Gaelscoil under An Foras Pátrúnachta	14	1.4%
Community National School	19	1.8%
Church of Ireland Primary School	36	3.5%
Presbyterian School	1	0.1%
Catholic Special School	36	3.5%
ETB Special School	13	1.3%
Other	15	1.5%
Multiples	10	1.0%

Basic frequency and descriptive analyses were conducted on closed item questions. A reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020) was conducted on open questions, consisting of coding common ideas, constructing initial themes and then refining them.

Interviews with families

Interviews were designed to explore how families with LGBTQ+ members (parents/ guardians and children) are navigating everyday life in primary schools. Purposive and snow-balling sampling methods were used to recruit participants. The primary avenue of recruitment for LGBTQ+ parents (Cohort A) was via LGBTQ+ parents' and allies' *WhatsApp* and *Facebook* groups with a nationwide spread. For Cohort B (families with LGBTQ+ children), recruitment emails were sent through LGBTQ+ support organisation databases/networks as well as via the list of primary school staff who took the national survey and were willing to be contacted about future research. Semi-structured interviews took place with 21 families (a total of 24 people[3]), with each interview lasting an average of 80 minutes. Semi-structured interviews contained the following question areas:

- Basic demographic detail about the participant and their family; journey to parenthood (Cohort A, LGBTQ+ parents only).
- Decisions about and experiences of pre-school education, decisions about and experiences of primary school education.
- Everyday life in primary school; strengths and weakness of their primary school with regard to LGBTQ+ inclusivity.

All data were thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2020).

Exploring the potential for holistic LGBTQ+ inclusivity

The main body of the paper focuses in on seven main facets of primary school life. Each category outlines key findings – challenges and opportunities – arising from the primary school staff survey, the family interviews, or both, and discusses the ways that each aspect of primary school life holds the potential for embedding LGBTQ+ inclusivity in holistic terms. The paper thus builds an evidence-based, illustrative picture of what holistic LGBTQ+ inclusivity could look like in primary schools.

1. Building on the LGBTQ+ inclusive attitudes of primary school staff

The vast majority of primary school staff who took the survey placed significant importance on every school staff role type category knowing about LGBTQ+ inclusivity (Neary & Power, 2024a, p.63). An average of 89.9% of respondents believed it was very important or somewhat important for principals and deputy principals, class teachers, and SNAs and support teachers to know about LGBTQ+ inclusivity. A very small number of staff believed that it was either not important or not at all important for principals and deputy principals to know about LGBTQ+ inclusivity (an average of 3.8% across role types). In addition, comfort levels with staff and parents/guardians being LGBTQ+ were also high (Neary & Power, 2024a, p. 34). 95.3% of primary school staff reported that they were either very comfortable or somewhat comfortable in relation to a colleague coming out as LGBTQ+, while 93.9% were either very comfortable, or somewhat comfortable with regard to a

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3 For a detailed breakdown of the sample, please see the full research report (Neary & Power, 2024a, p. 82-83).

parent/guardian coming out as LGBTQ+. These high numbers of staff who rated LGBTQ+ inclusivity as important and who had positive dispositions towards LGBTQ+ inclusivity bodes well as a basis for enacting holistic LGBTQ+ inclusivity in primary schools.

Staff comfort levels with a pupil coming out as LGBTQ+ were relatively high (Neary & Power, 2024a, p. 38). 79.8% of staff reported that they were either very comfortable or somewhat comfortable regarding the idea of a pupil coming out as LGBTQ+. 8.8% reported they were neutral and 8.2% were either somewhat uncomfortable or very uncomfortable about a pupil coming out as LGBTQ+. Within this, 84.6% (n=872) were either very comfortable or somewhat comfortable with the idea of a pupil coming out as lesbian, gay, bisexual or a sexual orientation other than straight, and 75% (n=774) were either very comfortable or somewhat comfortable with the idea of a pupil saying that they feel they are a gender other than the gender they were assigned at birth or describe themselves as trans or non-binary. 68.2% (n=703) were either very comfortable or somewhat comfortable with the idea of a pupil wanting to socially transition at school with the support of a parent or guardian. The gap between the rate of comfort with a child coming out as trans or non-binary (75%, n=774) and comfort levels with a child making a social transition whilst in primary school (68.2%, n=703) is suggestive of a lack of confidence. This issue is discussed further in the 'Confidence, knowledge and preparedness' section.

These largely positive staff dispositions towards LGBTQ+ inclusivity in primary schools in Ireland fit with the small body of literature internationally which shows that teachers make attempts to be LGBTQ+ inclusive in their practice (Leonardi & Staley, 2018; Mangin, 2020), albeit sometimes with a particular focus on accommodating and responding to specific cases, as opposed to planning proactively for LGBTQ+ inclusivity or making attempts to change school culture (Payne & Smith, 2014). We know that such positive and affirming attitudes are hugely important for children and families. Indeed, in this study many families articulated huge relief and delight when such attitudes were conveyed in their schools. For example, one child explained how their principal subtly conveyed a disposition that the child understood clearly as LGBTQ+ inclusive:

Yeah, my principal's really nice. She's really kind. And like every time she comes into our class, she always lets us know that if we ever we need to talk to her, we can just come down and talk to her. She's really nice. She's really sweet, you know? Yeah she always comes in and is checking on us. She does like watch people out on break. Like she goes out on break to make sure nobody does anything. (Child 7, age 12, Educate Together school)

In a similar vein, many LGBTQ+ parents articulated delight when the staff displayed a generally inclusive positive attitude:

The principal knows everybody by name, greets them at the gate every morning. Like it's a very inclusive school as well… they don't do anything down there that would exclude anybody. (Parents 3, Church of Ireland school)

Such experiences echo previous research which confirms the powerful knock-on effect of supportive, affirmative adults when a child is making sense of an LGBTQ+ identity whilst in primary school (Neary, 2018), or as parents are navigating everyday primary school life as an LGBTQ+ parented family (Mann et al., 2024; McDonald & Morgan, 2019; Carlisle & Paechter, 2018). The potential of holistic LGBTQ+ inclusivity in primary schools begins with individual staff attitudes and, of course, principals and deputy principals are particularly crucial in setting an LGBTQ+ inclusive tone in schools (Farrelly et al., 2017; Leonardi & Staley, 2018).

2. LGBTQ+ inclusive messaging and symbolism

Messaging and symbolism are crucial components of a holistic approach to LGBTQ+ inclusivity in primary schools. Administration is one significant area whereby schools can signal their LGBTQ+ inclusivity. LGBTQ+ parents across this study reported that administrative processes and systems of their schools were not always reflective of all family forms. They described how, at least initially, the applications, systems and forms that schools used presumed that there was a father and a mother present in every family. For instance, one parent explained:

> …as we're going through filling out the forms for the kids, she was looking for the name of the athair (father), and… I was like, 'there's no athair (father)'… And she's like, 'oh', and… she had an awful shock that there was no father. And then she asked me was I a single parent. And I was like, 'no'. And then I was trying to remember the word for gay in Irish… so anyway, I outed myself to her. And she's like: 'Oh, that's great. That's amazing. That's no problem. Oh, my God, that's fine. So there is another parent, so?' And I was like, 'yes, there is… my partner's outside if you'd like to meet her?' 'Well, that's totally fine. And I must amend these forms'. And you know, then she realised, you know, they had mother and father, and she needed to change it to parent/guardian. So she did, which was very interesting because we got the forms the next time, we were the first ones to break it. (LGBTQ+ Parent 2)

For the most part, parents who experienced forms and administrative systems in this way described positive reactions from primary school staff and the systems were subsequently changed, further signalling the ways that individuals are continuously changing the systems and culture of schools (Neary, 2018), and how primary school staff are typically positively disposed to accommodating diversity and difference (Payne & Smith, 2014).

Another example of LGBTQ+ inclusive messaging is in the display of LGBTQ+ inclusive symbols. One child in this study talked emotively about the power of a rainbow flag in signalling that LGBTQ+ people were safe and included:

> I don't know much about it, but it does seem like the most friendly school, or like the safest school to be in, you know?... I mean, safe to be myself… They had a couple of Pride flags outside like the classrooms and science rooms and the art rooms. I mean, I pointed it out and said, 'How cool is that?' you know, because

that's another reason that I want to go there for knowing that it's a safe sphere school. (Child 7)

A staff member explained the power of such messaging, linking it strongly to a child's ability to be open or talk to someone about their LGBTQ+ identity:

We have had many children over the past number of years who have been comfortable to have come out as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender. The ethos of the school from junior infants promotes inclusivity and celebration of difference. We purposely ensure that different types of families are represented in picture books and other classroom resources from junior infants to 6th class. (Woman, classroom teacher, Educate Together school)

Attention to such acts of symbolism and messaging might seem small-scale but they are hugely significant in the lives of those who are not seeing their lives reflected in schools or, worse still, worry about their safety in their everyday lives. Administrative systems that represent all families are a crucial aspect of feeling a sense of belonging from the outset in one's school community (Mann et al., 2024). Furthermore, while inclusive representation through the display of a rainbow flag, images of diverse family forms, or a diversity of representations of gender are no guarantor of LGBTQ+ inclusive practice, such visible efforts are nonetheless an important part of a multi-faceted approach to holistic LGBTQ+ inclusivity. They induce a sense of relief and delight for those who are uncertain or who worry about how they will be treated in their school community. Ultimately, they set the tone with a knock-on effect for how LGBTQ+ lives are approached amongst all members of school communities.

3. Fostering an LGBTQ+ inclusive ethos

Across the primary school staff who took this survey, there was an overwhelming commitment to the principle of inclusivity. Although the concept of inclusivity was understood and approached in a variety of ways by staff (Neary & Power, 2025), the prevalence of such narratives across the data signals that there is a strong basis in Irish primary schools for developing a holistic approach to LGBTQ+ inclusivity. Respondents to this survey were asked whether they thought that their school ethos has an impact overall on LGBTQ+ inclusivity (Neary & Power, 2024a, p. 50-51). 39.9% (n=411) of staff said yes; 37.2% (n=384) of staff said no, and 22.9% (n=236) said that they didn't know (Neary & Power, 2024a, p. 50). Within this, relatively equal numbers of staff across multi-denominational schools and religious schools reported that their school ethos impacted LGBTQ+ inclusivity. Of those who said their school ethos did not affect their inclusivity, 80.5% (n=309) were identifiable as religious schools and 15.6% (n=60) were identifiable as multi-denominational.

These statistics are limited because they do not give us a full picture of how staff are interpreting the nature of the impact and so, the qualitative data in relation to this question, help in understanding further. Staff were asked: "In what way does your school's ethos

impact upon LGBTQ+ inclusivity?", with 379 responding to the question. Of the staff who worked in religious schools, many reported that the ethos of their school was a barrier to LGBTQ+ inclusivity. For example, one classroom teacher said:

> It's a very Catholic, traditional school. I personally have been told to remember I am teaching in a Catholic school and parents choose to send their kids here for religious reasons. Obviously, LGBTQ+ clashes with this. I think we don't do enough for kids in this regard. We tip toe around these topics to keep management and some parents happy. (Woman, classroom teacher, Catholic school)

This was echoed in the interviews with LGBTQ+ parents as the vast majority largely avoided or reported attempting to avoid sending their children to religious schools. For example, one parent said:

> So we ruled out all Catholic schools straight off the bat. We just wouldn't go anywhere near one... so people were saying before we arrived, oh, you know, Catholic schools have changed, and... you know, they're fine. And some of them are grand. And I was just like, I just was not going nowhere near them, even if the school itself, even if the principal was fine, you'd never know what the parents are like. And you could never trust that your child would be accepted. (LGBTQ+ Parent 5)

On the other hand, some staff noted that, despite the tensions between LGBTQ+ lives and religious teachings, religious schools can be inclusive of LGBTQ+ people in holistic ways. For example, one teacher said:

> Our school's ethos (while Catholic in nature) is an open, positive, safe space for all pupils. The children in our school are appreciated as individuals, and we have a holistic approach to education. Inclusivity of all kinds is respected and practiced, and as awareness of the LGBTQ+ develops, I'm confident we can support any children or parents in this community. (Woman, special education teacher, Catholic school)

Although it was clear from some staff and parent responses that multi-denominational schools did not guarantee that LGBTQ+ inclusive practices would be embedded in school life, LGBTQ+ parents felt more protected by a school ethos that explicitly prioritised 'equality' and wasn't 'held back' by ambiguities around religious ethos and religious teachings:

> It was just always a good atmosphere in the Educate Together, and like I got that from the start, whereas I can think of some older schools, and I just wouldn't really be at ease sending (Child) there. It just wouldn't be the right fit. (LGBTQ+ Parent 1)

While ethos was referenced as a factor across the parents of LGBTQ+ children too, there was an acknowledgment across this cohort that individuals held significant power in schools and were the greatest determining factor in how supported or affirmed their child felt at school.

Much research in Ireland has acknowledged that religious ethos has served as a 'chill factor' with regard to LGBTQ+ inclusivity in many schools, and there are systemic barriers here that cannot be ignored (Gowran 2004; Fahie, 2016; Neary, Gray & O'Sullivan, 2018; Neary, 2017). Nevertheless, the vehement commitment to inclusivity articulated by the vast majority of primary school staff in this study – combined with the notion that a school's 'ethos' or school climate is ultimately made up of and operationalised by the everyday acts of people – holds potential in terms of establishing an LGBTQ+ inclusive spirit in primary schools. Furthermore, the experiences and everyday negotiations of families with LGBTQ+ members are all the time changing the lived 'ethos' of primary schools (Neary, 2018). A crucial challenge remains, though, in moving beyond an individualised, child-centred, support-focused approach to LGBTQ+ lives in primary schools to achieve a more holistic, embedded approach, whereby LGBTQ+ people can meaningfully see their lives reflected in ordinary, everyday ways in primary schools.

4. LGBTQ+ inclusive policy and support processes

Policy is a significant factor in enabling a school's approach to LGBTQ+ inclusivity (Ferfolja & Hopkins, 2013), however the statistics related to policy that emerged in this study suggest that many primary schools are falling short of policy directives (Neary & Power, 2024a, p. 27-28). In relation to anti-bullying policies, 65.8% (n=256) of primary school staff reported that their anti-bullying policy mentioned homophobic/biphobic bullying, while a total of 34.2% (n=133) of respondents either did not know whether their school's anti-bullying policy mentioned homophobic/biphobic bullying, or reported that this was not included in the policy. 30.8% (n=120) reported that their anti-bullying policy mentioned transphobic bullying and a total of 69.2% of respondents (n=269) either did not know whether their school's anti-bullying policy mentioned transphobic bullying, or reported that this was not included in the policy.

Respondents were also asked whether their anti-bullying policy included information on education and/or prevention strategies in relation to homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying. 52% (n=536) reported that their policy included information on education and/or prevention strategies in relation to homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying; 20.9% (n=215) reported that their anti-bullying policy did not include information on education and/or prevention strategies in relation to homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying; and 27.2% (n=280) reported that they did not know. These figures are stark, particularly given that primary schools have been guided to explicitly include LGBTQ+-based bullying and associated education and prevention strategies in their anti-bullying policies since 2013 (Department of Education, 2013).

However, anti-bullying policies should not be the only place whereby LGBTQ+ lives are included at school (Formby, 2015). Equality policies that signal a school's approach to LGBTQ+ are arguably a more powerful framework for establishing a holistic approach to

LGBTQ+ inclusivity. 37.7% (n=389) of staff who took the survey reported that their school had an equality policy independent of their anti-bullying policy. Of those staff that had an independent equality policy in their school, 50.6% (n=197) reported that their school's policy mentioned sexual orientation; 57.8% (n=225) reported that their equality policy explicitly mentioned gender; 39.1% stated that it explicitly mentioned gender identity; and 43.2% (n=168) explicitly mentioned LGBTQ+ people. While these figures are not overwhelmingly positive, they are somewhat encouraging, particularly in the absence of a national directive for schools to establish such equality policies.

There is much potential in the idea of primary school communities developing an equality policy and reviewing other policies, such as admissions policies, to ensure that they overtly use the language of existing equality legislation and human rights law. Such efforts – bolstered by the weight of equality and human rights legislation – could be better utilised across primary schools in Ireland to provide a framework for overcoming some of the barriers that are perceived to exist between religious teachings and LGBTQ+ lives at school. Again, such efforts take strong, inclusive leadership as well as effort and time on the part of many actors in school communities, but they hold huge potential for giving primary school staff the 'permission' they very often need to be overtly and proactively inclusive of LGBTQ+ lives in primary schools (Carlile, 2020; Ferfolja, 2009).

5. Building confidence, knowledge and preparedness for LGBTQ+

Staff confidence is a key component in building a holistic approach to LGBTQ+ inclusivity. This study revealed much about the confidence levels of primary school staff with regard to their understanding of sexuality and gender identity (Neary & Power, 2024a, p. 29), providing support if a pupil 'comes out' at school (Neary & Power, 2024a, p. 30-31), and related to LGBTQ+ inclusive teaching and learning practices (Neary & Power, 2024a, p. 68 & p. 74-77).

In terms of knowledge levels about sexuality and gender identity, 34.2% of staff reported that they felt very confident, while 37% reported that they felt somewhat confident in their knowledge about sexual orientation and gender identity. There was a significant gap though between participants' knowledge levels of sexual orientation when compared with gender identity. While just 5.8% (n=59) of staff rated themselves as either not very confident or not at all confident regarding sexual orientation, 26.8% (n=276) of primary school staff rated themselves as either not very confident or not at all confident in their knowledge levels about gender identity. This gap was mirrored in relation to knowing what to do if a pupil comes out. 12% (n=124) of primary school staff were not very confident or not at all confident in knowing what to do if a pupil came out as lesbian, gay, bisexual or a sexual orientation other than straight, while 23.8% (n=245) of primary school staff reported they were either not very confident or not at all confident in knowing what to do if a pupil says that they feel they are a gender other than the gender they were assigned at birth and/or describes themselves as being trans or non-binary. Furthermore, 23.1% (n=238) of staff rated themselves as not very confident or not at all confident in knowing what to do if a pupil wanted to socially transition at school.

Confidence in knowledge levels regarding ensuring LGBTQ+ inclusive teaching and

learning also indicate the need for further work. Relatively low numbers of staff were very confident in their knowledge levels regarding LGBTQ+ inclusive language (26.6%, n=274), planning lessons that are LGBTQ+ inclusive (19.4%, n=200), and teaching SPHE/RSE in an LGBTQ+ inclusive way (20.8%, n=213). 17.2% (n=178) were either not very confident or not at all confident in using LGBTQ+ inclusive language; 26.3% (n=271) were not very confident or not at all confident in planning lessons that were LGBTQ+ inclusive; and 24.2% (n=249) of staff were not very confident or not at all confident in teaching SPHE/RSE in an LGBTQ+ inclusive way.

This study also confirms that staff who feel more confident in planning LGBTQ+ inclusive lessons are far more likely to represent LGBTQ+ identities and experiences in the classroom than those who lack this confidence. 93% (n=160) of staff who were very confident in including same-gender parented families in their lessons included them always or sometimes. 88% (n=130) of staff who were very confident in using LGBTQ+ inclusive books and resources use them always or sometimes; 86% (n=138) of staff who rated themselves as very confident included LGBTQ+ historical or public figures in lessons always or sometimes, while 93% (n=156) who feel confident in teaching SPHE/RSE in an LGBTQ+ inclusive way always or sometimes taught it in this way.

Echoing previous research in Ireland (Neary, 2021a; 2021b), this study reveals that parents/guardians and children bear the burden of educating about their lives when staff lack confidence and knowledge. Whilst many parents/guardians do this work willingly, there is an inevitable cost of having to do it. For example, one parent said:

> She was wanting to learn, wanting to get to… where do I go? what do we do? how do we learn? And I did sort of think to myself, OK… It IS positive… but it's also actually not appropriate. You don't ask the parent, "How do I learn?" You're the teacher, and I'm sending my kid to your school six hours a day, and what, you're gonna tell me now that you need me to educate you on how to be inclusive? And as I've said, I have a lot of respect for (the principal), and I adore her, and I think she's amazing and everything, and she's been on a learning process too. But I do remember that particular meeting thinking to myself, no, it's not my job to educate you. (Parent of Child 7)

Other risks to this kind of work identified by the parents/guardians in this study included how if a parent/guardian is left in a position of educating on LGBTQ+ inclusivity, it can render them vulnerable to being positioned as the 'difficult parent':

> And I sent Belong To's contact details. I sent so many contact details and it's like studies and stuff like that when I was saying to them, let's do something for Pride, you know, right? Yeah. Yeah, I reached out to Belong To myself just in case the school wouldn't… there's so many possibilities, but it's been the same with autism for me, you know… Yeah, I'm a difficult parent. That's what I am. I'm seen as a difficult parent because I asked for stuff and… that's not really good. (LGBTQ+ Parent 12)

Such experiences, when combined with the statistics outlined here, underline the need for confidence-building through knowledge development work with primary school staff. This was reiterated a lot in the qualitative commentary from staff. Indeed, some mentioned the powerful knock-on effect of even just one staff member completing a course and bringing back their learning for discussion and workshopping with colleagues:

> I completed the INTO Summer Course 'The LGBT & Inclusive School' and it was really amazing to bring back to the whole school and inform my own individual practice. (Woman, deputy principal, Catholic school)

There is merit in recognising the potential that each staff member has as an individual. Each staff member has the potential to foster belonging for all children through daily practices of care, that are both reactive and proactive. In this vein, some staff members articulated it as their own responsibility to educate themselves: "I need to do more... need to educate myself – this survey highlights this for me", (Woman, deputy principal, Catholic school). At any rate, whether through formal continued professional development (CPD) or individual exercises in information-gathering, there is no denying the huge confidence-building potential in proactively working together as a staff to share knowledge, practice and ideas. Such collaborative exercises, again, undoubtedly rely on strong, committed leadership and they can go a very long way to achieving many of the goals of a holistic approach to LGBTQ+ inclusivity.

6. LGBTQ+ inclusive teaching and learning practices

This study revealed a large portion of primary school teaching staff are enacting LGBTQ+ inclusive practices, but the statistics also reveal that there is more work to be done to ensure that this happens in every school (Neary & Power, 2024a, p. 70-71).

79.6% (n=648) of teaching staff either always or sometimes include same-gender parented families when talking about families in general. Within this, 34.9% (n=281) of teaching staff always include same-gender parented families when talking about families in general, while 44.7% (n=367) sometimes include same-gender parented families when talking about families in general. 65.6% (n=476) of teaching staff either always or sometimes include LGBTQ+ historical or public figures in lessons. Breaking this down, 15% (n=109) of teaching staff always include LGBTQ+ historical or public figures in lessons, while 50.6% (n=367) sometimes include LGBTQ+ historical or public figures in lessons. 64.2% (n=502) of teaching staff either always or sometimes use books and resources with LGBTQ+ people represented. Within this, 13.8% (n=108) of teaching staff always use books and resources with LGBTQ+ people represented, while 50.4% (n=394) of teaching staff sometimes use books with LGBTQ+ people represented. 75.3% (n=549) of teaching staff reported that they either always or sometimes teach SPHE/RSE in an LGBTQ+ inclusive way. Breaking this down, 31.7% (n=231) of teaching staff reported that they always teach SPHE/RSE in an LGBTQ+ inclusive way, while 43.6% (n=318) of teaching staff reported that they sometimes teach SPHE/RSE in an LGBTQ+ inclusive way. Significantly, a large portion of staff reported that they never enacted these LGBTQ+ inclusive practices. 19.6% (n=158)

reported that they never include same-gender parented families; 34.4% (n=250) never include LGBTQ+ historical or public figures in lessons; 35.8% (n=280) never ensure that LGBTQ+ characters are represented in books and resources; and 24.7% (n=180) never teach SPHE/RSE in an LGBTQ+ inclusive way.

While the large portion of people who reported enacting LGBTQ+ inclusive practice is encouraging, some of these statistics remind us that this is not a consistently positive story. In this light, it is perhaps unsurprising that a significant finding from families who have LGBTQ+ parents/guardians or LGBTQ+-identifying children is that many are not seeing their lives reflected in holistic ways in schools. For instance, one parent indicated that while there was a spirit of inclusivity, work was needed to ensure that LGBTQ+ inclusivity was embedded and reflected through all facets of school life:

> I think my experience of management is that they feel like they're being inclusive. They feel like they are instilling great values in the children, which they are. But there is another step that is usually important. And I don't think it's enough. (LGBTQ+ Parent 4)

Celebratory aspects of school life were highlighted as moments that required extra negotiation on the part of the families and sometimes the teachers too. Furthermore, whilst restrictive for all children, deeply embedded gender-segregating and gender restrictive practices were experienced as particularly problematic for families with trans and gender diverse children. Through all of this, several parents asserted that, irrespective of how progressive they were in their own views, staff could be fearful and/or not on solid ground where it came to enacting LGBTQ+ inclusivity in an explicit way.

There is huge potential in proactively planning so that LGBTQ+ lives are reflected in small, ordinary but powerfully impactful ways in teaching and learning practices. Of course, some schools and staff are already doing this. For example, one staff member explained their approach:

> We have laid out which areas will be covered by each class so that we have a spiral approach to education in relation to LBGTQ+ rights. We try to not make it a 'once a year' learning exercise, but rather focus on the human rights aspect. (Woman, classroom teacher, Educate Together school)

Crucially, very many primary school staff in this survey who reported that they were not doing this, expressed a desire to work on it. Examples of such responses included:

> I have definitely spotted gaps in my own teaching I need to fix. I found that because none of my pupils had LGBT in their households that I didn't really address it. (Woman, classroom teacher, Catholic school)

> I don't think I will ever have all the right answers but I'm always open to learning more. (Woman, SNA, Educate Together school)

Such proactive work involves continuous awareness and intentional planning, but these are small acts of inclusivity that do not require much beyond what primary school teaching staff already do in preparing for their teaching every day. Furthermore, while a child-centred approach is undoubtedly crucial in planning for teaching and learning, a holistic, proactive approach to LGBTQ+ inclusive teaching and learning involves presuming a diversity of children's lives in every classroom, and not waiting until a child with LGBTQ+ parents or an LGBTQ+ identifying child appears in the class. Such proactive approaches can have a transformative impact on children's attitudes to LGBTQ+ people (Atkinson, 2021) and, importantly too, avoid placing undue attention or burdens on the child or family who is being included.

7. Avoiding age-related assumptions

A final component of school life which holds the potential for holistic LGBTQ+ inclusivity involves a continued attention to, and awareness of, assumptions related to age. This study reveals important findings regarding primary school staff perceptions related to age (Neary & Power, 2024a, p.64-65).

74.5% (n=768) believed that all class groups should have lessons that include same-gender parented families in the same way as different-gender parented families. However, a further 12.1% (n=125) qualified this by age. 2.8% (n=29) said 6th class only; 5% (n=52) said 4th-6th inclusive; and 4.0% (n=41) stated 2nd-6th inclusive. 70.1% (n=723) asserted that all class groups should have lessons with LGBTQ+ characters included in the same way as heterosexual characters. However, a further 14.7% (n=152) qualified this by age. 3.8% (n=39) said 6th class only; 6.6% (n=68) said 4th-6th classes inclusive; and 3.4% (3.4%) said 2nd-6th inclusive. 11.5% (n=119) of staff stated that no class should have lessons with LGBTQ+ characters included in the same way as heterosexual characters. Furthermore, the word 'age-appropriate' was used quite a lot through qualitative commentary in the survey.

While there is a common-sense aura to the phrase 'age-appropriate', when this is applied to LGBTQ+ lives, it warrants further layers of interrogation. Is 'age-appropriate' being imbued with presumptions about children's capacities as well as their lives? We know of course that many children have LGBTQ+ parents and family members, and many are processing their own LGBTQ+ identities from a young age. Yet, discourses of 'age-appropriateness' can be applied to LGBTQ+ lives in ways that presume children are not already seeing LGBTQ+ lives in their everyday worlds. These discourses can silently combine with mischaracterisations of LGBTQ+ lives in purely sexualised terms, resulting in many adults having negative, reactionary, protectionist responses that presume primary school-aged children are 'too young' to learn about LGBTQ+ lives (Neary & Power, 2024; Neary & Rasmussen, 2020; Neary et al. 2017; Payne & Smith, 2014; Robinson, 2013). Ironically, such protectionist discourses fail to account for the significant harm that is being done when children are not seeing their own personhood, families, or LGBTQ+ lives reflected in primary school life. There is harm being done too when children only see LGBTQ+ lives represented through the negative messaging of bullying frameworks. Indeed, these are the early conditions for discrimination and exclusion with significant

negative knock-on effects into adolescence (Wilson & Cariola, 2019).

The potential here then lies in a collective commitment to interrogating such discourses, acknowledging how they travel and how they might not be serving every child. This involves noticing and moving beyond knee-jerk, reactionary responses and instead approaching LGBTQ+ inclusivity in measured, research and practice-informed ways. Indeed, much research counters claims that children are too young to know about LGBTQ+ lives, emphasising children's capacities to understand and accept (Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2016; Ryan, Patraw & Bednar, 2013), as well as their sophisticated understandings of their own identifications (Neary, 2024). Such practices of thought and care would go a long way towards ensuring that all children see their lives reflected at school.

Conclusion

This paper has drawn on the perspectives of primary school staff, families and children to outline the potential for embedding a holistic approach to LGBTQ+ inclusivity in and through seven different components of primary school life. The findings of this study reveal that each of these elements of primary school life poses some challenges for LGBTQ+ inclusivity. However, at the same time, across each dimension, there is a solid base from which to work to realise the potential of embedding LGBTQ+ inclusivity in primary schools. There will always be challenges and tensions in doing this kind of work, but the ultimate impact will be that many children will start to see their lives or families reflected in school life in ordinary ways. Furthermore, all children will be prevented from subtly learning to view LGBTQ+ lives as taboo, thereby interrupting these early conditions for hierarchy and discrimination which have hugely negative impacts into adolescence (Wilson & Cariola, 2019).

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Say yes to languages? Irish primary teachers' beliefs on modern foreign language integration

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Abstract

The integration of modern foreign languages (MFL) at primary level invites schools to foster intercultural and plurilingual competencies from an early age. Aligned with the broader aims of the *Primary Language Curriculum* (PLC), the *Languages Connect Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017-2026* (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2017) intends to introduce young learners (aged 8-12 years) to the personal, cultural and cognitive benefits of language learning while cultivating a greater appreciation for linguistic diversity and communication. As MFLs continue to embed within the *Primary Curriculum Framework* (PCF), understanding teachers' beliefs and perceptions becomes critical for sustainable curricular implementation. However, despite increased attention to plurilingualism and language policy in Ireland, empirical research into Irish primary teachers' beliefs related to MFL education remains limited. This study sought to investigate the beliefs, experiences and professional reflections of 257 primary school teachers nationwide, with a view to exploring their perceptions of the value of MFL learning in the classroom, and whether its integration complements or detracts from the existing curriculum. Data were generated through a national questionnaire and analysed by variables such as school contexts and years of teaching experience. The findings revealed broad endorsement of MFL provision, though important distinctions emerged regarding teachers' professional backgrounds, perceived preparedness, and systemic support. While most participants acknowledged the pedagogical and cultural benefits of early MFL exposure, concerns were raised around implementation feasibility. This study underscores the significance of supporting teacher agency and competence in the rollout of MFL initiatives. It concludes by considering implications for national programmes such as the *Say Yes to Languages* and the PCF, highlighting opportunities to more effectively align teacher education, policy, and practice in fostering a linguistically inclusive and future-ready primary education landscape.

