

Irish Teachers' Journal

Volume 3, Number 1
December 2015

into 
Irish National Teachers' Organisation
Cumann Maitteoirí Éireann

Irish Teachers' Journal

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Editorial correspondence should be addressed to Dr Deirbhile Nic Craith, Irish National Teachers' Organisation, Vere Foster House, 35 Parnell Square, Dublin 1.

Design

David Cooke

Layout

Selina Campbell, Irish National Teachers' Organisation

ISSN 2009-6860 (Print)

ISSN 2009-6879 (Online)

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Volume 3, Number 1

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Irish National Teachers' Organisation
35 Parnell Square
Dublin 1

Telephone: 01 804 7700
Email: info@into.ie
Web: <http://www.into.ie>

General Secretary: Sheila Nunan

Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann
35 Cearnóg Pharnell
Baile Átha Cliath 1

Guthán: 01 804 7700
Ríomhphost: info@into.ie
Gréasán: <http://www.into.ie>

Árd Rúnaí: Sheila Nunan

IRISH TEACHERS' JOURNAL, Volume 3, Number 1, December 2015. ISSN: 2009-6860 (Print). ISSN: 2009-6879 (Online).

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

The journal is distributed to all primary schools in the Republic of Ireland and primary and post primary schools in Northern Ireland.

It is also available as a free download from the publications section of the INTO website at www.into.ie/ROI/Publications/IrishTeachersJournal.

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Enquiries to Education Section, INTO, Vere Foster House, 35 Parnell Square, Dublin 1. Email: info@into.ie. Tel: 00353 (0) 1 8047700.

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≡ Editorial ≡

Continuing with our tradition of bringing teachers' research to a broad audience, the INTO is delighted to publish the third edition of the *Irish Teachers' Journal*. The topics addressed in this edition of the journal will stimulate thinking and reflection on some of the current educational issues of interest to the teaching profession.

The INTO represents primary teachers in the Republic of Ireland, and nursery, primary and post-primary teachers in Northern Ireland on both trade union and professional issues. In contributing to the journal, teachers demonstrate their commitment to professional engagement through writing articles on educational issues to share with their colleagues. It is one of the aims of the INTO to facilitate and provide a means of expression for teachers' collective opinion on educational and professional matters. The *Irish Teachers' Journal* serves this purpose.

At a time of uncertainty – both political and economic – it is unclear what the future holds for education. The INTO's priority of reducing class sizes remains a firm policy objective. Class size makes a difference, particularly in the early years (Blatchford et al, 2003). Primary classrooms have seen significant changes over the last decade, becoming more open and inclusive. Children with special educational needs, children with English as an additional language, children of diverse religious beliefs and none, feature in almost all classrooms. Teachers have embraced such changes willingly and with enthusiasm but not always with sufficient resources. At a broader policy level, the last year has seen invitations to the teaching profession to contribute to policy developments in areas ranging from teacher professional development, to school autonomy, and to the curriculum for education about religious beliefs and ethics. While the invitation to participate in consultations is welcome, it can at times appear daunting to teachers as they attempt to engage with a plethora of initiatives. The world of education never stands still. The articles in this edition of the *Journal* reflect the impact global trends on education in Ireland and are a valuable contribution from teachers to current education debate.

Following an open invitation to members, the INTO received a number of articles for consideration for the *Journal*. All articles were reviewed by external experts who provided constructive feedback to the authors. The INTO would like to acknowledge its appreciation of their contribution to ensuring the quality of the articles submitted. Authors resubmitted their articles having taken account of the reviewers' feedback. The INTO invited Professor Mark Morgan, to write the guest article. Professor Morgan was commissioned by the INTO to prepare a research report on teacher workload following the adoption of a Congress resolution in 2014.

Teacher workload and the stress associated with workload have tended to dominate many discussions among teachers, particularly when initiatives are being introduced. Prof Morgan's research is timely. Curriculum changes, increasing administrative demands, and expectations that schools solve the problems of society all contribute to teachers' sense of workload-related stress. In this article, the main findings of a survey on teacher workload carried out

✉ Email: author@into.ie

ISSN: 2009-6860 (Print) 2009-6879 (Online)
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by the INTO, in collaboration with Professor Morgan, are outlined. Notwithstanding the finding that teaching has become more stressful in the last five years, job satisfaction among teachers remains high. The fact that teachers still consider their job worthwhile is a very positive finding from a professional perspective. Principal teachers are more likely to experience excessive work overload. However, the causes of workload are not too difficult to eliminate, as they relate to demands for paperwork, which can be reduced without impacting on the quality of teaching. Perhaps it's also time to be more realistic about what society should expect from schools.

Cuireann sé áthas orainn alt i nGaeilge a fhoilsiú san eagrán seo den irisleabhar. Tá traidisiún fada i measc múinteoirí a bheith ag plé leis an gcruthaitheacht agus leis an bhfilíocht. Feictear téama an oideachais go minic. Sna dánta atá roghnaithe ag an Dr Marie Whelton, atá cumtha ag oidí, déantar trácht ar an dteagasc agus ar an bhfoghlaim. Drawing on a sample of poems from the period 1930-2010, Marie Whelton explores the themes of education, teaching and learning. Her selected poems were authored by poets who spent some or all of their time as primary or post-primary teachers. The INTO is delighted to include an article in Irish in this edition, reflecting the strong tradition of poetry and creativity amongst the teaching profession.

The *Journal* includes two articles on assessment and two articles on evaluation. The first article on assessment seeks to critically examine the developmental trajectories of self-assessment processes. Drawing on Black and Wiliam's review of the literature on assessment Lainey Keane and Claire Griffin acknowledge the increased focus on self-assessment in both policy and practice. However, they question the appropriateness of self-assessment strategies for young children, arguing that some children are unable to provide the accurate self-assessments, necessary for self-regulated learning. Their comprehensive review of the literature certainly raises questions about the efficacy of self-assessment. They recommend professional development for teachers in self-assessment theory and practices and further research on the impact of development trajectories on the accuracy of children's self-assessments.

In the second article on assessment Barbara Collins examines the implementation of a formative approach to assessment in the visual arts in a classroom characterised by an explicit sociocultural learning environment. Collins argues that for formative assessment to be effective there needs to be an alignment between assessment and learning theory. It is through formative assessment that a teacher can assess what has been learnt as opposed to what was taught. She provides a theoretical underpinning of formative assessment and sociocultural theory, and then presents her research, an action research study, using the visual arts as a domain-specific location for formative assessment. Her findings indicate a shift in classroom culture, with less teacher-led discussion, and show that students were surprised that learning in a sociocultural environment could be enjoyable.

Both articles on school evaluation address the topic of school self-evaluation. In the first article, Susan Bailey employs Scheurich's policy archaeology to explore how quality assurance and evaluation gained legitimacy as educational problems for which school self-evaluation was constructed as the policy solution. She locates Irish education policy in an international setting outlining how the introduction of data-driven school self-evaluation reflects the incorporation of international trends in Irish educational policy. Policy archaeology as a

methodology offers an interesting and unusual approach to analysing a particular policy issue, and in her article, Bailey refers to new managerialism in education, data as governance, policy sharing and policy borrowing. She poses the question whether Irish primary education has become more economy-centred as opposed to child-centred as a result of the global economic context influencing Irish social, cultural and educational contexts.

Derry O'Connor in his article focuses on the implications for leadership arising from the introduction of school self-evaluation. He describes the emergence of self-evaluation in Ireland and places its introduction in the context of international developments in school self-evaluation. By exploring the impact of school self-evaluation on leadership practice, O'Connor considers the concept of organisational learning, and the various approaches to leadership, such as transformational and transactional leadership, distributed leadership, and instructional and shared instructional leadership. He advocates a form of hybrid leadership as espoused by Gronn (2009), which acknowledges that various forms of leadership coexist in schools. He concludes that school-self-evaluation signals a major shift in the culture and practice of evaluation in schools, requiring principals also to alter their practice to meet the needs of this changed context. According to O'Connor, principal teachers play a critical role in school self-evaluation but require the appropriate resources, guidance and support. These observations are timely in a context where a moratorium on promotions in schools, in place since 2009, has significantly reduced supports for principal teachers.

The final article in this edition of the *Journal* explores the effect of fixed playground equipment on primary school children's fitness levels. A timely article in the context of current policy focus on obesity, Claire Heneghan describes how permanent playground equipment in schools can influence physical activity in children. Her research evaluated the effect of fixed playground structures on children's fitness levels during their first year in school, using the *EUROFIT* test battery consisting of five test items measuring aerobic capacity, muscular strength, and muscular endurance and flexibility. Her findings show that fitness levels were higher in the intervention school than in the control school. Though her research is a small scale study, she concludes that investing in providing fixed playground equipment in primary schools would be worthwhile.

Articles in this journal reflect the views and opinions of the authors, and not necessarily those of the INTO. The *Journal* provides an opportunity for teachers to share their research findings and to offer their colleagues some interesting and stimulating ideas to ponder. These articles are an indication of teachers' increased engagement in education research, a core dimension of professional development, an opportunity to enrich one's own understanding of teaching, whether from a practice, professional or policy perspective. The INTO is delighted to bring teachers' research to a wider audience through the publication of the *Irish Teachers' Journal*. The Organisation wishes to record its thanks to all teachers who contributed articles, and would like to encourage many more teachers to do so in the coming years.

SHEILA NUNAN,
GENERAL SECRETARY

Author Notes

Mark Morgan

Dr Mark Morgan is Professor of Education and Psychology at St Patrick's College and is acting co-director of *Growing up in Ireland*, the national longitudinal study of children. He is a graduate of the London School of Economics and a post-doctoral Fellow of Stanford University. He has been Head of Education, Dean of Education and currently teaches in the psychology degree jointly organised by DCU and St Patrick's College, as well as supervising Doctoral students.

Marie Whelton

Is léachtóir le Gaeilge í An Dr Marie Whelton in Institiúid Oideachais Marino. Údar *Teagmháil agus Tnúthán: Staidéar ar an Apastróf i bhFilíocht na Nua-Ghaeilge* (2008) agus *Nuair a Stadann an Ceol: Úrscéal don Fhoghlaimoir Fásta* (2013, 2015). I gcomhar le hAodán Mac Suibhne scríobh sí trí leabhar do mhúinteoirí bunscoile: *Cóir Ghaoithe: Cúrsa Ullmhúcháin don Scrúdú Le hAghaidh Cáilíochta sa Ghaeilge* (2006); *Í A Labhairt: Cúrsa Gaeilge Idirmheánach do Mhúinteoirí Bunscoile* (2008); agus *Sruth na Maoile: Ábhar Tacaíochta d'Oiriúnú Le hAghaidh Cáilíochta sa Ghaeilge* (2009).

Lainey Keane and Claire Griffin

Lainey Keane is a primary school teacher. She completed her 'Bachelor of Education in Education and Psychology' degree in 2014 in Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. As part of her degree, she engaged in an elective in educational assessment and also engaged in applied research in self-assessment as part of her final year Undergraduate Dissertation in Psychology. Lainey was shortlisted and highly commended in the international Undergraduate Award Competition for her essay based on her dissertation. Currently, she is working as a junior researcher with the European Federation of Psychology Students' Associations' Junior Researcher Programme.

Claire Griffin is an educational psychologist and lecturer in educational and developmental psychology at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. She is also the placement co-ordinator and supervisor of trainee educational psychologists on the Master of Arts in Educational Psychology programme. Claire is currently undertaking her PhD in Educational Psychology through the Institute of Education, University College London. Her research interests include inclusive education, assessment in education, child-centred teaching/learning and the role of the paraprofessional within the larger school system.

Barbara Collins

Barbara Collins (M.Ed.) is a primary teacher with 27 years' teaching experience. She also lectures in classroom assessment in St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Dublin 9. Barbara has carried out research in the area of Formative Assessment (Assessment for Learning) in the sociocultural learning environment. She is a student on the Ed.D Programme in St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, and is planning to carry out research in the area of teacher education, in particular pedagogies that support effective teacher learning of assessment practices.

✉ Email: author@into.ie

Susan Bailey

Susan Bailey is a primary school teacher in Rutland NS in Dublin. Susan is currently undertaking the Ed.D (Ethical Education) in St Patrick's College, Drumcondra.

Derry O'Connor

Derry O'Connor is a primary school teacher in Scoil Bhríde, Naas, Co Kildare. He graduated from Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, in 2010 and was awarded the Kieran Burke Fellowship for that year. He is currently studying for the degree of Master in Education (Leadership and Management in Education) at Trinity College, Dublin.

Claire Heneghan

Claire Heneghan graduated from Mary Immaculate College in 2007. She specialised in exercise and nutrition science after completing a Master's of Science in these subjects with the University of Chester. In 2013/2014 she worked in the University of Western Sydney lecturing in health and physical education and now works with Hibernia College in this area. She is currently teaching in Salthill, Galway and is involved in numerous health promotion initiatives in the county.

Workload, stress and resilience of primary teachers: Report of a survey of INTO members

≡ MARK MORGAN AND DEIRBHILE NIC CRAITH ≡

Abstract

The research reported in this article arises from a resolution adopted at Congress 2014 asking for research on aspects of workload and related stress of primary teachers. A questionnaire was developed focusing on teachers' perceived changes in workload and stress levels over recent years, as well as the on factors that may have made their work more or less challenging over these years. These factors include curriculum changes, administrative demands, and employment-related changes like job mobility. The results showed that the vast majority thought teaching had become more stressful. Of various factors that contributed to this change, the greater need for documentation was identified as a major issue as was the demands on schools to solve problems of concern in society. Catering for individual differences and the overcrowded curriculum were also significant contributors to stress as was the number of children with behaviour difficulties. There were substantial differences between teachers in their perceived stress levels with principal teachers, learning support/resource teachers, and teachers in multi-grade situations more likely to report being affected by increased workload. Teachers with 16-25 years' experience of teaching were more likely to report that the job had become more demanding and stressful than were teachers with fewer years' experience.

Background

The terms of reference of the research reported in this article are based on a resolution adopted at Congress, 2014, as follows: 'To research and survey the membership on all aspects of workload, expectations and work-related stress and report back to Congress 2015 with the findings... (and) to explore in the context of this research whether, given the ever-increasing performance demands for the planning and teaching of all curricular subjects, the time has come for a radical changes in the number of subjects a primary teacher is expected to assume responsibility for'. The research described examines major issues emerging in the international literature regarding teachers' workload stress, describes the methodology of a survey of INTO members and summarises the main outcomes of that research. Finally the implications of the findings are considered with particular reference to core policy issues in primary schools.

✉ Email: author@into.ie

ISSN: 2009-6860 (Print) 2009-6879 (Online)
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Research on workload stress of teachers

A significant body of international research on teacher workload stress has focused largely on the following questions: What is known about the prevalence of stress among teachers? What are the main causes of stress experienced by teachers? How can resilience be promoted?

The percentage of teachers experiencing stress is dependent on the age/gender of the teachers and on the stage of their careers. Furthermore, there are a great many potentially stressful events in any day in teaching including what would normally be categorised as 'little things' (Kitching et al., 2009). What is clear, however, is that teachers experiencing high job satisfaction and lower stress levels create a climate that is conducive to the development and maintenance of a safe, supportive learning environment where children feel cared for and respected. This in turn results in high performance expectations, commitment to the academic success of all students, and openness to parental and community-involvement (Greenberg, 2006). In looking at the causes of stress among teachers, some of the relevant influences operate across countries, some are national, other influences are local in the sense that they arise from the school community and finally some are immediate in the sense that they concern classrooms and pupils.

The drive for standards and accountability across countries is partly due to international comparisons deriving from PISA and TIMMS and has a profound impact on teachers in all countries involved in these studies. A major problem comes about because the success of an education system and the success of the teachers in each country are measured by the relative position of that country on these international comparisons. National policies are also a major influence on the work experiences of teachers, especially if higher standards and increased level of accountability are demanded (Day and Gu, 2014). Different kinds of school (privately managed vs public schools) have an impact on stress levels and there is also evidence which suggests that the school socio-economic location and environment affect teachers' stress in their working lives (Stoll and Louis, 2007). Finally, the immediate effects of classroom experiences are a major factor in workload stress. In a survey of teachers in England, nearly 40% of teachers of the 1,000 questioned had considered leaving the profession because of disruptive pupil behavior (Day and Gu, 2014).

There is a consistent line of research that suggests that a major factor in workload stress is the problematic nature of time and time shortage (Brunetti, 2006). This is especially the case when a variety of factors interfere with the time that is intended for teaching. Among the factors emerging as important are discipline problems, interruptions, extracurricular activities and excessive paperwork. A further problem is that there is no simple strategy to balance the various demands so that teachers are left to make their own decisions on how to cope – a situation that can in turn increase workload stress (Castro et al., 2010).