Keywords: **Early years education (EYE), modern foreign languages (MFL), teachers' beliefs, teacher knowledge, curriculum reform, plurilingualism.**

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Introduction

In today's increasingly interconnected and linguistically diverse societies, early engagement with modern foreign languages (MFLs) is widely recognised as key to fostering intercultural competence, global citizenship, and cognitive development (Council of Europe, 2001;

Flynn & Singleton, 2025). Ireland has responded to these global priorities with a renewed emphasis on primary-level language learning in the early 2020s. This is reflected in initiatives such as the *Say Yes to Languages Programme* (SYLP) and the integration of MFL into the redeveloped PCF (DES, 2017; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2023). As of 2024, the SYLP has entered its fifth year and has provided varying levels of MFL provision to more than 85,000 students in over 1,300 schools in the 2024/2025 academic year alone (Post-Primary Languages Ireland (PPLI), 2024). Serving as a transitional policy initiative, the SYLP is considered a stepping stone to the formal integration of MFL in the PLC (PLC, 2015).

Parallel to these curricular developments, there has also been a notable resurgence in language upskilling opportunities for Irish primary school teachers. Continuing professional development (CPD) courses designed to enhance teachers' language competence in their chosen MFL. These courses are delivered by Irish universities, language schools, and regional education support centres to help equip teachers with the linguistic and pedagogical tools to deliver age-appropriate MFL instruction. Mostly funded by the Department of Education and administered by the PPLI, these initiatives represent a promising step towards supporting the sustainable integration of MFL in the primary school classroom.

However, successful reform depends not only on policy, but on teachers' beliefs, agency, and classroom realities (Orafi & Borg, 2009; Fullan, 2007). The *Cosán Framework* (The Teaching Council, 2016) underscores this by affirming that professional learning for teachers is most impactful when it 'builds on their existing values, knowledge and experiences' (p. 3). Therefore, if MFL is to be meaningfully embedded in primary schools, its rollout must be responsive to diverse school types, demographics, and resources. Moreover, despite increased policy attention, limited research has examined how Irish primary teachers perceive MFL or how their beliefs align or conflict with new curricular directions. Understanding these beliefs is essential to ensuring that language education reform is grounded in the lived realities of the classroom. Building on a prior systematic review outlining key domains of teacher knowledge for plurilingual education, this study investigates the beliefs, experiences and perceptions of 257 Irish primary teachers regarding the integration of MFL in the classroom. It examines how factors such as school context and years of experience shape these beliefs, and what implications arise for national language education policy and teacher education. In doing so, it contributes practical insight to the broader research questions central to the field:

1. What are the essential domains of MFL teacher knowledge and what is the knowledge gap?
2. How can we enhance plurilingual competencies of Irish primary school teachers?
3. How do we measure satisfactory plurilingual competency amongst primary school teachers?

This paper begins with a review of the relevant literature on teacher beliefs and the role of MFL in Irish primary education. It then outlines the national survey methodology, presents key findings from teachers across a range of school contexts and experience levels, and concludes with practical recommendations for policy and classroom practice.

Teachers' beliefs and self-efficacy

Teachers' beliefs influence practice, pedagogical choices and student engagement. These beliefs are shaped by a wide range of personal, professional, institutional and cultural experiences that can help individuals make "sense of the world, influencing how new information is perceived, and whether it is accepted or rejected" (Borg, 2001, p.186).

It has been said that beliefs can differ from knowledge which is commonly built on "fact, logical arguments, and expert consensus" (Egloff & Souvignier, 2019, p. 162; Pajares, 1992; Richardson, 2003). However, contrary to this, some empirical insights suggest that beliefs are emotionally driven and can 'serve as a guide to thought and behavior' (Borg, 2011, p.186 Ashton & Gregoire-Gill, 2003; Frijda & Mesquita, 2000). This highlights the complex and often personal nature of beliefs, which can operate independently of formal knowledge.

Additionally, Rubie-Davies et al. (2011) argue that teachers' beliefs are "not likely to exist in isolation" but are instead intertwined with "contextual school and personal characteristics" (p.271). They can be determined by multiple factors and inherently connected to 'teacher self-efficacy' – a term referring to the "self-perception of competence rather than actual competence" (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy & Hoy, 1998, p.211). Emerging from this concept, we learn that 'strong professional beliefs and high levels of self-efficacy' can work in tandem to positively influence teaching effectiveness and student achievement (Wang et al., 2023, p.511; Morris, 2019; Zonoubi et al., 2017). Therefore, this interconnection highlights the importance of examining self-efficacy more closely as a key component of teacher belief systems.

There are two main forms of self-efficacy; high and low. High teacher self-efficacy plays a pivotal role in shaping classroom decisions, willingness "to implement new and innovative pedagogical practices" and perseverance in the face of challenges (Rubie-Davies, 2011, p.273). When teachers believe they can positively influence student outcomes, they are more likely to be cognisant of their "specific teaching actions" (Wheatly, 2002, p.6). Conversely, teachers experiencing diminished self-efficacy are often "labelled as having less confidence, doubting their efficacy, having low teacher efficacy, or having a less positive sense of teacher efficacy" (Wheatly 2002, p.6). These perceptions, in turn, can shape and reinforce teachers' underlying beliefs about what can be achieved – or not achieved – in the classroom.

Recognising this interplay between beliefs and self-efficacy lays the foundation for exploring how external professional and contextual environments shape – and at times challenge – teachers' fluidly evolving identities (Golzar, 2020).

Teachers as learners: forming beliefs

Teachers, as lifelong learners, encounter multiple opportunities to shape and refine their pedagogical beliefs. Through ongoing professional development, reflective practice, and the pursuit of disciplinary knowledge, educators are continually evolving their teaching identities. These beliefs, however, are also influenced by teachers' formative experiences as learners. Attia (2016) suggests that early schooling can serve as a valuable source of pedagogical inspiration, encouraging educators to "look back on (these experiences) for possible influences on their pedagogical theories" (p.1129). Lortie's (1975) concept of the

'apprenticeship of observation' captures the enduring impact of these early experiences. 'Apprenticeship of observation' refers to the implicit lessons about teaching that individuals acquire simply by spending years and thousands of hours as students in classrooms. Lessons that may unconsciously shape their beliefs as early career teachers (ECTs) (Lortie, 1975; Attia, 2016; Borg, 2004). While these experiences provide a basis for their perceptions of teaching, they can also present challenges. Darling-Hammond (2006) and Attia (2016) both emphasise that the 'apprenticeship of observation' can prove challenging as ECTs must learn "to conceptualize teaching in ways that are different from their own early experiences as learners" (p.1300). Borg (2004) extends this idea, noting that learners and novice teachers often hold only a 'partial view' of teaching – one that sees the teacher 'frontstage' like a performance, without access to the 'backstage' complexities that underpin effective practice (Lortie, 1975, p.62; Borg, 2004, p.275). "Students do not receive invitations to watch the teacher's performance from the wings; they are not privy to the teacher's private intentions and personal reflections on classroom events" (Borg, 2004, p.274).

From this perspective, it is salient to note that teacher learning is not limited to formal training, but is co-constructed within broader cultural and relational contexts. The way teachers make sense of their own learning – both past and present – can significantly influence how they approach curriculum reform and adapt to new pedagogical expectations. In this regard, understanding teachers as language learners themselves may provide critical insight into how they engage with evolving curricular initiatives, particularly in the context of MFL integration.

Teachers' beliefs: professional and contextual influences

In the educational context, Pajares (1992) suggests that teachers' beliefs are "formed early, strongly influence behaviour and tend to persevere despite contradictory evidence" (Martinez et al., 2024, p.2). Influential factors such as school environments, leadership structures, and peer relationships further shape how beliefs evolve across the professional lifespan. Teachers, in this way, may become 'an embodiment of their inner worlds' which can make it difficult to fully separate personal values from professional contexts (Couper, 2019, p.44; Darmody et al., 2020, p.504). Professional and contextual influence can occur as early as initial teacher education (ITE) and frame how teachers interpret curriculum content, approach classroom practice, and navigate new pedagogical initiatives. Similarly, Henson (2001) maintains that novice teachers may be more 'malleable' in their professional beliefs and their levels of self-efficacy are 'in flux' due to their diverse school placement experiences (p.514).

While initially shaped by theory, novice teachers often hold 'idealistic views' that spark enthusiasm and contribute to the formation of their teaching identity. However, as teachers gain experience, their beliefs tend to become more practice-oriented and shaped by lived classroom realities. This can present both strengths and challenges, particularly during times of curriculum change, where more experienced teachers may be "more hesitant to try new practices" if they believe existing approaches are already effective (Clayback et al., 2023, p.36). Given the strong influence of context on teacher beliefs, these beliefs also play a critical role in how teachers respond to curricular innovation and reform.

Teachers' beliefs: curriculum change

At any stage of their professional journey, teachers' beliefs can be "strengthened and extended" and can "provide a basis for action" (Borg, 2011, pp.371-379). However, when a curriculum conflicts with those beliefs, challenges in implementation may emerge. Indeed, teachers are less likely to apply professional development strategies that contradict their core pedagogical values (Martinez et al., 2024; Rogers et al., 2022). Perceived misalignment between curricular aims and classroom realities may also lead to partial adaptation, resistance, or, in some cases, lack of implementation fidelity – that is, how closely and consistently a programme is delivered in line with its intended design (Clayback et al., 2023, p.27).

Furthermore, research from Clayback et al. (2023) also highlights that teachers who held more favourable initial beliefs about a new curriculum demonstrated greater fidelity to it. Conversely, more experienced teachers – while bringing valuable expertise – reported lower curriculum-specific self-efficacy and perceived less compatibility between the new programme and their established practices (p.28).

These findings reinforce the idea that meaningful curriculum reform requires more than top-down implementation. As Clayback et al. (2023) emphasise, addressing teacher beliefs is essential. Not to critique resistance, but to acknowledge that pedagogical change must be co-constructed with those tasked with its delivery. Bybee (1993) reminds us that teachers are "change agents for educational reform", and as such, should be supported as reflective professionals navigating these evolving educational landscapes. This underscores the value of recognising teachers not simply as implementers, but as learners whose beliefs, experiences, and ongoing development shape how new pedagogical ideas are understood and enacted. As Haney et al. (2002) contend, "teachers' beliefs should not be ignored" (p.171).

Furthermore, Orafi and Borg (2009) caution that curriculum reform often falters when there are "unacknowledged mismatches between (its) principles and teachers' beliefs" (p.244). This is particularly relevant in the context of MFL, where adopting plurilingual pedagogies requires more than structural reform – it demands shifts in professional identity, pedagogical thinking, and classroom practice (Golzar, 2020).

As previously noted, the intended curriculum 'does not always reflect what curriculum designers have in mind' and frequently depends on teachers' interpretations, prior experiences, and classroom realities to bring it to life (Orafi & Borg, 2008, p.243 ; O'Sullivan, 2004; Smith & Southerland, 2007). This highlights the importance of recognising not only teachers' beliefs, but also the broader language ideologies embedded within education systems, which can either enable or constrain how additional languages are supported in practice – a consideration that is particularly relevant given Ireland's evolving language landscape.

Slaughter and Cross (2020), in their study of English as an additional language (EAL) provision in Australia, demonstrate how well-intentioned policy can be constrained by underlying monolingual assumptions. However, the Irish dual-language school system and the fact that 13% of the population speaks a language other than English or Irish (Census, 2016; Gallagher, 2021) position the country – both historically and contemporarily – to

embrace a more inclusive linguistic vision. While this proportion is lower than that reported in contexts such as Australia, i.e. "In 2021, 5.6 million people or 22 per cent, reported using a language other than English at home" (abs.gov.au, 2021, para. 6), the significance in Ireland lies less in the figure itself than in how demographic change interacts with Ireland's bilingual schooling tradition and its long-standing curricular engagement with additional languages. This potential is reinforced by Ireland's curricular engagement with 'continental languages' (Walsh, 2016, p.31) and a series of initiatives such as *The Provision of Modern Languages at Primary Level* (INTO, 1991-1998), the *Modern Languages in Primary Schools Initiative* (Modern Languages in the Primary School Curriculum (MLPSI), 1998-2012), and the *Intercultural Education Strategy* (DES, 2010-2015). Against this backdrop, the recent trajectory of MFL integration marks a significant step forward, placing Ireland in a strong position to support and celebrate linguistic and cultural diversity within its education system.

As the NCCA (2024) observes, "in a multicultural and multi-lingual society like Ireland, our children hear, see and use multiple languages" (p.98). Indeed, the Irish education landscape is evolving, with initiatives such as *Languages Connect* (DES, 2017), the PLC (NCCA, 2015), and the SYLP (PPLI, 2024) signalling a renewed emphasis on language learning. Lanvers (2024) highlights the PLC's emphasis on the Irish language as a foundation for broader language learning, describing it as "a positive context for foreign language learning" and positioning Irish primary schools as well-placed to lead in the advancement of plurilingual education (p.1,218). Yet, while policy frameworks offer strong aspirations, there remains uncertainty around the internal supports available to teachers, their perceived preparedness, and the capacity of schools to implement MFL alongside existing curricular demands.

Collectively, the literature underscores that teachers' beliefs – shaped by early experiences, self-efficacy, professional learning, and school context – play a decisive role in shaping how new language initiatives are enacted. Furthermore, little is currently known about how these beliefs are formed or how they vary across school types and stages of teaching experience in the Irish primary sector. Addressing this gap is essential to ensure that MFL reform is not only policy-driven, but teacher-informed and contextually grounded. As Fullan (2007) reminds us, "engagement with teachers' beliefs is a crucial step in the pursuit of long-lasting deep reform" (Darmody, Lysaght, & O'Leary, 2020, p.503).

Research design and approach

Research context and participants

This survey employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods approach encompassing both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection. With 257 participants, this study investigated Irish primary teachers' experiences, insights, and concerns regarding the recent integration of MFL into the redeveloped PCF (NCCA, 2023).

At the beginning of the survey, participants completed a short demographic section, gathering background information such as school context (e.g. Gaelscoileanna, Gaeltacht schools, Irish-medium (GGIM), English-medium, DEIS, special education), years of teaching experience, highest teaching qualification, gender, age group, and their

professional status, distinguishing between those currently in-service and those engaged in initial teacher education (ITE). This information was essential in helping identify patterns and variations in responses across different educational settings and teacher profiles.

Exclusion criteria

Participants were excluded if they were not currently working as primary school teachers or undertaking ITE in an Irish primary context. The study specifically targeted both pre- and in-service teachers within Ireland. Individuals based outside Ireland, non-teaching staff, administrative personnel, members of the public, and those unable to engage with the questionnaire in English or Irish were also ineligible. Children, adolescents, and vulnerable groups were not involved, and all participants were assumed to be over 18 and professionally engaged in primary-level teaching.

Ethical considerations

There were several ethical considerations to be made over the course of this research project. This study was reviewed and approved by the Social Research Ethics Committee (SREC) at University College Cork (UCC), ensuring that all aspects of data collection, participant involvement, and data management adhered to the highest ethical standards. In line with UCC's *Code of Research Conduct* (University College Cork, 2021), GDPR guidelines, and the university's records management policy (University College Cork, 2020), several procedures were put in place to ensure the protection, privacy, and dignity of participants.

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. All participants were provided with a digital information sheet incorporated into the survey detailing the purpose of the research, their rights as participants, and how their data would be handled. Informed digital consent was obtained at the outset of the questionnaire, with participants reminded of their right to withdraw at any time. They were also given the option to allow anonymised quotations from open-text responses to be included in subsequent publications. Anonymity was prioritised throughout the research. No identifying information was collected in the questionnaire, and all responses were stored securely using the UCC-approved platform *OneDrive*. In keeping with institutional data management guidelines, all data will be retained for a minimum of ten years.

Upon completing the survey, participants were provided with the researcher's contact details should they have any questions or concerns. As no sensitive or clinical data were involved, and no incentives offered, the ethical risk level for this study was deemed low. This ethically grounded approach enabled the safe, respectful, and meaningful collection of teacher voice data, in support of national efforts to evaluate and strengthen MFL provision at the primary level.

Research approach and data collection instruments

The primary data collection instrument for this study was an online questionnaire designed and administered through *Qualtrics.*[1] This platform was selected due to its secure, user-friendly interface and its alignment with UCC's data protection and ethical research guidelines.

Although the national survey itself consisted of sixteen questions, this article reports on two specific prompts:

1. Complete the following sentence: "Learning Modern Foreign Languages at Primary School is…" (followed by 'very important, somewhat important neutral, not very important, not important at all'), and
2. "Do you believe introducing MFL complements or detracts from other subjects?" (open-text responses)

The survey was structured around three overarching thematic strands:

1. Perspectives and beliefs in MFL tuition.
2. Levels of competency and expertise in MFL tuition.
3. Aspirations and desires for the future delivery of MFL tuition.

For the purposes of this paper, the analysis has been honed specifically on the first strand, 'perspectives and beliefs in MFL tuition', to allow a more detailed exploration of teachers' attitudes toward MFL integration within the redeveloped PCF.

The survey was accessible in both English and Irish and was optimised for completion on a range of digital devices, including desktop computers, laptops, tablets, and smartphones. The estimated completion time of this questionnaire was approximately ten minutes.

For the purposes of quantitative analysis, the 'Crosstabs IQ' function within *Qualtrics* was used to examine relationships between teacher demographics and key belief-based items. At the time of analysis, over 257 complete responses had been gathered. Two variables were selected to explore potential patterns and associations: school context (e.g., GGIM, English-medium, Other) and years of teaching experience. These were cross tabulated with the two core belief items introduced earlier, allowing for meaningful comparisons across subgroups. To support clear interpretation, the 'Crosstabs' settings were configured to display column percentages. The resulting tables were exported for further analysis, providing insight into trends within teacher responses and informing the wider discussion of the findings.

Piloting the questionnaire

To enhance the clarity, accessibility, and contextual relevance of the questionnaire, a 'talk aloud method' was employed during the pilot phase (Noushad et al., 2024). This involved inviting two experienced primary school teachers – one of whom was based in a Gaelscoil

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1 *Qualtrics* is a platform designed to collect, analyse and distribute surveys providing tools for data analysis and reporting (Qualtrics, 2025)

and one of whom was a teaching principal – to complete a draft version of the survey while providing their insights. This allowed participants to verbalise their thoughts, interpretations, and "capture cognitive processes and decision-making strategies" (2024, p.892). The aim was to minimise potential discomfort and identify ambiguities or assumptions in the survey's wording and structure.

Participants were encouraged to reflect openly on each question, noting any confusion, hesitation, or suggestions for improvement. Their verbal feedback was audio-recorded with consent, allowing for detailed post-hoc analysis and revision of the survey items in due course. This iterative process ensured that the final version of the questionnaire was linguistically clear, pedagogically appropriate, and inclusive of the diverse educational contexts represented in the national primary teaching landscape.

Findings

Drawing on responses from primary school teachers nationally across a range of school contexts and years of experience, this section presents a descriptive analysis of up to 195 teachers' beliefs based on two key prompts:

- (Q1) The perceived importance of MFL
- (Q2) Does MFL in primary schools complement or detract from other subject areas?

The following summaries and tables identify trends that offer insight into the broader landscape of teachers' beliefs toward MFL in Irish primary schools.

Perceived importance of MFL

As seen in both Table and Figure 1 (n=194), teachers' beliefs and their perceived importance of MFL were first examined in relation to their current school contexts. In English-medium schools, which made up the majority of the sample (n=157; 80.9%), 64.3% of participants considered MFL either very or somewhat important (n = 101), with 15.9% indicating it was not important (n=25) and 4.5% viewing it as not important at all (n=7).

GGIM teachers, while representing smaller proportions of the sample (8.8% and 3.1% respectively), offered more varied perspectives. For example, one-third (33.3%) of Gaeltacht-based participants considered MFL very important, yet an equal proportion (33.3%) remained neutral, and 33.4% viewed it as either 'not important' or 'not important at all' (n=2). In Irish-medium contexts, 64.7% considered MFL either very or somewhat important (n=11), while nearly a quarter (23.5%) remained neutral and 11.8% felt it was not important (n=2).

In contrast, teachers from special education contexts – representing 4.1% of participants – expressed strong support, with 62.5% deeming MFL as 'very important' (n=5). However, one quarter (25.0%) still indicated it was 'not important' (n=2).

Similarly, those in the 'other' category – comprising student teachers on both national and international teaching placements – demonstrated high levels of endorsement, with 50% rating MFL as 'very important' (n=3) and a further 33.3% as 'somewhat important' (n=2). Only one participant expressed a negative response (16.7%).

These results suggest GGIM may foster mixed beliefs and attitudes towards the integration of MFL. Conversely, ITE students or inclusive educational contexts appear more uniformly in favour. However, a Chi-square test (χ^2=19.81, p =.229) indicated that these differences were not statistically significant at the .05 level, suggesting that overall, the pattern of responses was broadly similar across all school contexts.

Table 1: Perceived importance of MFL by school context.

	Total Participants for Q1	Very important (25%)	Somewhat important (39%)	Neutral (16%)	Not important (16%)	Not important at all (4%)
Total Count (Answering)	194.0	49.0	75.0	31.0	31.0	8.0
English-medium	157.0	36.0	65.0	24.0	25.0	7.0
Irish-medium	17.0	3.0	8.0	4.0	2.0	0.0
Gaeltacht	6.0	2.0	0.0	2.0	1.0	1.0
Special Ed. School/unit	8.0	5.0	0.0	1.0	2.0	0.0
Other	6.0	3.0	2.0	0.0	1.0	0.0

Figure 1: Importance ratings of MFL by school context (percentages).
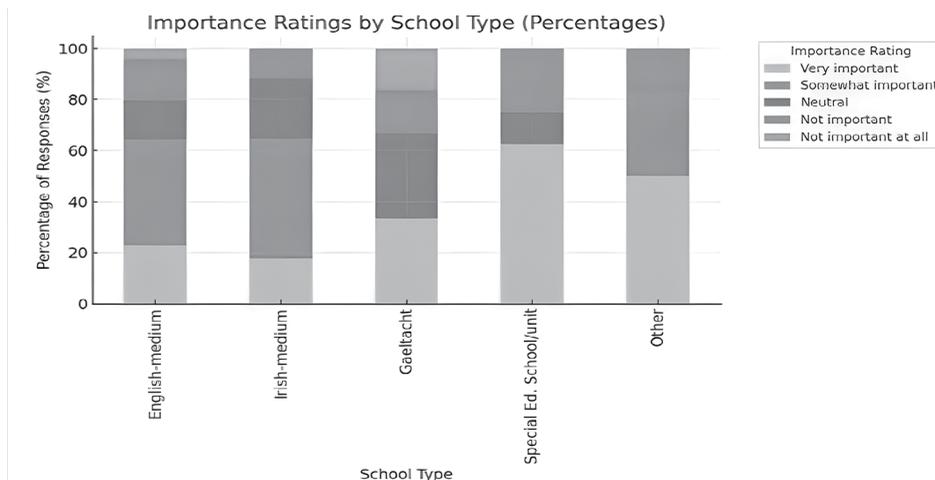
Subsequently, in Table 2 and Figure 2 we see that perceptions of MFL importance varied considerably across years of teaching experience. Among teachers with 11-20 years of experience (n=69; 35.4% of participants), 30.4% rated MFL as 'very important' and 34.8% as 'somewhat important', representing the highest combined endorsement across experience groups. Only 2.9% in this group selected 'not important at all' (n=2).

Similarly, early-career teachers (ECT) with 0-5 years of experience (n=32; 16.4%) expressed favourable views, with 31.3% selecting 'very important' and 34.4% 'somewhat

important'. However, 18.8% considered MFL either 'not important' or 'not important at all' (n=6), indicating that while support is high, scepticism still exists within this group.

Teachers in the 6-10 year cohort (n=36; 18.5%) were more ambivalent. Here, only 16.7% viewed MFL as 'very important', while 44.4% selected 'somewhat important'. A combined 25.0% considered MFL either 'not important' or 'not important at all' (n=9).

Interestingly, teachers with the longest experience (21+ years; n=58; 29.7%) showed mixed profiles. While 20.7% rated MFL as 'very important' and 43.1% 'somewhat important', 20.7% viewed it as either 'not important' or 'not important at all' (n=12). This represented the highest expression of strong opposition across the experience spectrum. These findings suggest that while mid-career teachers (6-10 years) appear more cautious, both newer and more experienced teachers show relatively stronger endorsement of MFL inclusion in the redeveloped PCF, albeit with some reservations among the longest-serving group.

Table 2: Perceived importance of MFL by years of teaching experience.

	Total Participants for Q1	Very important (25%)	Somewhat important (39%)	Neutral (16%)	Not important (16%)	Not important at all (4%)
Total Count (Answering)	195.0	49.0	75.0	31.0	31.0	8.0
0-5 years	32.0	10.0	11.0	5.0	4.0	2.0
6-10 years	36.0	6.0	16.0	5.0	8.0	1.0
11-20 years	69.0	21.0	24.0	11.0	11.0	2.0
21+ years	58.0	12.0	25.0	9.0	8.0	4.0

Figure 2: Importance ratings of MFL by years of teaching experience.
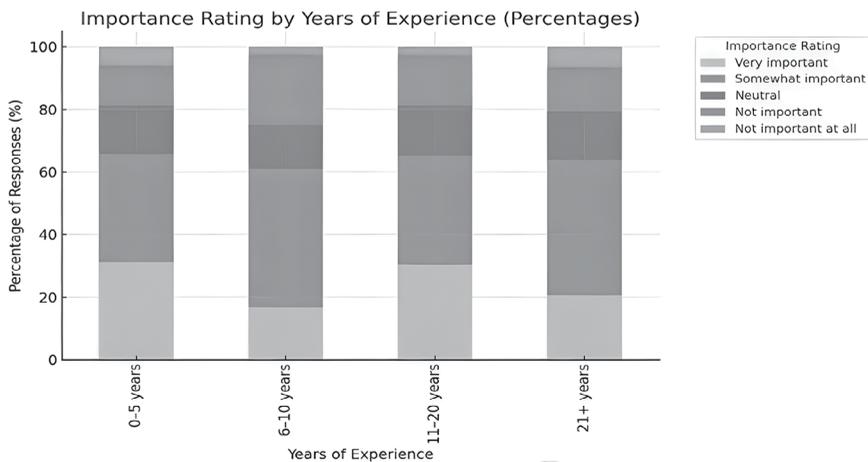
Complement or detract? School contexts

In addition to exploring the perceived importance of MFL, the survey examined whether teachers felt that introducing MFL 'complements or detracts' from other areas of the primary curriculum. This section presents findings from the same demographic variables as above (see Tables 1 and 2) to highlight variation in how MFL is positioned within broader curricular priorities. Teachers' beliefs about whether MFL complements or detracts from other subjects varied according to school context. Chi-squared tests indicated, however, that there may be a relationship between the type of school environment and teachers' opinions about whether the introduction of MFL detracts from other subjects (p=0.059), but more data is required.

In English-medium schools (n=151; 81.6% of the sample), responses were mixed: 13.9% believed MFL 'strongly complements' and 27.8% 'somewhat complements' other subjects. However, 27.2% felt it 'somewhat detracts', and 17.2% selected 'strongly detracts' – the highest negative perception across all groups. This distribution suggests a significant divide in how MFL is viewed in terms of curricular integration within mainstream settings.

In contrast, special education settings (n=7; 3.8%) displayed more favourable attitudes, with an even spread across categories: 28.6% selected 'strongly complements', 28.6% 'somewhat complements', and 28.6% felt MFL 'somewhat detracts'. The most supportive group overall was the 'other' category (n=6; 3.2%), where 66.7% believed MFL 'strongly complements' other subjects. While one participant was neutral and one felt it 'somewhat detracts', no participants reported strong opposition.

Teachers in Irish-medium schools (n=16; 8.6%) expressed a relatively balanced perspective: 12.5% selected 'strongly complements', 37.5% 'somewhat complements', 12.5% remained neutral, and 37.5% believed MFL detracted.

GGIM participants, though few in number (n=5; 2.7%), were notably critical: while 60% felt MFL 'somewhat complements', 40% believed it 'strongly detracts' from other learning areas. These findings suggest that ITE students and inclusive settings tend to frame MFL positively, while GGIM schools seem to reveal greater resistance.

Table 3: Complements or detracts – School context.

	No. of participants for Q2	Strongly complements (16%)	Somewhat complements (29%)	Neutral (13%)	Somewhat detracts (27%)	Strongly detracts (15%)
Total Count answering	185.0	29.0	53.0	25.0	50.0	28.0
English-medium	151.0	21.0	42.0	21.0	41.0	26.0
Irish-medium	16.0	2.0	6.0	2.0	6.0	0.0
Gaeltacht	5.0	0.0	3.0	0.0	0.0	2.0
Special Ed	7.0	2.0	2.0	1.0	2.0	0.0
Other	6.0	4.0	0.0	1.0	1.0	0.0

Figure 3: Complements or detracts – Perception by school context (percentages).
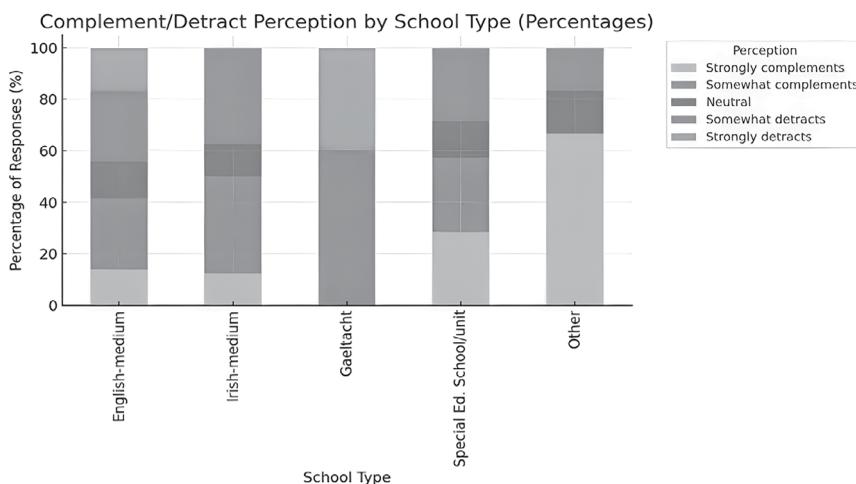
Complement or detract? Years of teaching experience

Teachers' views on whether MFL complements or detracts from other curricular areas differed notably by years of experience. Chi-squared analysis (p=.012) reveals that there is a statistically significant relationship between years of teaching experience and whether MFL is perceived to complement or detract from other subjects.

The most supportive group was teachers with 11-20 years of experience (n=66; 35.5% of participants), where 21.2% selected 'strongly complements' and 34.8% 'somewhat complements'. Only 37.8% indicated that MFL detracted, either somewhat or strongly.

ECTs (0-5 years; n=31; 16.7%) also leaned positive, with 25.8% believing MFL 'strongly complements' and 22.6% 'somewhat complements'. However, 41.9% reported that MFL detracted from other subjects.

In contrast, teachers with 6-10 years of experience (n=34; 18.3%) were the most critical overall: just 5.9% selected 'strongly complements', while 61.7% indicated that MFL 'somewhat' or 'strongly detracts'.

Finally, those with 21+ years of experience (n=55; 29.6%) presented a more ambivalent profile: 9.1% viewed MFL as 'strongly complementary', 29.1% chose 'somewhat complements', and a combined 34.6% felt MFL detracted. Notably, this group also had the highest proportion of neutral responses (27.3%; n=15).

These findings mirror the earlier patterns in perceived importance, suggesting that mid-career teachers (especially in the 6-10 year range) seem to express the most reservations about MFL, while support is more evident among teachers with either less or more classroom experience.

Table 4: Complements or detracts – Years of teaching experience.

	No. of participants for Q2	Strongly comple-ments (16%)	Somewhat complements (29%)	Neutral (13%)	Somewhat detracts (26%)	Strongly detracts (16%)
Total Count (answering)	186.0	29.0	54.0	25.0	49.0	29.0
0-5 years	31.0	8.0	7.0	3.0	8.0	5.0
6-10 years	34.0	2.0	8.0	3.0	15.0	6.0
11-20 years	66.0	14.0	23.0	4.0	16.0	9.0
21+ years	55.0	5.0	16.0	15.0	10.0	9.0

Figure 4: Complements or detracts – Perceptions by years of teaching experience.
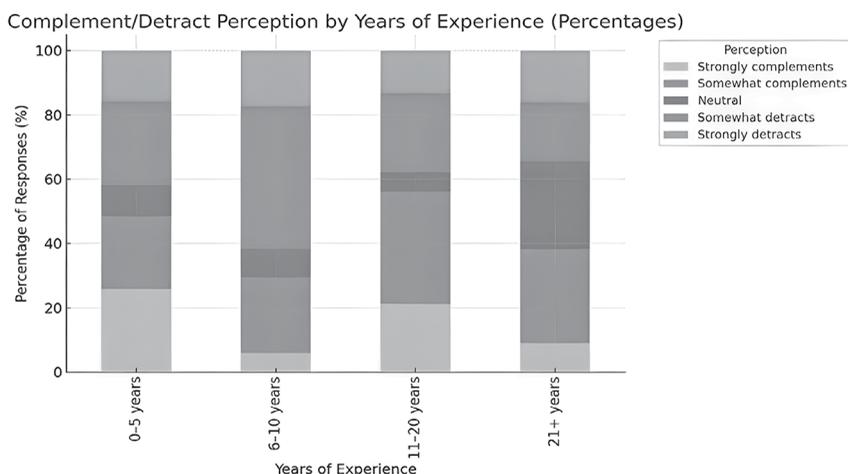
Thematic analysis: qualitative data – open-text responses

Broad support, but mixed views

The survey's findings revealed that the vast majority of primary teachers view MFL learning positively, particularly valuing its importance, cultural enrichment, and cognitive benefits for young learners (64%). This widespread support aligns with established literature emphasising how early language learning can foster cognitive flexibility, metalinguistic awareness, and intercultural understanding (Petrovic & Olmstead, 2001; Sepiol, 2025). As one participant articulated:

> We celebrate children's differences and engage in inclusivity. Nowadays we have so many different nationalities in our school community. With this in mind, I think that it is important to offer a MFL, in line with other countries. Research shows that learning a second language improves cognitive ability, boosts creativity, promotes cultural awareness and improves memory and problem-solving skills.

Another participant highlighted the relevance of MFL to childrens' lived experiences and how they can immerse themselves in authentic interactions:

Children travel abroad on holidays and it would be nice for them to have a MFL to use – they will see MFL as living languages and will be happy to have opportunities to try out their vocabulary in real life situations.

These responses reinforce the survey's qualitative findings and highlight the interplay between local school contexts and broader global citizenship goals. However, despite the generally positive outlook, a degree of ambivalence surfaced. While teachers supported the idea of MFL, many expressed uncertainty around practical considerations, such as time, training, and curriculum overload. As one teacher remarked:

I believe that the Irish primary school curriculum is already stretched to capacity. If foreign languages are added to the existing 12 subjects, it leads to taking valuable time from other areas.

This concern was echoed by another:

While in theory, teaching a modern foreign language is a lovely idea, our curriculum is simply far too overloaded as it is.

These reservations are not unique to MFL and reflect broader themes in curriculum literature, where teacher engagement is often contingent on perceived feasibility and workload demands (Fullan, 2014; Orafi & Borg, 2009). Gleeson (2022) further highlights these concerns by referencing "the complexity of curriculum change and the limitations of top-down reform" (p.726). A perspective clearly mirrored in teacher concerns and the primary education landscape today.

Moreover, the qualitative data revealed a recurring tension between innovation and educational fundamentals. While many teachers recognised the benefits of MFL, some expressed apprehension about its potential to divert attention from core areas such as literacy and numeracy:

Learning to read, write and do maths should be the key focus. The curriculum is already overloaded. More focus on literacy and numeracy needed.

Such insights speak to a broader concern regarding curricular prioritisation. As this comment succinctly put it:

Teachers are struggling to fit everything into the teaching day as is – there's no time for additional subjects.

These reflections highlight the importance of positioning MFL not as an 'add-on' but as a complementary component within a broader, integrated framework for language learning. As Batardière et al. (2023) contend, it is vital to promote "a holistic approach to language learning" (p.55), where MFL is embedded meaningfully rather than appended superficially. This vision was echoed in several teacher responses, including one who described the potential for cross-curricular integration:

> There can be a cross-curricular link with many subject areas; studying different countries in geography and learning key phrases from their language. Exposure of different language through music and culture throughout history.

This perspective aligns closely with the PLC which advocates for "supporting multidisciplinary, inter-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary approaches to language learning" (NCCA, 2015, p.4). It demonstrates how teacher practices and beliefs are not only pedagogically sound, but also in harmony with national curricular aims.

In sum, while primary teachers support the inclusion of MFL for its cognitive, cultural, and social value, practical concerns around curriculum overload and resource limitations remain significant. To better understand how these beliefs and concerns are shaped, the following section explores variation in teacher responses across different school contexts.

Variation by context

As this study is grounded in the exploration of teachers' beliefs, it is essential to recognise how these beliefs are shaped by specific contexts. While support for MFL was strong across the survey as a whole, differences in emphasis and concern emerged when responses were analysed by school type.

Teachers in English-medium and special education settings expressed broad support for MFL integration (see Table 2 and Table 6). However, more cautious perspectives were evident among participants from GGIM schools. In these immersion-based contexts, the addition of a third language was sometimes perceived as a potential threat to the promotion of Irish, which many teachers viewed as their core linguistic and cultural responsibility. One teacher commented:

> Children today often have a poor grasp of the English language, even as native speakers. Irish proves very difficult for most. I do not think a third language is necessary/advisable at this stage.

This concern is reflected in the literature. Cenoz (2009) notes that, in contexts where minority languages such as Irish are already under societal pressure, the introduction of further languages must be managed with care to avoid unintended consequences for language maintenance. Ó Duibhir (2019) similarly highlights the complexity of implementing additional language policies in immersion settings, where Irish language maintenance remains central to educational practice: "Similar findings are seen in other parts of the world where minority languages struggle to compete with major languages" (p.126)

Importantly, these concerns do not represent resistance to multilingualism, but rather a belief that the sequencing, support, and prioritisation of language learning must be handled sensitively and contextually. As Cenoz (2009) points out, "it is possible to make the maintenance and the acquisition of literacy skills in minority languages compatible with the acquisition of other languages", provided appropriate planning is in place (p.10).

Several teachers also framed their beliefs about MFL within the realities of workload and resource allocation. One noted:

This is adding more additional workload and not something teachers are adequately trained to do.

Another added:

At present I believe expertise and energy should be focused on English and Irish.

In DEIS contexts, similar concerns about feasibility and priority were expressed, particularly in relation to supporting vulnerable learners:

As I teach in a DEIS school I believe time spent on literacy, Irish and wellbeing to be of more importance. The curriculum is overloaded.

Together, these reflections reveal that teachers' beliefs are not purely philosophical, but are deeply influenced by the institutional, cultural, and logistical realities specific to their school settings. Where curriculum demands are already perceived as heavy, or where the role of Irish is especially valued, MFL can be seen as an additional strain rather than an enhancement.

Yet, not all teachers viewed MFL as competing with existing educational goals. A smaller number offered a more integrative vision, where MFL supports and enhances broader linguistic and curricular aims. As one teacher shared:

I think that learning languages helps support critical thinking and that learning a modern foreign language alongside Irish can help students to situate Irish as a living language.

Another teacher described opportunities for cross-curricular integration:

European languages have correlations with Irish such as masculine and feminine words... Teaching songs or dances ties in with PE and Music strands. SPHE – cultural awareness and tolerance of other people's and traditions.

These insights signal a more expansive view of language learning – one that embraces interdisciplinary connections and recognises the value of drawing links between languages. They align with approaches that view plurilingualism as additive and mutually reinforcing, rather than competitive. The PLC consolidates this by stating: "An explicit focus on

integration between languages enables children to make cross-lingual connections and develop an awareness of how language works" (2015, p.8) As Cenoz (2009) further explains, the challenge is not in the presence of multiple languages, but simply how the survival of minority languages can be acutely impacted by their "limited use in everyday life" (Cenoz, 2009, p.76).

Ultimately, these findings affirm that teachers' beliefs about MFL are closely intertwined with their professional contexts. While caution is understandable in immersion settings, the presence of MFL tuition is possible, but only when it is context-sensitive, well-supported, and aligned with broader language goals (NCCA, 2015; DES, 2017; Department of Education (DE), 2020).

Experience matters

A notable pattern in the findings was the variation in teacher beliefs by career stage. ECTs (0-5 years) and those with 21 or more years of experience tended to view MFL more positively, while mid-career teachers (6-10 years) expressed the most reservations. This difference may be partially explained by the distinct professional positioning of each group.

Scholars agree that ECTs "can supply current and up-to-date knowledge of their fields, and embody fresh perspectives on education" (Leeuwen et al., 2022, p.404; Ulvik and Langørgen, 2012; Kelchtermans, 2018). These teachers are often enthusiastic adopters of innovation, having been recently exposed to contemporary pedagogical frameworks during their ITE. At the same time, they typically exhibit 'absorptionist models of learning' and characteristics of 'transmissionist-oriented classroom actions' (Caleon et al., 2018, p.138), reflecting their early-stage pedagogical development.

With this in mind, tensions and conflicts of beliefs can arise as they can often be presented with 'resistance from colleagues or are not taken seriously' (Leeuwen et al., 2022, p.403; Correa et al., 2015; Kessels, 2018). Their enthusiasm and theoretical outlooks are nonetheless an important component when forming one's own initial teacher beliefs.

Mid-career teachers, often in the 6-10 year range, present as being more cautious in their beliefs about MFL. As eligibility for professional progression typically arises for this cohort, they assume roles such as mentoring or middle leadership. Although challenging to define, some of the more desirable characteristics of middle management within schools include "trust and respect of staff, strong content and pedagogical knowledge, and the ability to mediate senior leadership's vision for teachers" (O'Mahony, 2024, p.654). Characteristics typically accumulated after years of service leading to a more pragmatic or reserved stance toward new initiatives. By contrast, more experienced teachers – those with over 21 years in the profession – demonstrated greater openness to this curriculum reform. Informed by sustained professional development and reflective practice, encouragement and willingness to incorporate MFL into primary curriculum was welcomed. As Caleon (2018) notes, "teaching experience tends 'to enrich teachers' contextual knowledge, beliefs, and practices and increase their pedagogical sensitivity" (p.141).

Discussion and conclusion

This study has demonstrated that while primary teachers in Ireland broadly support the inclusion of MFL within the redeveloped PCF, their beliefs are shaped by a complex interplay of contextual, experiential, and systemic factors. School type, curriculum demands, geographical location, and resource availability all influence teachers' beliefs and perceptions of feasibility, while career stage affects levels of confidence, agency, and readiness to implement MFL instruction.

These insights highlight the need to move beyond a 'one-size-fits-all' model of curriculum reform and the rollout of MFL must be responsive to Ireland's diverse school landscapes (Kavanagh & Neville, 2024, p.6), with tailored approaches addressing the specific needs of different contexts. Whether they are DEIS schools requiring additional resourcing, rural schools facing staffing limitations, or GGIM navigating the integration of additional languages within immersion settings.

Crucially, teachers' beliefs – about language learning, their own competence, and curricular priorities – play a pivotal role in how reforms are interpreted and enacted. For example, ECTs may display enthusiasm, but seek clear guidance and support while more experienced colleagues may prefer incremental pathways through targeted CPD aligned with their existing practice. These findings speak directly to three broader research questions at the heart of MFL integration. First, what are the essential domains of MFL teacher knowledge and what is the knowledge gap? The evidence suggests that teacher knowledge must encompass not only subject expertise, but also pedagogical adaptability and the capacity to integrate MFL with Irish and English in diverse classroom ecologies. Second, how can the plurilingual competencies of Irish primary teachers be enhanced? Teachers consistently pointed to the importance of sustained CPD, collaborative networks, and cross-sectoral communities of practice linking primary and post-primary colleagues. Third, how do we measure satisfactory plurilingual competency amongst primary school teachers? While fixed benchmarks remain elusive, teacher self-perceptions indicate that competency should be understood as developmental and context-dependent, varying across career stages and school settings.

In addition to these recommendations, three limitations must first be acknowledged. While the survey aimed for broad representation, participation from GGIM and special schools was limited, which may restrict generalisability across all school types. Secondly, although the survey generated 257 teacher responses, this accounts for only a small proportion of the national primary teaching population The number of teachers allocated for the 2022/2023 school year was 42,739 in primary schools (oireachtas.ie, 2023, para. 3). The findings should therefore be viewed as indicative rather than representative; however, given the infancy of MFL as a curriculum addition, they still offer a valuable snapshot of how teachers are experiencing and interpreting this change at the present moment in 2025.

Thirdly, the questionnaire did not explore teachers' beliefs surrounding the inclusion of Irish Sign Language (ISL). ISL is now formally recognised within the redeveloped PCF, which "aims to develop understanding of the cultural and linguistic heritage of Sign Language and Deaf communities, and of the identity of those who use Sign Language" (NCCA, 2024, p.22). As inclusive language policies evolve, examining teacher perspectives

on ISL integration presents a timely and important avenue for future research. Doing so would deepen our understanding of how teachers conceptualise multilingualism, accessibility, and equity within language education.

Ultimately, these findings reaffirm that sustainable MFL integration must be teacher-informed, context-sensitive, and grounded in practice. As Ireland moves toward full-scale implementation, a flexible and inclusive approach – one that acknowledges teacher beliefs, honours school diversity, and supports professional growth – will be essential to ensuring that language learning is both meaningful and manageable for all.

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Appendix A

National Questionnaire

Complete the following sentence: 'Learning Modern Foreign Languages at primary school is...'

- ○ Very important
- ○ Somewhat important
- ○ Neutral
- ○ Not very important
- ○ Not important at all

English ▼

Do you believe introducing Modern Foreign Languages complements or detracts from other subjects?

- ○ Strongly complements
- ○ Somewhat complements
- ○ Neutral
- ○ Somewhat detracts
- ○ Strongly detracts

English ▼

With regards the teaching of Modern Foreign Languages to primary school students, **select** the options most relevant. **Group** them either in the 'Beneficial' or 'not beneficial' boxes below. **Rank** them by numbers i.e '1' being the most beneficial and so forth...

Items

Enhances cognitive development

Encourages cultural awareness

Prepares students for future opportunities

Improves overall language skills (i.e metalinguistic skills)

Encourages linguistic and cultural appreciation

Beneficial

Not beneficial

With regards the teaching of Modern Foreign Languages to primary school students, select the options most relevant. Group them either in the 'Concerned' or 'Not concerned' boxes below. Rank them by numbers i.e '1' being the most beneficial and so

Items

Lack of time in the curriculum

Limited teacher expertise

Lack of confidence

Insufficient resources/training

Overemphasis on other languages at the expense of Irish

Concerned

Not concerned

How do you think the introduction of Modern Foreign Languages through initiatives like 'Say Yes to Languages' influences the overall development of primary school students?

- ○ Very positively
- ○ Somewhat positively
- ○ Neutral
- ○ Somewhat negatively
- ○ Very negatively
- ○ I don't know what the 'Say Yes to Languages' initiative is

Do you speak any other languages, apart from English and Irish, that you could teach?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

How would you describe your level of confidence in teaching a Modern Foreign Language? 1 being 'not confident at all' and 100 being 'extremely confident'

0   10   20   30   40   50   60   70   80   90   100

Confidence

Have you received any formal training in MFL pedagogy

○ Yes

○ No

English ▾

Please state **one thing** that you believe would most inspire and motivate primary school teachers to confidently implement Modern Foreign Languages in their classrooms

Rank the following forms of Modern Foreign Language training in terms of professional value i.e '1' being the most valuable '5' being the least valuable

| In-person workshops |
| Online courses/modules |
| Blended learning (mix of online and in-person) |
| In-school coaching/mentorship |
| School-based professional learning communities (i.e collaboration with colleagues, peer observations, or mentoring in MFL teaching) |

Have you ever (or do you currently) teach a Modern Foreign Language?

○ Yes

○ No

Select the following resources and **group** them under the following headings i.e Important/Moderately Important/Not important

Items
Ready-made lesson plans
Printable activities
Interactive digital tools
Audio and visual resources
MFL Teacher Manual
Specific MFL Textbook for students
E-Books/materials
MFL Teaching Forums/Support groups
Professional collaborations with external stakeholders

| Important |
| Moderately important |
| Not important |

If you teach an Modern Foreign Language or would like to teach one, what type of professional development would help you the most? (please select the most relevant supports and group them as per title i.e Helpful/Unhelpful

Items
Language proficiency training
Appropriate accreditation in MFL pedagogy
MFL pedagogy workshops
Cross-cultural teacher exchanges and shadowing (i.e international staff mobility)
Conversational circles with MFL speakers/practitioners

| Helpful |
| Unhelpful |

If you could design your ideal CPD course for the teaching and learning of Modern Foreign Languages, what is **one thing** it must include?

Name **three things** you would include in a primary school teachers' handbook for Modern Foreign Language teaching.

Would you be interested in working with secondary school teachers to support the delivery of MFL in the primary school classroom?

○ Very interested

○ Somewhat interested

○ Neutral

○ Not very interested

○ Not interested at all

From gaps to growth: School leadership, professional learning, and the emerging role of communities of practice in autism special classes

≋ Linda Dennehy ≋

Abstract

This article explores how primary school principals in Ireland enable professional learning (PL) within autism special classes. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 15 school leaders from diverse settings, the study examines how principals support staff development, address gaps in teacher and special needs assistant (SNA) preparation, and foster collaborative practices. Four key themes emerged: inconsistent preparation among teachers; the centrality of leadership in enabling PL; inequities in SNA learning opportunities; and the emerging potential for communities of practice (CoPs). Findings reveal that while principals are deeply committed to inclusive education, their efforts are often constrained by systemic issues such as limited time, funding, and access to specialist training. The study highlights the relational and ethical dimensions of inclusive leadership and calls for more coherent professional development frameworks. Recommendations are offered for school leaders, initial teacher education providers, and policymakers to support sustainable, job-embedded learning in autism class contexts.

Keywords: **Autism, professional learning, principal, leadership, inclusion, communities of practice.**

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Introduction

In recent decades, the Irish education system has undergone a significant policy and practice transformation, particularly with the growing emphasis on inclusive education (Shevlin & Banks, 2021). Grounded in national and international commitments such as the *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004* (EPSEN), the UN *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (UNCRPD, 2006), and successive circulars and strategy documents from the Department of Education and Youth (DEY), Ireland has moved toward greater educational inclusion. A central element of this shift has been the development of autism-specific provision within mainstream school settings (Rice, Kenny, & Connolly, 2023), which continues to grow despite the lack of evidence to support the effectiveness of this model (Shevlin & Banks, 2021).

Autism classes are now a widely used model for supporting autistic pupils within Irish primary schools. These classes aim to provide a low-pupil, high-support environment for children who may benefit from more targeted intervention than that available in a mainstream classroom, while still facilitating inclusion and engagement in whole-school life (Sweeney & Fitzgerald, 2023). The expansion of this model is evident in the increasing number of classes being sanctioned each year by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), with many schools now hosting one or more autism classes as a regular part of their provision.

This growth is supported by *Circular 64/2024*, which sets out the purpose and context for additional measures to support forward planning for special education provision. The circular reminds schools of their legal obligation to co-operate with the NCSE and outlines provisions from the *Education (Provision in Respect of Children with Special Educational Needs) Act 2022*. It advises that "all medium to larger sized (Principal + at least 8 teachers) primary schools will be required to open at least one and possibly 2 to 3 special classes" (DE, 2024, p.4).

Recent developments also indicate a systemic shift in how teacher education addresses inclusion. In April 2025 at INTO Congress, the DEY announced that mandatory placements in special education settings would be introduced for all trainee teachers, a move described as "a landmark change to ensure teachers are better prepared for inclusive classrooms" (O'Brien, 2025). This marks an important step forward in aligning teacher preparation with the realities of inclusive practice, especially for those entering autism special class settings. However, it could be argued that separating autistic children from their peers is not fully inclusive. It is, therefore, important to note the tension in this area: the government's commitment to increased specialist provision appears to contradict both NCSE policy (2024) on the progressive realisation of an inclusive education system and Ireland's obligations under the UNCRPD*.

This growth has introduced new challenges, particularly in relation to staffing, teacher confidence, and the PL needs of both teachers and SNAs. Teachers often take up posts in autism classes with limited prior experience or training in autism education (Finlay, Kinsella, & Prendeville, 2023). SNAs, who play a vital daily role in supporting autistic children (DE, 2024) frequently report that they have minimal access to structured or accredited professional learning and would like to see more recognition and respect for their role (Carolan, 2023). These realities raise significant questions about how schools – and particularly school leaders – support the development of knowledge, skills, and inclusive practice among staff working in autism-specific provision.

School leadership is widely recognised as a critical factor in shaping the quality and effectiveness of inclusive practice (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010). Principals play a central role not only in setting a vision for inclusion but also in enabling the day-to-day conditions in which professional learning can occur. They influence staff deployment, access to training, resource allocation, and the development of collaborative cultures within schools. However, the ways in which principals navigate these responsibilities, particularly in relation to autism special classes, remain underexplored in the Irish context (Dennehy, 2023).

This article focuses on the perspectives and experiences of primary school principals as they lead professional learning for staff in autism special classes, which formed part of

a PhD thesis. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 15 principals from a diverse range of school settings, the study examines the challenges, strategies, and values that shape their leadership. Specifically, it investigates how professional learning is understood and supported in autism class contexts; the roles played by principals in fostering inclusive practice; and the extent to which collaborative models – such as communities of practice – are emerging or could be developed.

By centring the voice of the school leader, this study contributes to a growing body of research on inclusive leadership and situated professional learning. It highlights the relational, strategic, and systemic work that principals do to create inclusive schools and sheds light on the professional learning conditions needed to support effective autism education. The article is structured as follows: the next section reviews key literature on professional learning, inclusive leadership, and autism education; this is followed by an explanation of the study's methodology; the findings and discussion present four key themes from the data; the article concludes with recommendations for practice, policy, and future research.

Literature review

Autism special classes in Irish primary education

In Ireland, autism special classes represent a key element of the DE's continuum of provision for pupils with autism (DE, 2020). These classes, located within mainstream primary schools, provide structured learning environments for students who are unable to access the mainstream setting full-time, even with additional supports. Each autism class typically maintains a pupil-teacher ratio of 6:1 and is supported by two SNAs, facilitating individualised learning and support (DE, 2020).

Special classes aim to balance specialised support with inclusion by integrating pupils into mainstream settings as much as possible. The NCSE describes these settings as offering smaller class groups within local schools to meet more complex needs, with inclusion in mainstream activities encouraged "in line with their abilities" (NCSE, 2016, p.2). Admission usually follows a formal autism diagnosis and a recommendation from a professional, with the special educational needs organiser (SENO) helping families to secure appropriate placements.

Leadership is critical to the successful operation of these classes. The DE (2020) underscores the central role of principals and school management teams in ensuring the effectiveness of special class provision. These leaders must co-ordinate with various stakeholders, support inclusive planning, and ensure professional learning for staff.

Over the past decade, there has been a significant expansion in autism class provision. Since 2011, the number of special classes in Ireland has grown by 386%, with over 200 new classes opening in 2023 alone (DE, 2021; NCSE, 2023). However, the figure is much higher when viewed over a slightly different timeframe: in the ten years from 2013 to 2023, there has been over a 600% increase in classes (Travers, 2023). This growth reflects wider trends in national policy, such as increased investment in special education, which has seen a 46% rise in teaching posts and a 51% increase in SNA roles (NCSE, 2019).

However, critiques remain. Some scholars argue that autism classes, while positioned

as inclusive, may reinforce segregation if not carefully implemented. Banks and McCoy (2017) and Ware (2009) note that many students remain in special classes full-time, which undermines the goal of inclusion and contradicts both EPSEN and Ireland's commitments under the UNCRPD 2006 (Travers, 2023). These tensions highlight the need for continued evaluation of how autism classes function and how inclusive practices are truly realised within them.

Defining professional learning in an inclusive context

Professional learning (PL) refers to the ongoing, dynamic process through which educators develop their knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values in order to enhance teaching and improve student outcomes (King et al., 2022). Unlike the more traditional concept of continuing professional development (CPD), which is often associated with one-off workshops or training days, PL is increasingly understood as an embedded, sustained, and reflective process (O'Brien & Jones, 2014). It is integrated into the day-to-day work of teachers and school leaders and is driven by both individual inquiry and collective goals (Webster-Wright, 2009).

In inclusive education settings, PL takes on a particularly crucial role. Teachers and SNAs are expected to adapt and respond to diverse student profiles, including those of autistic pupils whose educational and social needs may differ significantly from neurotypical peers. As Stewart (2014) highlights, effective PL in inclusive schools goes beyond knowledge acquisition – it encompasses changes in mindset, practice, and the development of collaborative capacities. It involves engagement with theories of learning, equity, and disability, but also an understanding of real classroom complexities.

Authentic PL must therefore be situated, relevant, and empowering. It should support educators in responding to the evolving challenges they face in the classroom, and it should allow them to co-construct knowledge with colleagues. Research increasingly suggests that such learning is best achieved when educators are supported to reflect critically on their practice, experiment with new approaches, and learn through ongoing dialogue (Easton, 2008; Kennedy, 2014).

Autism-specific challenges in initial and continuing education

While inclusive education has become a policy priority, the implementation of autism-specific support within mainstream schools remains ad hoc with resourcing a source of contention (McNally et al., 2025). Initial teacher education (ITE) in Ireland has made strides in integrating inclusive education into general programme content or modules, yet the depth and consistency of autism-specific preparation continue to vary significantly between providers (Hall et al., 2021). Many newly qualified teachers (NQTs) report feeling underprepared for teaching in autism special classes, with some having received no targeted training at all (Barrett, 2023).

McConkey and Bhilrighi (2003) were among the first to document the limited exposure student teachers had to autistic learners during their preparation. More recent studies have reiterated that much of the confidence and competence developed by educators working with autistic students arises from on-the-job learning, often in the absence of structured

support (Finlay, Kinsella & Prendeville, 2019). This puts pressure on individual schools to 'fill the gaps,' particularly in cases where experienced teachers are reluctant to move into autism-specific roles due to their own perceived lack of readiness.

Furthermore, SNAs, who form a core part of autism class teams, are often excluded from system-level professional learning frameworks. While the official role of SNAs is to support the care needs of children (DE, 2014) rather than to provide teaching support, in practice they frequently play a direct role in learning. They often spend more time than teachers supporting autistic students, particularly in relation to communication, self-regulation, and personal care. Despite this, SNAs are rarely afforded access to accredited or job-embedded training (Roddy & O'Neill, 2019). As Zhao, Rose and Shevlin (2021) observe, this contributes to the undervaluation of SNAs' professional roles and undermines the coherence of educational support teams.

The role of the principal in leading inclusive learning

Leadership is consistently highlighted in international research as one of the most significant influences on inclusive school cultures and the effectiveness of professional learning (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2020). Principals shape school ethos, allocate resources, create opportunities for staff development, and model values through their daily actions (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010). When it comes to PL, principals function not only as organisational leaders but also as instructional leaders and facilitators of collaboration (Stevenson, Hedberg, O'Sullivan, & Howe, 2016).

Effective inclusive leadership requires principals to be responsive, reflective, and knowledgeable about both policy and pedagogy. O'Neill and Glasson (2018) emphasise the need for principals to create enabling conditions that support all learners, particularly those with additional needs. This includes prioritising staff learning, removing logistical barriers to training (e.g., finding substitute cover), and nurturing environments where reflective dialogue can thrive.

Distributed leadership, as conceptualised by Spillane (2005), further enhances these efforts. It recognises that leadership in schools is not confined to those in formal positions of authority. In practice, this might mean enabling teachers or SNAs with specific expertise to mentor colleagues, lead workshops, or facilitate peer observations. In schools with autism classes, where staff often learn from one another out of necessity, distributed leadership provides a framework for formalising and sustaining these practices.

Communities of practice and situated learning

The concept of communities of practice (COPs), first developed by Lave and Wenger (1991), offers a compelling lens through which to view PL in autism education. COPs consist of individuals who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion for a topic, and who deepen their knowledge through sustained interaction. In educational contexts, COPs enable teachers and SNAs to work collaboratively over time, to learn from one another, and to develop shared language, tools, and approaches to their work.

In the autism class context, COPs can be particularly powerful. These settings often require staff to engage in collective problem-solving around behavioural, sensory and

communication challenges. When supported by leadership, such collaboration can evolve from informal exchanges to more structured, reflective learning communities. Handley et al. (2006) argue that for COPs to be effective in schools, they must be purposefully cultivated, with attention given to identity, participation, and practice.

Situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) further strengthens the case for school-based COPs. It posits that learning is most effective when it is grounded in authentic contexts and activities. For staff in autism classes, this means the best professional learning often occurs not in abstract workshops, but in the everyday work of planning lessons, co-managing the classroom, and reflecting on what strategies are (or aren't) working. These everyday experiences provide fertile ground for growth – provided time and space are created for reflection and dialogue (Borko, 2004). However, COPs do not emerge automatically; their effectiveness depends heavily on how they are structured and enacted. As King, French & Halligan (2022) suggest, core design features of PL include content focus, active discussion of practice, and time for planning and reflection, and they emphasise the need for structured time and space for collaborative learning. Meanwhile, Kennedy (2014) cautions that collaborative inquiry approaches such as professional learning communities must be teacher- and student-driven, otherwise they risk becoming "contrived collaboration" that promotes externally imposed interests (p.691). In short, without purposeful design, leadership, and responsiveness to context, COPs risk remaining superficial or tokenistic rather than becoming truly transformative.

Barriers and enablers to collaborative professional learning

Despite the well-documented benefits of collaborative PL, many schools face substantial barriers in establishing and sustaining it. Time is a recurring constraint; teachers and SNAs frequently report that their days are already full, and that opportunities for collaboration and shared learning are minimal (Kennedy, 2014). Without dedicated release time, even the most motivated staff struggle to engage meaningfully with PL.

Another significant barrier is the lack of formal structures. While many schools engage in informal collaboration, the absence of scheduled team meetings, shared planning time, or protocols for peer learning can limit the depth of professional dialogue (Lafferty et al., 2024). Additionally, systems often prioritise externally delivered CPD over school-generated learning, sending a message that expert knowledge comes from 'outside' rather than being cultivated internally.

On the other hand, there are clear enablers of effective PL in autism education. These include leadership that explicitly values and promotes inclusion, availability of high-quality in-service training, and external supports from special education teams or autism specialists. Schools that allocate time for reflection, facilitate mentoring relationships, and encourage cross-staff collaboration are far more likely to develop sustainable models of learning (Lafferty et al., 2024).

Methodology

Research aim and rationale

The overall aim of this study, which formed part of a PhD programme, was to explore the lived experience of primary school principals leading autism classes. The overarching question for the study was: "What are the lived experiences of current primary principals leading autism classes in mainstream schools?"

This article is borne out of one of the major findings from the study *Professional Learning*. The rationale stems from the recognition that while inclusive education is an established policy goal in Ireland, its implementation – particularly in autism-specific contexts – relies heavily on the leadership capacity of school principals. PL is essential to support inclusive pedagogy, yet little is known about how school leaders shape the conditions for this learning or what challenges they face in doing so. There is some literature on how teacher professional learning communities (PLCs) can support inclusive pedagogy (for example, Brennan, King & Travers, 2021), but studies are limited, particularly in autism class settings. Brennan et al. (2019) found that engagement in PLCs, underpinned by critical dialogue and public sharing of work, positively impacted teacher beliefs, efficacy, and inclusive practice (pp.1545-1548). By focusing on the perspectives of principals, this study seeks to generate new insights into how leadership influences staff development and, by extension, student outcomes in autism class settings.

This study also responds to calls in the literature for more school-based, context-rich research on inclusion and professional development. While research on autism education and ITE has grown in recent years, there remains a significant gap in studies that centre the experiences of leaders at the coalface of policy enactment. This research, therefore, aimed to contribute to both practical understanding and theoretical development in the field of inclusive leadership and situated professional learning.

Research design and approach

Given the exploratory nature of the study and its focus on lived experiences and subjective meaning-making, a qualitative research design was adopted. The interpretive paradigm guided the study, underpinned by the assumption that educational leadership and professional learning are socially constructed and best understood through the lens of participants' own perspectives (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018).

A qualitative approach was also chosen for its flexibility and depth, allowing for the exploration of complex, nuanced issues within school settings. The study was not concerned with generalisability in the statistical sense, but rather with generating rich, detailed accounts that could illuminate practice and inform further research. Qualitative interviews were selected as the primary method of data collection, as they provide space for participants to reflect openly and construct meaning in conversation with the researcher.

Participant selection

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, a strategy that enables researchers to identify individuals with specific knowledge or experience relevant to the research questions. All participants were serving primary school principals in Ireland with direct responsibility for at least one autism special class in their school. The final sample included 15 principals, ensuring a balance of perspectives across school type, location and socio-economic status.

The group included leaders from single-sex and mixed-gender schools, as well as schools operating under Catholic, multi-denominational, and non-denominational patronage. It also included a mixture of Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) and non-DEIS schools, capturing a range of contexts. Principals were recruited through national professional networks and organisations, with invitations sent out via email and social media platforms used by education leaders. Those who expressed interest were provided with detailed information about the study and gave written informed consent.

Data collection procedures

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, a method chosen for its ability to balance structure and flexibility. An interview schedule was developed based on themes identified in the literature, such as ITE, professional learning experiences, leadership roles, collaboration, and barriers to inclusion. The schedule included open-ended questions and prompts designed to encourage reflection and allow participants to raise additional points of relevance.

Interviews were conducted remotely via *Microsoft Teams* due to public health restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' permission. Recordings were later transcribed verbatim and anonymised to protect confidentiality.

To support consistency across interviews, the researcher maintained a reflective field journal to note observations, emerging themes, and methodological reflections after each conversation. This helped ensure that the interview process remained both systematic and responsive to the context.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained University College Cork's Social Research Ethics Committee (SREC). Informed consent was sought and secured from all participants, and they were assured that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without consequence. Pseudonyms were used throughout the research process to protect participant identity, and identifiable information about schools was omitted or altered. Given the hierarchical nature of schools and the potential sensitivity of discussing leadership practice, particular care was taken to frame the interviews in a supportive and non-evaluative manner.

Data analysis

Transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis, a widely used method in qualitative research that allows for the identification, analysis, and reporting of patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The analysis followed a six-phase process: familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up.

Coding was carried out manually, with codes initially organised around the research questions. As analysis progressed, inductive themes began to emerge that reflected participants' lived experiences and interpretations. Data were managed using a coding framework developed in *Microsoft Excel*, which allowed the researcher to cross-reference themes and track emerging insights.

The final themes presented in this paper were chosen based on their recurrence across interviews, their alignment with the literature, and their capacity to offer meaningful insights into leadership and professional learning in autism education.

Findings and discussion

This section presents four interrelated themes that emerged from the qualitative interviews with 15 primary school principals. These themes illustrate both the opportunities and constraints in leading PL within autism special classes. The discussion integrates participant narratives with existing literature, emphasising how principals interpret their roles and responsibilities in fostering inclusive, collaborative learning cultures. Figure 1 illustrates the findings.

Figure 1: Findings.

1. Inconsistent preparation and confidence among teachers

A strong theme across the interviews was the inconsistency in teacher preparedness for working in autism special classes. While a few teachers pursued postgraduate qualifications or additional training in autism education, most were assigned to autism class roles without any autism-specific education. Principals described supporting teachers who lacked both confidence and foundational understanding of autism.

One principal noted that teachers were often overwhelmed when first placed in autism classes due to the absence of prior training. Others shared that teachers frequently relied on informal peer support or on-the-job learning to develop appropriate strategies. While this experiential learning was seen as useful in context, it was widely acknowledged as insufficient on its own. The result is a reactive model of professional learning, where teachers often 'learn on the job', piecing together strategies through personal initiative or informal peer support.

Several principals expressed frustration at the lack of formal pre-appointment training. BH compared the situation to a general practitioner doctor (GP) being asked to specialise without prior instruction, stating:

> It's like asking a GP to treat liver complaints without any training – and when they do finally get training, someone else steps in who also has no clue about livers. We need to flip this model.

This sentiment was echoed by MK, who admitted:

> I wish I had more teacher education with children with autism, just myself, because I felt I lacked confidence.

Several principals reflected that teacher confidence grew once they had opportunities to contextualise professional learning within their daily classroom experience. They emphasised that effective learning occurred when training aligned with real-time challenges and classroom dynamics.

> It's easier to take on teacher education if you're in the middle of something because you can relate it... you can connect.

Similarly, KR emphasised the benefits of contextualised professional learning:

> It actually makes total sense that it's only when you're in there, as you can connect the teacher education and apply it.

This underscores the need for a continuum of professional development that includes both pre-service preparation and in-service support. The findings align with calls from national and international literature for embedding autism-specific content into ITE (Ryan

& Mathews, 2022; Barry et al., 2022). Without such foundational training, principals are often left to facilitate learning through reactive, school-based strategies, which vary widely depending on resources and leadership capacity.

The literature consistently highlights the importance of job-embedded professional learning as essential for teacher growth. This is not simply about teachers 'learning as they go', but about opportunities that are deliberately structured, collaborative, and supported within the context of practice (King, French & Halligan, 2022; Kennedy, 2014). As Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (2011) argue, effective PL is sustained, ongoing, and embedded in teachers' daily work, enabling them to engage in continuous inquiry and improvement. In autism education specifically, research in Ireland shows that teachers in special classes often experience unmet professional development needs, struggling to access sufficient, high-quality, context-relevant supports (Finlay, Kinsella & Prendeville, 2023). The findings of this study suggest that such structured supports are not always in place in schools, or that existing supports lack the coherence required to impact practice meaningfully. This points to a gap in provision: rather than ad hoc or superficial models of information sharing – often labelled as 'training' – teachers in autism education require co-ordinated and sustained professional learning opportunities that are embedded in their daily work, supported by leadership, and oriented towards inclusive pedagogy.

2. The principal as enabler of professional learning

Principals across the study recognised their central role in enabling and supporting PL for staff in autism special classes. They described taking initiative in identifying training needs, sourcing opportunities, and advocating for time and resources to facilitate staff learning. Despite these efforts, systemic challenges – such as limited substitute cover and budgetary constraints – frequently inhibited their ability to implement comprehensive PL strategies. One principal highlighted the issue of staffing shortages, explaining:

> Until the pandemic... if we had staff off, it would be kind of hard to get cover... But I have seen more and more people have come to me willing to cover.

Another shared the difficulty in supporting autism class staff fairly without dedicated resources:

> Asking a SET teacher to cover a special class with no paperwork in front of her. I mean, like, that's not fair.

Despite these limitations, some principals leveraged their leadership to promote informal learning communities within their schools. They shared how encouraging reflective practice, fostering collaboration between teachers and SNAs, and facilitating peer mentoring were important, low-cost strategies that helped embed inclusive practices.

Others underscored the importance of modelling a culture of learning, showing commitment to inclusion not just through policies but through everyday decision-making.

By promoting distributed leadership – where experienced staff take on mentorship and co-ordination roles – principals cultivated shared ownership of professional development.

The findings suggest that while principals are committed to supporting PL in autism education, they often do so within a constrained environment. Their leadership is essential in enabling school-wide engagement with inclusive practice, but sustained, systemic supports are required to allow this work to flourish.

The results align with previous research emphasising the importance of principal leadership in shaping inclusive school cultures (O'Neill & Glasson, 2018) and highlight the need for targeted policy support to enhance principals' capacity to lead professional learning effectively.

3. Gaps and inequities in professional development for SNAs

Principals in the study acknowledged the indispensable role played by SNAs in autism special classes. Despite this, they expressed frustration at the systemic lack of structured, accredited professional learning available to SNAs. Most described SNA training as informal, with knowledge gained through experience or by shadowing colleagues. One principal noted:

> There's no formal education for SNAs, and that needs to change. They are working with the children all day, every day.

Another emphasised the inequity in opportunities:

> Our teachers have access to training days and postgraduate courses, but our SNAs are often left behind. It's not fair, and it impacts the whole team.

Some schools had taken steps to address this gap locally. A few principals described funding short courses or encouraging SNAs to pursue qualifications on their own time. However, they were clear that these efforts were inconsistent and heavily dependent on the school's capacity.

Principals voiced a strong desire for a nationally co-ordinated approach that would provide SNAs with funded, job-embedded, and accredited learning opportunities. This call aligns with broader research (Zhao, Rose, & Shevlin, 2021) highlighting the need for inclusive professional learning frameworks that support the whole educational team.

The findings suggest that until systemic structures are in place to ensure equitable access to PL, SNAs will remain professionally undervalued despite their centrality to autism education. Addressing this inequity is critical to supporting a fully inclusive and collaborative school culture. These accounts echo findings by Roddy and O'Neill (2019) and Zhao, Rose, and Shevlin (2021), who point to a systemic undervaluation of the SNA role. Without a formalised, funded framework for SNA PL that is integrated into the school day, inclusive practice will continue to be informal and reliant on individual initiative.

4. Collaboration, not yet community: emerging potential for COPs

Collaboration among staff in autism special classes was evident across all participating schools. Principals described strong informal working relationships between teachers and SNAs, especially in day-to-day problem-solving and shared support of pupils. However, few schools had structured opportunities for reflective professional dialogue, peer coaching, or team-based learning sessions. Arguably, schools cannot sustain such professional learning on their own and require external support to establish and maintain more formalised structures. Brennan and Gorman (2023), in their work on professional learning communities for inclusion, emphasise that while school-based collaboration is vital, external facilitation and system-level backing are essential to ensure that professional learning is transformative and sustainable. One principal described the informal nature of staff collaboration:

> It's mostly in passing – a quick chat here and there. We don't have a formal space where people sit down and say, 'what's working, what's not?'

Another noted the challenge of creating such spaces:

> Time is always the problem. I would love to see proper time allocated to that kind of collaboration.

This aligns with findings by Brennan and Gorman (2023), who highlight that well-designed professional learning communities, underpinned by critical dialogue and collaborative reflection, can significantly improve teachers' efficacy and inclusive practice across diverse educational contexts.

While collaboration is clearly valued, the findings suggest it often falls short of constituting a true COP as described by Wenger (1998) – a structured group engaged in sustained, reflective, and mutually enriching learning. Most current practices were reactive and dependent on the goodwill and initiative of staff rather than school-wide planning or leadership facilitation.

A small number of schools had made intentional efforts to cultivate COP-like structures. These included team teaching, use of shared journals, or regular debriefs. In these settings, principals reported a stronger sense of shared responsibility and more coherent professional learning experiences.

The findings indicate significant untapped potential for building COPs in autism special class settings. With targeted leadership support and protected time, informal collaboration could be formalised into robust professional learning structures that benefit the whole school community. However, this also highlights the need for external support. While the NCSE provides workshops and seminars, these are typically off-site and focus on short-term provision. Although advisory supports exist, there remains an absence of sustained, school-embedded support to help leaders cultivate and maintain collaborative professional learning for inclusion (NCSE, 2024).

Cross-cutting tensions and implications

A recurring thread across all themes was the dissonance between the vision of inclusion articulated in national education policy and the practical realities faced by school leaders. While principals in this study were deeply committed to inclusive values and to fostering professional learning within their autism special class settings, they often did so in the face of significant systemic constraints.

Time, funding, access to specialist training, and staffing cover emerged repeatedly as limiting factors that undermined principals' efforts to implement sustained professional learning. These constraints reflect broader tensions in the Irish education system, where the infrastructure needed to support inclusive practices has not fully kept pace with policy aspirations.

Principals often described grappling with educational dilemmas, making what Slee (2018) refers to as "educational settlements" due to limited resources. One principal captured this tension:

> You're trying to say, look, I promise you we're doing our best, and I promise we will. And that's why we're doing this... you're kind of trying to justify yourself, even though you know... doing the right thing, you know.

Equally striking was the strong moral dimension of school leadership articulated by participants. Many principals spoke not only about fulfilling a professional obligation but about leading with care and integrity. Their decisions were guided by ethical considerations as much as policy frameworks.

This sense of ethical responsibility reinforced the importance of leadership that prioritises not just compliance but compassion and sustainability. Inclusive education was seen as a collective endeavour that required investment in the professional growth and wellbeing of all staff members.

These findings suggest that policy commitments to inclusion must be matched by coherent support structures, professional development pathways, and strategic resourcing. Only then can the ambition of truly inclusive education move from rhetoric to reality within Irish primary schools.

Conclusion and recommendations

This article set out to examine how primary school principals in Ireland support PL within the context of autism special classes. Through qualitative interviews with 15 school leaders, the research revealed a nuanced picture of both the promise and the challenges of leading inclusive education at the school level.

A central finding of the study is that while there is widespread commitment among principals to support inclusion and staff development, their ability to do so effectively is constrained by systemic issues. These include gaps in ITE, limited access to high-quality, relevant professional development opportunities – particularly for SNAs – and a lack of structured time and resources for staff to engage in collaborative, reflective practice.

Principals play a multifaceted role in this context. They act as vision-setters, logistical

co-ordinators, advocates, and learning leaders (Cobb, 2014). Their efforts are often heroic in nature – covering classes themselves to enable staff to attend training, lobbying for resources, and informally mentoring team members. However, as the data make clear, these efforts are not sustainable without systemic change. Schools need structures that recognise and support the professional learning of all staff, not just those in formal teaching roles.

The findings also point to an emerging but underdeveloped culture of collaboration in schools. While many autism class teams engage in rich, informal exchanges of knowledge, these practices often lack the conditions needed to grow into true COPs. There is strong potential here: when time, leadership, and trust are present, schools can foster sustainable, job-embedded learning that enhances not only staff confidence and competence but also the quality of education for autistic pupils. However, research shows that schools cannot always achieve this alone. Studies highlight the importance of external facilitation in enabling transformative professional learning (Brennan & Gorman, 2023), and university-school partnerships have been shown to help teachers establish and lead PLCs for inclusion within their own contexts (Brennan, Pennycook & Barr, 2024). Yet, despite this evidence, there remains little indication that such sustained supports are widely available in autism class settings. At present, the NCSE mainly provides off-site workshops and seminars, with advisory supports available but limited in scope. This model falls short of providing the kind of embedded, long-term support that schools need to lead collaborative PL for inclusion effectively. The gap suggests an urgent need for co-ordinated, system-level frameworks to ensure schools are not left to develop collaborative PL in isolation.

This study contributes to the growing literature on inclusive leadership, situated learning, and autism education. It highlights the critical role of school leaders in interpreting and enacting policy, often filling in the gaps left by system-level frameworks. It also underscores the importance of recognising professional learning as relational, ongoing, and collective – especially in contexts where inclusion is complex and evolving.

In response to the study's findings, a set of targeted recommendations is offered. These are intended to guide practice and inform policy across multiple levels of the education system.

Recommendations

Practice-focused recommendations (for school leaders)

- Embed professional learning into the school culture.
- Establish structured time within the school calendar for collaborative planning, peer learning, and reflection – particularly for autism class teams.
- Promote distributed leadership.
- Empower teachers and SNAs with experience in autism education to lead elements of professional learning, mentor peers, and share resources.
- Create inclusive learning plans.
- Develop whole-school professional learning plans that include objectives for both teaching staff and SNAs, reflecting the school's inclusion strategy.

- Model reflective leadership.
- Lead by example by engaging in your own learning about autism, inclusive pedagogy, and leadership for diversity.

Policy-focused recommendations (for policymakers and the Department of Education)

- Establish a national framework for SNA professional learning.
- Design a tiered, accredited system of training that is accessible, job-embedded, and recognised in career progression.
- Fund whole-school inclusion development days.
- Allocate annual professional learning days specifically for schools with autism special classes to engage in collective learning and planning. These days could mirror the one-day closure schools are entitled to on opening their first special class and ensure new staff also benefit from rich onsite learning.
- Support communities of practice (COPs).

It is recommended that schools be supported to develop and sustain COPs among autism class teams through the provision of guidance, time, and facilitation resources. Responsibility for this should be clearly allocated: national support services such as Oide and the NCSE, working in partnership with education support centres and schools, should take a leading role. In particular, education support centres are well placed to act as a bridge between national agencies and local schools, ensuring that facilitation is sustained, context-sensitive, and responsive to schools' needs.

Research-focused recommendations (for initial teacher education providers)

- Collaborate with schools on transition support.

Work with schools to support NQTs as they move into specialist roles, for example through mentoring, bridge programmes, or follow-up PL. This could be strengthened by developing cross-school COPs, where early career teachers can engage in structured professional dialogue and collaborative learning across different school contexts. Research shows that CoPs, particularly when externally facilitated, can foster sustained collaboration and inclusive practice (Brennan & Gorman, 2023; Brennan, Pennycook & Barr, 2024). ITE providers should therefore collaborate with schools and national agencies (e.g., Oide, NCSE, education support centres) to design transition supports that are coherent, evidence-informed, and oriented towards inclusive pedagogy.

Conclusion

Inclusive education is not only a pedagogical challenge, it is a moral imperative. Ensuring that every child, including our autistic pupils, receives a high-quality, equitable education requires that schools function as professional learning communities. Principals are central to this mission, but they cannot and should not do it alone.

To build inclusive schools, we must invest not just in policies or buildings, but in people. The recent move by the DEY to introduce mandatory special education placements for all pre-service teachers (O'Brien, 2025) marks an important shift – signalling that inclusive education is becoming embedded from the earliest stages of teacher preparation. Such

reforms must be matched by strong, ongoing professional learning for all educators already in the system, particularly those in high-support roles.

We must move from reactive, fragmented models of learning to proactive, systemic frameworks that empower educators to grow together. This study has shown what is possible when school leaders are committed, creative, and courageous. With the right supports, these efforts can move from the margins to the mainstream – transforming not just autism education, but the culture of inclusion across the Irish education system.

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The role of resilience in sustaining teachers through educational change

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Abstract

Studies on teacher resilience are limited in the Irish context. Pursuing this mixed-methods research enabled the researcher to elicit the views of 137 primary school teachers and principals in terms of what sustains or hinders their resilience. Six participating schools in the Leinster region undertook to be involved in this case study research. A follow up national questionnaire ensured that a broader representation was included. Participants' lived experience in relation to the educational changes which took place between 2016-2021 were examined and considered. Emerging findings determined teacher resilience was impacted by systemic changes, however, not all changes impacted equally on participants. This paper offers insights on several key findings from this doctoral study, concentrating on career wide resiliency and offering solutions to challenges identified as impacting on teacher resilience.

Keywords: **Teacher resilience, lived experience, systemic change, case study, collaboration.**

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Introduction

During the 2020/21 school year, 137 primary school teachers and principals responded to the call for participants for a multi-site case study on teacher resilience in the face of systemic changes. Spanning across six case study schools in the Leinster region initially, and followed by a wide-reaching national questionnaire, this study centred on the lived experience of principals, mainstream class teachers and special education teachers (SETs) in relation to teacher resilience. Internationally, there is a range of literature on teacher resilience (e.g., Mansfield et al., 2012, 2016; Day & Gu, 2014; Peixoto et al., 2018), however, by contrast, teacher resilience remains under-researched in the Irish context. Teacher resilience concerns an individual's capacity to "maintain positive attributes in the face of a range of challenges, pressures and demands", which are associated with their work (Daniilidou & Platsidou, 2018, p.17).

For the purpose of this study, teacher resilience was envisaged as the capacity to continue to maintain and sustain a sense of commitment and agency in teaching throughout different career phases and in ever changing environments (Gu & Day, 2013). Substantive changes were systemically introduced in the period under scrutiny in this research from 2016-2021. The five teaching years prior to data collection saw the introduction of policy documentation, legislative development, strategies and guidelines. These included but

were not limited to: the introduction of the revised special education teaching allocation (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2017a) [1], hereby referred to as the revised SET model; the *Primary Language Curriculum* (PLC), (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2016, 2019); and the introduction of *Droichead*, the integrated induction programme for newly qualified teachers (NQTs) by the Teaching Council (TC) (2017). The pillars of systemic change considered for this study are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Pillars of systemic change 2016-2021.

Legislative	Curricular	Department of Education (DE) policy documents		TC policy directive
		DE directives	DE policy guidelines	
The Education (Admissions to Schools) Act 2018 (Government of Ireland)	*Primary Language Curriculum* (PLC), (NCCA, 2016, 2019)	*School Self-Evaluation Guidelines 2016-2020* (DES, 2016)	*Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020* (DES, 2015)	*Droichead* (TC, 2017)
		Special Education Teaching Allocation (DES, 2017a)	*Digital Strategy Action Plan* (DES, 2018a)	
		Child Protection and Safeguarding Inspections (DES, 2017b; DE 2020)	*Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* (DES, 2018b)	

The study sought to elicit the implications of these changes on teacher resilience, both mainstream class teachers and SETs and principals. The mixed-methods research explored what impacted individually and collectively, and sought to determine if the outcome was role- or context-specific and the extent of the link between the two. This led to the main research question (RQ): "What are teachers' perceptions of systemic change and their own resilience, with particular reference to role, context and career stage?" The subsidiary research questions were:

1. What supported or fostered resilience for teachers and principals?
2. What inhibited resilience for teachers and principals?
3. How does lived experience impact on resilience for teachers and principals?

In this paper, the focus is firstly on understanding and fostering teacher resilience during a time of constant educational change, and secondly, reporting on some key themes that emerged from the data set. The process of building, sustaining and renewing teacher resilience is very relevant given the recent changes in primary education since the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) report *Workload, Stress and Resilience of Primary Teachers: Report of a Survey of INTO members* (INTO, 2015). This publication examined

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1 Department of Education and Skills (DES) was the department's official name from 2010-2020.

the role of teacher resilience in the context of workload, stress and resilience of primary teachers and identified sources of stress and burnout over the previous five years. The respondents' position in schools led to some discrepancy in relation to the experience of stress and time for planning and professional learning opportunities were also raised. Almost three quarters of principals who participated in the 2015 study reported that their role had become more stressful in the previous five years.

The significant systemic changes in the Irish primary context from 2016-2021 justified a re-examination of teacher resilience, and identification of what builds and sustains resilience throughout different career phases. A subsequent report by the INTO, *Teacher Workload: INTO Research Report* (INTO, 2022), sought to build on the identified sources or workload and stress from the previous report and offer solutions, as well as factoring in new sources since the publication of the last report.

The INTO report (2022) had four phases. Phase one was workshop-based, with eight workshops held in 2019. Phase two was a questionnaire based on phase one with suggested solutions to elicit interest among members – 1,178 principals completed the principal questionnaire and 4,262 teachers responded to the teacher survey on workload. Phase three involved a focus group discussion with members and the preparation of recommendations. Phase four finalised the suggestions from the project.

The need for the present research stemmed from the researcher's vision of building resiliency as an integral part of career-wide teaching. Eliciting what teachers and principals thought could be enhanced about the current system established suggestions for future improvement when change initiatives are proposed and implemented. It should be noted that much of the literature currently available in the area of teacher resilience, focuses on initial teacher education (ITE) and early career resiliency in the induction phase. Limited studies exist in the Irish education domain. This study sought the views of case study participants in the questionnaire and expanded further through the semi-structured interviews with the same participants. This allowed for an in-depth analysis of the opinions of primary teachers (both mainstream class teachers and SETs) and principals across six school types. As the questionnaires in both (INTO, 2022) and the present study were circulated in 2021, this allows for comparison to be made between the two studies. Understanding how systemic changes impact on career-wide resiliency and what fosters or inhibits resilience for teachers and principals is necessary to sustain school teachers and leaders. This paper will provide an overview on the conceptual framework which is the foundation for this study and detail the methodology and some emerging findings.

Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework underpinning this study is a combination of two existing frameworks – the *Four Dimensional Framework of Teacher Resilience*, Mansfield et al., (2012) presented in Figure 1, with the Boon *Lived-in Resilience Framework* (2021, Figure 2) situated at the core.

The Mansfield et al. *Four Dimensional Framework of Teacher Resilience* (2012) encompasses the resilient teacher within four distinct categories or dimensions. These are: professional related, emotional, motivational, and social. The study surveyed 259

graduating and early career teachers in Western Australia. 200 respondents answered the question "How would you describe a resilient teacher?" These demonstrated 23 aspects of resilience which were organised into four broad dimensions referred to as the *Four Dimensional Framework*, seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The Four Dimensional Framework of Teacher Resilience (Mansfield et al., 2012).
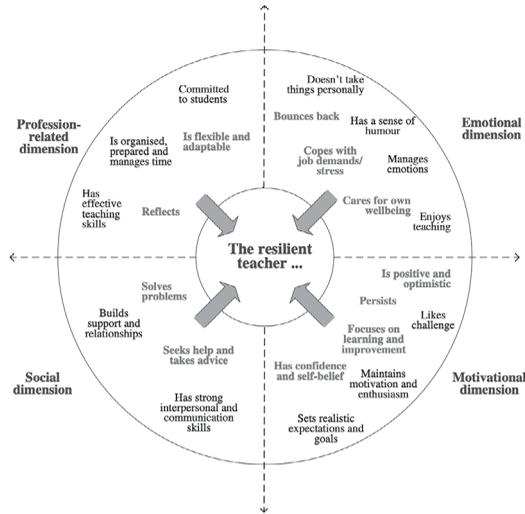
The literature indicates that research to date has relied on self-reported measures and presented on the perceived psychological resilience of teachers, Boon proposes a 'lived-in' teacher resilience framework. This conceives a holistic examination of resilience that recommends the contextual social factors and support that impact an individual are taken into consideration in terms of teacher resilience. The pathways and feedback loops from a range of factors contribute to the experience of lived-in resilience. A combination of the two frameworks establishes how experiences influence or hinder the capacity to be resilient through various career stages.

Figure 2: Lived-in Resilience Framework (Boon, 2021).
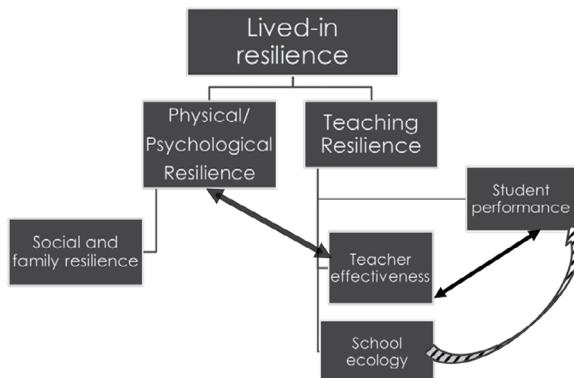
Many of the questions used in the questionnaire stemmed from work carried out previously in relation to teacher resilience, notably Mansfield et al. (2012), Day & Gu (2014), INTO (2015), and Ainsworth & Oldfield, (2019).

Methodology

This research was conducted as part of a doctoral study in Dublin City University (DCU). Ethical approval was granted by the DCU Research Ethics Committee and the study conformed with DCU regulations. The research approach was a mixed-methods case study across six primary schools in the Leinster region. The demographic included both the voices of administrative and teaching principals. In 2021, 55% of Irish primary schools had teaching principals (Department of Education (DE), 2021a). Schools were initially recruited via professional contacts and the researcher then used DE statistics on school enrolments to categorise schools into small, medium or large schools. The six case study schools represented varied school types in terms of size, socio-economic status (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) or non-DEIS), leadership (administrative and teaching principals), location (rural or urban) to represent each school context as equally as possible. Schools with a designated DEIS status are recognised as being in areas of socio-economic disadvantage and receive additional funding and resources to support children at risk of educational disadvantage to reach their potential. An initial target of five schools was set out and agreed by the researcher and supervisors, but as the project progressed, six seemed more suitable. This was important to support representation of various school types and allowed for cross comparison studies between school size and type. In total over 200 schools were emailed and follow-up phone calls were made to 180 schools in an attempt to recruit suitable schools. Every effort was made to include an Educate Together or Community National School using the multi-denominational school list from the DE website but none were available to partake at the time. The recruitment phase was not an easy feat for a full-time teacher. An overview of the schools involved (using pseudonyms) is provided in Table 2 and the interview participants are presented in Table 3 (again pseudonyms are used to maintain anonymity).