Recent research has focused on teacher resilience in order to understand teachers' job satisfaction and motivation (Kitching, Morgan, and O'Leary, 2009) and teacher burnout and stress (e.g. Howard and Johnson, 2004). Teacher resilience was originally conceived as relying on personal attributes only, which reflected an ability 'to bounce back' from an adverse situation. However, current research points to the dynamic nature of resilience (Day et al., 2007) and suggests that resilience itself results from the interaction between psychological,

behavioural and cognitive aspects of functioning as well as emotional regulation. There is now a consensus that the processes involved in resilience are far more complex than specific internal traits or assets. A number of recent studies have examined the factors that discriminate between resilient teachers and those who quit teaching. Hong's (2010) study explored factors such as values, self-efficacy, beliefs and emotional factors to ascertain differences between leavers and stayers – those who leave teaching and those who stay in teaching. Findings from the study reveal that despite similar interest in working as a teacher, leavers showed weaker self-efficacy beliefs than stayers, when presented with challenging circumstances. Unlike leavers, stayers often reported on effective strategies that they had developed to prevent them from being burned out. One such strategy is setting boundaries in relationships with students.

Therefore, the key themes in the international literature include the impact of constantly changing pressures in the educational systems, which is partly due to a drive for standards and accountability, and which in turn has a major impact on workload stress. There is also agreement that teacher stress has an impact not only on teachers but on pupils' well-being and achievement. Finally, an important theme concerns a variety of ways in which teachers' resilience can be developed.

Development of questionnaire

Five planning meetings were held between September and November, 2014, at which participating teachers were invited to suggest possible areas to be included in the questionnaire and to indicate whether there were particular groups of teachers for whom the issues of workload and stress were especially pertinent. There were also discussions on factors that impinge on workload including expectations, curricular change, planning demands and policy changes. The final version of the questionnaire consisted of nine sections. Sections 1, 2 and 3 were concerned with the teacher (respondent's) profile (section 1), with the school profile (section 2) and the class profile (section 3). The next section asked about changes in teaching, specifically the extent to which teaching had become more stressful, trying, hectic and/or enjoyable over the recent years, while the fifth section was concerned with various factors that may have made teaching more or less challenging. These included the issues discussed above including curriculum changes, organisational influences and employment-related changes like job mobility.

All sections of the questionnaire were in a structured format that required the respondent to 'tick' the appropriate choice. The questions involved a five choice option for each item, of which two were positive, two were negative and one was neutral. For presenting the results, the selected options were reduced to three categories, broadly positive, negative or neutral. There were also open-ended invitations for respondents to comment on any of the issues featured in the section that were relevant to them or on any other issues besides those addressed.

Results

PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

Of the 800 members to whom the questionnaire was sent in December 2014, 332 (41%) responded within the allocated time. Given the time of year and the demands on teachers and especially the frequency with which they are asked to complete questionnaires, this is a satisfactory response rate. Furthermore, the sample is broadly representative of the membership of the INTO. Just over 82% of the respondents were female and 18% male, while just under 70% qualified through the B.Ed and 29% through a post-graduate course, either in Ireland or abroad. Nearly 21% of those responding were principal teachers, 55% were class teachers and 21% were either learning support or resource teachers. The remaining minority were either home school community liaison teachers or special class teachers. As regards school location, about one-third of the respondents were in city or suburban schools, just under one third said they were in town schools and over one third worked in rural schools. Over 22% were in schools designated disadvantaged, with almost equally divided between DEIS urban band one, DEIS urban band two and DEIS rural schools. Finally, 32% of the participants in the study taught in a multi-grade situation.

WORK LOAD STRESS LEVEL AND JOB SATISFACTION

In the first substantive section of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked how their work had changed in the last five years (or since they began to teaching if less than five years) with respect to nine features, including both challenging aspects (stressful, demanding) and positive aspects (enjoyable, worthwhile). Both these scales showed a very satisfactory level of reliability; specifically the results of the statistical tests showed that those items measuring workload stress had a Cronbach alpha of .92 showing that all the items measured the same underlying construct. In the case of job satisfaction the corresponding alpha was .87, again showing that the items measured the same basic construct.

Table 1: How teaching has changed

	More/Much More	About the same	Less/much Less
Stressful	87.9	10.9	1.2
Demanding	93.4	6.6	0.0
Challenging	88.2	10.6	1.2
Hectic	91.5	7.3	1.2
Trying	77.1	19.9	3.0
Satisfying	19.2	46.4	34.4
Enjoyable	17.5	45.0	37.5
Rewarding	20.9	47.0	32.1
Worthwhile	22.5	56.1	21.4

This pattern of results shown in Table 1 suggests that without doubt the dominant view is that teaching has become more stressful in the last five years. It is especially noteworthy that the 'demanding' dimension got the very highest endorsement. Not one respondent said

that the job was less demanding than in earlier times. However, it is interesting that for most teachers these features do not detract from their job satisfaction and their view that teaching is worthwhile. The predominant view was that teaching had remained 'about the same' with regard to positive features of the work.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Many of the participants (over half) made comments regarding stress and/or job satisfaction in the open-ended section following these ratings. The most frequent of these comments concerned the ways in which the teachers were experiencing problems in maintaining the expected high standard while being required to take on additional areas of learning and responsibility. One observation was: "the additional educational initiatives put forward in recent years are not consistent with all that is required in the classroom and the problem of fitting all into a day's work, while at the same time maintaining high standards. The new initiatives are not replacing others but are additional to what is already there." Some teachers mentioned their efforts to maintain their job satisfaction in the face of the demands. "While each day brings something good to come away with, the amount of pressure from admin work makes it very difficult to teach all of the curriculum given the demands that are made on us".

Comparison of teachers in different roles

An interesting comparison can be made between principal teachers, class teachers and learning support teachers. For example, 73% of principal teachers took the view that their work had become 'much more stressful' over the last five years while the corresponding figures were 58% and 50% for resource/learning support teachers and class teachers, respectively. It is especially striking that 88% of principal teachers thought that teaching had become much more demanding in the last five years, while 74% of resource teachers and 60% of class teachers thought that this was the case. In fact not one principal teacher thought that the job was 'about the same' or 'less demanding'.

With regard to aspects of job satisfaction, the indications are that principal teachers thought that their work was resulting in less satisfaction than was the case with others. Just 44% were of the view that their work was less rewarding than some years ago, while 30% and 31% of classroom teachers and resource teachers, respectively, took that view.

Experience of teaching

There was an association between the respondents' years of experience of teaching and the extent to which they perceived their work to be stressful. Specifically, participants who had between 16 and 25 years' experience reported more stress and less satisfaction; the teachers with six years or less experience were the least stressed and were more satisfied than other respondents. For example, 78% of teachers who had 16-25 years' experience took the view that teaching had become much more stressful while this was true of only 29% of those with six years' experience or less. Similarly, 90% of the respondents with 16-25 years' experience took the view that teaching had become more demanding but only 38% of the group with

six years or less experience expressed this opinion. While the differences with regard to job satisfaction were not as great, there were still significant differences. For example, while 31% of respondents with 16-25 years' experience thought that teaching was now 'less worthwhile', this was true of only 13% of those with six years' experience or less.

Comparison of multi-grade and single classes

Differences emerged between respondents teaching in multi-grade classes and respondents in single-grade situations in relation to their experience of workload stress. Of the respondents who taught in a multi-grade situation, 71% took the view that teaching had become 'much more stressful' while only 48% of respondents in single-grade situations thought this was the case. There was also a difference between respondents in multi-grade situations and respondents in single-grade situations. In total, 74% of teachers in multi-grade classes and 63% of those in single classes noted that teaching had become much more demanding.

Table 2: Factors making teaching more or less challenging

	More/much more	Neutral	Less/much Less
Number of school subjects	75.4	23.4	1.2
The primary school curriculum	67.1	31.3	1.6
New emphasis on literacy and numeracy	77.3	16.6	6.1
Opportunities to engage in professional development	41.7	40.1	18.2
Greater demands by DES inspectors	81.6	17.5	0.9
Reporting on results of standardised tests to parents	55.0	36.6	8.4
Making provision for individual differences	93.8	4.7	1.5
Pressure to engage in CPD relevant to initiatives	71.6	22.4	6.0
Requirements for documentation relating to policies and practices	96.0	3.7	0.3
Unreasonable demands of some parents	73.2	20.3	6.5
Greater diversity among pupils	74.2	20.5	5.3
Changes in regulations on sick leave	67.1	27.9	5.0
Difficulty in getting information on issues	50.1	40.0	8.9
Number of children with behaviour difficulties	82.5	13.3	2.1
The variety of agencies with which schools have to deal	82.4	16.6	1.0
Obligations to do yard-duty	57.0	36.8	6.2
Less job mobility in teaching	57.2	37.5	5.3
Demand for school improvement plans	88.0	10.3	1.7
Demand on school to solve problems of concern in society	91.3	8.4	0.3
Challenge in finding regular employment	34.9	49.7	15.4

Factors influencing workload stress

When teachers were asked to identify the factors that have made teaching more challenging in the last five years or since they began teaching, it is interesting that a relatively small number

of issues are considered as contributing most (see Table 2). The first is the greater need for documentation regarding policies and practices and the related matter of the demand for school improvement plans. The demand on schools to solve problems that were of concern to society was thought by more than 90% of respondents to have made teaching more challenging. The requirement of teachers to cater for individual differences was regarded also as a major change that made teaching more challenging with almost 94% of respondents taking this view. Consistent with this finding, more than 82% of respondents were of the view that the number of children with behaviour difficulties in classrooms was an important factor in contributing to teaching becoming a greater challenge.

Additional comments

Respondents were invited to provide additional comments as part of the questionnaire. Over half of the sample availed themselves of this opportunity and provided additional comments – an outcome that can of itself be taken to indicate the very strong responses that this request elicited. As might be expected, many of the comments elaborated on the items in the structured part of the questionnaire. A great many remarks (over one third) underlined the effects of administrative work with a particular focus on documentation. One respondent's comment was "the amount of paperwork is killing us. Sometimes you feel it is more important than actual teaching. On some occasions, I spend more time on completing forms than on the application of the relevant policy in the school. There is a total imbalance." Another comment linked the additional admin work to the changing school population:

"No end to paperwork, documentation and writing up policies. This does not help to make teaching more relevant. The diversity and additional needs of a changing pupils population has changed what is required and in addition requires more admin work."

Other teachers mentioned the additional burden on schools in response to various problems that are perceived to be relevant in society. As one teacher said "Every challenging aspects of society is placed on the shoulders of schools." Another comment linked the demands with the ever-expanding curriculum. "When a new societal issue arises, the question is always about what schools should do. But the curriculum is already too broad with too much to do and not enough time." One respondent summed up the new demands: "schools are now expected to solve all ills in society".

The overcrowded curriculum was identified as a major issue. Sometimes, the overcrowded curriculum was linked with the need to cope with individual differences. Indeed some comments linked administration, the curriculum and the need to cater for differences:

"As well as new subjects/topics, we have to cater for a greater variety of differences among pupils. As a teaching principal the burden of all of this is logistically impossible and something has to suffer depending on which I give priority at any given time. The cascade model of disseminating information on new initiatives is a huge burden on top of all this."

Table 3: Factors to make teaching more satisfying and less stressful

	Help	Hard to say	Not help
Less requirement to document certain school activities	91.0	4.1	4.9
Reinstatement of promotional positions	93.0	4.8	2.2
Reduction in curriculum overload	93.1	3.8	3.1
Enhanced policies to protect teachers' welfare	91.9	5.7	2.4
More time for planning at school level	90.4	4.8	4.8
Better support services for children with special needs	98.8	1.6	0.6
Adequate funding for classroom resources	97.4	1.6	1.0
Having suitable school buildings and environment	96.2	2.2	1.6
Having adequate funding for running schools	98.0	1.6	0.4
Recognising the importance of teachers' well-being for pupils' success and well-being	93.4	4.7	1.9

Making teaching less stressful

In the last sections of the questionnaire, the teachers were asked about changes that would increase job satisfaction and make teaching less stressful. The results which are summarised in Table 3 focus on those factors where there is almost unanimous agreement in the sense that over 90% of the participants took the view that these changes would help. A number of themes emerge. As might be expected, given the earlier results, there was a consensus that a lesser requirement to document certain school activities would help greatly. It is likely that the perceived need for the reinstatement of promotional positions is related to this factor. Another point of consensus is the need for more time for planning at school level.

As might be expected, curricular issues emerged as important. There was agreement that a reduction in curriculum overload would help to make teaching more satisfying and less stressful. Furthermore, there was virtually unanimous agreement that 'better support for children with special needs' would help. At a more general level, there was a consensus among the respondents that there was a need for enhanced policies to protect teachers' welfare. In support of the view, there was a strong belief that there was a need to recognise the importance of teachers' well-being for the benefit of pupils' success and well-being.

It is worth looking at other issues where there is a contrasting picture (not shown in Table 3). When respondents were asked whether 'giving less importance to standardised tests' would assist in reducing workload, less than two-thirds thought that this might help. While this is a substantial number of respondents, it is significantly less than the number of respondents who supported a reduction in curriculum workload and more support for children with special educational needs. There was also support for the suggestion that it would be helpful if principal teachers were given the option of stepping down, with a similar percentage of the view it would be helpful.

Additional comments

When the respondents were invited to make additional comments, over 200 did so with regard to ways of reducing stress and enhancing job satisfaction. As might be expected given the results of the structured questions, many of the comments were concerned with documentation and policy development. As one respondent said, "there should be less requirements for documentation and instead have a dedicated time for planning in the school day as well as fewer initiatives". In line with this comment another teacher said that "teachers spend far too much time worrying about planning, both short and long-term planning. Teaching should be about children and not planning".

There were several comments about ways in which the well-being of teachers could be enhanced. Furthermore, some respondents mentioned the benefits of well-being for all. As one teacher said: "there is a real need to recognise that teachers' well-being is crucial not only for their own professional development but also for the success and well-being of the children". Another point made in relation to well-being was the need to recognise the diligence of teachers and the time they spend on planning and preparation. One comment was: "Teachers work far beyond what is expected and there are no bonuses or time in lieu. Furthermore there is a need to acknowledge the tense relationships that can sometimes build up with parents".

Some of the comments referred to the challenge of coping with individual differences especially given large classes. As one respondent said: "With more children now presenting with symptoms of autism, other special needs as well as non-national language issues... we need less children in classes and more resource hours, for almost everyone in the class". Many referred to the various distractions that get in the way of teaching. One comment was "I just want to get on with my job and teach. The endless paperwork is a major problem. As a teacher in a small school, there are issues of class size in a multi-class situation and the needless red tape is not top of my list".

There were a number of comments on issues to do with the funding of schools. One respondent commented on the lack of funding for schools: "The funding for running schools and maintaining a suitable standard of accommodation is a major issue". Another respondent commented that, "maintenance of IT equipment within the school is important". Other comments were concerned with the requirement of schools to be involved in activities to raise funds, for example: "Schools are running on empty financially. It is dreadful that we need to raise money through Christmas raffles in order to pay for the heating". The comments of one teacher reflected the sentiments of many:

"The level of bureaucratisation of schools and the degree to which teaching has become governed by policies is soul-destroying. Teacher discretion, teacher autonomy and teacher professional experiences are now being increasingly suspended in favour of policies and box ticking. Back off and let us teach!"

Summary and implications

The vast majority of the respondents to the questionnaire took the view that teaching has become more stressful in the last five years and over 93% thought that the work of teachers had become more demanding. Of the various factors that contributed to this increase in stress, the greater need for documentation was identified as a major issue. Furthermore, the demand on schools to solve problems of concern in society was considered an important influence in making teaching more challenging and stressful. Catering for individual differences was also significant as was the number of children with behaviour difficulties.

There are quite large differences between teachers in relation to their experiences of stress that were related to their position in schools. Just half of the class teachers thought that teaching had become much more stressful but nearly three-quarters of principal teachers were of this view. More learning support/resource teachers than class teachers thought that teaching had become much more stressful, but the number was less than the number of principal teachers who held this view. There is a similar pattern of results in relation to the statement that teaching is 'becoming much more demanding', while taking into account the much higher overall percentages of respondents who endorsed this view. It is noteworthy that a very high percentage of principal teachers took the view that teaching had become much more demanding in the last five years; in fact no principal teachers thought that the job was about the same or less demanding.

There was also an association between experience of stress and teaching experience; teachers who were relatively new to the system tended to be perceived as less stressed. However, what is especially noteworthy is that teachers with 16-25 years' experience were more likely than other groups to take the view that the job had come more stressful/demanding. Teachers in multi-grade classes were also more likely to indicate that their work had become much more stressful and demanding than was the case with teachers in a single-grade situation.

The results considered above strongly indicate that teachers' work has indeed become more stressful in the last five years. However, respondents also suggest ways in which this has happened and by implication some of the changes that are especially important. A major factor is the increased workload associated with administration thus making teaching more bureaucratic. The other major factor that has increased stress is the greater demands to solve problems that have their origin in societal concerns. On the other hand, some other changes, especially some central policy changes, such as the national strategy on literacy and numeracy and the use of standardised tests in schools, are not regarded as causing the same level of stress. Changing them would not help greatly to enhance job satisfaction. It is also of interest that catering for children with special needs was considered by respondents as being especially worthy of further support.

It is striking that as a result of the changes associated with workload stress, teachers perceived themselves to be less in control and also that their professional expertise was being downplayed. They were very highly motivated to be involved in planning in their own schools and wanted opportunities and time to make this happen.

It could be said that the main factors involved in teachers' workload stress are outside the educational realm and are determined largely by thinking, partly socio-political in nature,

regarding how to deal with complex issues. In other words, the matters that emerged as stressful are not issues that are based on evidence regarding how the system is performing or even based on a value judgement about what is needed in the system. There is concern about greater accountability of teachers which is to be established through more detailed documentation. What is significant is that the demand for increased documentation is likely to be perceived as evidence of greater accountability on behalf of teachers and a diminution of professional trust. This development, in turn, is likely to have a knock-on effect on morale which also affects stress levels.

Similarly, it is not obvious that schools should have the primary responsibility for dealing with problems in society; rather it seems that there are no other institutions or structures that might take responsibility for these complex matters. What is worth serious consideration is how children could be equipped in a broad sense for the ever-changing challenges in the wider society rather than simply attempt to deal with new concerns as they occur. This approach would help to deal with an overcrowded curriculum but would also equip children with a range of socio-emotional and cognitive competencies that have long-term benefits.

Conclusions

A number of important conclusions emerge from the research reported here. Firstly, it is evident that primary teachers are still enthusiastic and motivated in their work and ready to work hard to provide the learning experiences that are crucial to their pupils. Teachers are not unduly discouraged by some of the difficulties that are encountered in achieving positive outcomes for pupils. Secondly, it is clear that some demands that are made on schools result in teachers becoming frustrated, especially when these requirements are not perceived to enhance children's learning and achievement. An issue that emerged consistently in this research was the need for documentation. There was also a major concern about new topics in the curriculum, since the addition of such work has the effect of making an overloaded curriculum quite unmanageable. A third important finding concerns principal teachers' role; the demands have increased very substantially but without the necessary supports being put in place.

This research provides a starting point for further investigation of the issues raised. It is crucial that the nature of the documentation being sought from teachers is examined further with a view to discerning which aspects are crucial and which can be simplified or omitted. There is also a need to examine which aspects of principal teachers' work is causing the most serious challenges. This will allow for proposals on how appropriate supports could be put in place.

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Oide agus File: Gnéithe den teagasc agus den fhoghlaim i sampláil ionadaíoch de nua-fhilíocht le múinteoirí scoile, 1930-2010

≡ MARIE WHELTON ≡

Achoimre/Abstract

Sa pháipéar seo, trí úsáid a bhaint as bunanailís théacsúil, scrúdófar sampláil ionadaíoch de dhánta ón tréimhse 1930-2010. Téann na dánta go léir i ngleic le téama an teagaisc agus na foghlama, agus, is dánta iad le filí Gaeilge a bhí ina múinteoirí bunscoile, nó ina múinteoirí meánscoile, ar feadh tréimhse, nó ar feadh a saoil ghairmiúil ar fad.

In this paper, a representative sampling of poems from the period 1930-2010 will be examined using basic textual analysis. The poems deal with the theme of teaching and learning, and, all of the poems were authored by Irish-Language poets who were primary, or secondary, teachers for all, or part, of their professional lives.

Eochairfhocail: an múinteoir mar scríbhneoir cruthaitheach, téama an oideachais san fhilíocht, insintí liteartha ar oideachas

Réamhrá

Tá fiúntas na filíochta Gaeilge mar fhoinsé d'insintí ar chúrsaí oideachais léirithe ag Caoimhe Máirtín i staidéar ceannródaíoch ar an scoil agus an scolaíocht i litríocht na Gaeilge. Ina staidéar, bailíonn Máirtín an t-iliomad foinsí neamhfhoirmiúla agus liteartha le chéile a bhfuil tábhacht ag baint leo do thaighdeoirí oideachais (Máirtín, 2003). Díríonn a taighde ar fhoinsí a bhaineann go háirithe leis na blianta idir 1800 agus 1930. Maidir leis an tréimhse ó 1930 ar aghaidh, tá dhá staidéar bheaga déanta ar théama an oideachais san fhilíocht. Sa chéad áit, tá alt Tom Mullins a dhíríonn ar an litríocht Angla-Éireannach (Mullins, 1996) agus, sa dara háit, tá aiste réamhráiteach le Máirín Nic Eoin ina bpléann sí le téama an oideachais mar chuid dá plé ar théamaí óige agus caidrimh teaghlaigh (Nic Eoin, 2010). Is beag aird scolártha atá faighte, áfach, ag an bhfilíocht a scríobhann údair a chleachtann gairm na múinteoireachta iad féin. Ar an ábhar sin, seachas díriú ar fhilíocht le filí iomráiteacha, déanfar bunanailís théacsúil sa pháipéar seo ar shampláil ionadaíoch de dhánta, ón tréimhse dhéanach sin, ar théama an teagaisc agus na foghlama le filí Gaeilge a bhí ina múinteoirí bunscoile, nó ina múinteoirí meánscoile, ar feadh tréimhse, nó ar feadh a saoil ghairmiúil ar fad. Is léir, dá bhrí sin, nach ar son a gcáilíochtaí liteartha a roghnaíodh na dánta a phléifear

✉ Email: author@into.ie

ISSN: 2009-6860 (Print) 2009-6879 (Online)
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thíos, ach ar son a bhfiúntais do Léann an Oideachais. Nuair a chuir mé romham struchtúr a chur ar an bpáipéar, ba léir go bhféadfaí na dánta a rangú de réir thrí ghné uilíocha de théama an oideachais. Sa chéad roinn is é aoibhneas agus taitneamh an teagaisc agus na foghlama is mó a thagann chun cinn. Sa dara roinn, is iad na dúshláin a bhíonn le sárú ag múinteoirí agus ag foghlaimeoirí atá á bplé agus sa tríú roinn, tá sraith de dhánta a dhéanann ceiliúradh ar oidí agus ar oideachasóirí ar leith. Bheadh sé spéisiúil an léargas thíos a shuíomh i gcomhthéacs an traidisiúin fhileata ina iomláine ach ceal spáis, is ábhar ann féin é sin a scrúdóidh an t-údar in alt eile amach anseo.

Aoibhneas an teagaisc agus na foghlama

Tá go leor dánta ag na hoidí-fhilí ina bpléitear le haoibhneas an teagaisc agus na foghlama. Cuid acu tá siad ró-urramach agus ró-mhaoithneach. Sa chuid seo pléifear le cúig dhán le ceathrar filí éagsúla a thabharfaidh blaiseadh den ghné sin den fhilíocht.

Machnamh ar uaisleacht, aoibhneas agus uaigneas cheird an oide is ea ‘An tOide’ (Ó hAodha, 1966, lch 14), le Séamas Ó hAodha¹. Dán dea-dhéanta struchtúrtha is ea é agus osclaíonn gach véarsa le ráiteas a dhearbhaíonn gach ceann de na tréithe sin faoi seach (‘Uasal ceird an oide... Aoibhinn ceird an oide... Uaigneach ceird an oide’), ansin, leantar gach ráiteas le samhail éagsúil. Sa chéad cheann déantar comparáid idir oide agus rí a chuireann a chuid bád san fharrage agus a sheolann iad ó fhothain na bá amach go dtí an t-aigéan mór. Is féidir leis an rí a chuid soitheach a fheiceáil agus a thionlacan ar feadh tamaillín ach ansin bíonn air fanacht ar an mórthír ina ndiaidh. Íomhá mheánaoiseach go leor is ea íomhá an rí, ach is íomhá chumasach í sa mhéid go léiríonn sé go samhlaítear ginealach ríoga leis an oide agus stádas uasal dá réir. Tugann an t-oide ceannasaíocht dheoranta, agus cé go mbíonn gaol aige leis na páistí, tá sé scoite amach uathu. Is íomhá álainn é an loingeas bád, freisin, do na páistí atá ar snámh i mbá na scoile agus a sheolann i bhfochair a chéile, ach fós go neamhspleách, i dtreo an domhain mhóir. Ar deireadh thiar bíonn orthu a mbealach féin a dhéanamh trí dhoineann agus trí shoineann na farraige (‘Mar rí ar imeall trá/Chuir ar toinn na soithigh/‘Sheol go hoscailt bá.’). Tá an dara samhail níos créúla agus an uair seo, samhlaítear ról níos gníomhaí ag an oide. Deirtear go bhfuil an t-oide cosúil le garraíodóir i lár an tsamhraidh a aistríonn a chuid bláthanna ó theas an ghrianáin go dtí an chré chrua agus an aeráid nádúrtha. Músclaíonn an chosúlacht sin íomhá de gharraíodóir a bhaineann taitneamh as aire mhaith a thabhairt do gach planda. Ardaíonn sé a chroí a bheith á n-uisciú agus á dtabhairt ar aghaidh lá i ndiaidh lae, go dtí go mbíonn na bláthanna sciámhacha réidh agus aibí go leor don saol lasmuigh. Tríd an gcomparáid seo léirítear imshaol na scoile mar ghrianán ina bhfásann agus ina mbláthaíonn an páiste faoi chaoinchúram an oide. Ullmhaítear na páistí sa ghrianán don saol os a gcomhair amach agus tugann sé aoibhneas don oide iad a fheiceáil ag teacht in inmhe (‘Mar gharnóir lá Iúil/D’aistrigh sciámh na scoithe/Ó ghrianán go huir’). Is féidir go bhfuil an iomarca den mhaoithneachas sa tsamhail dheireanach ina ndéantar comparáid idir an t-oide agus máthair atá fágtha ina haonar tar éis imeacht a clainne ó thairseach theach an teaghlaigh (‘Mar mháithrín léi féin/tar éis imeacht a clainne...’). Is cinnte, áfach, go léiríonn an tsamhail sin go mbíonn ról ag an oide mar threoraí aireach agus mar chúramaí grámhar i saol an pháiste. Bíonn an t-oide cosúil le

tuismitheoir a thugann beatha don pháiste, a chothaíonn agus a oileann é/í agus a mhóthaíonn cumha nuair a fhásann an páiste agus nuair a fhágann sé/sí an scoil. Ar an iomlán is íomhá dhearfach den oide agus de ghairm an oide a chruthaíonn an dán seo ach ní shéantar, san am céanna, na dúshláin mhothálacha a bhíonn le sárú ag múinteoirí de bharr thimthriall na scoilbhliana, imeacht an ama agus fhás an pháiste.

Íomhá dhearfach de shaol an oide a eascraíonn, freisin, as an dán 'Eibhlín' (Dáibhís, 1989, lch 21) le Bríd Dáibhís². Cailín beag amháin is ábhar den dán agus tar éis di a hainm a lua, déanann an file cur síos ar charachtar an pháiste le ceithre aidiacht éagsúla. Gabhann na haidiachtaí íomhá de pháiste atá lán d'fhuinneamh spontáineach. Tá sí cosúil le féileacán álainn éadrom a eitlíonn ó bhláth go bláth agus í lán de spraoi agus de mheidhir na hóige ('Eibhlín/Treilleseánach,/Féileacánach,/Meidhreach, guagach.'). Sa dara rann léiríonn an file tuiscint ar bhríomhaireacht agus ar fhiosracht nádúrtha an chailín. Tá beogacht spleodrach sna briathra a roghnaíonn an file ('Bonsaíonn...Preabann...brúnn') chun gníomhartha an chailín sa seomra ranga a léiriú. Leanann sí an chailc a thiteann ar an urlár agus tugann sí faoina cuid suimeanna le fonn. Bíonn a cuid fiacla á mbrú aici ar a beola le bís chun foghlama ('Bonsaíonn thar an urlár/Le titim na cailce./Preabann a súile in airde/In amhras di/Faoi 6+9,/Agus brúnn a cár/Ar a beol/Le sceitimíní.'). Ligeann an file don chailín labhairt léi agus éistean an múinteoir lena cuid scéalta. Insíonn an cailín di faoi na tascanna beaga a dhéanann sí sa bhaile dá máthair ('Deir sí liom/ Go gcruinníonn sí/...Na huibhe glana bána'). Is léir go dtuigeann an múinteoir gur saibhre an fhoghlaim nuair a fhéachtar ar shaol an teaghligh agus ar shaol na scoile mar chontanam foghlama, agus nuair atá leanúnachas agus dlúth-chomhoibriú idir an baile agus an scoil. Trí éisteacht lena cuid cainte, tugann an múinteoir cead don pháiste a gar-imshaol agus a heispéireas baile a thabhairt isteach sa seomra ranga. Ach ní hí tuiscint an mhúinteora amháin atá múscaillte ag an gcaoilín óg. Cé go bhfuil an múinteoir ag iarraidh a bheith stuama agus socair os comhair ranga, meallann an cailín í lena súile gliondracha agus 'cnagann' sí ar 'bhlaosc' thanaí na stuaimhe sin. Ba bhreá leis an múinteoir ciseán lán an chailín a fheiceáil di féin, ba bhreá léi lúcháir shaol an pháiste a bhlaiseadh. Is léir ón dán go dtéann eispéireas an chailín i bhfeidhm go mór ar a múinteoir agus nach próiseas foghlama aon-treo (múinteoir-páiste) atá ar siúl, ach go bhfuil samhlaíocht an mhúinteora á hadhaint ag an bpáiste, leis ('Nár mhéanar dom/A feiscint/I mbun ciseáin/Is plaosc mo stuaimhe/Á cnagadh aici siúd/Le súileoga an tsonais.').

Mar is dual d'fhilíocht Bhríd Dháibhís trí chéile, tá snáth reiligiúnach ag sníomh tríd an dán 'Ealaín na bPáistí' (Dáibhís, 1999, lch 49) leis. Is apastróf phaidriúil é an dán ina labhraíonn múinteoir le Dia ag deireadh lá fliuch scoile. Insíonn an múinteoir dá héisteoir diaga gur séimhe fuaim na báistí dá cluasa ná an gleo a bhí á dhéanamh ag na páistí agus iad i ngéibheann ag an aimsir sa scoil. I gcodarsnacht le hidéalachas an dáin atá díreach pléite, tá macántacht réalaíocht i gcaint an mhúinteora sa dán seo. Ligeann sí osna uailbhreasach fhaoisimh aisti ag deireadh an chéad véarsa, a léiríonn go bhfáiltíonn sí go mór roimh an gciúnas ag deireadh an lae ('Is ciúine go mór do mo chluasa/Clagarnach na bpáistí ar an díon/Is ar an gclós amuigh/Ná rúille búille an lae/Agus na daltaí istigh,/Óró, a Dhia, an suaimhneas!'). Is léir ón dara agus ón tríú rann, áfach, nach bhfuil a lá oibre críochnaithe go fóill don mhúinteoir, agus, cé go bhfuil sos á fháil aici ó fhothram na bpáistí, go n-úsáideann sí a cuid saor-ama chun féachaint ar iarrachtaí cruthaitheacha an ranga. I dtearmann an

chiúnais, féachann sí go haireach, agus go tuisceanach, ar an ealaín agus díorthaíonn sí léargas ar a bpearsantachtaí agus ar a gcroíthe uaithi ('Anois, tig liom gleoiteacht a gcroíthe/Do thuiscint gan dithneas'). Is rílér ón tagairt sin do chroíthe na bpáistí go dtugann sí spás ina seomra ranga don eispéireas aeistéitiúil agus go bhfeiceann sí a thábhacht i bhforbairt shamhlaíoch agus mhothálach an pháiste. Sa chomparáid a dhéanann sí idir na páistí agus an diabhal/na haingil ('Is déantar eítí de na hadharca'), léiríonn sí tuiscint mhacánta arís, ar chastacht ilchineálach iompar an pháiste, ach dearbhaíonn sí, san am céanna, a maitheas bhunúsach eisintiúil. Is iad dea-thréithe na bpáistí is mó a thagann chun suntais san ealaín di agus sáraíonn na dea-thréithe sin na dúshláin a thug siad di i rith an lae. Glacann sí am chun féachaint ar na hiarrachtaí agus baineann sí pléisiúr agus taitneamh as an léargas gleoite a nochtann na píosaí ealaíne di. Tá urraim á léiriú aici ar thorthaí an lae ('Agus ligim le racht mo mheasa'). Ag an deireadh casann sí go comhráiteach i dtreo Dé chun an gliondar a mhúsclaíonn na páistí inti a roinnt leis. Sna línte deireanacha, is léir go bhféachann an múinteoir ar na páistí mar chuid d'ealaín aoibhinn Dé agus cé nach bhfuil buíochas luaite, tugann sí aitheantas domhain do Dhia mar chruthaitheoir an aoibhnis chéanna ('Roinnim leat mo lúcháir/De bharr an aoibhnis/A chruthaigh tú tríothu').