Table 2: Case study schools.

School	School ethos	Size	Teachers	Gender type	Socio-economic status	Admin principal	Location
Newtown School	Church of Ireland	165 pupils	8.5	Mixed	Non DEIS	No	Rural
St John's NS	Catholic	120 pupils	7	Mixed	Non DEIS	No	Rural
St Stephen's BNS	Catholic	158 pupils	20	Boys	DEIS 1	Yes	Urban
St Mary's NS	Catholic	1000 pupils	65	Mixed	Non DEIS	Yes	Urban
St Anne's GNS	Catholic	145 pupils	16	Girls	DEIS 1	Yes	Urban
Sacred Heart School	Catholic	441 pupils	26	Mixed	Non DEIS	Yes	Urban

Table 3: Interview participants (pseudonyms).

School	Principal	Mainstream Class Teacher	Special Education Teacher (SET)
Newtown School	Louise	Sinéad	Mary
St John's NS	Áine	Donal	Elaine
St Stephen's BNS	Rachel	Deirdre	Bláithín
St Mary's NS	Daniel	Niamh	Jacinta
St Anne's GNS	Síle	Amy	Clare
Sacred Heart School	Vincent	No teacher provided at interview phase.	No teacher provided at interview phase.

A collaborative mixed-methods design was implemented, to clarify the potentialities and limitations of both quantitative and qualitative research methods and facilitate a more in-depth descriptive and statistical study (Choy, 2014). A pilot study was conducted in the researcher's school prior to data collection in March 2021. This established the theoretical boundaries and ensured the data gathering protocols and tools were workable for the case studies. The multi-site case study approach facilitated an initial questionnaire distributed via *Google Forms*, which established teachers' attitudes and experiences followed by individual interviews held via *Zoom* in the final term of the 2020/21 school year. The questionnaire was divided into three sections which looked at the teacher profile of the respondent, their own interpretation of resilience, the impact of support in school and finally the future of teaching.

There were 137 questionnaire respondents, this comprised 16 principals, 61 mainstream class teachers and 60 SETs. Closed questions were analysed using *SPSS* statistical software (Version 28.0.1.1) and open questions were read and the ideas or information gathered was tallied or noted. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 participants across the three roles: six principals, five mainstream teachers and five SETs. Every case study school was asked where possible to provide three participants for the interview phase: principal, mainstream class teacher and SET. The sixth school became an outlier as only one staff member (the principal) took part at the interview phase. This was initially disappointing given the size of the school.

The thinking behind having a representative of each role from case study schools was to determine if teacher resilience was context- or role-specific, or the extent of the link between these. Using the Braun & Clarke reflexive approach to thematic analysis (2022), interview data was analysed by *NVivo* qualitative data analysis software. A reflexive journal detailed a summary of recruitment procedures followed and actions taken by the researcher in recruiting and contacting schools. This helped to reduce researcher bias by stating a factual account of the process. Subsequently a nationwide questionnaire was shared in June 2021 to reach a broader demographic of teachers and leaders nationwide.

Key emerging findings

Quantitative data indicated that teachers at every career phase participated in this research study. Systemic changes did impact teachers (mainstream class teachers and SETs) and principals, but not all systemic changes impacted equally (Fleming, 2024). The respondents were reflective of the primary teaching population in Ireland in 2021 (DE, 2021a), with 85% female, teaching 11-20 years and primarily working in Catholic, non-DEIS schools of between 151-300 pupils. The lowest response rate was from teachers and leaders with an excess of 31 years teaching, which is arguably reflective of primary teacher retirement trends witnessed and experienced by the researcher across schools, in addition to the *Teacher Retirement Statistics 2020* (DE, 2021b) which state "the most common age of retirement for primary teachers in 2020 was age 60 (16.9%, 108 retirees)" (p.4). Figure 3 depicts the number of respondents and their teaching experience.

*Figure 3: A profile of respondents and their teaching experience (n=137).*
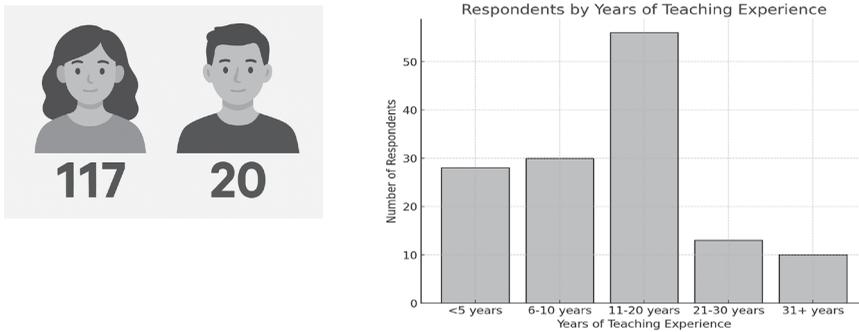
Through coding the interviews following Braun and Clarke's (2022) six step thematic analysis and using *NVivo* software, six main themes emerged from the findings: career-wide resiliency, challenges, leadership, collaboration, role-specific, and context-specific. This paper will examine career-wide resiliency and challenges in more detail.

Career-wide resiliency

The lived experience of participants is understood as their experience both from a professional basis and personal experience in terms of their own resilience. Findings in this area demonstrated the role of relationships in supporting resilience. Career-wide resiliency is viewed as an umbrella term which encompasses initial teaching experience; developing personal resilience; teacher professional learning (TPL); network and professional experience as participant determined subthemes. In Figure 4, the overarching theme of career-wide resiliency is shown alongside five subthemes generated from the interview data.

Figure 4: Career-wide resiliency and associated subthemes.
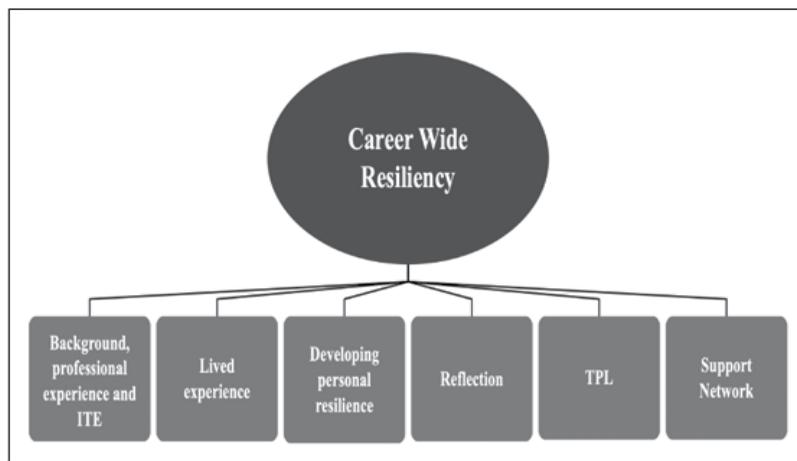
Several interview participants referenced changeover of staff as impacting on resilience with one teacher mentioning there would be on average 20 NQTs joining their staff each year. All principals interviewed (n=6) mentioned the impact this had on their school in the past five years. For interviewees, 68% raised this as an issue, with only one being a mainstream teacher. Four SETs commented on the changeover or change in leadership in their schools. It was pointed out that now, more than ever, new staff are not always NQTs but may be returning from teaching overseas for a number of years or new to an area for family reasons, amongst others. One of the NQTs interviewed was in her second year of teaching having changed careers. She acknowledged the teaching lifestyle, hours and holidays was a better fit for her family at her stage in life.

Every school culture is different. This was commented on by questionnaire and interview respondents alike. In some schools teachers felt, regardless of experience, if they were in a new role, or new to the school, they had mentors or were informed on policy and expectations, whereas in other schools newer staff members felt they didn't know their way around even in the final term. The researcher acknowledged that this may have been due to COVID-19 restrictions in place in schools, where schools were operating in pods (depending on school size) and opportunities for collaboration and socialising may have been impacted as a result. Preliminary findings from questionnaire and interview data suggests a link between school culture and teacher resilience. The impact of school culture on resilience warrants further exploration. The triad of teachers interviewed from one case study school all referenced the changeover of staff and the close relationships which had been formed as a result of this.

One teacher acknowledged that she had been on the receiving end of support as an NQT during the *Droichead* process – the sole induction route for Irish primary teachers from 2021 (TC, 2017). She now found herself on the professional support team in her school and mentored others. In terms of challenges, 67% of respondents did not find *Droichead* to be an issue, with many commenting on the positive impact it had in terms of enabling

a sharing of best practice among staff. For the experienced teachers in this study, several explained what makes a resilient teacher with personal anecdotes that demonstrated times when they had shown resilience and overcome challenges of a personal and professional nature. Other teachers were disillusioned with teaching and contemplating career changes. Any interviewees in this situation were unsure if it was as a result of the changes in their profession due to COVID-19 – lack of interaction, collaboration, staggered lunches, less opportunities for movement within schools, for example, or due to personal desires to pursue other challenges. Bláithín, an experienced SET in St Stephen's BNS, explained the importance of finding balance, personal balance, maintaining good academic standards, eating well, sleeping well, exercising and keeping friendships. As teachers you are "in it for the long haul, it's not just a short race".

Reflections on the isolated nature of teaching in 2020/21 were commented on, staff meetings were paused in some schools and opportunities for socialisation were limited to pods. Depending on school size and location it seemed different opportunities for promotion may be apparent and equally for a lack thereof, in smaller schools. Teachers who commented on this were generally teaching between 11-20 or 21-30 years. The notion of lifelong resilience among teachers across different career phases requires different levels of competency and commitment and teachers' capacity to be resilient can fluctuate (Day & Gu, 2014).

In relation to TPL, understood by many participants as a necessary factor in sustaining career-wide resiliency, the accessibility of webinars offered through the Education Support Centres Ireland (ESCI) network were viewed as a beneficial support in particular for rural participants and respondents with young families and other obligations. During the COVID-19 pandemic there was a move to online webinars which grew in popularity and have continued since, with face-to-face courses also being offered again through the ESCI network.

In summary, career-wide resiliency was associated with feeling valued within the system, having opportunities to build internal and external networks of support and through the sharing of professional knowledge among teachers.

Challenges

In the context of this study, the main challenges were recognised as leadership and management, stressful challenges, negative challenges and systemic changes. All interviewees (n=16) referenced challenges. Figure 5 depicts the challenges associated with teacher resilience in the face of systemic changes raised by interview participants.

Figure 5: Challenges and associated subthemes.
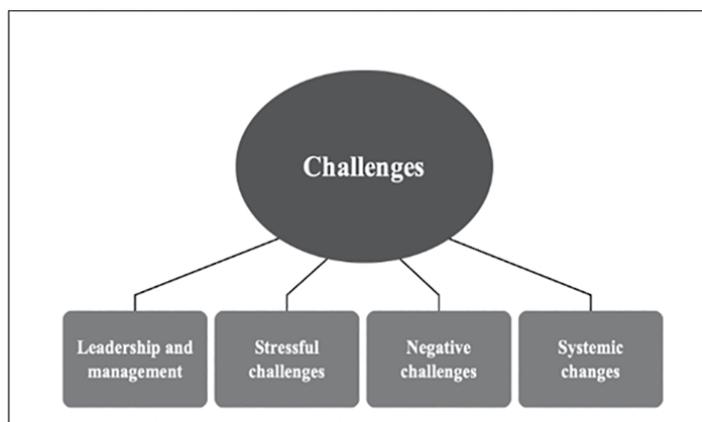
The impact of these challenges was seen to be dependent on the participant's role. According to principals, staffing schedules, classroom accommodations, appeals, uncertainty around projected numbers, class splits and appointments were some of the decision making challenges they face annually. One principal gave the example of interviews, and in particular interviews for posts of responsibility knowing all candidates would enrich the school, as a challenge they face in their leadership role. When asked how she managed the pressure of paperwork another principal (Áine, principal, St John's NS) explained:

> I prioritise. I decide what needs to be done, what can be left and what doesn't need my attention, what can be given to other people.

An experienced principal of a large school, Daniel, revealed the most demanding aspect of his work was managing his diary and "finding time to interact meaningfully with teachers, pupils and parents". He outlined the importance of a "shared leadership" and the main pressure points that come from conflict with staff:

> So let's take what's coming up shortly now class allocations and if you enter into a situation where somebody is unhappy with the allocation or the calendar for the coming year, that's where they feel personally and they're making demands that maybe you can't meet because you have to take so many people into account. They would certainly cause huge pressure, at other times of the year it can be pressure of events.

These findings indicate interview respondents are aware of what challenges their capacity to be resilient and what decisions they need to take to support their resilience development.

When asked about systemic challenges respondents were in an overwhelming agreement that *Droichead* did not challenge them and identified remote learning and the

PLC (NCCA, 2019), the introduction of a new curriculum for primary languages, as most challenging. Teachers recognised they needed support in specific areas notably special education needs (SEN) and the rollout of the PLC. Collaborative endeavours to implement the PLC were impacted by COVID-19 and teachers felt isolated by this. It was also apparent that participants felt professional learning (PL) in the area of wellbeing should be provided both in terms of teacher wellbeing and in supporting pupils to develop their own wellbeing. Data gathered in the study suggested that those with additional PL in special educational needs (SEN) felt confident to lead and support colleagues collaboratively with pupils with SEN. It was felt that a greater understanding of the role of SET was needed for mainstream counterparts and some principals and whole school PL would support this deficit.

The enormous pressure on principals was acknowledged by interview respondents who were sympathetic for the most part to these demands. Interviewees (68%) made reference to leadership challenges with an experienced SET stating that management in schools have so much to do that they are nearly at "breaking point". The accountability of the role and the juggling nature, the multiple hats worn by principals on a daily basis from the lived experience of principalship was emphasised through the data. Principals were united in the view that they spend a huge amount of time on non-educational work which takes them away from leading teaching and learning in their schools which has been highlighted as an issue elsewhere (Irish Primary Principal's Network, 2022). The question remains to be answered if the board of management or patron bodies should have some responsibility for these tasks going forward. Principals identified the responsibilities to return certain information at different times, the circulation of circulars to principals on a Friday evening, and the changes in application and paperwork requirements by the DE as stressful challenges.

Teachers identified paperwork, an increase in parental demands, and a change of staff or roles as factors which have made their job more challenging in the past five years. Over 80% of respondents thought teaching had become much more challenging or somewhat more challenging than five years ago. Clare, an experienced SET (St Anne's NS) who did not have a post of responsibility in her school explained:

> If things aren't going well at home you can have a tendency to carry that in and that I suppose can affect your own emotional state but sometimes just being too relied on, given too many roles, being asked to be part of different subject teams and also setting up sports day and then you might have pupils in your class who you're having maybe discipline issues with and you've parents to contact so I suppose just for me it would be an overload where maybe you feel overwhelmed then and that can affect your resilience.

Difficulties in striking a work-life balance were identified by 31% of interviewees. This was made increasingly more difficult during the period of remote teaching and learning when boundaries were limited. Staff relationships were identified as a challenge or potential challenge to resilience. An experienced principal explained the end of the school year is when staff fall outs occur and tension and pressure build and so his role becomes one of firefighting and trying to get everybody to the end of the year safely. In a smaller school

setting, the principal emphasised the need for collegial relationships to be positive. This notion is supported across cases and roles.

Challenges of increased SEN among pupils was raised as an obstacle by interview participants, as well as the time needed for profiling, assessing, planning, and collaborating with mainstream teachers. Limited opportunities for progression and promotion were identified by respondents in smaller schools. One teacher suggested a career development review and her opinion that there is the need for something like this in teaching, "parents get parent teacher meetings but teachers never get teacher-teacher meetings" (Niamh, mainstream class teacher, St Mary's NS). This view was also suggested by questionnaire respondents in open answer questions. The need to feel respected and regarded in the workplace was also raised.

While there were more negative and inhibiting factors identified by participants, this also shows the respondents' ability to articulate and discuss current challenges. The evolving nature of teaching, with increased use of technology and an 'always-on' culture was linked with increased communication opportunities and demands from parents. Educators had a degree of "*Zoom* fatigue" (Kushner, 2021) at the end of a challenging year. Time management and paperwork seemed to be causing the most stress among participants. Paperwork and the expectations around paperwork vary from school to school. More experienced teachers felt they became quicker at completing plans with experience. Principals explained that in the 2020/21 school year there was an increase in paperwork associated with COVID-19, contact tracing, and return to school forms. The processing and organising was another task to be managed by principals, among other increased paperwork demands.

The lack of time for collaboration and co-planning was raised by almost 98% of participants. This has been highlighted previously in Irish research (INTO, 2022; King, Brennan & Gorman, 2023) as well as internationally (Friend, 2008; Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020). Regardless of role, teachers and principals felt that more time to collaborate in school would positively impact their resilience. This reinforces calls from teachers previously to have dedicated time for planning at school level (INTO, 2015). School leaders also felt that time for collaboration with colleagues was a concern, staff absences and insufficient in-school management roles were found to create a barrier to effective leadership (INTO, 2022).

Interview participants were asked about pressure points throughout the year. It was clear the pressure points raised were associated by role and not context-specific. Unilaterally, principals found September, December and June the busiest months. This was typically true for those in role as SET also, whereas mainstream classroom teachers found June busiest.

Discussion

It was apparent that, regardless of when the study was completed, teachers are always subjected to considerable demands from a range of sources (Gibbs & Miller, 2014), and important to recognise COVID-19 as only one such source and contributor over the five-year period. The reality was that, although teachers and leaders acknowledged the

pandemic, they didn't focus on it entirely and their resilience was not significantly impacted as a result. While systemic changes did impact on the resilience of teachers and leaders, not all systemic changes impacted equally. There was no statistical difference between responses of participants in the national questionnaire regardless of role, experience or location, this was in contrast with previous research in terms of role (INTO, 2015).

A range of supporting and inhibiting factors were identified. The following factors supported teacher resilience: the introduction of the *Droichead* process; adapting to online teaching and learning; relationships and collegiality within the school setting; collaboration; positive relationships and technology; and leadership support. As previously mentioned, the introduction of *Droichead* was seen as an overwhelmingly supportive factor with only six respondents identifying this as an area requiring additional PL. *Droichead* was also recognised as leading to enhanced collaboration among all staff in schools, not just NQTs, which to some extent addressed the issue of a lack of time for collaboration, something which negatively impacted teacher resilience. Technological advances have reformed teaching in terms of utilising digital platforms seamlessly in schools to assign homework, as assessment portfolios, and as communication tools. Teachers who felt supported by their principals expressed their resilience and ability to thrive in the workplace improved as a result. Teachers were sympathetic to the extra demands placed on principals during the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated paperwork and administrative duties that fell to them as a result.

Factors inhibiting teacher resilience included: stressful challenges; relationships; school size; a lack of access to PL; isolation during COVID-19; barriers to collaboration; and maintaining a work-life balance. An increase in paperwork demands generally, and the associated paperwork necessitated by the plethora of systemic changes introduced and referenced in Table 1, alongside parents were identified as two stressful challenges regardless of role, career experience, or location. While many teachers felt they improved their approach to planning and paperwork with experience, there was an acknowledgement that the demands of paperwork were ever-increasing due to constant systemic changes introduced over a relatively short period of time. Similarly, previous research found that an 'excessive' amount of time is spent on non-teaching tasks "including paperwork, tracking, audits and form-filling; tasks that have little effect on the quality of teaching and learning and yet have a negative impact on the quality of teachers' working life" (INTO, 2022, p.18). Yet, ambiguity around planning prevails, with a lack of continuity around planning both at school and national level. While collaboration is acknowledged as fostering resilience, the lack of time and opportunities to collaborate effectively within schools was highlighted in this study as well as in previous studies (INTO, 2015, 2022). Interestingly, engagement in the *Droichead* process, which involved collaborative professional learning with peers, supported teacher resilience.

The right to disconnect was raised by case study respondents in this study with an increase in interactions from parents and other staff members as technology has evolved. While many respondents recognised the benefits to this in terms of communication with parents which would have been a barrier previously in certain areas and school types, a worrying trend is the impact of this accessibility on teacher resilience. Previous research in the Irish context suggests "communication outside of school hours had increased

significantly in recent times and it was impossible to disconnect from work in these circumstances" (INTO, 2022, p.59). Guidance around school policies for communication with parents is welcome, with many schools scheduling emails and responses and setting quiet hours on communication platforms.

Recommendations

Emerging findings from this study have implications for practice, policy and subsequent future research in this area. Given the huge and deserved focus on wellbeing promotion and resilience in schools for pupils and teachers, the findings will be of interest to all those working in primary school contexts. More experienced teachers raised the question of what supports are there in the system at present for teachers who may self-identify as mid-career. Lack of collaboration time could be addressed through a focus on evidence-based approaches that support teacher professional learning. Engagement in professional learning communities (PLCs) can support teachers to increase their confidence and skills to meet the needs of all learners (Brennan et al., 2024), these can be within schools or involve representatives from a number of different schools. Further exploration of teacher resilience in the face of evolving systemic changes since the completion of this data collection warrant investigation. The researcher recognises that the findings presented are reflective of participants views at the time of data collection and many additional changes have been introduced in the interim period. Indeed, future studies may examine teacher shortages as outlined by the INTO (2023, 2024), the introduction of the *Primary Maths Curriculum* (NCCA, 2023), the rollout of the school inclusion model, *Circular 54/2022 Exemptions from the Study of Irish* (DE, 2022) and *Circular 02/2024 Primary Special Education Teacher (SET) allocation model and the calculation of the SET allocation for each school from the 2024/25 school year* (DE, 2024), for example.

Conclusion

Teaching by its very nature has always required resilience, "to lead to one's best and to teach to one's best over time require resilience" (Day & Gu, 2014, p.105). While teacher resilience is linked to motivation, beliefs and satisfaction (INTO, 2022), this study has shown there to be no significant statistical difference across roles and schools in terms of how teachers view their resilience. Lessons can be learned from this study in relation to fostering resilience, utilising similar approaches adopted by *Droichead* to promote the sharing of knowledge and build collaborative opportunities within and between schools. Equally, calls for additional time for collaboration and co-planning should be responded to and recognised as being impactful on teacher resilience. Teachers and principals require sustained support in order to implement new initiatives and policy directives successfully. Providing whole staff PL on SEN will equip principals, teachers and SNAs with the confidence and understanding to work with all learners. Embedding change in schools requires time and opportunities for meaningful discussion and PL can support this.

This study built on previous research in the area of teacher resilience to examine from an Irish primary context how teachers and principals sustain teacher resilience through different career phases and educational changes. New learnings indicate to maintain

career-wide resiliency teachers need to reflect, engage in TPL and feel supported from management at every phase of their teaching journey. The challenges of paperwork and policy implementation and parental demands, leadership support and the vast range of systemic changes introduced hindered teacher resilience. The cumulative impact of the educational changes introduced during the 2016-2021 timeframe added increased pressure on teachers and leaders, however, respondents could articulate their needs and their resilience was not significantly impacted. Many of the insights gained contribute positively to driving for academic success in teaching and learning today and the relevance of a healthy social culture in schools is deemed essential to the maintenance of career-wide teacher resilience.

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Growing connections with nature: A pathway to wellbeing and sustainability in primary education. A qualitative study of a nature connectedness intervention in an Irish primary school

⚞ Éilish Mc Donagh ⚟

Abstract

In the context of the evolving Irish *Primary School Curriculum Framework* (2023), which places increased emphasis on wellbeing and environmental stewardship, this study investigates the impact of a dedicated nature connectedness time slot on the wellbeing of primary school pupils and its key role in supporting education for sustainable development (ESD). A qualitative intervention was designed involving 28 pupils aged 5-12 years in a rural school. Over four weeks, children engaged in structured nature connection sessions based on the PERMA model of wellbeing (Seligman, 2018) and the *Five Pathways to Nature Connectedness* (Richardson, 2019). Data was collected through participant observation, focus groups, and child-led activities. Thematic analysis identified five key themes: biophilia hypothesis (Wilson, 1984), child autonomy, initial hesitation, flourishing, and caring for nature, with a sub-theme of ecophobia (Sobel, 2004). Findings suggest that nature connectedness interventions can enhance pupil wellbeing, promote autonomy, foster pro-environmental behaviours which align closely with ESD goals and the new *Primary Curriculum Framework* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2023).

Keywords: **Nature connectedness, wellbeing, education for sustainable development (ESD), primary education, place-based learning.**

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"We are not on the Earth, we are of the Earth" John Moriarty.

Introduction

In recent years, education systems worldwide have recognised the urgent need to equip young people, not only with academic skills, but also with the capacity for wellbeing, environmental stewardship and critical engagement with global challenges (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2017). The Irish education system has responded to this need in its restructured *Primary School Curriculum Framework* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2023), which reimagines the primary school experience and prioritises areas such as wellbeing and

education for sustainable development (ESD) as central pillars of learning. Among the key innovations proposed is the new subject area social and environmental education (SEE), which emphasises direct, meaningful engagement with the environment through active, place-based learning.

Building on this need for holistic education, nature connectedness is emerging as a key component of both wellbeing and ESD, with significant implications for practice in schools. Within this evolving context, the potential of nature connectedness, defined as the emotional, cognitive, and experiential relationship between individuals and the natural world, has attracted significant interest. A growing body of research suggests that children who feel connected to nature are more likely to exhibit pro-environmental behaviours and experience higher levels of wellbeing (Richardson, 2019; Seligman, 2018). Despite this, structured opportunities for deep nature connectedness remain limited in many school settings, often confined to occasional outdoor activities rather than embedded into ongoing practice. Given the dual pressures of rising mental health concerns among young people (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), 2021) and escalating environmental crises, the role of schools in fostering resilience, connection, and environmental action has never been more critical.

Education for sustainable development (ESD)

ESD seeks to equip learners with the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes necessary to act responsibly and sustainably in their communities and the wider world (UNESCO, 2024; Tilbury, 2011). Central to this framework is the concept of nature connectedness, which underpins both environmental stewardship and the development of personal and collective wellbeing. By fostering emotional, cognitive, and experiential relationships with the natural world, schools can promote sustainable thinking, pro-environmental behaviour, and the holistic development of children (Chawla, 2020; Walsh & Corcoran, 2012).

At the international level, UNESCO's *Global Action Programme (2014-2024)* emphasises learning in, about and for sustainable environments, highlighting how direct experiences in nature cultivate agency, empathy and hope. Similarly, Irish policy frameworks, such as the NCCA's *Primary Curriculum Framework* (2023), align with these goals by integrating SEE and promoting place-based learning. Through structured interventions that foster child autonomy, hands-on engagement, and reflection, nature connectedness becomes a central pillar for advancing both wellbeing and sustainable behaviours.

Key ESD considerations in this study

- Learner agency and participation: children actively direct and co-design activities, reflecting UNESCO's principle of participatory learning.
- Place-based education: engagement with the local environment strengthens identity, community responsibility, and care for biodiversity.
- Emotional and cognitive development: nature connectedness supports resilience, empathy, and pro-environmental attitudes essential to ESD goals.

Online resources for teachers

- Irish School Sustainability Network: www.issn.ie
- Burrenbeo Trust: www.burrenbeo.com
- Forest School Ireland: www.forestschoolireland.ie

Wellbeing and the PERMA model

As the Irish primary curriculum continues to evolve, wellbeing is recognised as a vital area of learning, underpinning children's ability to engage meaningfully with education and life (NCCA, 2023). Martin Seligman's *PERMA* model of wellbeing provides a theoretical framework for understanding how experiences can promote flourishing. *PERMA* stands for:

- positive emotions,
- engagement,
- relationships,
- meaning, and
- accomplishment (Seligman, 2018).

Each element offers a pathway to enhanced wellbeing and has been successfully applied within educational settings, leading to improvements in mental health, engagement, and academic achievement (Shoshani & Slone, 2019). Connecting with nature offers opportunities across all five *PERMA* elements: experiencing joy in natural spaces, engaging deeply with activities, building relationships through shared outdoor experiences, finding meaning in environmental stewardship, and feeling a sense of accomplishment through challenges and exploration.

Barriers to nature connectedness: disconnection, ecophobia, and eco-anxiety

While nature connectedness offers considerable wellbeing benefits, several barriers hinder its widespread integration into education. Early environmental educators such as Rachel Carson (1962) and Richard Louv (2005) warned of a growing disconnection from nature, particularly among children in increasingly urban, technology-driven societies. Louv's term Nature Deficit Disorder captures the emotional, cognitive, and physical consequences of this disconnection. David Sobel (1996) introduced the concept of Ecophobia, suggesting that exposing children prematurely to overwhelming environmental crises can lead to fear, helplessness, and disengagement. Similarly, eco-anxiety, the chronic fear of environmental doom, has been recognised as a legitimate mental health concern among young people (Hickman, 2020). Both concepts highlight the importance of positive, developmentally appropriate nature experiences that foster love and connection before introducing complex environmental issues.

Forest School Theory and experiential learning

To counteract these barriers, *Forest School Theory* offers a solution, focusing on child-led, experiential learning in natural environments that fosters connection and resilience (Coates & Pimlott, 2019; IFSA, 2024). Core forest school principles, such as child autonomy, risk-

taking, emotional development, and respect for nature, align closely with both the *PERMA* model and the goals of ESD. Research shows that forest school experiences promote not only environmental awareness but also psychological wellbeing and academic achievement (Cree, Cutting, & Sherwin, 2018). In Ireland, the Irish Forest School Association (IFSA) actively advocates for outdoor learning as an essential part of a child's educational journey, a philosophy increasingly reflected in curriculum developments.

Place-based approaches in primary education

Similarly, place-based education supports the goals of forest school by connecting students with their immediate surroundings, further enhancing engagement and environmental stewardship. The new Irish *Primary Curriculum Framework* (2023) places strong emphasis on place-based learning, particularly through the proposed SEE area. Place-based education connects learning to students' local environments and communities, enhancing relevance, engagement, and care (Monroe et al., 2017; Burrenbeo Trust). Yi-Fu Tuan's concept of 'Topophilia' (1974), the emotional bond between people and place, suggests that nurturing a deep connection to local environments can foster lifelong stewardship. Within education, this approach not only supports ESD but also promotes student wellbeing by strengthening identity, belonging, and resilience.

Having established the importance of nature connectedness, wellbeing, and ESD, it is crucial to explore how these concepts can be integrated into educational practice. The following section outlines the methodology used to investigate the impact of nature connectedness on student wellbeing and pro-environmental behaviours within the context of primary education. This approach draws on the principles of experiential learning, place-based education, and the *PERMA* model, with a focus on designing interventions that foster a deeper connection to nature among students.

Methodology

This study explores whether a dedicated nature connectedness time slot could support the aims of both wellbeing and ESD within Irish primary schools. It investigates whether providing regular, structured opportunities for nature engagement can enhance children's sense of wellbeing, foster environmental stewardship, and bridge the theoretical aspirations of the new curriculum with practical, everyday school life.

The intervention involved 28 pupils aged 5-12 years from a rural Irish primary school. Over four consecutive weeks, children participated in nature connectedness sessions guided by a forest school leader, with the active participation of teachers and special needs assistants (SNAs). These sessions were designed around two evidence-based frameworks: the *PERMA* model of well-being (Seligman, 2018) and the *Five Pathways to Nature Connectedness* (Richardson, 2019). Using qualitative methods including participant observation, child-led photography, and focus group interviews, the research aimed to capture the children's authentic experiences and measure changes in both wellbeing indicators and attitudes towards environmental care.

Emerging from the data were strong indications that nature connectedness interventions can positively influence both pupil wellbeing and the development of

sustainability mindsets. Themes such as child autonomy, flourishing, and caring for nature, were particularly significant. In parallel, findings also highlighted initial hesitations among some children to fully engage with natural elements such as mud, rain, and wild spaces, an insight that aligns with contemporary concerns about eco-anxiety and ecophobia (Sobel, 1996; Hickman, 2020).

Study design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the impact of a structured nature connectedness intervention on the wellbeing and environmental engagement of primary school pupils. Using a combination of participant observation, child-led research activities, and focus group interviews, the study captured authentic, lived experiences of children as they engaged with nature over time. Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2015) framework, guided the data analysis. The design aimed to place the child's voice at the centre of the research, ensuring that children's perceptions, choices, and experiences shaped both the intervention and the findings.

Participants and setting

The study was conducted in a small rural primary school in Ireland with an enrolment, at the time, of 28 pupils aged between five and 12 years, supported by five staff members (teachers and SNAs). The school's natural outdoor environment included an open field, wild areas, trees, and a developing outdoor classroom space.

Participants were divided into three age-based groups (5-7 years, 8-9 years, and 10-12 years) to allow for developmental differentiation in the activities. All pupils and staff in the school were invited to participate, and fully informed parental consent and child assent was obtained.

The intervention

The intervention involved a four-week programme of weekly 40-minute sessions focused on enhancing nature connectedness. Each session was designed around two complementary frameworks:

- The *PERMA* model (positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment) for promoting wellbeing (Seligman, 2018).
- The *Five Pathways to Nature Connectedness* (contact, beauty, emotion, meaning, and compassion) (Richardson, 2019).

Sessions were experiential and child-led, incorporating forest school (FS) principles. A forest school leader (FSL) guided the activities while teachers and SNAs participated alongside pupils as "interested adults" (Carson, 1965), strengthening relationships and modelling positive engagement with nature. Over the four weeks, pupils embarked on adventures across their school grounds through playful, hands-on exploration. Blindfold games guided children to trees and secluded spots, awakening curiosity and trust, while campfires brought storytelling to life, inspiring wonder and imagination. Off the beaten path, they discovered evidence of nocturnal visitors, insects, birds, and even imagined

traces of fairies, fostering a sense of connection to the unseen world. Children engaged in creative, nature-based activities such as making art, mosaics, collages, and experimenting with sticks, leaves, feathers, stones, and other 'jewels' from the natural world. Using FS tools safely – mallets, peelers, hand drills, and simple woodworking implements – they built small boats, whittled sticks for fairy dens, and crafted shelters, combining problem-solving with collaboration and imagination. Planting seeds, tending wildflowers and observing the growth and habits of plants and animals helped pupils witness the cycles of life first hand. Mindful walking, sensory sit-spot exercises and moments of quiet reflection aimed to encouraged observation, empathy, and connection with nature.

These immersive, place-based experiences nurtured child autonomy, teamwork, joy, and curiosity, while fostering wellbeing and pro-environmental attitudes. Through hands-on discovery, imaginative play, and gentle engagement with the natural world, pupils developed a deep emotional, cognitive, and experiential bond with their environment, an essential cornerstone of ESD.

Data collection methods

Three primary methods of data collection were used:

1. Participant observation: Teachers, SNAs, and the researcher engaged in systematic observation during both structured sessions and free playtimes. Observers used a narrative approach, capturing moments of joy, engagement, pro-environmental behaviours, and changes in children's relationships with their surroundings.
2. Child-led research activities: Older children (8-12 years) used digital cameras to photograph places and moments of importance to them in the school grounds. Younger children (5-7 years) led 'walking tours' of favourite spots and used drawing and art to express their feelings. These activities provided insight into children's autonomous perceptions of nature and wellbeing.
3. Focus groups: Four focus groups were held: three with children (one for each age group) and one with staff. Semi-structured discussions explored children's feelings about nature, their experiences and learning during the intervention, and their understanding of wellbeing and environmental care.

All qualitative data were transcribed and thematically coded. The study adhered to ethical guidelines set by Atlantic Technological University (ATU) and received approval from both the school's board of management and the university's Research Ethics Committee.

Ethical standards were maintained throughout, ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and participants' right to withdraw at any time. Care was taken to minimise any power imbalance, especially given the researcher's role as school principal.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2015) six-phase process: familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Semantic coding was used, focusing on explicit, surface meanings in children's words, behaviours, and observations. Themes were considered in relation to the research aims:

1. Enhancing pupil wellbeing through nature connectedness.
2. Fostering attitudes aligned with ESD.

Trustworthiness was enhanced by involving multiple observers, gathering data through multiple methods (triangulation) and member checking with participants where appropriate.

This pie chart is an example of data display. It represents the following information: 26 out of 28 children favoured the natural surroundings as their favourite spot on the playground. The chart shows that 92.9% of the children preferred the natural areas, while the remaining 7.1% favoured other spots

Favourite playground spot for 28 pupils.

- Natural Surroundings.
- Other areas.
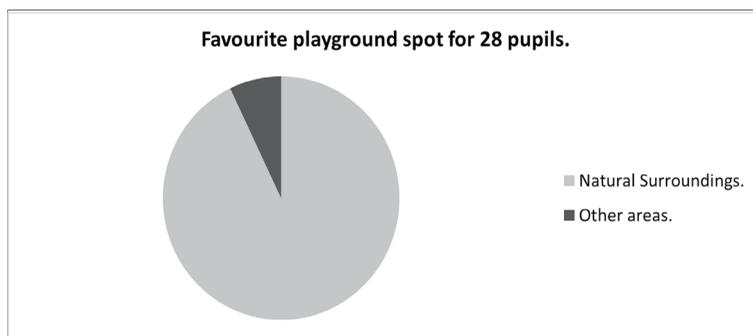
Findings and discussion

> "We have exiled ourselves from the Earth. We need to come home again"
> John Moriarty.

This study suggests that structured, regular nature connectedness experiences could form a vital strategy in meeting the intertwined goals of wellbeing and ESD envisioned in the Irish *Primary Curriculum*. The findings offer practical insights for educators, policymakers, and school leaders seeking to translate the ambitious frameworks of curriculum policy into meaningful, everyday practice in Irish classrooms and school yards . The thematic analysis of qualitative data from the nature connectedness intervention revealed five primary themes, along with a sub-theme addressing ecological concerns.

Biophilia Hypothesis

The results of this study strongly support the *Biophilia Hypothesis*, which suggests that humans possess an innate tendency to seek connections with nature (Wilson, 1984). Throughout the study, it became clear that children's engagement with nature was not only spontaneous but also deeply rooted in a natural affinity for the environment. From

the onset of the pre-intervention activities, children consistently gravitated toward less manicured, more natural outdoor settings. These environments, such as areas with mud, leaves, sticks, and puddles, were the spaces where they expressed the most joy and creativity. Teachers noted that children often showed emotional attachment to specific natural features, like hideouts, dens, and significant spots they used in their imaginative games. This observation echoes Wilson's assertion that our connection to nature is not learned, but innate, children naturally seek out and derive pleasure from natural elements, even when these environments are less structured or aesthetically pleasing.

See figures 1-3 highlighting favourite places on the school yard identified by children.

Figure 1: Child participant's favourite spot.

Figure 2: Favourite spot due to the view.

Figure 3: Teacher's photo of reserved play spot.

The children's interactions with nature in this study mirrored findings from previous research by scholars such as David Sobel and Shirley Gleeson, who emphasise that meaningful connections with nature are critical for fostering environmental stewardship. According to their work, such interactions help children build a sense of responsibility and affection for the environment, which can later translate into pro-environmental behaviours and a broader commitment to sustainable practices. Interestingly, the children's emotional and physical engagement with nature, such as climbing trees, jumping over streams, or sneaking into bushes, seemed to elicit not only a sense of joy but also a sense of flourishing. This active involvement in nature's less curated spaces appeared to support the idea that biophilia is not just a theoretical concept but a practical experience to which children can naturally respond.

The study's findings also point to a possible consequence for educational settings that prioritise aesthetic upkeep over the preservation of wilder areas. Many schools opt for well-maintained, manicured environments that may be visually appealing but lack the kind of untamed natural spaces children instinctively connect with. While these well-kept environments might appear ideal for learning, they may inadvertently limit children's opportunities to engage with the more chaotic, unpredictable aspects of nature that foster curiosity, creativity, and deeper emotional connections.

This raises an important question: could the absence of wild natural spaces in educational

settings contribute to the erosion of children's biophilic tendencies? In schools where such spaces are absent, children may have fewer opportunities to connect with nature in a way that nurtures both emotional wellbeing and environmental stewardship. As the study suggests, this lack of engagement may hinder the development of the very attitudes needed for effective ESD. If educational environments fail to embrace the biophilic impulses of children, we might be unintentionally undermining the goal of fostering sustainable attitudes and behaviours. See figures of areas children gravitated to.

The findings of this study indicate that creating educational settings that allow children to connect with nature in its wilder forms may be essential not only for wellbeing but also for advancing the aims of ESD for the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.* By integrating more natural spaces that children are naturally drawn to, schools can align with biophilic principles, potentially offering a more authentic and effective approach to environmental education.

Additionally, preserving these spaces could contribute to biodiversity, fostering an environment where children's natural curiosity about the world can grow. In this sense, the study suggests that educators and policymakers should reconsider the design of school environments and the kinds of experiences offered to children. A place-based approach, grounded in children's intrinsic connection to nature, may provide a more meaningful and sustainable way to engage them in environmental care and awareness, rather than introducing complex global issues prematurely.

Child autonomy

A key theme that emerged from this study was the enhancement of child autonomy, which played a crucial role in shaping the children's engagement with the nature-based intervention. The study's design placed a strong emphasis on choice and agency, allowing children to direct their own learning experiences. This autonomy was often linked to the *Biophilia Hypothesis,* with children consistently choosing wilder natural areas for activities, despite teachers viewing these areas as 'risky' or 'messy'. Interestingly, the children's preference for these areas, such as trees over more structured play features like buddy benches and purpose-built climbing walls, highlighted the importance of considering children's preferences when designing educational spaces. This aligns with the pedagogical stance that decisions should be made 'with them, not for them', a concept reinforced by the teachers' realisation that a child's actual preference might be a familiar tree, not a neatly designed bench (Sobel, 2008).

By giving children the opportunity to choose settings and lead activities, the intervention fostered a deeper sense of autonomy, which in turn encouraged engagement, curiosity and joy. Teachers observed that children developed personal relationships with their environment when allowed to explore freely. One example of this was when children chose to experiment with boats in a puddle rather than a more structured tuft tray activity. The freedom to select such experiences fostered a genuine interest in nature and a stronger connection to the environment. Furthermore, children were encouraged to offer input before each session, and their feedback was taken into account when making adjustments to activities. This participatory approach was seen as empowering, with children feeling

pride in their contributions, which led to a sense of fulfilment and accomplishment.

The autonomy children experienced in this study is consistent with the *Self-Determination Theory* (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which posits that when individuals feel a sense of autonomy, they are more likely to engage deeply with the activity and experience greater intrinsic motivation. This was clearly evident in the children's increased engagement with nature-based learning and the positive emotional responses they exhibited. Teachers reported that children felt a sense of empowerment through their choices, and this was associated with enhanced wellbeing, which corresponds with the *PERMA* model, particularly 'engagement' and 'accomplishment' (Seligman, 2018). This study strengthens the value of seeing educational experiences through the eyes of children, particularly in relation to ESD.

Allowing children to have a real voice in their learning experiences, such as through decisions about school yard design or involvement in community projects, can greatly enhance their connection to the environment. This approach echoes the principles of place-based and child-led education, which underpin the ethos of the new SEE curriculum. It also increases the likelihood of fostering a sense of responsibility and care for one's local environment, as evidenced by the children's bond with their school grounds in this study. When children are encouraged to explore autonomously, they develop a stronger connection to the natural world, which not only enhances their environmental awareness but also contributes to their overall wellbeing. Teachers noted that children's joy and fulfilment were heightened by the opportunity to make choices that reflected their interests. This approach, which promotes child autonomy, ultimately empowers children, encouraging them to take ownership of their learning and, by extension, their role in promoting environmental sustainability. This connection between child autonomy, wellbeing, and environmental engagement suggests that fostering such autonomy can enhance the effectiveness of ESD initiatives, making them more meaningful and impactful for the children involved. Please see figures 4-5 to demonstrate children using autonomy to reconstruct activities from the intervention during free play.

Figure 4: Campfire during intervention.

Figure 5: Children re-enacting the campfire during free play.

Initial hesitation

An initial reluctance to engage with certain natural elements, such as mud and untamed areas, was observed among some children at the outset of the intervention. This hesitancy reflects the concept of ecophobia, described by Sobel (1996) as a discomfort or fear of wild environments. However, as the weeks progressed, these apprehensions noticeably lessened, indicating that consistent, positive exposure to natural settings can help to overcome such fears and foster a greater ease and enjoyment in the outdoors. Compounding this initial reluctance were the lasting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly altered children's perceptions of hygiene and their relationship with the natural world. Educators noted that some children expressed concerns about getting dirty or associated contact with soil and mud with becoming ill. This heightened sensitivity appeared to stem from the strong emphasis on cleanliness and frequent handwashing protocols implemented in schools and preschools during the pandemic.

The FSL involved in the intervention remarked on the clear disconnection from nature she observed among children post-COVID, attributing it to prolonged periods spent indoors and the intense focus on hygiene practices. Teachers further reported that many younger children continued to display excessive handwashing behaviours, often linking dirty hands directly to illness. In this study, several children verbalised concerns about becoming sick if their hands were not perfectly clean, illustrating how early pandemic messaging around hygiene may have inadvertently contributed to lingering anxiety around natural elements. This finding highlights the critical need for interventions such as FS programmes in the post-COVID context. Structured, supportive engagement with the outdoors can help rebuild children's confidence and connection with the natural world, alleviating unnecessary fears while promoting emotional resilience, physical health, and positive wellbeing. Encouraging safe outdoor exploration helps foster a more balanced perspective on hygiene, where natural play is embraced as an essential and beneficial part of healthy development.

Flourishing through nature connectedness

Throughout the intervention, numerous children displayed signs of flourishing, a central concept in Seligman's *PERMA* model of wellbeing. This model encompasses five elements: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment, which collectively contribute to an individual's overall wellbeing. Observations revealed that children often entered a state of 'flow' during nature-based activities, characterised by deep immersion and enjoyment. Teachers noted that some children, who typically expressed hunger, were reluctant to leave sessions even when it was time for lunch. This level of engagement aligns with the 'engagement' component of the *PERMA* model, indicating a deep connection with the activities at hand. Moreover, the natural setting fostered positive social interactions. Teachers reported a decrease in minor disputes and 'tell tales,' suggesting that children were more focused on collaborative play and shared experiences. Such interactions contribute to the 'positive relationships' aspect of the *PERMA* model, emphasising the role of social connections in wellbeing.

The activities also provided children with a sense of purpose and achievement.

Engaging in tasks like building shelters or exploring natural habitats offered opportunities for accomplishment and meaning, fulfilling the 'meaning' and 'accomplishment' components of the model. These observations are supported by research indicating that nature connectedness enhances children's psychological, social, and physical wellbeing. In summary, the intervention not only facilitated children's connection with nature but also promoted holistic wellbeing, as evidenced by increased engagement, improved social interactions, and a sense of accomplishment. These findings underscore the potential of nature-based activities in fostering flourishing among children. Please see figures 6-8 depicting children immersed in activities without previous concerns for handwashing;

Figure 6, 7: Children using their hands to experimenting with mud/clay.

Figure 8: Children gather in anticipation to use hand drill.

Caring for nature

A central theme that emerged from this study was caring for nature, expressed both through children's behaviour and the reflections of educators. From the outset of the intervention, children demonstrated pride in their environmental efforts, enthusiastically showcasing planting projects around their school. This sense of ownership deepened over time. For example, when younger pupils placed their wildflower seed balls in raised beds rather than

scattering them, they did so to 'mind and monitor' their growth, guarding them with sticks in a symbolic gesture of protection. Teachers also reported a growing awareness of the natural world among pupils. Children increasingly noticed birds, insects, and flowers, and demonstrated empathy through gentle handling of insects and thoughtful actions, such as offering leaves for shelter or speaking kindly to small creatures. These seemingly minor acts reflect a foundational shift; the nurturing of emotional connections with nature. This aligns closely with Sobel's (1996) assertion that environmental empathy is a necessary precursor to environmental action.

Rather than viewing ESD solely as a transfer of knowledge, this research supports a model of experience-based learning, where direct engagement with the natural world fosters emotional investment. As one teacher observed, the older pupils commented positively on the younger pupils' caring behaviours, a ripple effect that signals attitudinal change across age groups.

While the actions themselves may appear modest, they offer a scaffold for long-term environmental stewardship. By providing structured, supportive opportunities for children to interact with nature in meaningful ways, educators lay the groundwork for the kind of behavioural and value shifts that underpin sustainable futures. This finding underscores the importance of moving beyond theoretical approaches to ESD, and instead creating spaces where pupils can actively care, connect, and protect the environment they inhabit.

See figures 9-12 depicting children actively caring for nature in this study.

Figure 9: Children making a home for a worm they found on tarmac.

Figure 10: Children placing sticks for protection.

Figure 11: Child caring for a baby caterpillar.

Figure 12: Child pointing out flowers sown.

Sub-theme: ecophobia

A striking theme to emerge from this research was 'ecophobia', a term coined by Sobel (2004) to describe the fearful or paralysing feelings young people may experience when confronted with environmental issues. Prior to the intervention, when environmental topics were raised in the classroom, teachers described a sombre atmosphere. Some pupils expressed real anxiety, including fears and nightmares about the future, and a sense of helplessness prevailed. There was little belief that environmental challenges could be meaningfully addressed, leading the teacher to change the topic for fear of overwhelming the class.

However, a shift occurred during the intervention, particularly during outdoor sessions facilitated by the FSL. When similar environmental themes were discussed outside the confines of the classroom, in a space aligned with nature and led by an optimistic, supportive adult, children responded with renewed curiosity and even hope. Their engagement with topics such as pollination and planting took on a more positive tone, and children no longer expressed the same despair as they had previously.

This change suggests that place-based, experiential learning may play a critical role in reducing ecological anxiety. The FSL's hopeful framing of environmental issues, particularly around Earth Day activities, appears to have empowered children to think more creatively and constructively. This aligns with Charles Snyder's *Hope Theory*, which frames hope not as passive optimism, but as the belief in one's ability to make meaningful change, a key motivator in fostering environmental agency.

Importantly, this study points to the dangers of introducing children to complex ecological crises without appropriate emotional scaffolding. While the prevalence of ecophobic or eco-anxious responses may initially seem surprising in young pupils, it is increasingly understood as a response to widespread climate discourse in media and education. For sensitive or highly aware children, these topics can feel like a heavy burden.

The findings suggest that how we teach these issues is just as important as what we teach. The intervention's success in easing ecological anxiety reinforces the value of the place-based, child-centered approaches outlined in the revised SEE curriculum. By situating learning in real, tangible, and hopeful experiences, teachers can create emotionally safe spaces for engagement, allowing children to move from fear to empowered action. This hopeful lens may be vital in countering the so-called 'crisis of engagement' and enabling genuine, lasting participation in ESD.

Discussion

The findings suggest that integrating a dedicated nature connectedness time slot into the *Primary School Curriculum* can significantly enhance children's wellbeing and environmental engagement. Grounded in the *PERMA* model and the *Five Pathways to Nature Connectedness*, the intervention effectively supported both holistic wellbeing and the aims of ESD. The success of the intervention highlights the power of place-based learning, where engagement with the local environment fosters meaningful connections and makes learning more relevant and impactful. Moreover, the emphasis on child-led activities nurtured autonomy, agency, and a sense of ownership, key ingredients not

only for personal growth but also for cultivating long-term environmental stewardship. These insights not only affirm the transformative potential of nature connectedness in primary education, but also offer clear, actionable steps for schools seeking to embed such approaches more intentionally. The following recommendations translate the study's findings into practical strategies for educators and school leaders.

1. Regular nature sessions: Implement consistent, structured nature engagement sessions that are experiential and child-led, guided by frameworks like the *PERMA* model and the *Five Pathways to Nature Connectedness*.

2. Place-based learning: Integrate local natural environments into the curriculum to strengthen children's emotional bonds with their surroundings, fostering a sense of place and belonging.

3. Addressing ecophobia: Introduce environmental education in a developmentally appropriate manner, ensuring that initial experiences with nature are positive and engaging before delving into complex environmental issues.

4. Interdisciplinary approach: Connect nature connectedness activities with various curricular areas, such as science, art, and social and environmental education (SEE), to provide comprehensive learning experiences.

5. Educator training: Provide professional development opportunities for teachers to lead outdoor learning experiences effectively, incorporating principles from forest school theory and emphasising the links between nature, wellbeing, and sustainability.

Conclusion

> "A return to wonder is the beginning of wisdom." John Moriarty

This study demonstrates the powerful role of structured nature connectedness interventions in enhancing children's wellbeing and fostering values that underpin ESD. By embedding time in nature into the primary curriculum through place-based, experiential, and child-led approaches, schools can nurture children's emotional, cognitive, and experiential connection to the natural world, a connection that is absolutely central to ESD, as it underpins both personal wellbeing and the development of responsible, sustainable behaviours. Themes such as biophilia, child autonomy, ecophobia, and caring for nature highlight the nuanced relationship children have with their environment. The intervention not only reduced initial hesitations and ecological anxieties but also cultivated joy, empathy, and a sense of environmental responsibility among participants. Drawing on frameworks such as the *PERMA* model and the *Five Pathways to Nature Connectedness*, the programme created fertile ground for both personal flourishing and environmental stewardship.

By fostering these connections, schools contribute directly to the goals of the UN *Sustainable Development Goals* and international ESD frameworks, promoting global citizenship, environmental care, and sustainable action from the earliest years. These findings suggest that fostering emotional bonds with nature is a critical foundation for meaningful engagement with sustainability. As the Irish *Primary Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2023) continues to prioritise wellbeing and ESD, this research reinforces the value of giving children regular, supported opportunities to connect with their local

environment. In doing so, we not only prepare them to understand the complexities of ecological challenges but empower them with the hope, agency, and empathy needed to face them.

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An exploration into the impact of an early literacy intervention programme, Reading Recovery, on pupil wellbeing

⫸ Attracta Williams and Eva Devaney ⫷

Abstract

This article is based on a research study completed as part of a dissertation which explored the impact of an early literacy intervention programme, *Reading Recovery*, on pupil wellbeing in a Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) junior school. This research is timely given the increasing focus on wellbeing promotion in Irish educational policy. Studies have shown that early literacy intervention programmes can have a positive impact on pupils who are at risk of literacy failure. However, there is limited research establishing a connection between participation in early literacy intervention programmes and pupil wellbeing. The purpose of this study was to address that gap. Nine participants took part in the study – two senior infant pupils, one first class pupil, their parents and their class teachers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants before and after the literacy intervention. Participants identified positive relationships, which is the focus of this article, as one of several key protective factors for enhancing pupil wellbeing.

Keywords: Wellbeing, positive relationships, belonging, literacy intervention programme, Reading Recovery.

✦✦

Introduction

This research study explored if pupil wellbeing is enhanced by participating in the early literacy intervention programme, *Reading Recovery*. This research is timely given the increasing focus on wellbeing promotion in Irish educational policy with the aim of enabling young people experience success at school and achieve their full potential. The Department of Education's *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2019) assists schools in ensuring wellbeing promotion is embedded within their current practice. In addition, wellbeing is one of the five key curriculum areas in the new *Primary Curriculum Framework* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2023). Research has indicated that children who cannot read fluently may experience other difficulties including low self-esteem and socio-emotional problems (Murphy et al., 2008; O'Brien, 2022).

However, in recent years *Reading Recovery* has faced substantial criticism as an early literacy intervention programme. May et al. (2023) claim that literacy improvements

gained from *Reading Recovery* may fade if not reinforced by additional literacy supports in later grades. Chapman & Tunmer (2025) hold the view that *Reading Recovery* may be ineffective for struggling or dyslexic readers and they also state that it is not aligned with the 'science of reading' which emphasises the importance of explicit phonics instruction. Critics also argue that *Reading Recovery* can be expensive to implement as it requires one-to-one daily instruction and they suggest that group-based phonics interventions may work as well or better than *Reading Recovery*. For example, some parts of New Zealand have phased out *Reading Recovery* in favour of less expensive and more scalable options (Chapman & Tunmer, 2025).

This debate, while significant, extends beyond the scope of this study which explored the link between participation in the *Reading Recovery* programme and pupil wellbeing in a DEIS school. Findings from the qualitative data in this study suggest that, for some pupils, participation in the *Reading Recovery* programme may contribute positively to their emotional wellbeing. Factors such as increased individual attention, a sense of achievement and the supportive relationship with the *Reading Recovery* teacher appear to enhance pupil wellbeing and self-esteem. While these benefits are not a substitute for long-term literacy development, they may represent an important outcome for the most vulnerable pupils.

The two research questions guiding the study were: "What are some of the factors that enhance pupil wellbeing from the perspective of parents, teachers and pupils?"; and, according to the participants in the study, "is pupil wellbeing enhanced by participating in *Reading Recovery*?"

Personal interest – A. Williams

It was my background as a *Reading Recovery* teacher in a DEIS junior school that led to my interest in completing this study. The DEIS programme was first introduced in Ireland in 2005. It is the national policy that addresses educational disadvantage in schools and it aims to provide opportunities for communities who are "at risk of disadvantage and social exclusion" (DES 2017, p.6). The DEIS programme was further expanded in 2017, and more recently in 2022, to allow more schools benefit from targeted supports, such as early literacy interventions, additional teaching posts and extra funding. Schools in the programme are assigned DEIS Urban Band 1, DEIS Urban Band 2 or DEIS rural status based on their level of disadvantage (DES, 2017).

Following approval from my school principal and ethical approval from Mary Immaculate Research Ethics Committee (MIREC), I conducted a research study in our school from September 2023 to April 2024 with pupils, parents and class teachers. As a *Reading Recovery* teacher, I noticed that pupils who struggled with early literacy often showed signs of low self-esteem, which could subsequently contribute to emotional and behavioural challenges at school. The daily *Reading Recovery* lesson provides pupils with a structure which can help improve their social, emotional and cognitive development (Lyons, 2003). More recently, evidence suggests that there is a strong link between an individual's literacy level and their wellbeing and happiness (Dugdale & Clark, 2008; O'Brien, 2022). According to O'Brien (2022), reading can be a powerful wellbeing tool for children as it gives them the opportunity to explore new situations and empathise with

characters through stories. This resonated with my own experience as a *Reading Recovery* teacher. In addition to enhanced literacy scores, I noticed a gradual improvement in pupil's motivation, self-esteem and behaviour as a result of participating in *Reading Recovery*. However, much of the available literature on the benefits of early literacy intervention programmes focusses on literacy improvement only. The objective of this study was to address some of the research gaps in this area by exploring if pupil wellbeing was enhanced by participating in the *Reading Recovery* programme.

Wellbeing

A review of the literature highlights that there is no universally agreed definition of 'wellbeing', with many studies highlighting its multidimensional nature. For example, Dodge et al. (2012) describe wellbeing as a state of equilibrium where a person has the appropriate psychological, social and physical resources required to meet challenges in life. Wellbeing is defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as a state where individuals can manage stress, realise their potential and maintain physical health. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), an individual's wellbeing and development is influenced by the relationships and interactions with their families and the wider community. Similarly, Maslow (1943) suggests that the need to belong refers to a social desire to have positive relationships with family, friends and neighbours. Helliwell & Putnam (2004) refer to 'subjective wellbeing' as wellbeing that can be measured fairly accurately by asking an individual a series of questions about their happiness and life satisfaction. They reported a strong link between subjective wellbeing and social capital as measured "by the strength of neighbourhood, family and community ties" (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004, p.1435). This is further supported by Gnanapragasam et al. (2021) who state that the social environment where people are born, live and work has a huge influence on their health and wellbeing. According to Newland (2014), children's wellbeing consists of five main components (Figure 1):

- Physical health (healthy behaviours and attitudes).
- Mental health (personal self-esteem and happiness).
- Self-regulation (ability to manage emotions and deal with stress).
- Social competence (ability to sustain positive, healthy relationships).
- Cognitive competence (ability to learn and problem solve).

Figure 1: Components of child wellbeing (Newland, 2014).
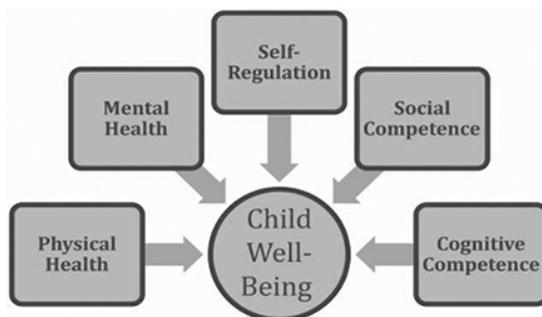
A review of the literature shows that there is a lack of instruments and methods to measure young people's wellbeing especially among younger children. Despite this lack of measures for younger children, a study completed by Durbin (2010) showed that children as young as six can give accurate reports about their emotional state. Sanchis et al. (2022) also note that drawing is a form of expression, enabling young children to communicate their feelings in a relaxed manner, making it an important method for collecting information. Providing the opportunity for children to express themselves is essential because information provided by adults about children is different to the information that children provide about themselves (Waters et al., 2021).

In this study, I investigated the use of an alternative method for measuring pupil wellbeing by examining the data from the pupil, parent and teacher interviews in addition to using a subjective assessment based on pupils' fortnightly self-report of their wellbeing during the intervention (*Wellness Journal*, n.d.). The interviews explored essential aspects of the children's lives including their family, friends and school.

Wellbeing policy in Irish education

The *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* (DES, 2019) describes the Department of Education's vision for wellbeing promotion in schools and centres of education. This document builds upon other national documents, guidelines and current practices in wellbeing in education. Wellbeing is a central theme in *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) and the *Framework for Junior Cycle* (DES, 2015). 'Being well' is also one of the key competencies in the new *Primary Curriculum Framework* which aims to develop children's understanding of their physical, emotional and social wellbeing (NCCA, 2023).