An bhreisfhoghlaim a dhéanann daltaí meánscoile agus iad ar thuras scoile i gcéin san Iodáil atá mar théama sa dán fada prósuil 'Ar Cuairt in Assisi' (Ó Cearbhaill, 1998, lgh 72-75) le Seán E. Ó Cearbhaill³. In alt faoi fhilíocht Uí Chearbhaill luann Liam Prút gur filíocht 'ghrá, taistil agus chreidimh' (Prút, 1996, lch 303 agus Prút, 2005, lgh ix-xxviii) í a chuid filíochta agus is cinnte go dtagann an cuardach ar ghrá Dé, an grá don duine daonna agus áilleacht na hIodáile chun solais sa dán seo. Peannphictiúr is ea é ina dtugann an file tuairisc ar chuairt ar áit bheannaithe. Tá an tuairisc cosúil leis na tuairiscí a chuirtear ar chártaí poist nó i ndialann saoire. Is léir ón rann deireanach go bhfuil an áit, agus Naomh Proinsias féin, tar éis dul i bhfeidhm ar dhaltaí scoile Choláiste Eoin agus Choláiste Íosagáin ('Assisi/i ndeireadh lae:/mar a bhí/mar a bheas.../is cailíní agus buachaillí as Éirinn/faoi dhraíocht/don chéad uair riamh.../ag a naofacht...'). Tá luachanna séimhe an Naoimh le cloisteáil, fiú sa tslí a labhraíonn siad lena chéile 'go bog-ghlórach...os íseal'. Eispéireas saibhir foghlama atá curtha ar fáil do na déagóirí. Is eispéireas é a dhaingníonn na naisc stairiúla idir Éire agus cultúr na hEorpa, ach is eispéireas coincreíteach spioradálta é, freisin. Faigheann na déagóirí blaiseadh de thraidisiún cráifeach amháin, de luachanna an traidisiúin sin agus de dhe-shampla simplí bhunaitheoir an traidisiúin chéanna. Éascaitheoir is ea an múinteoir, agus an scoil, a chuireann an deis ar fáil agus a dhéanann na déagóirí a thionlacan ar a n-oilithreach, ach is iad na daltaí a chuardaíonn, agus is í an áit agus scéal an Naoimh a mhúineann an chríonnacht.

Tagann foghlaim na Gaeilge chun cinn uaireanta mar théama i bhfilíocht na n-oidí. Sampla amháin is ea an dán 'Mar a Bheidh' (Prút, 1994, lch 42), le Liam Prút⁴, atá scríofa san aimsir fháistineach ar fad. Tugann an dán guth don mhian atá ag an gcainteoir a bheith ina chainteoir dúchais a tógadh le Gaeilge ón gliabhán. Samhlaíonn sé an chéad saol eile agus deir sé go dtiocfaidh sé ar an saol, an uair sin, i gceartlár shaol na Gaeltachta. Beidh bríomhaireacht na canúna áitiúla aige agus is é léamh an Bhéarla an t-aon Bhéarla a bheidh aige. Freastalóidh sé ar an bpobalscoil áitiúil, áit a bhfoghlaimeoidh sé ábhair phraiticiúla, ceirdeanna an cheantair agus an Béarla labhartha. Ó thaobh fhealsúnacht an oideachais de,

is léir go gcuireann an dán sin leis an argóint gur treise an dúchas ná an oiliúint. Cé gur féidir leis an duine a tógadh le Béarla an Ghaeilge a fhoghlaim, creideann an t-urlabhraí nach sáraíonn foghlaim na leabhar an fhoghlaim a tharlaíonn sa teaghlach agus sa phobal áitiúil agus santaíonn sé an nádúrthacht, an éascaíocht agus an fhéiniúlacht a thagann le Gaeilge a bheith agat ó dhúchas.

Dúshlám don teagasc agus don fhoghlaim

Sé dhán a phléifear sa chuid seo den pháipéar. Tabharfar faoi deara nach bhfuil na dánta sa chuid seo chomh maoithneach agus go dtéann siad i ngleic leis na fadhbanna agus na deacrachtaí a bhíonn le sárú ag múinteoirí scoile.

Ceann de na dúshláin is mó atá le sárú ag múinteoirí i gCórás Oideachais na hÉireann sa mhílaois nua ná dúshlán an ilchultúrachais sa seomra ranga. Baineann sé le dlúth agus le hinneach Churaclam na Bunscoile go ndéanann múinteoirí gach iarracht idirdhealú ionas go bhfaigheann páistí ó chultúir éagsúla na deiseanna céanna foghlama agus ionas go ndéantar an éagsúlacht eitneach, an éagsúlacht theangúil agus an éagsúlacht chultúrtha a urramú agus a cheiliúradh. Le níos mó ná céad bliain anuas, áfach, tá múinteoirí ó Éirinn agus go háirithe baill de na hoird reiligiúnacha idir mhisinéirí agus oibríthe cabhracha, tar éis tréimhsí a chaitheamh ag múineadh i gcultúir atá iomlán difriúil ó chultúr na hÉireann. Is é an Bráthair Críostaí, Liam Ó hÁinle⁵, thar aon fhile eile a thugann guth don 'ding thraschultúrtha' (Prút, 2006, lch 59) sin ina chuid filíochta. Sa dán 'Teannas Teanga' (Ó hÁinle, 1999, lch 80), mar shampla, tugtar léargas ar eispéireas an mhúinteora a chaitheann tréimhse ag múineadh san Afraic. Is é an múinteoir, seachas an páiste, a bhaineann leis an gcultúr iasachta agus is iad na dúshláin teanga a bhíonn le sárú aige ina sheomra ranga atá á bplé. Déanann sé comparáid idir an t-eispéireas a bhíonn aige agus an t-eispéireas a bhíonn ag an duine a dhéanann iarracht abhainn a thrasnú 'ar chlocha cora'. Léiríonn an meafar sin go mbaineann teannas drámata le foghlaim agus le hionramháil teanga nua os comhair páistí – is beag bá agus comhthuiscint a léiríonn siad dó mar fhoghlaiméir. Agus é ag iarraidh é féin a chur in iúl i dteanga dhúchais na bpáistí, bíonn sé 'ag faire de shíor' ar na focail a úsáideann sé agus tuigeann sé gur féidir titim 'go tobann in uiscí na scige' de bharr dhéfhíús fuaime agus mhíthuiscintí brí.

Sa dán 'Coilínachas' (Ó hÁinle, 1996, lch 65), téann an file céanna, Liam Ó hÁinle, i ngleic le dúshlán an domhandaithe (globalisation) agus leis an tionchar a bhíonn ag luachanna an Iarthair ar fhéiniúlacht an pháiste san Afraic. Labhraíonn an file go díreach le buachaill óg. Trí thagairt a dhéanamh do ghruaig an bhuachalla ('A gharsúirín cheannchataigh') cuireann sé béim ar eitneacht Afracach an pháiste, agus, trí iarraidh air a chóipleabhar a thógáil amach as a 'mháilín plaisteach' tarraingíonn sé aird ar nósanna ar leith na tíre – ní tiachóg ná mála scoile atá ag an bpáiste ach mála neamhshofaisticiúil feidhmiúil. In ainneoin chomharthaí féiniúlachta na hAfraice a bheith le feiceáil sa seomra ranga, is pictiúr de theach mór, ar stíl iasachta, atá tarraingthe i gcóipleabhar an pháiste agus músclaíonn sé sin alltacht sa mhúinteoir ('Cén diabhal duine a línigh duit/an teach mór iasachta ceannsinne/nach bhfaca do shúile a shamhailsin cheana?'). Iarrann sé ar an bpáiste teacht chuige - cuireann sé béim ar an bhféiniúlacht, arís, trí ainm Afracach an pháiste a lua

ina iomláine ('Tabo Kaingu') – agus molann sé dó a bheith dílis dá thaithí féin agus 'Likambi' (teach beag dúchasach de chuid na Saimbia) a líonadh ina chóipleabhar. Ag deireadh an dán tá cúig líne ina ndéanann an file ceiliúradh ar an teach dúchasach. Labhraíonn sé, i bhfoirm apastróife, leis an Likambi agus tugann sé stádas suaitheantais dó ('a fhíor-dheilbh de Nua-Saimbia'). Nochtann sé go bhfuil cion mór aige féin ar an gcineál tí ('is geal lem chroí do mhór-mheangadh...'), agus, trí chomparáid a dhéanamh idir an teach agus síol mine, éiríonn leis óigeantacht chríonna an tí a luacháil. Fágann sé an léitheoir le híomhá de lonnaíocht iomlán de na tithe dúchasacha tríd an bhfocal 'both-bhaile' a úsáid. Is cinnte go mbraitheann an múinteoir sa dán go bhfuil ról lárnach aige mar oideachasóir i gcaomhnú féiniúlachta atá i mbaol a cailte agus go ndéanann sé iarracht mhór feasacht a dhála a ardú faoina chultúr féin agus go háirithe faoi shaibhreas a oidhreacht ailtireachta náisiúnta. Aithníonn sé go bhfuil teannas ann idir an fhéiniúlacht nua-aimseartha dhomhanda agus an fhéiniúlacht náisiúnta. Tá an chuma ar chaint an mhúinteora uaireanta, áfach, go bhfuil sé ag caitheamh i ndiaidh ré órga, agus cé nach luaitear an bochtanas d'fhéadfaí a áitiú go bhfuil a rian ar na tagairtí don 'mhála plaisteach' agus don 'bhoth-bhaile' a ndéanann an cainteoir rómánsú áirithe orthu. Más 'coilíneachas' a shamhlaítear leis an gcultúr domhanda, is féidir gurb í an easpa maoinne a shamhlaíonn an páiste leis an rud traidisiúnta Afracach. Sa chomhthéacs sin, ní miste a rá go bhfuil ábhar den mhaoithneachas le haithint ar an dán agus gur laige ar an dán í nach dtéann sé i ngleic leis an mbagairt a thugann an bochtanas d'fhéiniúlacht chultúrtha an pháiste ná leis na dúshlán a chruthaíonn sé sin don mhúinteoir atá ag obair sa chuid sin den domhan atá i mbéal a forbartha.

Is eol do gach oideachasóir, sa lá atá inniu ann, gur mó an bhaint atá ag an mbainistíocht ranga le dea-ullmhúchán an mhúinteora, le modh an aoibhnis agus le cothú spéise ná le srianadh dhroch-iompar an pháiste. Ina ainneoin sin, bíonn ar gach múinteoir déileáil le hiompar fadhbach ó am go chéile agus bíonn air nó uirthi straitéisí agus scileanna a fhorbairt chun aghaidh a thabhairt ar dhúshlán an smachta. In 'Graffiti' (Collinge, 2007, lch 29), le Declan Collinge⁶, ní hamháin go mbíonn ar an múinteoir déileáil le drochiompar a chuid mac léinn, ach bíonn air déileáil, freisin, leis an masla fíorphearsanta a thugann siad dó. I leithreas na scoile, feiceann an múinteoir go bhfuil a chuid mac léinn tar éis graffiti dubh a scríobh ar an mballa. Fógraíonn an scríbhneoireacht dhubh gur 'muc' é an múinteoir. Ní ghlannann an múinteoir an scríbhneoireacht den bhaile láithreach, áfach, agus ní thugann sé aísfhreagra feargach do na scríbhneoirí. Stopann sé, agus déanann sé a chuid machnaimh. Smaoiníonn sé ar mhuca cáiliúla na litríochta ('Ní raibh teorainn le dásacht thorc Bhinne Gulbain...Ná muca Orwell féin...') agus ar fhocail Oscar Wilde ('Nach bhfuil rud níos measa ná neamhaird'). Sa chaoi sin, éiríonn leis moladh a aimsiú sa mhasla agus éiríonn leis greann a dhéanamh de féin agus "d'ealaín dhubh" na ndaltaí ('Is fear le seift mé le muc ar gach mala agam/ A dhéanfaidh scrios choíche ar lucht na healaíne duibhe!').

Cosúil le Declan Collinge, pléann Colette Nic Aodha⁷ freisin, leis an ngéarchritic a dhéanann a cuid mac léinn uirthi. Ina dán 'An Rang' (Nic Aodha, 1998, lch 34), tugann sí guth don neirbhís a mhothaíonn sí nuair a fheiceann sí na daltaí ag déanamh scrúdaithe ar a cuid éadaí agus ar a cuid gruaige ('Nuair a bhreathnaíonn siad orm/Chomh géar sin,...Nuair a scrúdaíonn siad m'éadaí,/Nuair a scrúdaíonn siad mo chuid gruaige –/Ní fheadar ar nigh sí ar maidin í'). Is iomaí oideachasóir atá tar éis scríobh faoin bhfaitíos a

bhaineann leis an teagasc i gcoitinne. Dar le Richard Elmore, mar shampla, ní bhíonn sé éasca ar dhuine a (h)eolas, a p(h)earsantacht agus a (h)ego a nochtadh go poiblí agus go rialta don ghrinn-iniúchadh (luaite in Showalter, 2002, lch 4) agus tagraíonn Jane Tompkins, freisin, don inní a bhíonn ar mhúinteoirí nach nglacfaidh a gcuid mac léinn leo (luaite in Showalter, 2002, lch 3; Tompkins, 1990). Go paradacsúil, is í somhealltacht agus mothaolacht na bpáistí is mó a chuireann faitíos ar Colette Nic Aodha ('Ach, níos measa fós,/Nuair a chreideann siad mé/Chomh héasca sin,/Bíonn faitíos orm'). Léiríonn an dán ina iomláine go ngabhann défhiús áirithe leis an gcaidreamh múinteoir-páiste agus go mbaineann inní leis an teacht i láthair os comhair páistí dá bharr, ach ní faitíos stáitse amháin a thugann ábhar inní don mhúinteoir áirithe seo ach an tionchar ollmhór fadtéarmach a bhíonn aici ar na páistí.

Tá ionad lárnach ag an measúnú i bpróiseas an teagaisc agus na foghlama. Is iondúil go ndéanann oideachasóirí idirdhealú idir an 'measúnú den fhoghlaim' agus an 'measúnú don fhoghlaim'. De ghnáth, samhlaítear an 'measúnú den fhoghlaim' leis an scrúdú foirmiúil agus uaireanta tugtar 'measúnú suimitheach' air sin. Is í an phríomhaidhm a bhíonn leis ná gnóthachtáil an fhoghlaimeora a mheas agus a thuairisciú i bhfoirm mharcanna ag deireadh cúrsa. Scrúdú suimitheach is ea scrúdú béil Gaeilge agus is é sin is ábhar den dán, 'An Cheist' (Ó Tuathail, 1992, lch 66), le Ruaidhrí Ó Tuathail⁸. Cruthaítear pictiúr de shuíomh fíor-foirmiúil – triúr scrúdaitheoirí léannta ina suí os comhair mhic léinn Ghaeltachta atá ina aonar agus a bhfuil gnáthneirbhís scrúdaithe air ('Bhuail faoi gan focal/os comhair an Bhoird/triúr ollamh ar mhórán léinn./Cén cheist a sheolfaí chuige,/scóláire bocht an scrúdú béil...). Tá an t-iarrthóir ag súil le ceisteanna ábhartha faoi théacs liteartha éigin a ndearnadh staidéar air i rith an chúrsa ('Scéal Mhic Dháthó/nó Saltar na Rann?...') ach is ceist faoi fhíle áitiúil a chuireann an t-ollamh seachas ceist faoin litríocht ainmnithe ('Ollamh an Chaoláire/ba thúisce le hábhar/"Inis dom," arsa sé go réidh/leis an mac léinn aniar/"Bhfuil Johnny Chóil Mhaidhc fós/i mbun filíochta?"). Tá codarsnacht mhór idir suíomh foirmiúil an scrúdaithe agus an cheist neamhfhoirmiúil áitiúil a chuireann an scrúdaitheoir. Léiríonn an cheist go bhfuil a straitéisí measúnaithe féin ag an scrúdaitheoir agus nach gcuireann ábhar an tsiollabais srian air. Is mó a chuid spéise i scileanna cumarsáide nádúrtha an mhic léinn agus i muintir an Iarthair ná a spéis sa litríocht ainmnithe. D'fhéadfaí an seanfhocal cáiliúil Laidineach 'non scholae sed vitae discimus (foghlaimítear don saol seachas don scoil)' a lua ina thaobh. Cé nach ndeirtear linn sa dán ar éirigh leis an mac léinn déileáil leis an gceist nach raibh sé in ann a thuar, léiríonn an dán ina iomláine gur dúshlán é don mhúinteoir modhanna measúnaithe oiriúnacha a fhorbairt a thugann cothromaíocht do chritéir bhaílí an churaclaim agus atá cruthaitheach go leor, san am céanna, chun freastal ar riachtanais an mhic léinn sa saol mór.