The framework outlines the following four key areas (Figure 2) that schools must consider in wellbeing promotion: culture and environment, teaching and learning, policy and planning, and relationships and partnerships (DES, 2019).

Figure 2: Whole School Approach – Four Key Areas of Wellbeing Promotion (DES 2019, p. 16)
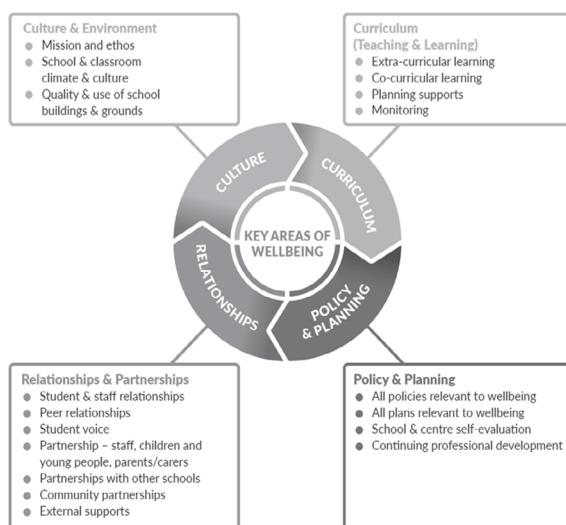
Similarly, these four areas align with other recent Department of Education initiatives which address the wellbeing of children and young people. For example, the *Looking at Our School* framework considers pupils' wellbeing both as "an enabler of learning and as an outcome of learning" (DES 2022, p.9). Since young people spend a large proportion of their time at school, it makes sense that schools are a good location for implementing and promoting wellbeing initiatives. This study was guided by the *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* document (DES, 2019) which identifies positive relationships, a sense of belonging and inclusive practices for special educational needs (SEN) pupils as some of the enablers for whole school wellbeing promotion: Some identified risk factors to wellbeing include learning difficulties, relationship difficulties with peers and poor relationships between school and home. *Reading Recovery* is individually tailored to meet the learning needs of each pupil. So, pupils who struggle with early literacy have the opportunity to experience success by working in a one-to-one setting with the *Reading Recovery* teacher. Furthermore, research shows that access to 'one good adult' who supports pupils at a vulnerable time is a protective factor in promoting their self-confidence and wellbeing (Newland, 2014; DES, 2019; Dooley et al., 2019).

Why is literacy important?

Our society is dominated by the written word so proficient literacy skills are essential to actively participate and contribute to society. The *Programme for International Student Assessment* (PISA) defines reading as the ability to "understand, evaluate and engage with texts to develop one's knowledge and to participate in society" (OECD, 2021, p.23). PISA's definition of literacy has changed over the last 20 years to reflect the key role pupil engagement plays in developing reading skills in addition to recognising the importance of evaluating digital content (Shiel et al., 2022). Research completed by Dugdale and Clark (2008) suggests a strong link between a person's literacy level and their success, wellbeing and happiness. Furthermore, they suggest that literacy is one of the first steps in helping individuals to overcome a cycle of disadvantage. Similarly, a report by the European Commission Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (2012) states that literacy is the key to enable individuals to contribute to society as a lack of basic literacy skills increases poverty, reduces wellbeing and ultimately prevents economic growth. According to Snow et al. (1998), the majority of literacy problems experienced by adults can be resolved in early childhood so it is important that interventions are put in place in the first few years of primary school to minimise literacy failure.

Literacy intervention programmes

A literacy intervention programme is a structured, short-term teaching approach aimed at supporting pupils with reading, writing and comprehension (Nugent et al., 2019). There are many approaches and programmes available to schools but the following elements are usually common features of an effective literacy programme:

• Appropriate assessments are administered to ensure the intervention matches the pupil's needs.

- Learning outcomes are established.
- Pupils are taught in a small group or in a one-to-one setting.
- Literacy sessions are regularly and maintained over a sustained period.
- Pupil progress is reviewed regularly to ensure the intervention enhances pupil learning (Education Endowment Foundation , 2020).

Two comparable studies conducted in 2008 and 2009 examined the impact of early literacy intervention programmes on kindergarten students at high risk of reading failure. Both interventions involved teachers working on literacy skills with small groups of students for thirty minutes three days per week. The findings from the 2008 study were encouraging because pupils' literacy skills improved significantly after receiving the intervention (Kamps et al., 2008). Following their study, Lo et al. (2009) suggested that schools adopt early reading intervention programmes for pupils at risk of literacy failure to reduce achievement gaps with their peers.

However, the majority of research regarding early literacy intervention programmes tends to focus on improvements in pupils' literacy and there is little reference to assess its influence on social and personal development (Rhodes-Kline & Quaglia 1998; Quay et al., 2001). The aim of this study was to explore if pupil wellbeing was enhanced by participating in the early literacy intervention programme *Reading Recovery*.

Reading Recovery

Reading Recovery is an example of a short-term early literacy intervention programme delivered by a trained *Reading Recovery* teacher. It is designed for children between the ages of five years nine months and six years six months who have the most difficulty in reading and writing after one year of school (Clay, 2016). Pupils are taught individually by the *Reading Recovery* teacher for 30 minutes daily for a period of between 12 and 20 weeks. The programme aims to help children achieve reading and writing skills that fall within the average range for their age group.

The literacy benefits of the *Reading Recovery* programme for children who have reading and writing difficulties are well documented. According to Burroughs-Lange & Douëtil (2007), pupils who had received *Reading Recovery* for approximately 20 weeks had a reading age in line with their chronological age at the end of the school year. A ten year follow up study on a group of children who received *Reading Recovery* showed that they were performing just five percent below the national average in literacy at 16 years old (Fridkin & Hurry, 2018). This study suggested that *Reading Recovery* may have a long-term positive effect on pupils' literacy. As mentioned previously, much of the research into the benefits of *Reading Recovery* focusses solely on literacy improvement and it rarely measures the effect on enhancing pupil wellbeing and self-confidence (Rhodes-Kline & Quaglia, 1998; Quay et al., 2001). This is surprising given that a core aspect of the *Reading Recovery* programme is its individualised approach, where the programme's success is linked to the relationship between the teacher and the pupil (Rhodes-Kline & Quaglia, 1998; Clay, 2016). More recently, Farrell & Mahon (2022) suggest that positive relationships between pupils and teachers offers the greatest potential for enhancing pupil wellbeing. *Reading Recovery* is a way of creating such positive, meaningful relationships.

Methodology

The study used a mixed method approach which involved gathering and analysing both qualitative and quantitative data. While two different data collection approaches were used in this study, the data gathered was mainly qualitative in nature. The study was conducted using an action research methodology such as that proposed by (Koshy, 2010; Kemmis et al., 2014). This enabled the researcher, who was the *Reading Recovery* teacher and an active participant in the research process, to engage in a cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting on the research questions (Figure 3). The daily *Reading Recovery* lesson is a powerful planning, observation and reflection tool allowing the teacher to make decisions to support pupils who find literacy challenging (Clay, 2016).

Figure 3: Cycle of Action Research (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988).
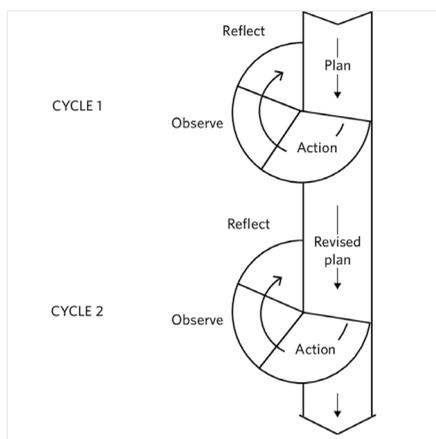
Most definitions of action research highlight the following elements:

- Participants are willing to take part in the research and are seen as equals in the research process.
- The researcher may generate findings that enhance their practice, helping to bridge the theory-practice gap (Meyer, 2000).

The qualitative data which formed the majority of the data collection in this study included:

- 18 semi-structured one-to-one interviews with the participants before and after the literacy intervention;
- researcher's reflective journaling;
- daily lesson records for each pupil; and,
- pupil wellbeing self-reports (*Wellness Journal*, n.d.).

In this study, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were conducted with pupils, parents and class teachers before and after the literacy intervention. This allowed a flexible approach to interviewing and helped gain a better understanding of the participant's responses (Cohen et al., 2007). The pre-intervention interviews with parents

(Figure 4) and class teachers explored what they thought the pupils liked/disliked about school, what they found easy/difficult at school and the pupils' attitude to reading. Post-intervention interviews (Figure 4) explored what the parents and class teachers thought about the benefits of participating in early literacy intervention programmes. Pre-intervention interviews with pupils involved asking them to draw and answer questions about their families, friends, what they liked about school and their opinions about reading. The post intervention interviews with the pupils explored what the pupils liked about the daily *Reading Recovery* lesson.

Figure 4: Parent interview questions.

Parent Interview Questions

The following questions were included in the interviewing process **before** beginning the twenty-week literacy intervention programme Reading Recovery.

1.	What does your child like about school?
2.	What does your child not like about school?
3.	What does your child tell you about school at home, i.e. do they talk about friends, playing in the yard, class work, etc.
4.	What do you think your child finds easy at school?
5.	What do you think your child finds difficult at school?
6.	What do you think your child's feelings are about reading?
7.	How do you think your child is doing at reading?

The following questions were included in the interviewing process **after** completing the twenty-week literacy intervention programme Reading Recovery.

1.	Do you think your child has benefited by participating in Reading Recovery?
2.	In what way has your child benefited/not benefited by participating in Reading Recovery?
3.	What did your child like about the programme?
4.	What did your child not like about the programme?
5.	What do you think some of the benefits are of participating in an early literacy intervention programme?
6.	Do you think literacy success in school contributes to pupil self-esteem and wellbeing?

One of the key features of the *Reading Recovery* intervention is keeping daily lesson records for each pupil (Gibson, 2010). The teacher uses the daily lesson record to plan and record observations of pupil actions during the lesson and to reflect on pupil learning after the lesson (Clay, 2016). In this study, the daily lesson record was used to track each pupil's progress in reading and writing and plan for future lessons (Gibson, 2010).

In addition, the pupil participants were given an opportunity to provide a regular self-report of their wellbeing using a *Wellness Journal* (Figure 5) which was edited to make it more age appropriate for the child participants. The journal was based on the *Wellness Journal for primary schools*, which is available from St Patrick's Mental Health Services website walkinginmyshoes.ie (*Wellness Journal*, n.d.).

Figure 5: Pupil wellness journal (Wellness Journal, n.d.).

The quantitative element of the study involved conducting the *Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement* (OSELA) assessment before and after the literacy intervention with each pupil (Clay, 2016). The OSELA is a standardised test that evaluates a child's literacy before and after the *Reading Recovery* programme.

Credibility of the study

Reflective journaling allowed the researcher to document decisions, potential biases and difficulties during the study and to take appropriate action (Cohen et al., 2007). As the *Reading Recovery* teacher and an active participant in the research, I kept a reflective journal for the duration of the study which allowed me to think critically about my practice, reflect on personal assumptions and avoid any biases that might have influenced the research (Chitpin, 2006).

Participants

The nine participants in the study were selected using a purposive sampling technique which involved selecting a sample for a specific purpose (Cohen et al., 2007). The sample was composed of two senior infant pupils, one first class pupil, their parents and class teachers. Table 1 outlines how the researcher referred to the participants in the study to preserve their anonymity. Parent 1 referred to Pupil 1's parent and Class Teacher 1 referred to Pupil 1's class teacher. The same naming conventions were used for Pupil 2 and Pupil 3.

Table 1: Participants in the study.

Parent 1	Class Teacher 1	Pupil 1 (senior infant/Age 6 years 3 months)
Parent 2	Class Teacher 2	Pupil 2 (senior infant/Age 6 years 5 months)
Parent 3	Class Teacher 3	Pupil 3 (first class/Age 6 years 7 months)

At the beginning of the school year the senior infant and first class teachers created a list of students in order of literacy ability in their class. The six lowest achieving pupils in literacy were assessed, by the *Reading Recovery* teacher, using the OSELA assessment (Clay, 2016). The three pupils with the lowest scores in this assessment were selected for *Reading Recovery*. Prior to administering the assessment, the researcher got ethical approval from the Mary Immaculate Research Ethics Committee (MIREC) and permission from the school principal and board of management to conduct the research study.

After securing parental consent for their child's participation in the *Reading Recovery* programme, the researcher invited the parents, pupils and class teachers to take part in the study. Following this discussion, the adult participants agreed on a convenient date and time to sign the study's consent form and complete the pre-intervention interviews. The researcher then met the children with their parents. At this meeting the researcher explained to the children that their parents had confirmed they could partake in the study which involved some reading, writing and completing a wellness journal. However, the researcher explained to the children that even though their parents had agreed that they could participate in the study, the child could decide if they wanted to participate or not. It was explained to all participants that they were free to withdraw from the research at any point and this would not impact them in anyway.

Data analysis

The next section outlines how the qualitative and quantitative data were analysed as part of the research process.

Qualitative data analysis

The researcher analysed the qualitative data by grouping it into categories based on the participants' responses and interpretations of a situation (Cohen et al., 2007). Interview data was manually coded using thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes that helped answer the research questions (Braun & Clark, 2006; 2024). A content analysis approach was used to examine the drawings in the pupils' self-report wellness sheets, whereby the data was analysed for recurring themes (Wellness Journal, n.d.). By using this approach, the researcher explored qualitative patterns (themes) in the drawings in addition to quantitatively considering how often specific themes appeared (Merriman & Guerin, 2006).

Quantitative data analysis

Quantitative data analysis is a systematic approach to analysing measurable data and it is no more or less important in research than qualitative data (Cohen et al., 2007). In this study, pupils' OSELA pre-test and post-test results were collected and analysed to compare pupil attainment in literacy (Clay, 2016). Table 2 below shows a comparison of the pre and post-assessment OSELA (Clay, 2013) results for Pupil 1 in this study.

Table 2: Pre-assessment and post-assessment results.

Pupil 1	Pre-assessment	Post-assessment
Known letters of the alphabet (26)	8	21
Word test (23)	0	9
Phonemic awareness (37)	2	12
Number of words written by pupil	2	13
Concepts about print	11	15
Instructional reading level	1	7

Analysis of the literacy results in Table 2 show a considerable improvement in the pupil's scores after completing the *Reading Recovery* programme. For example, Pupil 1 recognised eight letters of the alphabet prior to the *Reading Recovery* but the pupil recognised 21 letters after completing the programme. The findings in this research study suggests that *Reading Recovery* has a positive impact on pupil's literacy and may help minimise achievement gaps with their peers (Kamps et al. 2008; Lo et al. 2009).

Findings and discussion

The themes and sub-themes which emerged from the data analysis are presented in Table 3. The data provided by participants during the interviewing process was the main dataset used to generate the themes and sub-themes. This data was further supported by the pupils' literacy test scores, pupils' self-report wellness sheets, daily lesson records and the researcher's reflective journal.

Table 3: Themes and sub-themes derived from the study.

Theme	Sub-theme
Protective factors for promoting pupil wellbeing	• Positive Relationships • Belonging at School • Pupil Voice
Risk factors for pupil wellbeing	• Literacy Difficulties • Emotional Regulation • Challenges for Pupils with SEN
Benefits of early literacy intervention	• Literacy Success • Confidence and Self-Esteem • Pupil Motivation and Self-Efficacy • One-to-One Relationship

Positive relationships emerged as the most prominent sub-theme in discussions with all participants and was identified as one of several key protective factors in promoting pupil wellbeing. The sub-theme positive relationships is discussed below using quotations from the participants and with relevant connections made to wellbeing policy and literature. The discussion begins with parents' and class teachers' perspectives on the significance of positive relationships for pupils, followed by pupils' perspectives on their relationships with family members and peers at school.

Positive relationships: parents' and teachers' perspectives

During the interviewing process, the parents in the study outlined the importance of their children having positive relationships with other pupils and teachers. One parent commented: "making friends at school is very important for my child – it is the key thing for him" (Parent 2), with another parent citing: "my child is very sociable and he likes meeting and playing with friends at school" (Parent 3). These findings align with Bronfenbrenner's model of human development which acknowledges that an individual's wellbeing is influenced by the relationship with their families, friends and the wider community (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Furthermore, two of the parents voiced concerns about their child's ability to make and maintain friendships with one parent saying: "my child misses his friend from playschool and he would really like to have a best friend at school, but he may not be able to make friends because he is too hyper" (Parent 2). Another parent commented: "my child finds it challenging to make friends as he has a speech and language difficulty and he gets frustrated if the children don't understand him" (Parent 3).

The findings from the class teacher interviews concurred with the parents' viewpoint on relationships and friendships. Class Teacher 2 stated that "the pupil has friends in class but he would like to have a best friend", while Class Teacher 3 said "the pupil has lots of friends but sometimes his friends don't play with him as they cannot understand what he says". According to the *Wellbeing Policy and Framework for Practice* (DES, 2019), positive relationships with teachers is one of the key protective factors for wellbeing promotion in schools. When Parent 2 was asked, during the pre-intervention interview, if her child talked about school at home she said "my child talks a lot about his friends and the teacher", while Parent 1 said "the pupil loves the one-to-one attention from the teacher". Interestingly, Pupil 2 echoed his parent's comments as he considered the class teacher to be his "friend" and Pupil 1 said she really enjoyed doing the 30-minute daily literacy lesson with the *Reading Recovery* teacher.

These interview reports from the participants in the study echo findings in the literature which suggest that developing a positive relationship with one good adult can enhance a pupil's wellbeing and happiness (Roffey, 2012; DES, 2019; Dooley et al., 2019). Furthermore, a teacher can show concern for pupil wellbeing by encouraging them to use their abilities and strengths in a specific subject (Farrell & Mahon, 2022). The class teachers and parents highlighted how the pupils benefited from the one-to-one relationship with the *Reading Recovery* teacher. For example, Class Teacher 1 agreed that, "the pupil benefited particularly from the one-to-one attention as it helped boost confidence in her

abilities". This class teacher also felt that one-to-one literacy support helps build a positive relationship between the teacher and the pupil and enables the holistic development of the child. This concurs with Lyons (2003) view about the success of *Reading Recovery* which she says is linked to creating a trusting, compassionate relationship between the teacher and the pupil. Likewise, Parent 2 spoke about the benefits of the one-to-one relationship for pupil's whose first language is not English when she said "for a child whose first language is not English the one-to-one support helps break down the barriers in learning a new language". Class Teacher 3 said that the pupil "loves the one-to-one support and he is very proud of himself and his reading". This class teacher also believed that pupils who participate in literacy intervention programmes are given the opportunity to read at their own level and are taught strategies to enhance their literacy skills. The pupils' perspectives on relationships with their families and friends at school will be discussed in the next section.

Positive relationships: pupils' perspectives

A key recommendation in the *Wellbeing Policy and Framework for Practice* (DES, 2019) is that schools should value the voice of the child as it plays an important role in supporting pupil wellbeing. Furthermore, it is important that teachers understand a pupil's world through a child's eyes rather than from an adult's perspective (Cohen et al., 2007). In this study, pupil participants had the chance to express their opinions through the interviewing process and they regularly submitted wellbeing self-reports during daily literacy lessons.

Pupil data which consisted of drawing activities and verbal reports revealed how pupils as young as six years old can give rich descriptions of their likes and dislikes and what makes them sad or happy (Durbin, 2010). Likewise, subjective wellbeing can be measured fairly accurately by asking an individual a series of questions about their happiness and life satisfaction (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004). During the pre-intervention interview the pupils were asked if there is anything they found difficult at school. Pupil 1's response was "the thing (interview) I'm doing now because I have to tell you what I like and don't like and it is hard to give the answers". A possible explanation for this pupil's response may be due to her lack of experience doing teacher-pupil interviews or not having adequate skills for self-expression.

Pupils' relationships with their families

One of the main findings of this study was the strong bond and close relationship between pupils and their families. This was evident from the pupils' drawings and the rich descriptions they gave of their immediate and extended families during the interviews. Figures 6, 7 and 8 show the pupils' drawings of their families, which includes the researcher's annotations, reflecting some of what the pupils said as they were drawing. As some studies suggest, very young children may find it difficult to answer interview questions due to lack of maturity or understanding and drawing gives them the opportunity to express themselves in a relaxed manner (Sanchis et al., 2022; Waters et al., 2022).

Figure 6: Pupil 1's drawing of family with researcher's annotations.

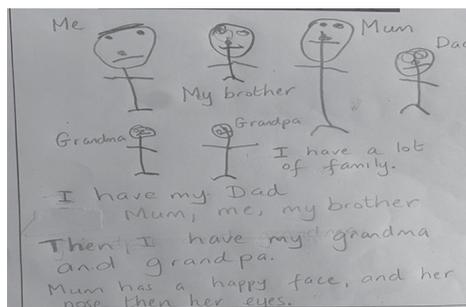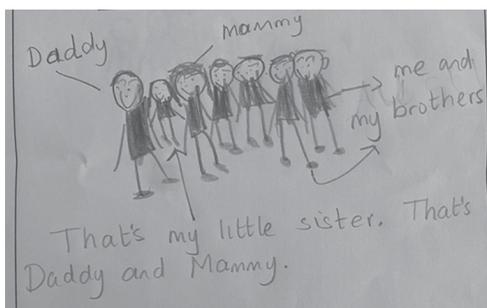*Figure 7: Pupil 2's drawing of family with researcher's annotations.*

*Figure 8: Pupil 3's drawing of family with researcher's annotations.*

Pupils' relationships with their friends

During the interviews, the three pupil participants said they were very happy at school when they were playing with their friends. For example, Pupil 1 said she liked "playing in the yard with her friends, drawing and learning" and "there was nothing that made her sad at school". Similarly, when Pupil 2 was asked what he liked doing at school his immediate response was "drawing, and playing with my friends and learning", and Pupil 3's response was similar: "I like playing with my friends out in the yard and I am very sad when my friends don't play with me." When asked about reading during the pre-intervention interviews, all pupils said that they didn't know how to read but that they liked when an adult read to them. For example, Pupil 1 said, "I don't know how to read so I just look at

books." The findings from the pupil interviews in this study challenge assumptions about methods for measuring pupil wellbeing and support the findings of Durbin (2010), which suggest that young children can accurately express their emotional state.

During the 20-week literacy intervention programme, pupil participants got the opportunity to provide regular reports of their wellbeing in the form of drawings and verbal reports. Drawing is an important instrument for collecting information from young children as it allows them to communicate creatively and spontaneously through graphic representation (Walker, 2008; Sanchis et al., 2022). This study used drawings and verbal reports as a research tool for listening to children's perspectives on their lives at school and at home. Furthermore, verbal input from the children helped the researcher interpret the content and the meaning the children wanted to communicate through their drawings (Walker, 2008). Pupil participants completed eight wellbeing self-reports during the study providing a total of 32 individual drawings per pupil. Figure 9 shows a sample of Pupil 2's wellbeing self-reports from weeks 3, 10 and 19, which include the researcher's annotations, reflecting some of what the pupil said as he was drawing.

Figure 9: Pupil 2's weekly self-reports for weeks 3, 10 and 19 with researcher's annotations.
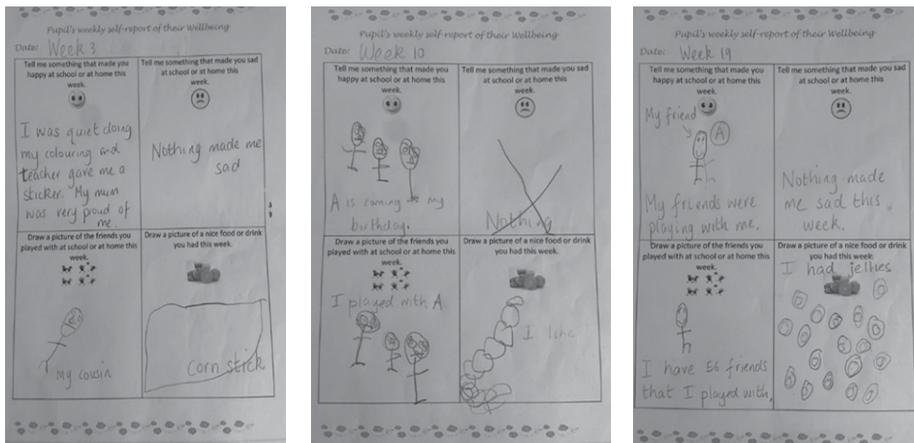
Friendships at school was the key theme following analysis of Pupil 2's data. When Pupil 2 was asked what made him happy at school six out of eight responses were linked to friends in his class. For example, he said that his friend was coming to his birthday party on two occasions, and on another occasion Pupil 2 said, "I am very happy because my friend said I have great skills". When asked about the friends he played with in the schoolyard, Pupil 2 exaggerated, saying, "I played with 56 friends today." One of the most interesting finding was that, on eight occasions, Pupil 2 stated, "nothing made me sad at school or at home".

A content analysis approach was used to analyse pupils' drawings which allowed for a qualitative exploration of what was drawn in addition to quantitatively considering how often themes appeared (Merriman & Guerin, 2006). The themes that were identified from the pupils' drawings and verbal reports were based on answering the following four questions on the wellness sheet:

- Tell me something that made you happy at school or at home this week.
- Tell me something that made you sad at school or at home this week.
- Draw a picture of the friends you played with at school or at home this week.
- Draw a picture of a nice food or drink you had this week.

The three themes that were identified from the pupils' reports were the important role that friends, school, and home played in their lives. Table 4 shows how frequently each pupil mentioned each of these three themes.

Table 4: Pupil wellbeing self-reports – frequency of themes.

Theme	Pupil 1	Pupil 2	Pupil 3	Total
Friends	8	14	7	29
School	6	5	4	25
Home	15	5	12	32

The pupils' self-reported wellbeing echo findings in the literature, which suggests that young children's wellbeing is strongly influenced by their relationships with friends, families, and the community (Maslow, 1943; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In addition, friendships with peers and positive relationships with teachers are some of the protective factors which enable whole school wellbeing promotion (DES, 2019).

Study limitations

Finally, a number of important limitations need to be considered in relation to the findings in this study. Firstly, the sample was small and the study was based in a DEIS junior school that caters for pupils from junior infants to first class. However, as qualitative methods were used to gather data the purpose of this study was not to generalise and the findings may be relatable to similar schools in Ireland. Secondly, ethical implications can add limitations as researchers need to strike a balance between the demands placed on them as researchers and the rights of participants in the study (Cohen et al. 2017).

Conclusion

This study explored the potential effects on pupil wellbeing resulting from participation in the early literacy intervention programme, *Reading Recovery*. All participants identified positive relationships, which was the focus of this article, as one of several protective factors for promoting pupil wellbeing. The findings from the study have important implications for practice and future research. Teachers working in similar school settings may wish to reflect on the reported benefits of *Reading Recovery* for pupils' confidence and wellbeing as reported by the participants in this study. Further research with a larger sample size in an alternative school setting would help build on the findings in this study. Additionally, a future study could explore the impact of early intervention programmes in other curricular areas on pupil wellbeing. Pupil voice was identified as a protective factor for enhancing pupil wellbeing. Future research that places greater emphasis on pupil voice and participation could explore how parents and school staff promote and interpret pupil wellbeing.

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Read Aloud Story Breaks:
A time for attunement, belonging and connection

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Abstract

Read Aloud Story Breaks is an intervention to cultivate a sense of safety as a strategy to promote children's wellbeing in primary schools. This research presents the relationship between safety and wellbeing, conceptualised through Porges' *Polyvagal Theory*. Acknowledging existing practice and progress, extensive background research influenced the direction of this research study to align with existing frameworks and policies set out by the Department of Education. Pre-questionnaires captured the current understanding, strengths and policies in schools. Following this, participants attended a workshop to implement the intervention in their school. This presented psychoeducation, an outline of alignment with current policies and support for implementation. Following a pilot of implementation, a post questionnaire and interviews were completed. Results indicated the intervention promoted a sense of attunement, belonging, and connection, allowing everyone to feel safe, engaged, and ready to learn in schools.

Keywords: **Wellbeing policies in education, wellbeing in primary schools, social and emotional safety, emotion regulation in the classroom, therapeutic stories.**

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"Feeling safe or unsafe is physiological in nature and directly responsive to the environment"
Prendiville, 2017.

Introduction

Read Aloud Story Breaks is a structured and intentional intervention in which a teacher reads a story aloud to their class. The initiative was carried out in 2024 as part of a research study for an MA in Creative Psychotherapy and Play Therapy with the Children's Therapy Centre. The purpose of the study was to explore if the shared experience of reading could cultivate a sense of safety by promoting emotion regulation and social connection in the classroom and in turn, positively affect pupil wellbeing and encourage engagement in learning. The impact of the intervention was recorded by the participants, who presented their own experiences and observations of emotional responses during the intervention. Emotion responses associated with the sympathetic nervous system (fight/flight), parasympathetic ventral vagal system (emotion regulation and social connection),

and parasympathetic dorsal vagal system (freeze) were equally considered to capture an authentic response (Porges, 2022).

This research study presents a review of literature that reflects the trajectory of our understanding of wellbeing. In response to this, it outlines the current policy landscape regarding children's wellbeing and the role of wellbeing in primary schools. Children's wellbeing is currently supported through various national policies and frameworks, including a new specification for wellbeing education to be finalised in 2025 by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA, 2024). The research design and findings investigate *Read Aloud Story Breaks* as an intervention to support wellbeing in schools. Considering collected and analysed information, the research question was refined to "Can teachers taking time to read stories aloud to their class cultivate a sense of safety as a strategy to promote children's wellbeing in primary school?" The intervention revealed implications which will be addressed prior to the conclusion of this article.

Summary of literature reviewed

The objective of this research was to explore whether reading aloud can support emotion regulation, stimulate connection, and cultivate a sense of safety as a strategy to promote wellbeing. The relationship between safety and wellbeing can be conceptualised through Porges' *Polyvagal Theory,* which provides an innovative scientific perspective that identifies neural circuits that downregulate threat reactions and neutralise defensive strategies via neural circuits communicating cues of safety (Porges, 2022). Feeling safe depends on cues of safety via neuroception, which subside autonomic states that activate threat responses and stimulate states that support interpersonal accessibility and homeostatic functions. A sense of safety can bolster homeostatic functions of health, growth, and restoration, making individuals accessible to others without feeling or expressing threat and vulnerability (Porges, 2022).