Aon aiste a dhéanann iarracht solas a chaitheamh ar léiriúcháin de chúrsaí oideachais in Éirinn ón mbliain 1930 ar aghaidh, caithfidh sí plé a dhéanamh ar an gcaibidil dhorcha scanrúil sin a bhaineann le mí-úsáid ghnéasach leanaí. Go dtí lár na nóchaidí ba scéal tosta é agus tá an tost sin le feiceáil i réimse na filíochta freisin. Lasmuigh d'Áine Ní Ghlinn is líon beag d'fhilí Gaeilge eile atá tar éis plé a dhéanamh ar an ábhar. Dar le Máirín Nic Eoin tá 'iarracht chróga á déanamh ag Áine Ní Ghlinn⁹, aghaidh a thabhairt go macánta ar mhórcheist na freagrachta morálta agus sóisialta maidir leis na cúrsaí seo ar fad' (Nic Eoin,

2010, lch xxxv). Sa dán ‘Pictiúr’ (Ní Ghlinn, 1996, lch 40) labhraíonn duine a d’fhulaing faoin mí-úsáid nuair ba pháiste í. Cé nach bhfuil sé soiléir an múinteoir nó gaol gairid atá mar éisteoir ag an gcainteoir, is cinnte gur duine fásta í a raibh cúram an pháiste uirthi. Anois, agus an páiste fásta suas, fiafraíonn a héisteoir di ‘cén fáth nár inis’ sí ‘an scéal ar fad’ di. Ach is í tuairim an chainteora gur inis sí an scéal di – níor bhain sí úsáid as focail chun an rud dolabharta a rá, ach, trí phictiúr a tharraingt agus trí shiombalachas dathanna (‘gach duine bán geal gealgháireach/ach eisean/é dubh dubh dubh’), léirigh an páiste an sceon a bhí uirthi roimh an duine a rinne í a éigniú. Dar leis an gcainteoir, bhí mionsonraí sa phictiúr faoi aghaidh, faoi theanga, faoi lámha agus faoi mhéara an fhir. Toisc cuimhne an-soiléir a bheith ag an gcainteoir fós ar an bpictiúr, is léir go bhfuil iarmhairt na mí-úsáide fós á fulaingt aici na blianta ar aghaidh agus is é athrá an fhocail ‘dubh’ is mó a léiríonn nach féidir leis an gcainteoir éalú ón dorchadas ná ón gcrá croí agus anama a lean tráma na mí-úsáide. Ba ghlaio tarrthála é an pictiúr ach ní raibh an t-éisteoir in ann comhbhá a dhéanamh leis an ealaíontóir óg. Léirigh gníomhaíochtaí an éisteora – féachaint thapa ar an bpictiúr sular chaith sí isteach sa tine é – gur thuig sí brí phictiúr an pháiste ach nach raibh sí ag iarraidh labhairt faoi. Roghnaigh sí an scéal a choinneáil faoi rún seachas é a phlé. Sa chomhthéacs sin, is líne dhochreidte shéimh í líne dheireanach an dáin (‘Ní raibh na focail agatsa/ach oiread liom féin.’). In ainneoin na faillí a rinne an duine fásta uirthi, ní léiríonn an cainteoir aon fhearg leis an éisteoir. Tá comhbhá agus comhthuiscint sa líne – tuigeann sí gur chothaigh an t-aíneolas coitianta ciúnas. Cé go bhfuil maithiúnas i bhfocail an chainteora, níl dearmad déanta aici ‘ar mheatacht an duine fhásta a d’aithin a pian ach nach ndearna a dhath ar bith le í a chosaint ón éagóir fhollasach a bhí á déanamh uirthi.’ (Nic Eoin, Máirín Nic Eoin, lch xxxv). Go pointe, tugann an dán léargas orainn féin mar shochoaí agus tugann an dán dúshlán an chórais oideachais i gcoitinne scileanna a fhorbairt san ábhar oide maidir le labhairt amach go macánta in aghaidh na héagóra.

Oidí agus oideachasóirí ar leith

Sa tríú cuid seo den pháipéar, pléifear rogha de dhánta ina ndéantar ceiliúradh ar shaol agus ar shaothar oidí agus oideachasóirí ar leith. Is dánta iad a bhronnann ómós agus aitheantas ar oidí de bharr na slí a ndeachaigh siad i bhfeidhm ar na páistí a bhí faoina gcúram, nó de bharr na comaoine a chuir siad ar dhomhan an oideachais i gcoitinne. Pictiúir dhearfacha arís de mhúinteoirí scoile paiseanta is mó atá sa tsampláil ionadaíoch seo.

Múinteoir ag an tríú leibhéal is ábhar den chéad dán. Tá clú agus cáil ar Bhreandán Ó Doibhlin¹⁰ mar theangeolaí, mar scríbhneoir agus mar thaighdeoir. Sa dán ‘Mórsholas saoil dúinn Breandán’ (Prút, 2008, lch 106) tugann Liam Prút onóir dó as a scileanna teagaisc agus go háirithe as an solas a d’adhain sé ina shaol féin. Tá an solas luaite ar bhealaí éagsúla i ngach aon rann (‘Mór sholas saoil dúinn... Solas saoil ón bhFrainc anoir... Scal ar shéada Phádraig... chuir spréach inár leamh-shaol’). Ar ndóigh samhlaítear an t-oideachas go minic in Éirinn le seachadadh an tóirse. Bhíodh ‘lóchrann an léinn’ mar shuaitheantas scoile ar chomharthaí bóthair agus cuirtear an frása, ‘Education is not the filling of the pail, but the lighting of the fire’ i leith W.B. Yeats, frása a luaitear go minic i bhfoilseacháin faoi chúrsaí oideachais. Dá bhrí sin, nuair a úsáideann Liam Prút meafar an tsolais, tá moladh mór á bhronnadh aige ar

Bhreandán Ó Doibhlin. Cuimhníonn an cainteoir siar ar an mbliain 1971 i Maigh Nuad agus ar an turas pribhléideach a thug sé, in éineacht lena mhúinteoir, 'trí chríocha' scríbhneoirí móra na Fraince ('La Fontaine... Montaigne, Villon, Pascal, Balzac, Molière, Le Cimetière') agus trí léann na hÉireann ('...ar shéada Phádraig/na nGael/ar léann na naomh/s na laoch'). Ní ag líonadh buicéid a bhí Ó Doibhlin, áfach, ach ag gineadh spéise agus ag tabhairt tinfídh. D'oscail sé doirse an léinn agus las sé tinte i saol a chuid mac léinn. Tá an buanrian uathúil a d'fhág Breandán Ó Doibhlin mar mhúinteoir, ar shaol an chainteora le léamh go háirithe i dtreo dheireadh an dáin ('D'ardaigh sinn ar Spéiríní Thíre Eoghain/sa tslí nach ionann roimhe sinn 's ina dheoidh').

Oideachasóir eile a d'fhág rian buan ar chúrsaí scolaíochta in Éirinn ab ea Pádraig Mac Piarais ach cé gurbh fhile agus oide é, ba thrí mheán an phróis, seachas trí mheán na filíochta, a ghlac sé páirt i ndioscúrsaí faoin teagasc agus faoin bhfoghlaim¹¹. Is fiú dán a scríobh múinteoir eile faoin bPiarasach a chur san áireamh, áfach, agus is é sin atá againn sa dán 'Laoch' (Ó Súilleabháin, 1982, lch 13), le Diarmaid Ó Súilleabháin¹². Déanann Ó Súilleabháin ceiliúradh gearr simplí ar idéalachas, ar ghean agus ar mhisneach an Phiarsaigh agus comhshamhlaíonn sé saol an laoi le saol Chríost ('Leanbh caoin... d'fhás i ngrás le Muire... Á ullmhú féin don Saol síor'.. Fear faoi scáth Chrann a Chéasta/Go mór i ngrá le hóg is aosta'). Is dán é a aithníonn snáitheanna éagsúla shaol an Phiarsaigh: an scríbhneoireacht ('File séimh cois mara Thiar'), an mhúinteoireacht ('Oide Éanna ag scaipeadh síol') agus an tsaighdiúireacht ('Laoch um Cháisc go tráth do éaga,/Dheimhnigh do ghrá-sa Saoirse Éireann'). Ach is dán é a aithníonn an nasc idir na snáitheanna sin ar fad, freisin, agus a léiríonn an Piarasach mar ghníomhaí athraithe (agent of change) ina shaol mar mhúinteoir, mar scríbhneoir agus mar shaighdiúir. Dar leis an dán seo, ba chodanna dá ghníomh polaitiúil deireanach iad a chuid iarrachtaí scríbhneoireachta agus oideachasúla araon (Walsh, 2009, lch 231).

Gníomh polaitiúil ar son na féiniúlachta Éireannaí ab ea an mhúinteoireacht do Shinéad de Valera, freisin. Sna blianta roimh Éirí Amach na Cásca, agus í ag obair le Conradh na Gaeilge, bhain sí clú amach mar mhúinteoir cumasach teanga agus chuaigh sí i bhfeidhm go mór ar mhac léinn amháin dá cuid – Éamon de Valera, an fear a phós sí. Sa dán 'Feartlaoi (do Shinéad de Valera)' (Ó Tuairisc, 2000, lch 78) le hEoghan Ó Tuairisc¹³, a foilsíodh ar dtús sa bhliain 1975, san Irish Press, go luath tar éis di bás a fháil, cuimhníonn an file ar Shinéad. Is apastróf é an dán ina labhraíonn an file go díreach léi ar bhealach muirneach pearsanta ('A bhean ba iníoda cré...'). Molann sé í as a hionracas polaitiúil in am na réabhlóide ('Trí chur i gcéill is liom-lead/easumhlaíocht na haimsire/chuir sainiúlacht do shoilse flaitheas/in iúl don daonlathas') agus cruthaítear íomhá di mar oide, agus mar bhean, eiseamláireach a chloígh lena hidéil agus a shoilsigh trí shuaiteacht na tréimhse stairiúla ('Nó gur thú ba oide don spéirling/...feictear ag glinniúint/trí thonn na haoise.../súile an mhuir-mhaighdeanais:/ Ba dhiamhair, a ainneir, do cheacht;).

An creideamh go bhféadfaí Athbheochan na Gaeilge a chur i bhfeidhm trí mheán an oideachais is ábhar, freisin, den dán 'An Bráthair Ó Maoileoin' (Ó hÁinle, 1996, 75) le Liam Ó hÁinle. Ar ndóigh, tá an chomaoin a chuir na Bráithre Críostaí ar Athbheochan na Gaeilge agus ar dhomhan an oideachais trí chéile áirithe ag Micheál Ó Cearúil ina leabhar Gníomhartha na mBráithre: Aistí Comórtha ar Ghaelachas na mBráithre Críostaí. Sa leabhar

sin gheobhaidh an léitheoir alt faoi shaol agus faoi shaothar an bhráthar a cheiliúrtar sa dán seo – An Bráthair Agaistín Seosamh Ó Maoil Eoin. Is leor a rá anseo go raibh sé ina mhúinteoir, ina léachtóir, ina uachtarán ar Choláiste Oideachais Marino ón mbliain 1948 go 1955, ina eagarthóir tréimhseachán agus go raibh baint mhór aige le bunú Ógra Éireann. Iarscoláire dá chuid ab ea an file Liam Ó hÁinle agus sa dán a chum sé ina onóir, is é meafar an tseodóra a úsáideann Ó hÁinle chun sainiúlacht Uí Mhaoil Eoin a léiriú. Cuimhníonn sé ar an mBr. Ó Maoil Eoin mar chaomhnóir díograiseach teanga agus mar dhuine a bhí tiomnaithe don fhoghlaim ar feadh a shaoil. Samhlaíonn sé é ag caitheamh a chuid samhrais i gceartlár shaol na Gaeltachta ('Níl de shamhail agam/den Bhráthair Ó Maoileoin/ach an ciúta úd cainte/a mheall gach samhradh é/go Dún Chaoin an deisbhéil...'). Ba dhuine é a thuig luach na brí a iompraíonn focail agus a rinne tréaniarracht nach ligfí don dúchas dul i ndearmad ('An teilgean cainte/ba rogha leis/bhí sé gearr gonta/taobh-throm tórmach le brí,/lom lonrach mar sheoid...'). Ní ag cur seod oidhreachta i dtaisce i leabhair a bhí Ó Maoil Eoin, áfach, ach is léir ón rann deireanach gur léirigh sé fuinneamh paiseanta spreagúil i leith na Gaeilge labhartha os comhair ranga, leis, agus gur ghríosaigh sé an chéad ghlúin eile chun seoda an tsinsir a athnuachan agus a sheachadadh ('Cathlán de choraí cainte/ar chlár ranga/go dúshlánach os ár gcomhair:/...chím fós an Bráthair Ó Maoileoin/ag áiteamh orainn.../dul i mbun na hathbheochana,/lándíomas is lándóchais/...é i seodlann na hurlabhra/ina shaineolaí, ina shainsheodóir').

Dán i gcuimhne ar an Athair Tadhg Ó Muineacháin, mach maireann, is ea 'Aoibhinn Beatha' (Mac Fhearghusa, 2002, lgh 28-30), le Pádraig Mac Fhearghusa⁴⁴. Is apastróf é an dán ina labhraíonn an t-údar lena iarmhúinteoir meánscoile ar chloisteáil dó go bhfuil sé tar éis bás tobann a fháil. I gcodarsnacht leis na dánta eile sa chuid seo, ní moladh neamhshrianta a bhronntar ar an múinteoir, ach aithnítear go raibh laigí móra aige. De réir dealraimh ní raibh an tAthair Ó Muineacháin oiriúnach i ndáiríre do ghairm na múinteoireachta agus léiríodh sé an iomarca spéise sna capaill agus sna madraí! Ina theannta sin, bhíodh fadhbanna smachta aige agus bhíodh a 'choisíocht tuathánaigh' ina ábhar magaidh ag a chuid scoláirí. In ainneoin é sin go léir, admhaíonn reacaire an dáin nach nglacadh sé féin páirt 'in aon scigmhagadh' faoi toisc an trua a bhíodh aige dó. Ar lá cinniúnach amháin, áfach, bhuail taom feirge an múinteoir agus ghearr sé 'trí dhosaen leadhb slaite' ar gach duine sa rang. Ní raibh an fillleadh ar an scoil i ndán don mhúinteoir as sin amach. Mar ghníomh fill a d'fhéach an cainteoir agus a chara ar a dhrochbheart. Is féidir díomá an chainteora a bhraith ar na línte ('Sé a ghoill ormsa/is ar Ó hÁinle, mo pháirtí, go mbeifeá chomh mór sin/ar mhístiúir is go ndéanfá ár gcomhbháidh leat a thruailliú.'). Is léir ag deireadh an dáin, áfach, go gcreideann an cainteoir gur fairsinge gach duine ná a ghníomh is measa agus admhaíonn sé nach ndearna sé dearmad riamh ar 'an chomaoin a bhí curtha' ag a mhúinteoir air. Téann 'Aoibhinn Beatha' i ngleic le castacht an chaidrimh agus an chonartha idir múinteoirí agus déagóirí; le gairm na múinteoireachta agus leis na tréithe pearsanta agus gairmiúla a bhíonn ag teastáil don ghairm sin. Ardaíonn an dán ceisteanna faoin oideachas a fhaigheann múinteoirí agus léirítear nach buntáiste i gcónaí é an iomarca léinn (bhí seacht mbliana caite ag an múinteoir ag staidéar sa Róimh agus, dar leis an reacaire, bhí sé 'ró-léannta' do phost an mhúinteora). Thar aon ní eile, áfach, ceistíonn agus bréagnaíonn an dán an seanfhocal a bhfuil cuid de mar theideal ar an dán, is é sin gur 'aoibhinn beatha an scoláire.' Ní fhágann

sé aon amhras ar an léitheoir faoi chruatan an chórais scolaíochta ina iomláine a bhí i réim agus an cainteoir ina bhuachaill óg ('Thugamar faoin mbliain úr, faoin bparsáil, faoin gcéimseata/chun carcairshaol an halla mhóir a mheilt, /is tréimhsí fada ainnise na hóige a chur thart,').