Polyvagal Theory outlines 'neuroception' as a neural evaluation of risk and safety that reflexively triggers shifts in autonomic state without requiring conscious awareness (Porges, 2017). This was considered when formulating the proposed intervention to prevent activation of stress responses. Efforts were made to ensure that participants felt informed, supported, and empowered. The study strived to align with current strengths and policies, considering wellbeing policies in schools to identify aims and objectives that may be achieved through the intervention. Multiple schools were invited to participate to ensure the intervention reflected a universal experience. Participating staff completed a pre-questionnaire to understand their awareness of policies, knowledge, practice, and challenges. This information influenced the proposed intervention to ensure participants felt comfortable and secure, building on existing strengths. This data supported the development of a workshop prior to implementation, providing psychoeducation, awareness of alignment with current policies and practice, and practical support for implementation. This allowed *Read Aloud Story Breaks* to align with current practice and be implemented by informed teachers. Following a pilot, participants completed a post-questionnaire detailing their experiences and shared accounts of the intervention through interviews.

Consideration of existing evidence and research is necessary to inform our current understanding of wellbeing. Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, despite criticisms, significantly impacted contemporary research by highlighting unconscious conflicts and their link to early relationships (Freud, 1920). John Bowlby combined psychoanalytic and biological approaches, emphasising the importance of early childhood relationships in personality development (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016). Bowlby's work influenced attachment research, notably by Ainsworth, who identified different types of attachment and their impact (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Secure attachment, emerging from consistent care, is associated with positive developmental outcomes in social, emotional, and cognitive domains (Siegel, 2020). Affect relationships influence physiological systems of emotion regulation, enhancing stress response and psychological wellbeing (Sagone et al., 2023).

Contemporary research examines attachment from a neurobiological perspective, observing its development and regulation over the lifespan (Flynn et al., 2024). The *Adverse Childhood Experience* (ACE) study has spurred research on the effects of childhood adversity, toxic stress, and wellbeing, linking high stress levels to mental and physical health, behaviour, and economic stability (Boullier & Blair, 2019). Questions outlined in the questionnaire used in this study are associated with one's sense of attachment and development of a secure base. It is now recognised that experiences shape brain structure and neural circuitry, with memories forming schemas and associations (Perry, 2007).

Policy landscape

Existing research highlights the importance of promoting health and wellbeing from prenatal stages through childhood. This highlights the need for early childhood policies and the effective allocation of funding and resources, recognising that "parents don't raise children in isolation from society" (Maté, 2023, p.179). *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures (2014-2020)* was the first overarching national policy framework to co-ordinate government efforts for improved outcomes in key areas for children and young people:

1. Active and healthy with physical and mental wellbeing.
2. Achieving full potential in all areas of learning and development.
3. Safe and protected from harm.
4. Economic security and opportunity.
5. Connected, respected, and contributing to their world.

These outcomes are unified through structuring policies for children and young people across government, agencies and sectors. In 2022, the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality, Integration and Youth launched a public consultation to inform policies for 2023-2028. The consultation emphasised promoting mental and emotional wellbeing through the education system and collaboration among services. The importance of schools to be welcoming safe spaces was outlined throughout the findings. Respondents highlighted the need for nurturing environments, early intervention, and preventative support. Satisfaction with access to education was noted, suggesting that existing services could be enhanced to support wellbeing (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2023).

Wellbeing in primary schools

The Department of Education and Skills[1] plays a key role in promoting children's wellbeing, in collaboration with other government departments and agencies (*Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice*, 2019). In 2023, being well is listed as a key competency in the *Primary Curriculum Framework For Primary and Special Schools* (Department of Education, 2023). The Department of Education and Skills defines wellbeing as "Wellbeing is present when a person realises their potential, is resilient in dealing with the normal stresses of their life, takes care of their physical wellbeing and has a sense of purpose, connection and belonging to a wider community. It is a fluid way of being and needs nurturing throughout life" (*Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice*, 2019). Wellbeing is influenced by individual, relational, community, cultural, and societal factors (Macblain, 2018). Bronfenbrenner's *Ecological System Theory* explains how human development is affected by the environment and communities (Macblain, 2018). School environments, part of the macrosystem, significantly impact children's wellbeing.

The Department of Education prioritises wellbeing, regularly updating advice for schools (Department of Education, 2021). Key policies include:

1. *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (Government of Ireland, 2024a)
2. *Aistear: Guidance for Good Practice* (Government of Ireland, 2024b)
3. *Get Active Physical Education Guidelines* (Department of Education and Skills, 2012)
4. *Well-Being in Post Primary Schools Guidelines* (Department of Education and Skills, Department of Health, & Health Service Executive, 2013)
5. *Well-Being in Primary Schools Guidelines* (Department of Education and Skills, Department of Health, & Health Service Executive, 2015)

The *Well-Being in Primary Schools Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion* emphasises integrating mental health into school life to build resilience. It outlines protective factors through a whole-school approach involving:

1. Environmental factors (physical and social).
2. Curriculum, teaching and learning.
3. Policy and planning.
4. Partnerships.

This research explored if *Read Aloud Story Breaks* support environmental factors by cultivating an emotion regulating atmosphere and kindle positive social connections. This embodied experience may create a sense of safety and connection which may support students to better engage in the curriculum, teaching, and learning. This activity may be utilised within policy and planning to support classes, e.g., managing transitions. Finally, there may be opportunities to extend the activity beyond the classroom through visits to the

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1 Due to the alteration of department names, from 2019-2025 references to the Department of the Education and Skills and references to the Department of Education shall be construed as references to the Department of Education and Youth.

local library and reading in the company of parents at home. Thus, working in partnership with the child's world as outlined in *Well-being in Primary Schools Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion* (2015).

This study explored the impact of cultivating a sense of safety to promote wellbeing in primary schools. Attachment style influences relational experiences and shapes the regulatory nervous system, affecting health and wellbeing (Sagone et al., 2023). Responsive care builds trust and organised sensory systems, essential for integrating self, body, and environment (Prendiville & Parson, 2021). Insecure attachment styles activate defensive systems, hindering social connection (Porges, 2017). Porges' *Polyvagal Theory* explains that feeling safe depends on neuroception, which detects safety without conscious awareness, and the autonomic nervous system being free from defence states. When emotion regulation is achieved, the social engagement system enhances wellbeing (Van der Kolk, 2017).

Early attachment styles can change over time, and nurturing relationships with adults, such as teachers, can positively influence a child's developing mind (Siegel, 2020). The *Positive Childhood Experience* study found that positive experiences, like having supportive adults, correlate with better physical and mental wellbeing and academic success, counteracting adverse childhood experiences (Bethell et al., 2019).

The benefit of storytelling is outlined from a therapeutic perspective by Sunderland (2000), Oaklander (2015), Schaefer & Cangelosi (2016), and Malchiodi (2021). Stories can parallel a child's experiences, supporting understanding and reducing feelings of isolation. Prendiville developed the *Therapeutic Touchstone Story* to facilitate the development of the therapeutic relationship (Prendiville,2014). Spitz goes beyond the content the story communicates and explores the practice of reading between adults and children, finding how reading aloud is seen as an enjoyable time which enhances social relationships (Spitz, 1999). Perry described reading to children as a warm, nurturing interaction that is not only cognitively stimulating but a playful, social, and engaging time together (Perry, 2010). It is this felt experience this research aims to explore: Can reading aloud cultivate a feeling of safety, and in turn promote a sense of connection in a classroom environment?

Perry's *Neurosequential Model of Therapeutics* emphasises regulation, relation, and reason. *Read Aloud Story Breaks* has the potential to support co-regulation and self-regulation, enhancing connection and engagement (Perry, 2006; Perry & Dobson, 2013). This shared experience promotes intersubjectivity, creating a secure base for exploration and learning (Hughes & Baylin, 2012).

Read Aloud Story Breaks as an intervention may allow the potential of safely entering the child's inner world and promotion of relational experiences. This may enhance a child's school experience and ability without changing existing policies or introducing a new curriculum. Reading is an activity most teachers are likely to already facilitate. This may diminish stress and challenges associated with implementation. The promotion of wellbeing should not overwhelm teachers. A child's sense of security depends on attuned, non-stressed caregivers (Maté, 2022). *Read Aloud Story Breaks* allow teachers to express qualities that foster co-regulation, with the teacher's emotion regulation being key (Goodyear-Brown, 2019).

Accessibility is crucial for long-term therapeutic interventions. The rebalancing of neurotransmitters, reducing stress and preventing inflammatory conditions are dependent on repetitive activation (Gerhardt, 2015). In correlation with research on neuroplasticity, we understand synaptic strengthening is experience dependent (Goodyear-Brown, 2019). *Read Aloud Story Breaks* utilise accessible resources, supported by initiatives like Ireland Reads and Children's Books Ireland.

This literature review explored existing research on wellbeing and its promotion, analysing societal influences, national policies, and frameworks. It traced their impact on government sectors, particularly the Department of Education in contemporary Irish society. Current policies within the Department of Education were examined to uncover guidance for promoting wellbeing in Irish primary schools. This guidance informed the selection of the intervention, ensuring alignment with existing frameworks. The study aimed to cultivate a sense of safety to promote wellbeing, defining safety and clarifying its relation to wellbeing. The review presents evidence supporting the potential of *Read Aloud Story Breaks* to achieve the study's aims.

Research design

This study aimed to explore whether teachers reading stories aloud to their class can cultivate a sense of safety as a strategy to promote children's wellbeing in primary schools. The study seeks to uncover the impact of the intervention, known as *Read Aloud Story Breaks*, on emotion regulation and social connection.

Wellbeing involves promoting social, emotional, and physical development, contributing to an individual's internal working model (Bee & Boyd, 2007). Effective improvements require developing and implementing an action strategy with continuous reflection (Fraser, 2010). This study used a research intervention to explore the strategy in practice followed by a reflection on its impact.

Quantitative research focuses on quantification in data collection and analysis (Bryman, 2016). It is deductive, determining the relationship between theory and research, and is objectivist, analysing intended study elements. This approach was relevant for identifying factors associated with safety and wellbeing, requiring multiple participants to establish prevailing experiences and generate statistics for comparison (Dawson, 2019). However, it limits data collection by not accounting for individual experiences or reflective practice, presenting a rigid approach that may restrict uncovering unintended outcomes (Pollock III, 2012).

Qualitative research explores attitudes, behaviour, and experiences through methods like interviews or focus groups, highlighting internal and external influences. It is inductivist, allowing patterns to emerge, and constructionist, understanding factors shaping the experience (Bryman, 2016). This approach enables thematic and comparative analysis, exploring subjective experiences and uncovering unintended outcomes. However, qualitative data alone would limit participant numbers and prevent uncovering the generalised impact of the intervention.

A mixed-method approach combines the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative research while reducing their limitations (Davies & Hughes, 2019). It acknowledges the increased workload and challenges in incorporating both data types when presenting results. However, separating the data can develop a cumulative portrait of the intervention. Thus, a mixed-methods approach was chosen for this study to encapsulate a comprehensive experience of *Read Aloud Story Breaks*.

Wellbeing promotion spans individual, relational, community, cultural, and societal levels, influencing policies within the education sector. The Department of Education and Skills' *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* recognises schools' unique role in promoting student wellbeing, with classroom teachers being key professionals. Therefore, the research was conducted in multiple primary schools to ensure the intervention's applicability. Three schools participated, supporting participant anonymity and working within the given timeframe and resources. Schools were selected through purposive sampling to include diverse linguistic, cultural, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds, enhancing variable analysis. It was explored if each school required an ethical procedure external to the college, desired compliance with individual policies or needed specific information. Each school confirmed the Children's Therapy Centre ethical approval was sufficient and no further ethical process, compliance or information was requested by the schools.

The research aimed to reflect societal progress by considering existing policies shaping school wellbeing culture. Quantitative methods gathered primary data via a pre-questionnaire to understand current strategies supporting children's wellbeing. This data then informed the intervention and required support for implementation. A workshop was facilitated, with feedback forms provided to identify gaps in understanding or additional support required. Participants then had four weeks to implement the intervention, followed by a post-questionnaire to examine its impact on cultivating a sense of safety, emotion regulation, and social connection.

A pre-questionnaire outlined 13 multiple-choice questions with opportunities for comments. It aimed to assess how wellbeing is promoted in schools, required support, training and knowledge completed by staff, and comfort levels with reading aloud. A total of 29 pre-questionnaires were completed, and data analysis influenced the workshop content using multivariate analysis to identify correlations.

The workshop presented psychoeducation on wellbeing, an understanding of safety, emotion regulation, policy alignment, and practical implementation. Participants debriefed and completed feedback forms. Feedback was analysed to identify experiences, learning, and support needed for future implementation. All school staff were welcome to attend the workshop without having to commit to the research study. A total of 41 participants attended the workshop.

Following implementation, a post-questionnaire was circulated. The post-questionnaire included an open-ended question to explore the experience of *Read Aloud Story Breaks*, and scale questions to identify the frequency of implementation. Additional scale questions uncovered the prevalence of emotion responses typically associated with the sympathetic, ventral vagal parasympathetic and dorsal vagal parasympathetic nervous system experienced by the facilitator. Multiple-choice questions determined the prevalence

of these responses amongst the students. Multiple choice questions identified challenges in implementation, learning gained, and if *Read Aloud Story Breaks* executed outcomes in the *Well-Being in Primary Schools Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion*.

Quantitative data was analysed using multivariate statistical techniques (Dawson, 2019), measuring mean, median, range, variance, and standard deviation. Nominal variables categorised data, while ordinal variables assessed frequency and prevalence of feelings. Open-ended questions provided contextual insights.

The qualitative method aimed to uncover attitudes, behaviours, and experiences of *Read Aloud Story Breaks*, capturing varying perspectives (Ryan et al., 2007). Semi-structured interview questions allowed concepts and theories to emerge from the data (Bryman, 2012), allowing responses to be clarified and explored.

Six teachers of various classes participated in the interviews. Interviews aimed to capture experiences, behaviours, and attitudes towards *Read Aloud Story Breaks*. Nine semi-structured questions facilitated open discussions. Interviews were transcribed and analysed using Braun and Clarke's Thematic Analysis method (Braun & Clarke 2006).

Following Braun and Clarke's method, initial codes were allocated through a semantic lens, forming themes and subthemes inductively (Dawson, 2019). Three main themes and associated subthemes emerged:

1. Implementation considerations
    a. Motivators and enablers
    b. Challenges
2. Changes in Practice
    a. Teacher changes
    b. Policy and planning
3. Reported insights
    a. Emotion regulation
    b. Social engagement
    c. Teaching and curriculum

Research findings

This study investigates whether teachers reading stories aloud to their class can cultivate a sense of safety to promote children's wellbeing. Background research guided the study's trajectory and support required for implementation. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study examined emotion responses and relational experiences to determine the intervention's effectiveness in cultivating safety, its alignment with current policies, and sustainability.

Quantitative data aimed to generate statistics for comparison (Dawson, 2019). A pre-questionnaire gathered primary data to identify an appropriate intervention, providing insights into participants' awareness, understanding, and strategies for supporting children's wellbeing. Key findings include:

1. Participant roles: Special education teachers (20.7%), special needs assistants (17.2%), and teachers from various class levels (48.1%).

2. Wellbeing support: All schools currently support students' wellbeing through various approaches.

3. Demand for wellbeing support: 86.2% of participants felt a demand to support wellbeing without alleviating current responsibilities.

4. Ease of implementing current guidelines: 72.4% found it easy to implement current wellbeing guidelines, though the definition and understanding of wellbeing varied.

5. Awareness and training: 25% received training to implement theory into practice, while 40% were unaware of available support.

6. Independent training: 69% pursued training independently, indicating inconsistent understanding of wellbeing.

7. Reading aloud: Most participants already read to their class and felt comfortable doing so.

8. Emotion regulation: 92.6% identified a need to support emotion regulation.

9. Support for emotion regulation: Only 21.4% felt informed to support emotion regulation.

10. Sense of safety: 72.4% did not receive training on creating a sense of safety, and 75.9% lacked training on trauma-informed practice.

11. Mental health protective factors: 82.1% were unaware of these factors, impacting policy implementation.

12. Staff wellbeing: A clear divide in awareness of policies supporting staff wellbeing, with 100% wanting promotion.

Background research provided necessary insights to tailor the workshop content for collective comprehension, avoiding assumptions or biases.

The feedback gathered post-workshop revealed participants' satisfaction and learning outcomes. Key points include:

1. Learning outcomes: Participants gained insights on the benefits of repetition, the Therapeutic Use of Self for co-regulation, the impact of trauma and stress, and the importance of teacher wellbeing.

2. Sample feedback: Participants shared reflections on balancing negative experiences through connection, the importance of daily time, countering trauma via regulation, and the science of stress.

The post-questionnaire aimed to determine the prevailing experience of *Read Aloud Story Breaks*. Quotes outlined in the results are a small example of the most prevailing experience. Close-ended questions provided statistical results, while open-ended questions offered contextual insights.

Participants were teachers across various classes, reflecting experiences from junior infants to sixth class. 90.9% of participants attended the workshop, ensuring results are primarily based on workshop attendance. Participants initially answered an open-ended question to outline their experiences of *Read Aloud Story Breaks*. Statements indicated a sense of unity, social engagement, and open discussions:

Very enjoyable sessions where we simply enjoyed the story together and allowed discussion and questions to lead us in different directions.

Reading out loud for children is great they enjoy listening to the story and after the story they have settled and regulated again and are more willing to do some work.

Statements indicated the intervention was also enjoyed by teachers, supported their own sense of emotion regulation and diminished stress:

They were more relaxed afterwards. I also felt relaxed and really enjoyed the story time.

I felt it allowed me time to have a brain break with the children for once.

77.3% of participants implemented *Read Aloud Story Breaks* daily or three to four times a week. All participants stated they enjoyed the intervention.

- **Sympathetic nervous system**: Over 90% of participants ranked a score of 0 out of 5 when asked if they felt anxious, frustrated, or angry during *Read Aloud Story Breaks*, indicating diminished sympathetic responses.
- **Parasympathetic ventral vagal nervous system:** Over 90% of participants ranked a score of 4 or higher out of 5, when asked if they felt calm, joyful, relaxed, safe, and connected with their pupils.
- **Parasympathetic dorsal vagal nervous system:** 95% of participants ranked a score of 0 out of 5 when asked if they felt hopeless, depressed or lonely during *Read Aloud Story Breaks*.

68.2% of participants reported that 0% of students appeared anxious, frustrated, or angry during *Read Aloud Story Breaks*. Approximately a quarter noted 0-9% of students appeared anxious or frustrated.

Participants reported 0% of students appeared hopeless, depressed, or lonely during *Read Aloud Story Breaks*, though these symptoms may be harder to identify.

It was reported that over 70% of students appeared calm, joyful, relaxed, safe, and engaged during *Read Aloud Story Breaks*.

Figure 1: Student emotional responses.
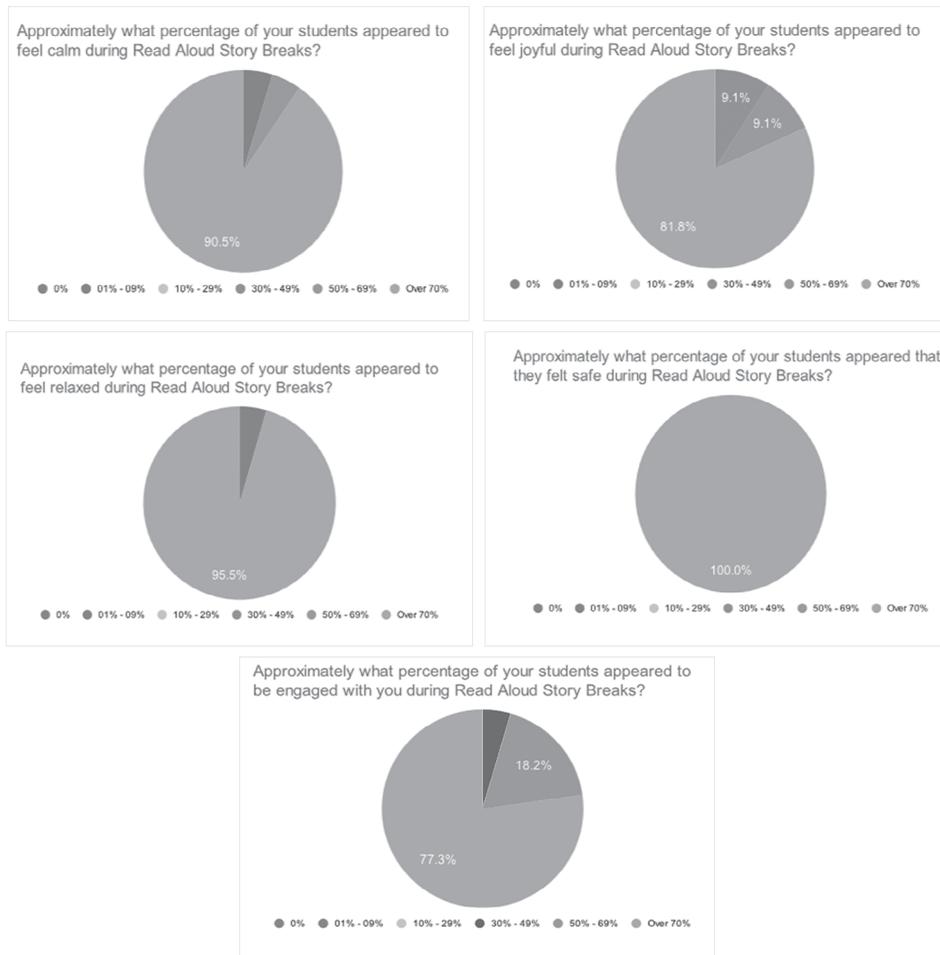
Challenges and sustainability

Approximately three-quarters of participants did not face challenges in implementation, with no discomfort or barriers in accessing reading material. However, 23.8% noted time as a challenge.

90.9% of participants reported that their understanding of creating a sense of safety changed since participating in this study. This change has the potential for teachers to better understand the behaviour of children and determine an appropriate response.

Participants reported that *Read Aloud Story Breaks* cultivated a nurturing environment (100%), implying the intervention has the potential to support environmental factors. Over 90% of participants stated the intervention promoted student engagement – a crucial factor to support teaching and learning. In addition, it may support classroom management as 86.4% reported it supported transitions between activities. Importantly,

95.5% reported increased interest in reading. This highlights the potential for additional opportunities for students. Each of these outcomes reflect factors in *The Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion* (2015). Finally, as stated in the literature review, "The rebalancing of neurotransmitters, reducing stress and preventing inflammatory conditions are dependent on repetitive activation" (Gerhardt, 2015). It is therefore essential interventions contributing to the wellbeing of students are sustainable. 100% of participants intend to continue the intervention.

Overall, the intervention supported emotion regulation, social engagement, and aligned with current wellbeing policies, indicating its viability for promoting students' wellbeing.

Figure 2: Alignment with policies.
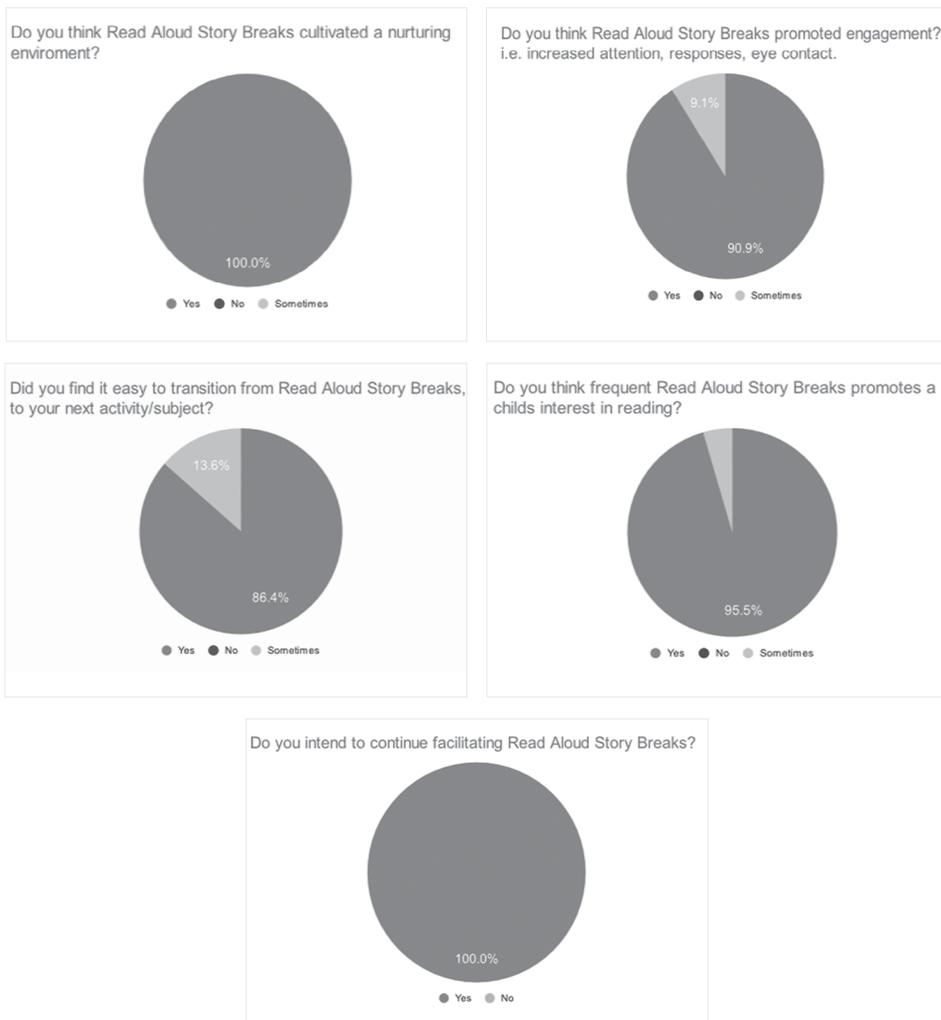
The qualitative research aimed to uncover attitudes, behaviours, and experiences of *Read Aloud Story Breaks* through semi-structured interviews. Following Braun and Clarke's method, three main themes and associated subthemes emerged:

Table 1: Implementation considerations theme.

Challenges	Participants expressed concerns about fitting *Read Aloud Story Breaks* into their busy schedules. Despite this, they found ways to integrate the intervention, such as using shorter books or reading during lunch: "…any stage you can still probably get it done somewhere in the day."
Motivators & Enablers	The workshop motivated participants to implement the intervention, highlighting its simplicity and accessibility. Familiarity with reading to the class also facilitated implementation: "I was very curious as to what it's all about. Because everything you said in the workshop that day made perfect sense to me."

Table 2: Changes in practice theme.

Teacher Changes	The workshop influenced teachers' attitudes. It prompted reflection on students' lived experiences and changed their approach to reading, emphasising the therapeutic use of self and promoting coregulation: "…there would be one or two here that would be a bit more mature and might hang around with older children and I didn't think they would react to it as well as they did. They reacted very well. Which was great and I remember the first day they were like what's this about or whatever but two days later they were saying it must be time to read the book now"; "They kind of feed of your energy a lot of the time. So, when you're enjoying something, like genuinely enjoying it they enjoy it more."
Policy & Planning	The intervention led to changes in classroom management, routine, and transitions. Teachers prioritised *Read Aloud Story Breaks*, integrating them into daily schedules and using them to calm students and support transitions: "I'm prioritising it more. It's a more definite part of every day. Now I see the benefit of it, in fairness they all need it, and number two, it's classroom management."; "It's kind of a break during the day but something that's worthwhile. So they're getting something out of it. It's a good transition between things. Like if they're in the hall and coming back if you read a story, it brings them back into the classroom, back into focus. For myself it's nice to get the break and do something I enjoy."

Table 3: Reported insights theme.

Emotion Regulation	Participants noted that *Read Aloud Story Breaks* promoted calmness and reduced anxiety in both students and teachers, supporting overall wellbeing: "Especially in a busy time when they're very giddy it actually calms down the whole classroom. There is also a lot of needs in the classroom as well. There are kids who get a little bit anxious or high and it brings them down and gives them a focus I suppose because they're listening to something. Then for enjoyment as well" "I found it calmed me down as well. It was a minute to sit down and do something nice".
Social Engagement	The intervention increased discussions and social engagement, creating a sense of unity and shared experience. It allowed integration of personal lived experiences into the classroom, promoting connection and belonging: "Like they would share if they read a story at home with their mom or 'I remember something this happened to me' like something from the story so gave you an extra chance to chat to them which increases the relationship" "It wasn't even just taking a book and go and read. It became a shared experience"
Teaching & Curriculum	The data also expressed that the intervention was a positive learning experience, and increased exposure to literacy: "I think it helps create a love of reading within the classroom as well" "Like even the children who are a possibility for dyslexia and things like that, it's an enjoyment for them and a positive experience of a story book where the pressure isn't on them to deliver it themselves"

The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), 2019 supports Perry's *Neurosequential Model*, stating that when young people are supported to feel calm and safe, social engagement is promoted and stimulates the ability to think and reason. It is interesting that the reported insights; emotion regulation (regulate), social engagement (relate), teaching and curriculum (reason/learn) reflect Perry's *Neurosequential Model* (Perry, 2006).

Implications for schools

Findings indicate that *Read Aloud Story Breaks* are a viable intervention for promoting students' wellbeing, aligning with current policies and supporting environmental factors. The intervention was effective across all age groups and class types (single and mixed classes in one room) achieving the aims set out in wellbeing guidelines. It promoted a sense of safety, mutual enjoyment, and social engagement, positively impacting both staff and students.

Collaborative work with schools and teachers is essential to identify strategies aligning with current policy and planning, and uncover potential implementation challenges. Participants gained new awareness of the impact of adversity on children's behaviour, trauma-informed practice, and the relationship between safety and behaviour. Without a pre-questionnaire, the workshop might not have adequately supported understanding

to justify implementation when faced with the challenge of time. Latent themes revealed unspoken curriculum and workload pressures. Participants found the workshop justified the intervention's implementation. The Department of Education aims for a whole school response to wellbeing, but there is a disparity between policy and implementation priorities. Staff seeking independent training does not support shared understanding and collective response. Greater efforts are needed to achieve a whole school response to wellbeing, where staff feel supported and secure in their practice.

Conclusion

The study involved background research, workshop creation and facilitation, intervention implementation, questionnaires, and interviews across several schools. Each component was critical to the overall results. However, future research should better define and refine these factors. Reducing the number of questions in the background research, post-questionnaire, and interviews would allow deeper analysis and consideration of additional perspectives, values, attitudes, experiences, and emotions. The high number of questions limited the opportunity to examine latent themes and explore internal and external influences. A mixed-methods approach has strengths but requires intentionality to avoid limiting its potential.

The study explored whether teachers reading stories aloud to their class can cultivate a sense of safety to promote children's wellbeing in primary schools. Quantitative and qualitative data indicated that *Read Aloud Story Breaks* supported emotion regulation and social connections, creating a calm, comfortable experience that promoted engagement and supported a learning environment. The intervention was used authentically within the school day, naturally supporting classroom management and aligning with current policies, particularly the *Well-Being in Primary Schools Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion* (2015). Participants expressed joy and a sense of unity, reducing their own stress responses and enhancing their wellbeing. The wellbeing of teachers is crucial, and policies should strive to enhance it to achieve a whole school response.

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