Ní haon ionadh é agus an cruatan sin á shamhlú leis an gcóras oideachais foirmiúil gurb iad 'na seandaoine neamhléannta, na fir cheirde agus chomhluadair' (Nic Eoin, 2010, lch xxxi) a shamhlaíonn go leor filí leis an bhfíor-oideachas. Déanann 'M'uncaí' (Mac Fheorais, 1954, lch 32) le Seán Mac Fheorais¹⁵, ceiliúradh, freisin, ar an oideachas neamhfhoirmiúil agus ar oideachasóir a chaith a shaol lasmuigh de bhallaí an léinn. Ba leis an dea-shampla, seachas le teagasc na leabhar, a mhúin uncail an chainteora ('Níor bhuaire sé mé le gaois na leabhar,/Ná fiú le gaois an tsaoil,') agus ba scileanna ceardaíochta ('Feadóg a dhéanamh den bhfuinseog'), scileanna seilge ('Thaispeáin sé dhom cosán an choinín... is d'fheistigh liom an dol') agus scileanna iascaireachta ('Is chuir sé orm lámha/a bhailíodh bric as sruth') na hábhair churaclaim a chlúdaigh sé ina chuid ceachtanna. Cosúil leis an gcainteoir sa dán atá díreach pléite againn, ba é bás a uncail a mhúscail cuimhní an chainteora ar na scileanna luachmhara sin agus ar an rian speisialta a d'fhág sé ar a shaol ('Leas-ghnóthaí beag dúthaí/A dhearmadas le blianta,/Ach bhrúcht siad suas im scornaigh').

Clabhsúr

Agus é ag scríobh faoi Mháiréad Ní Ghráda, múinteoir eile a chuir comaoin mhór ar dhomhan na litríochta, bhí an méid seo le rá ag Alan Titley:

Ní raibh aon teannas riamh inti idir an múinteoir agus an scríbhneoir. Bhí sí chomh haigeanta le páiste, agus níor chás léi a cumas agus a tallann a chaitheamh le hoideachas agus le foghlaim, arb ealaín freisin iad, an té a thuigfeadh é. Agus an té nach dtuigfeadh é sin ní bheadh oideachas ná foghlaim air. (Titley, 2010, lch 81)

Cosúil le Máiréad Ní Ghráda, is cinnte go raibh na hoidí a bhfuil dánta leo pléite san aiste seo in ann an dá thrá a fhreastal agus gur éirigh leo a bheith ina múinteoirí agus ina scríbhneoirí. Más cruthúnas é an leas a bhain na hoidí as téama an oideachais ina gcuid filíochta gur shamhlaigh siad an teagasc agus an fhoghlaim mar chineál ealaíne, is fíor, freisin, gur bhain siad úsáid as ealaín na filíochta mar mheán chun machnamh a dhéanamh ar a gcleachtas féin agus ar chleachtas múinteoirí eile. Ní machnamh maoithneach é an machnamh sin i gcónaí ach is machnamh macánta criticiúil é go minic nach seachnaíonn an ceistiú domhain. Má spreagann an páipéar seo oideachasóirí chun tuilleadh tochairle a dhéanamh sna foinsí liteartha agus má spreagann sé ceisteanna faoi nádúr an oideachais, faoi nádúr na healaíne agus faoin ngaol atá eatarthu, beidh a aidhm bainte amach aige (Hogan, 1977, 239; de Paor, 2009, 102-114).

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Testing the limits of self-assessment: A critical examination of the developmental trajectories of self-assessment processes

≡ LAINEY KEANE AND CLAIRE GRIFFIN ≡

Abstract

In 1998, Black and Wiliam’s landmark review of the literature on assessment revealed that summative assessment was overemphasised in education, whereas formative assessment was underemphasised. It was argued that the latter was, ‘at the heart of effective teaching’, with self-assessment being an integral component (Black and Wiliam, 1998b, p. 2). Consequently, Black and Wiliam’s seminal work set in motion a new impetus towards self-assessment in education, reflected in a plethora of current policy documents. However, recent researchers have argued that deficient knowledge exists in relation to children’s engagement in the self-assessment process (Andrade and Du, 2007). It appears that some developmental pathways render some children more susceptible to inaccurate self-assessments than others, with children’s academic abilities and gender also resulting in variability in the self-assessment process. Notably, self-regulated learning, the most coveted by-product of the self-assessment process, has been found to be dependent on accurate self-assessments (Nicol, 2009). In light of such findings, the following literature review tells a cautionary tale for policymakers and practitioners alike, highlighting the need for a reformation of current self-assessment policy directives and practice in classrooms worldwide.

Keywords: self-assessment, development, policy, psychology, Piaget



Introduction

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD; 2012), assessment of students is “integral to the work of teachers” and consequently, is an “uncontested and widely supported” practice within schools (p. 10). This quotation encapsulates the new impetus towards assessment globally, alongside the public trust accorded to its application in classrooms. In Ireland, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA, 2007) have defined assessment as “the process of gathering, recording, interpreting, using, and reporting information about a child’s progress and achievement in developing knowledge, skills and attitudes” (p. 7). In recent years, assessment has emerged at the forefront of educational research, discourse and policies – noted as a central process of teaching and learning within the *Irish Primary School Curriculum* (Department of Education and Skills; DES, 1999). Accordingly, the NCCA’s (2007) document, *Assessment in the Primary School: Guidelines for Schools*, and the DES’ (2011) *National Strategy to Improve Literacy and*

✉ Email: author@into.ie

ISSN: 2009-6860 (Print) 2009-6879 (Online)
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Numeracy among Children and Young People, have prioritised the use of assessment in classrooms, with the DES (2011) envisaging that assessment could serve to improve literacy and numeracy standards in Ireland.

Traditionally, summative assessment has been used in classrooms to measure what students have learned at the end of a given time period, such as the end of a week, a term, or a year (NCCA, 2007). Typically, a grade is the only feedback the student receives, leading Black and Wiliam (1998) to conclude that summative assessment offers little guidance on how work can actually be improved. Consequently, in light of Black and Wiliam's (1998) landmark review of the literature on assessment, formative assessment has gained momentum in classroom practice, being increasingly implemented in order to inform teaching and learning. For assessment to be formative, teachers must identify individual students' learning needs and adjust their teaching accordingly. Teachers and students are interactively involved in the assessment process. Black and Wiliam (1998) claimed that formative assessment is "at the heart of effective teaching", with self-assessment deemed an integral component (p. 2). Self-assessment is a certain type of formative assessment, which requires students to reflect upon their work, identify its strengths and weaknesses and set goals for themselves accordingly (NCCA, 2007). The function of self-assessment is to identify such strengths and weaknesses in order to improve the process and product of one's work (Andrade and Valtcheva, 2009). In this way, self-assessment can be used to inform learning, as children compare their work with certain criteria.

Black and Wiliam's (1998b) seminal work resulted in global policy shifts which advocated the use of formative assessment methods, including self-assessment in classrooms. This placed formative assessment at the forefront of legislation and policies in an effort to create more opportunities for self-assessment (Broadfoot and Black, 2004). Subsequently, teachers began to conform their pedagogical practices in line with such policy agendas, thus increasing their use of self-assessment in classrooms. In turn, this generated a slight shift of focus from the more established, teacher-led methods of assessment (Broadfoot and Black, 2004).

However, it is questionable whether such changes in policy and practice occurred somewhat prematurely. Namely, has the concept of self-assessment been accepted by policymakers rather haphazardly, and uncritically. Broadfoot and Black (2004) outlined how assessment methods that enjoy public legitimacy are often accorded trust by individuals, and so are not subject to the scrutiny they deserve. Unfortunately, an examination of the current literature reveals little advancement in the self-assessment discourse in this regard. For example, Brown, Andrade and Chen (2015) criticised the apparent bias in the self-assessment literature, stating that research has primarily focused on the efficacy of self-assessment in improving student learning gains, "with little concern for issues of validity" of self-assessment practices (p. 1). Such sentiments were somewhat corroborated in another recent article, wherein Wylie and Lyon (2015) contended that, again, despite the considerable interest in formative assessment, less consideration had been given to a coherent and systematic implementation of teachers' formative assessment. They stated that this was both in terms of the scope and quality of the application of formative assessment, questioning the utility and reliability of such assessment methods. Unfortunately, such issues at an international level appear ubiquitous. In Ireland, there has been a hiatus in the self-

assessment research, wherein some recent papers have pointed towards disparities between Irish policy agendas and related classroom practice (cf Grogan, 2013).

Given the dearth of research in the domain, both nationally and internationally, it appears necessary to critically examine the utility, validity and reliability of self-assessment in Irish classrooms. Consequently, this article seeks to review relevant literature from the fields of educational and developmental psychology, educational practice and theory, as well as national and international educational policy, in order to redefine and clarify current understanding of the validity and utility of self-assessment in Irish classrooms. Using Piaget's *Theory of Cognitive Development* (1978) as an overarching framework, the current paper aims to 'explore' the NCCA's (2007) assertion that self-assessment can be used "by children of all ability levels" and "throughout the primary school" years, with a particular focus on the accuracy and validity of schoolchildren's self-assessments of their academic work (p. 14). In addition, the author aims to examine whether the accuracy of school-children's self-assessments change in line with increased academic ability levels and increased cognitive stage of development, in light of previous research in the field. Central to this investigation is the evidence that suggests that children's self-assessments must be accurate relative to actual performance, in order to evoke self-regulatory processes (e.g., Nicol, 2009). Overall, this paper seeks to address some crucial, yet relatively unaddressed, questions in the field of educational assessment; Firstly, can children engage in accurate self-assessments of their academic work? Secondly, is enough evidence available regarding children's engagement in the self-assessment process in order to confidently and competently authorise its prioritisation in classrooms and policies worldwide?

Self-assessment: The policy and legislative context

An analysis of international and national policy documents in education illustrates the prominence of educational assessment in recent years. From an international perspective, the OECD and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) have promoted the use of formative and self-assessment in educational contexts in order to facilitate student learning and achievement (e.g., Looney, 2011; Nusche, Halász, Looney, Santiago and Shewbridge, 2011). In fact, in an OECD review of *Evaluation and Assessment in Education*, Nusche et al. (2011) stated that formative assessment needs ongoing attention with a particular emphasis on developing students' skills for self-assessment. This globalisation has resulted in countries having similar assessment policies and practices (Broadfoot and Black, 2004).

Accordingly, the policies pertaining to assessment in Ireland are extensive. The *Irish Primary School Curriculum* (1999) encouraged teachers to adopt a formative view of assessment, followed by the aforementioned NCCA (2007) document which encouraged the integration of formative and self-assessment into educational practices. More recently, two prominent documents issued by the DES called for the use of more formative assessment in schools, including that of self-assessment. In the *School Self-Evaluation Guidelines* (DES, 2012), it was recommended that teachers should form their judgements about the learner's progress by evaluating the learner's self-assessments. Additionally, in the document, *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning for Life*, the DES (2011) have instructed schools to employ more

formative assessment strategies in their current assessment practices. This is based on the expectation that formative assessment has the potential to improve the literacy and numeracy of children in Ireland. Thus, it is unsurprising that DES school inspectors have commended the use of formative and self-assessment methods in tandem with such policy instructions, with one department Inspectorate (DES, 2014) advising that formative assessment practices “should be developed further and implemented consistently throughout the school” (p. 4). In all, the predominance of formative assessment methods is very evident amongst Irish and global policy directives, with the intention that child-centred methods of assessment, such as self-assessment will enhance the teaching and learning experience.

However, it is somewhat disquieting that there is some ambiguity regarding how best to apply such policy sentiments into classroom practice. Specifically, it appears that there is a lack of coherence between the policy and classroom levels in terms of self-assessment. Such concerns have been acknowledged by a range of international bodies. For example, the OECD and Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (2008) have commented that although the principles of formative assessment have been applied at policy level, there are barriers which hinder its wider practice. In the OECD’s influential report, *Synergies for Better Learning* (2013), it was also stated that securing a link between policy and practice is one of the main challenges in assessment. Specifically, Black (2015) claimed that we have an “optimistic but incomplete vision” of formative assessment (p. 161). He argued that the policy documents have failed for some time to provide advice about how to successfully implement assessment in education. Jonsson, Lundahl and Holmgren (2014) explained that the procedures and practices for formative assessment have not been clearly defined, thus, making it difficult to execute consistently in the classroom. Ireland appears to be mirroring these international policy-practice caveats, with Grogan (2013) asserting that policies are idealistic and difficult to implement, and so, are being applied in an adhoc manner. Overall, Andrade and Du (2007) have argued that it is difficult to ascertain the most effective methods of using self-assessment in the classroom because not enough is known about children’s engagement in the self-assessment process.

Why is self-assessment being advocated?

Indeed, it does appear that self-assessment has the potential to enhance teaching and learning, whereby the prioritisation of self-assessment in educational documents appears warranted. Research has illustrated how self-assessment can be used to encourage student involvement, motivation, learning and responsibility. It can contribute to a positive classroom environment and develop students’ metacognitive skills by allowing them to recognise their strengths and weaknesses with regards to a piece of work (Andrade and Du, 2007; NCCA, 2007). In fact, Dow et al. (2012) have argued that self-assessment provides learning gains that are not evident with external assessments, with Lew, Alwis and Schmidt (2010) contending that self-assessment is the sine qua non of effective learning. Evidence also indicates that self-assessment practices can increase students’ problem-solving abilities, reduce disruptive behaviour, as well as maintain high levels of student self-efficacy (Brookhart, Andolina, Zuza, and Furman, 2004; Paris and Paris, 2001; Ross, 2006). Such

findings build on the work of Bandura (1994), who highlighted how high self-efficacy can increase student motivation, persistence at a task and target setting. Most importantly, research illustrates how self-assessment can improve children's learning to learn and metacognitive skills, and thus, develop children's self-regulatory skills (Brookhart et al., 2004). In fact, Nicol (2009) argued that many of the perceived benefits of self-assessment are reputed with the benefits generated by self-regulation. Self-regulated learning may be defined as "a process in which students actively and constructively monitor and control their motivation, cognition and behaviour" (van Beek, de Jong, Minnaert and Wubbels, 2014, p. 2). As a result, self-assessment reinforces self-regulation, because during the self-assessment process, children monitor their own learning. Studies have shown that self-regulated learning can predict children's academic success more powerfully than IQ, as well as increasing literacy and mathematical attainment (Hutchinson, 2013; McClelland, Acock and Morrison, 2006).

Self-assessment: The challenges

Despite the host of benefits and policies pertaining to self-assessment, a review of the literature illustrates that students often overestimate their abilities, whereby, their self-assessments may only hold a tenuous relationship with their actual academic performance. In this regard, Mabe and West (1982) engaged in a meta-analysis of 55 studies in the field. Such findings revealed a weak overall relationship between adults' predicted and actual ability ($r = .29$), while Freund and Kasten's (2012) findings revealed a moderate overall relationship ($r = .33$) in the same domain. Studies using children have also revealed weak correlations between students' predicted and actual abilities (e.g. Bouffard, Vezeau, Roy, and Lengelé, 2011; Sadler and Good, 2006; Sung, Chang, Chang and Yu, 2010). Most importantly, Zimmerman (1990) contended that in order for children to develop self-regulatory skills, they must be aware whether or not they possess a skill (i.e. they must make accurate self-assessments of their own work). Subsequently, it has been argued that self-regulatory processes may be dependent on such accurate self-assessments (Boseovski, 2010; Nicol, 2009). Evidence has also indicated that overestimations of ability can lead to external attributions of failure, maladjustment, poor social skills, narcissism, defensiveness and self-defeating behaviours. Försterling and Morgenstern (2002) found that overestimation of ability led to "ability-insensitive time allocation" in a task, which resulted in participants allocating too little time to subtasks for which they had low abilities (p. 584). Conversely, those who underestimated their performance allocated excess time on material that they had actually mastered (Bol and Hacker, 2012). Research indicates that those who underestimate may also set lower goals for themselves, thus inhibiting achievement strivings (Ackerman and Wolman, 2007; Freund and Kasten, 2012). In sum, it appears that distorted self-assessments can result in negative educational outcomes and unfortunately, may inhibit self-regulatory processes and their associated benefits.

Self-assessment: A developmental viewpoint

Reflecting on the issue of inaccurate self-assessments, literature analysis highlights a particularly salient factor in that such inaccuracies may be restricted to certain developmental periods (Boseovski, 2010; Folmer et al., 2008; Stipek and Mac Iver, 1989). This analysis questions the proposal made by the NCCA (2007) that self-assessment can be used throughout the primary school years. In fact, research illustrates that as children develop, they become more negative, albeit more accurate, in their self-assessments (e.g., Freedman-Doan et al., 2000; Pomerantz and Saxon, 2001). Interestingly, the changes in self-ratings may correspond with Piaget's *Stages of Cognitive Development* (1976). Piaget (1976) explained that cognitive changes occur at four different stages – the sensorimotor stage (infancy), the pre-operational stage (toddler and early childhood), the concrete operational stage (elementary and early adolescence) and the formal operational stage (adolescence and adulthood). Based on this theory, each stage is characterised by a number of distinct cognitive traits. Pre-operational thinking is typically characterised by egocentrism, defined by Berk (2013) as 'the failure to distinguish others' symbolic viewpoints from one's own' (p. 244). Moving into the concrete operational stage, egocentrism is thought to diminish whereby children begin to think concretely, and require concrete materials as objects of thought. During the formal operational stage, concrete thinking is then replaced with abstract thinking, during which individuals are capable of more complex thinking (Berk, 2013).

In light of such disparate cognitive traits across childhood development, research suggests that children at certain developmental stages may be more susceptible to making inaccurate self-assessments than others. For example, research outlines how the egocentric nature of young children could limit their perspective-taking abilities, resulting in over estimations of performance (Schneider, 1998; Stipek and Mac Iver, 1989). In addition, the wishful thinking hypothesis states that pre-operational thinkers often subordinate reality for wishful thinking which could lead to overestimations in performance (Butler, 1990). Schneider (1998) has provided direct evidence for the wishful-thinking hypothesis. Specifically, he found that young children's self-evaluations of how many balls they threw into a basket were not reflective of how they performed, but rather on how they wished they could have performed. Another explanation for young children's overestimations of ability arises from the effort-ability paradigm (Stipek and Mac Iver, 1989). Herein, research shows how young children are unable to differentiate effort from ability and consequently judge their performance based on the amount of effort they put into a task resulting in optimistic self-assessments (Pomerantz and Saxon, 2001).

An analysis of the literature has also revealed that there are changes in children's self-appraisals during the middle childhood years, coinciding with the transition from pre-operational thinking into concrete operational thinking (Blatchford, 1997; Freedman-Doan et al., 2000; Wigfield et al., 1997). During the concrete operational stage, egocentrism diminishes and concrete thinkers become less consumed by wishful thinking (Berk, 2013; Bulter, 1990). However, concrete thinking is still characterised by certain cognitive limitations which can lead to invalid self-assessments. Similar to pre-operational thinkers, those at the concrete operational stage may also lack certain metacognitive processes (i.e. hypothetico-deductive reasoning) which would prevent them from making accurate self-assessments

(Berk, 2013; Veenman, Wilhelm and Beishuizen, 2004). Pomerantz and Saxon (2001) have also reported that concrete thinkers lack an understanding of the relationship between effort and ability, leading to more optimistic self-assessments; akin to that during the pre-operational stage.

Nevertheless, as one moves into the formal operational stage, a sophistication of cognitive processes is deemed to occur. Research illustrates how during this stage, a steep decline in self-ratings occurs, resulting in more accurate self-assessments (Archambault, Eccles and Vida, 2010; Stipek and Mac Iver, 1989). Evidence suggests that formal operational thinkers understand the relationship between effort and ability and so make more valid self-assessments (Stipek and Mac Iver, 1989). Dweck and Leggett (1988) argued that such an understanding results in individuals associating increased effort with lower abilities. Contrastingly, those in the pre- and concrete-operational stages of development may believe that increased effort is indicative of higher abilities. Furthermore, in accordance with Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development (1976), Flavell (1992) stated that formal thinkers are capable of hypothetico-deductive reasoning. Hence, when faced with a challenge, they hypothesise which variables may affect an outcome and then deduce logical and testable inferences, enabling them to systematically isolate and combine variables in order to establish which inferences are true (Berk, 2013). This process is dependent on metacognitive control, which is required for making accurate self-assessments, indicating that formal operational children are indeed capable of higher self-accuracy (Veenman, Wilhelm and Beishuizen, 2004).

In summary, it appears that distinct characteristics of each of Piaget's *Stages of Cognitive Development* (1976) can influence the self-assessment process. Young children's biased self-assessments do not seem to be purposeful, but rather, a product of their cognitive limitations (Boseovski, 2010). However, as children develop, their cognitive processes become more sophisticated, and thus less susceptible to biased foresight, resulting in more accurate self-assessments. Given the research that has indicated that self-regulatory processes are dependent on accurate self-assessments (e.g., Nicol, 2009), the evidence reviewed challenges the well documented notion that children of all ages are able to engage in accurate self-assessments of their work.

Self-assessment: Prior academic attainment

Beyond the issue associated with developmental stages, Folmer et al. (2008) has suggested that within-cohort factors may also impact on self-assessment processes. Specifically, it appears that prior academic attainment may have an effect on self-assessments, albeit that such an effect could be restricted to certain developmental periods. Kruger and Dunning (1999) explained how low achievers may lack the metacognitive skills to realise that they are unskilled. This well-established phenomenon, in which the 'unskilled are unaware', is known as the Dunning-Kruger effect (Kruger and Dunning, 1999, p. 1121). The bias has received much empirical support (e.g., Boud, Lawson and Thompson, 2013; Kwon and Linderholm, 2014; Pazicni, and Bauer, 2014), with Lew et al. (2010), dubbing it the 'ability effect' (p. 135). Studies using child participants have revealed similar 'ability effects' (e.g., Kasperski and Katzir 2013; Sung et al., 2010). However, more empirical child studies are needed in order to

withstand the evidence to the contrary, whereby some researchers have debated that low academic attainment may actually lead to more nuanced self-assessments (Archambault et al., 2010). In particular, research is required to examine the interaction between development and prior academic attainment, whereby following the literature review, an absence of studies in this domain was revealed.

Implicit in this issue is evidence which suggests that cognitive variations characterising different developmental pathways render some cohorts more vulnerable to the effects of prior academic attainment than others. For example, from a Piagetian perspective, it has been argued that preoperational thinkers are unable to seriate and so are unable to “order items along a quantitative dimension”, rendering them oblivious to grades (Berk, 2013, p.250). Instead, they may rely on salient information such as praise and symbols as indicators of their competence (Stipek and Mac Iver, 1989). However, as children develop, they begin to compare their grades to those of their peers (Bouffard et al., 2011). In fact, it has been disputed that one of the most important developmental changes in self-assessment processes are social comparisons (Bouffard et al., 2011; Ruble, Boggiano, Feldman and Loebl, 1980). Thus, it may not be until children reach the preceding developmental milestones that the interaction between academic ability and self-assessments becomes apparent. Therefore, it is questionable whether children of all ability levels are capable of engaging in accurate self-assessments of their academic work, as proposed by the NCCA (2007) and other educational bodies. However, it must be noted that teachers may adopt a systematic approach in order to explicitly teach children how to self-assess their work with accuracy. Such an approach may mitigate such potential inaccuracies somewhat – an argument that will be debated later.

Self-assessment: Gender

In addition to developmental stage and prior academic attainment, gender differences in the accuracy of self-assessments have been a popular focus of many studies. In this regard, a host of studies have illustrated that boys were more likely than girls to overestimate their mathematical abilities (Blatchford, 1997; Sheldrake, Mujtaba and Reiss, 2014). With girls displaying higher competence beliefs for subjects such as music and reading (Archambault et al., 2010; Eccles, Wigfield, Harold and Blumenfeld, 1993). It appears as though participants’ competence beliefs were influenced by gender-stereotypes (Eccles et al., 1993). It is notable, however, that in the aforementioned studies, the relationship between gender, competence beliefs and development was not explored. In light of Kohlberg’s (1966) theory of moral development, it appears as though this area requires further exploration. As outlined in this theory, gender constancy does not appear to develop until late in the primary school years. However, following a thorough review of the literature, there are no studies to date that have examined gender differences in the self-assessment process from a developmental perspective. Hence, gender differences are relatively unaddressed in policy and practical guidelines.

Recommendations for research

Overall, it is evident that a paucity of research exists regarding the impact of developmental

trajectories on the accuracy of children's self-assessments. This research lacuna is noteworthy given that Irish policy documents, such as the NCCA's (2007) *Assessment in the Primary School: Guidelines for Schools*, and the OECD documents such as *Synergies for Better Learning* (2013) have strongly advocated the use of self-assessment in classrooms and across age groups. Yet, Andrade and Du (2007) argued that we still do not know enough about children's engagement with self-assessment in order to construct a pragmatic theory of self-assessment, or to ascertain the most effective methods of using it in the classroom. Schunk (2008) has also acknowledged the scarcity of research in the area and has thus called for more developmental research to be conducted on children's metacognitive and self-regulative processes, with explicit reference to Piaget's developmental framework. Stipek and Mac Iver's (1989) Piagetian-based review on the accuracy of children's self-assessments has also cited some convincing evidence which suggested that self-assessment processes may be governed by specific developmental pathways. Nevertheless, despite these evidence-driven recommendations, few studies have focused on self-assessment from a developmental perspective. Nevertheless, policy directives are still advocating the use of self-assessment in classrooms across the globe and across development, despite the evidence referred to throughout this paper that indicates the struggles of many children in engaging in accurate self-assessments of their work (e.g., Stipek and McIver, 1989).

Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged, that cognitive limitations cannot explain all of the variance in students' self-assessments. In particular, one cannot overlook the evidence which suggests that gender and prior academic achievement can have a substantial impact on the accuracy of self-assessments (e.g., Sheldrake et al., 2014; Sung et al., 2010). Many researchers have recommended that these areas also be explored (e.g., Andrade et al., 2008; Folmer et al., 2008; McQuillan, 2013).

Recommendations for policies, classroom practice and research

In the interim, and particularly considering the absence of this prerequisite research, it is clear that changes are required across three principal domains; namely policy, research and practice. Currently, policy documents such as the *Assessment in the Primary School: Guidelines for Schools* (NCCA, 2007) continue to advocate the use of self-assessment in classrooms. In line, it is suggested that such guidelines on self-assessment be revised in consideration of children's ages, gender and prior literacy attainment; particularly given the research that has indicated that young children of lower abilities are particularly inaccurate in their self-assessments, thus inhibiting self-regulatory processes (e.g. Stipek and McIver, 1989). Similarly, it appears that the guidance provided to date in educational documents has been of limited scope. Subsequently, it is strongly recommended that educational bodies overcome this impediment by developing age-appropriate instructional practices, with the intention of maximising students' ability to accurately self-assess. Age-appropriate self-assessment tools should also be made more readily available, or indeed, teachers should be encouraged to devise their own self-assessment tools (such as by developing success criteria in the form of rubrics), in collaboration with their students. In this way, students can recognise what they are trying to achieve, whilst playing an active role in their own learning. However,

this indicates the need for both qualified and pre-service teachers to receive specific training in self-assessment theory and practices, to ensure its correct application in the classroom. Indeed, Ross (2006) has acknowledged that self-accuracy can be improved through student training and other teacher methods.

In light of the need for more robust and substantial guidelines, future research should also assist in the translation of policy guidelines into teacher practice. As aforementioned, further scientific investigations into the most effective methods of increasing the accuracy of school-children's self-assessments is welcomed. In turn, the findings of such studies could aid in the creation of more appropriate resources and tools for self-assessment, thus ensuring that Irish practitioners and policy-makers are incorporating evidence-based research into both policy and practice. Furthermore, it is recommended that future research is conducted in order to examine the accuracy of schoolchildren's self-assessments across all ability levels, ages and across gender. An investigation into such facets should reveal, to some degree, the processes underlying children's self-assessments across the school years.

In consideration of these recommendations at policy and research level, a number of practical considerations are required that may improve the accuracy of children's self-assessments. For example, Ross (2006) noted that children often make biased self-assessment innocently, and as such, it is advised that teachers illuminate the importance of being as honest as possible in self-assessments. This is in line with Freund and Kasten's (2004) recommendations for self-assessment instruction. Furthermore, it is imperative that teachers ensure that children undergo the self-assessment process under optimal conditions. In this regard, Ross (2006) has outlined a number of dimensions for self-assessment instruction. Firstly, it is important that the criteria for self-assessments are 'child-friendly' (e.g. appropriate language; use of criteria that they consider important). Secondly, children should be explicitly shown how to apply the criteria (e.g. teacher modelling). Thirdly, providing children with feedback on their self-assessments can increase the validity of self-assessments. For example, Ross (2006) refers to a process of triangulating self-assessments with teacher and peer assessments of the same work. He considered this process especially important for children who perceive effort as more important than actual performance, and therefore, this could be useful for children at the earlier stages of cognitive development. In sum, these recommendations should increase children's opportunities for making accurate self-assessments.

Overall, self-assessment discourse needs to be developed across the research, policy and practical domains of education. In particular, the relationships between these domains need to be acknowledged and recognised in what has been referred to as the reconnection of the 'research-policy-practice nexus' (Locke, 2009, p. 119).

Conclusion

In summary, it appears that children may be rendered susceptible to inaccurately assessing their academic work. Given this vulnerability, the widespread practice of engaging in self-assessment in classrooms, as it is currently being implemented, is questionable. In particular, this paper queries the true potential of self-assessment for enhancing self-regulated learning.

Furthermore, it appears that there is a bias in the literature towards the promotion of the benefits of self-assessment, whilst failing to examine the potential vulnerabilities inherent in the same. Before 'self-assessment' can be safely implemented into our policies and practices, it is clear that more research is required which examines the self-assessment processes of children of all ages and abilities. In addition, the development of age-appropriate self-assessment tools and child-centred instructional practices that enhance self-accuracy are also important tasks for researchers, educationalists and policy-makers alike.

Thus, it appears that Black's (2015) suggestion that formative assessment is an "optimistic but incomplete vision", appears particularly appropriate to the area of self-assessment (p. 161). In light of this factor, it appears incumbent that all educational practitioners, policy-makers and researchers collaborate in clarifying the vision for self-assessment in Ireland. In doing so, parties must test the limitations of self-assessment, and indeed, test the limitations of children of all ages and ability levels and how such shortcomings impinge on their self-assessments. In essence, this literature review tells a cautionary tale of the potential inadequacies of self-assessment, a tale which follows a somewhat rhetorical and disjointed narrative. However, until research extends beyond the rhetoric, the need for vigilance when employing self-assessment strategies in classrooms is crucial.

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Formative assessment in the visual arts

≡ BARBARA COLLINS ≡

Abstract

Formative assessment is a defining feature of effective teaching as it makes learning visible. Without formative assessment there is no reliable way of establishing that whether what has been taught has actually been learned. Formative assessment allows the teacher to respond to the learning needs of the student and plan for future learning. However the theory of formative assessment suggests that for formative assessment to be effective there needs to be explicit rather than aspirational alignment between assessment theory and learning theory. Formative assessment is underpinned by the sociocultural learning model. In addition, Bennett (2011) argues that for research in the area of formative assessment to become meaningful to other teachers, it must be domain specific, so others can visualise the transference and bridge the notorious theory practice gap within teacher education. This study examines the implementation of a formative approach to assessment in visual arts in a classroom characterised by an explicit sociocultural learning environment.

Introduction

Teaching and learning are core classroom activities. However, what a student learns in a classroom setting, from instruction, may be different from what the teacher actually intended to teach (Cowie, 2005; Wiliam, 2010). Wiliam (2010) argues that formative assessment is a defining feature of effective teaching. Furthermore, formative assessment is the only method that can establish whether what has been taught, has in fact been learned. The formative assessment process allows the teacher adjust the instruction to meet the learning needs of the student. Adjusting instruction to meet student needs is a characteristic of “adaptive expertise” (Black and Wiliam, 1998; Bransford, Derry, Berliner, Hammerness and Beckett (2005). This expertise can only be acquired through supporting teachers’ professional development to become more flexible in their teaching particularly in the current climate of performativity, standardised test driven assessment and school self-evaluation. Clark (2014). It is also noteworthy that many Whole School Evaluation (WSE) reports identify assessment and group work as areas for further development within a school setting. This paper focuses upon the implementation of formative assessment in a group work learning environment in the area of visual arts. Visual arts offers a setting in which ‘the test’ is not central for neither the student nor teacher. Formative assessment also goes beyond the product of the visual arts lesson but focuses on the teaching and learning. The teaching and learning is made visible and put centre stage. In this way, the learning environment is

✉ Email: author@into.ie

ISSN: 2009-6860 (Print) 2009-6879 (Online)
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influenced by sociocultural learning theory. James (2006) argues assessment in a socio-cultural learning environment is weakly conceptualised and more alignment between assessment and our understanding of how learning takes place should be evident. Furthermore, Bennett (2011) argues that formative assessment needs to be investigated in a domain specific setting in order to deepen teachers' understanding of formative assessment and help them visualise implementation and in turn bridge the theory practice gap. This paper reports on an action research project investigating the implementation of formative assessment in the visual arts in a classroom informed by sociocultural learning theory.

Theoretical underpinning

Formative assessment

Broadly envisaged, formative assessment is defined as a collaborative process between teacher and student, located primarily in the classroom, for the purpose of understanding of student learning and sourcing information that can move the learning forward. Cizeck (2010). Black and Wiliam (1998) state that the impact of the introduction of formative assessment upon learning gains is greater than any other educational intervention even class size. In a meta-analysis of 250 academic research projects on formative assessment Black and Wiliam (1998) hypothesised that learning gains were greater for low achieving students. Formative assessment is assessment that is classroom based and goes beyond testing (Black and Wiliam, 2006; Clarke, 2005; James, 2006; Shepard, 2000; Torrance, 2007). It takes place during learning. Formative assessment refers to the use of information gathered during teaching and learning. It refers to

“all those activities undertaken by teachers and their students in assessing themselves which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged. Such assessment becomes ‘formative assessment’ when the evidence is actually used to adapt the teaching work to meet the needs.”
(Black and Wiliam, 1998, p. 2).

Formative assessment is in contrast to summative assessment which takes place at the end of learning. Summative assessment could take the form of an end of unit test or standardised test usually unseen and timed. Formative assessment can be viewed as the general idea that underpins the Assessment for Learning (AfL) strategies that are used in the classroom (Thompson and Wiliam, 2007). Students and teachers use assessment information gathered from the AfL strategies to meet learning needs on a constant and on-going basis. The information gathered forms part of the teaching and learning cycle. The key features of AfL are effective questioning, comment only feedback, peer and self-assessment, sharing the learning intention and the use of success criteria (Black and Wiliam, 1998; Shepard, 2000; Black et al. 2002, Clarke, 2002; Clarke, 2005; NCCA, 2007). Each key feature of AfL can then be implemented by using individual techniques as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Formative assessment model adapted from Thompson and William (2007)

Formative Assessment Dynamic On-going Information fed into teaching and learning			
Strategy	Effective Questioning that moves beyond recall	Comment Only Feedback	Self-and Peer-Assessment
Characteristics	Wait Time No Hands Talk Partners Post-its Discussions	Reinforce Quality Provide Next Stage in Learning Improvement carried out in class time	Traffic Lights Thumbs Up Learning Logs Talk Partners Teaching to another peer group
Strategy	Sharing Learning Intentions	Student Formulated Success Criteria	
Characteristics	Visible Learning Plan for Unit Separate Learning Intention for each lesson	Discussing Quality Identifying Quality Indicators Listing Criteria that help me produce quality work	

Formative assessment is not without detractors. As a pedagogy, formative assessment does bring about learning gains. Bennett (2011) argues there is a need for formative assessment to evolve and become more about developing clearly articulated formative assessment approaches with tight links to well defined content domains. The argument continues that if pedagogical research remains domain independent it is 'useful but weak' and is limited to routine knowledge. By aligning the assessment strategies closely to domain-specific visual arts learning of cognitive, affective, psychomotor and behavioural categories this study aims to move beyond a general curriculum based project to a domain-specific based study. It is an adaptive approach to teaching and learning necessary for dealing with the complexities of teaching and learning (Lysaght, 2012, Clark, 2014). The teacher needs to have the autonomy to respond to actual learning rather than the planned learning which may not happen. Cowie and Bell (1999) subdivided formative assessment into planned formative assessment and interactive formative assessment. They suggest planned formative assessment is used to elicit permanent evidence, is semi-formal and may take place at the start or end of a lesson. Interactive formative assessment takes place during pupil-teacher interaction. It may be

incidental but involves the teacher noticing, recognising and responding to student thinking. Hall and Burke (2003) comment upon the necessity of the dialogical relationship between the teacher and the student in order for interactive formative assessment to be successful.

McMillan (2010) argues that there could be important differences in the degree of formative assessments implemented in a classroom. He notes that the number of characteristics of formative assessment and the educational aims of the learning, determine the level at which formative assessment is implemented in a classroom. Aims that emphasise knowledge only are indicative of low-level formative assessment whereas aims that include deep understanding, reasoning, meta-cognition and self-regulation are indicative high-level formative assessment. In addition, the classroom environment that is required for successful high-level formative assessment is influenced by sociocultural learning theory. Student learning rather than a test performance or a completed product is central.

Sociocultural learning theory

Sociocultural learning theory draws from the work of Vygotsky (1978). Central to this theory is that idea that virtually all human learning and activity is facilitated by tools (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1988). The term tool refers not only to material objects used to influence the material world, but also to symbolic objects used to affect the mental world of the self and others. These include language, systems for counting, algebraic symbols, pieces of art, writing, diagrams and maps (Vygotsky, 1981). In their review of sociocultural learning theory, Tenenbergh and Knobelsdorf (2013) conclude that there are four main principles governing sociocultural learning. The principles include:

- ◆ Activity is facilitated by cultural tools.
- ◆ Learning involves looping between brain, body and world.
- ◆ Learning is distributed across people and tools.
- ◆ Learning is participation in the sociocultural practices of a cultural community.

Due to the fact that sociocultural learning theory endorses the view that knowledge is socially constructed, student learning, cannot be separated from the student engagement in the classroom (Cowie, 2005). Furthermore, assessment is part of student engagement and is in fact a practice which develops a pattern of participation which then leads to development of the students' identity as a learner. Sociocultural theory is also based upon the idea that through interaction with teachers and peers who are more knowledgeable than themselves, student learning takes place (Kindleberger-Hagen and Richmond, 2012). A sociocultural learning environment is characterised by specific pedagogical practices. The five pedagogical practices that signify such a learning environment are joint productive activity, language and literacy development, contextualisation, cognitive challenge and instructional conversation (Teemant, 2005). Table 2

Table 2 Pedagogical features of a sociocultural learning environment

Pedagogical Practice of a Sociocultural Learning Environment	Features
Joint Productive Activity	Instructional activities that require student collaboration, the demand matches the time available to the student, teacher monitors and supports collaboration.
Language and Literacy Development	Teacher models content vocabulary, encourages the student to use the content vocabulary to express judgements, teacher interacts and assists language development.
Contextualisation	Meaningful contexts, acknowledges what students already know from, home, school and community.
Cognitive Challenge	Tasks bring students to a higher level of thinking, teacher provides clear feedback about how student performance compares with the expected standard.
Constructional Conversation	Clear learning objectives to guide discussion, ensures more student talk than teacher talk, assists by questioning, restating and probing

In addition to the pedagogies of the sociocultural learning environment there are “affordances” that need to be present. Carr’s (2000) research into construction groups and technology groups in a kindergarten setting refers to the “affordances” (p.62) that characterise a sociocultural setting and enable learning. The transparency of the task, the challenge of the task and accessibility of the task and materials are viewed as affordances. Appropriate challenge is afforded to the learner by placing the learning outcomes within a zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Assisted discovery, where teachers involve themselves in the discussion, features as part of Vygotsky’s (1978) approach. Accessibility is afforded to the learner by possessing or having access to the right material so they can belong to the learning group.

The sociocultural perspective on learning, which has group work as an integral part of the learning process, espouses the idea that learning results from the interaction of the learner and the social environment (James, 2006). Learning is more than acquiring knowledge imparted by a teacher or engaging in dialogue exclusively with the teacher. Learning involves social collaboration in which thinking is developed as a group. Saloman (1993) refers to the concept of “distributed cognition” where the learning is not the property of an individual but shared among the social group. Engaged participation that is viewed as appropriate by the group is valued. De Vries (2000) argues teaching methods based on constructivism are effective because the active learning style encourages engagement and increases intrinsic motivation. James (2006) acknowledges that assessment within the sociocultural perspective is weakly conceptualised and suggests that “ethnographic observation and inference have a role” (p.58). However, a theory of what assessment in a sociocultural learning environment may look like is articulated (James, 2008). Key characteristics of such assessment include situated assessment. This implies that the learning cannot be separated from the action in the visual arts lesson and the act of assessment of the group learning and the act of assessment of agency over tools and resources (James, 2012, Cowie, 2005)).

The visual arts: a domain specific location for formative assessment

The visual arts it could be argued has not historically emphasised assessment and learning outcomes in perhaps the same way as literacy and numeracy or other subject areas within the primary school curriculum. Irish teachers commented in the *Primary Curriculum Review: Phase 1 Final Report* that assessment in the visual arts was “out of bounds” (NCCA, 2005a, p.125). As they equate assessment with grading and marking and they do not need it in the visual arts. Eisner (1966) however, commented that the lack of standardised testing in visual arts has enabled art education to escape problems associated with evaluation and testing. It could be argued that while the lack of standardised testing may create an assessment free zone it may have led to a lack of focus and purpose in art teaching combined with the belief that assessment has no function in the visual arts.

Talent and effort it can be argued often interfere with learning and assessment. Hall and Burke (2003) provide a fictional reaction to assessment in the visual arts from a student perspective. “A ‘C’. I got a ‘C’ for my coat hanger sculpture! How can you get a ‘C’ on a coat hanger sculpture? Was I judged on the sculpture itself or was I judged on my talent over which I have no control? If I was judged on effort I was judged unfairly because I tried as hard as I could. Was I judged on my learning about this project? If so, are you my teacher also being judged on your ability to transmit knowledge? Are you willing to share my ‘C’?” (p.107)

In order to have effective assessment in the visual arts the teacher needs to ascertain what is to be assessed. Learning outcomes have to be identified. Talent and effort are not being assessed per se. Lindström (2006) argues that refusal to assess student work in visual arts is a “concession to those who maintain no learning is taking place” (p. 64). He also emphasises the capacity to self-reflect, correct and modify as being crucial to learning in the visual arts. These qualities are core to the effective use of AfL and may be viewed as transferrable skills beneficial to the learner in other subject areas, a key aspect of this study. Gruber (2008) argues that assessment in the visual arts must not be labour intensive or intrusive but on-going and linked to a learning objective but can take place in four categories of learning namely the cognitive, affective, psychomotor and behavioural.

Table 3: Gruber’s (2008) Categories of learning in the visual arts

Cognitive Learning	Affective Learning	Psychomotor Learning	Behavioural Learning
Language and Concepts	Recognising and Creating Quality	Skilful Use of Materials and Equipment	Attention and Engagement with task and learning
The child can talk about a drawing commenting on the line, shape, pattern, texture and tone.	The child can identify and replicate specific features of a drawing that make it ‘good’ e.g. choice of materials, subject, shape, tone etc.	The child can use various grades of pencil to create different tone.	The child can complete a drawing, paying attention to quality, choice of pencil and pace of task.

The Visual Arts Curriculum (DES, 1999) in Ireland suggests drawing, paint and colour, print, clay, construction, fabric and fibre are the most accessible materials for children.

Particular regard should be given to develop sensitivity to qualities of line, shape, form, colour and tone, media for children to respond to the world around them. Through the development of the concepts of texture, pattern and rhythm and spatial organisation the child can make purposeful use of materials. The curriculum also advocates the use of specific language to promote learning in the visual arts.

Context

The Visual Arts Curriculum (1999), states that assessment is integral to teaching and learning. Furthermore, assessment should be present during the creative process of making art, when a piece is completed and while making a response to art works. Even though much of the learning in the visual arts is observable the curriculum states that assessment should extend beyond the observable skills and techniques. The pupils' attitudes, levels of responses and commitment should be assessed. The assessment tools suggested by the curriculum include teacher observation, teacher designed tests and tasks, work samples and curriculum profiles. The area of formative assessment is not addressed in any meaningful detail.

The study documents the implementation of AfL strategies in a class of 29 11-year-old students in an eight-teacher rural primary school in the Republic of Ireland. The teacher is the researcher. Sixteen boys and 13 girls participated in the study. All of the students spoke English as their first language. The students had no prior experience of AfL strategies within the visual arts domain. The researcher aimed to introduce classroom based formative assessment strategies to assess learning in the visual arts in a sociocultural learning environment. However, conceptualisation of the assessment of these qualities is not explicit even though assessment is viewed as integral to the primary curriculum and as a method of monitoring learning processes and achievement across all subjects including visual arts (DES, 1999). The educational landscape in Ireland has also traditionally emphasised standardised test data in literacy and numeracy and more summative assessment than AfL. This emphasis has been implemented in a national literacy and numeracy strategy (DES, 2011) which forms part of the policy on teacher education in Ireland. Assessment in the visual arts historically has not been emphasised and now maybe overshadowed by current educational policy. However Collins and O'Leary (2010) demonstrated the successful and beneficial integration of formative assessment into the visual arts.

Action research process

The study consisted of four phases of action research. Action research was appropriate in this study as Black and Wiliam (1998) reject the idea of an "immediate and large-scale programme, with new guides, and perhaps even rules, that all teachers should put into practice" (p.15). Instead the benefits and learning gains of using high quality formative assessment will only come about "if each teacher finds his or her own way of incorporating the lessons and ideas that are set out into his or her own patterns of classroom work" (p.15). To maintain this focus upon small scale, sustainable change combined with the ethnographic requirement to study the sociocultural learning environment, action research with the

researcher as participant was chosen. This study set out to create a ‘living example of implementation’ (Black and Wiliam, 1998, p. 16) which contributes to the understanding of AfL within visual arts by making implementation explicit. Action research also allows the transformative process of altering practice to be investigated rather than a quantitative effect measurement approach. Denscombe (2007, p.22) argues that the transformation of everyday practice is a skill requirement for a teacher and not just a research feature for academics. Action research helps to make the transformative process explicit for classroom practice. Change in everyday practice is a challenge but teaching is also conceptualised as a practice centred on inquiry (Cochrane-Smith 1991, 2009; Grossman, 2005; Tabachnick and Zeichner, 1999). Action research is a recognised method of making a contribution to instructional improvement (Suter, 2006).

The study also provided a natural setting with “real life situations which are naturally occurring as opposed to artificial or contrived ones” (Greig, Taylor and MacKay, 2007, p. 138). Grieg et al (2007) also comment that those working with children may not have access to large sample numbers. Instead they do have access to small groups with which they can work at a detailed and intensive level. This yields the type of data that are central to qualitative research namely “rich descriptions in words and pictures that capture children’s experiences and understandings, rather than the cold abstract findings that often derive from numerical analysis” (p.138).

Table 4: Research phases

Phase One	Phase Two	Phase Three	Phase Four
Introduced Group Work to establish a sociocultural learning environment	Refined the approach to establishing groups for the sociocultural learning environment	Teacher engaged in dialogue with the groups by providing quality open questioning	Teacher led choice of groups for establishing a sociocultural approach to learning in the Visual Arts
Learning Intentions	Continued use of learning intentions; Decided to instigate the peer- and self-assessment earlier in the lesson to implement suggestions for improvement from the feedback sooner		Construction produced by the group rather than individual pieces of work
Success Criteria	Drawing up of success criteria was continued		Success criteria
Comment Only Feedback	Introducing the concept of peer- and self-evaluation with reference to the success criteria.		Two periods of non-participant observation by a teaching colleague

Data collection methods

A number of data collection methods were used. Field notes, a reflective journal, audio tapes of dialogue during learning, learning logs, questionnaires and colleague observation provided rich description. These data methods were compatible with the sociocultural learning environment. Of particular importance in this study was the need to capture the active participation of the pupils in the learning environment as the sociocultural perspective views learning as an activity in which people develop their thinking together (James, 2006, p. 57). Lave and Wenger (1991) perceived learning as a process that takes place within a framework of social participation rather than within the individual mind. The teacher-as-researcher meant that data collection during teaching consisted of very brief observations recorded in field notes. The lessons were planned for the afternoon in order to allow time immediately after each session to generate observational data by the teacher-as-researcher. Two 30-minute periods of colleague observation of the visual arts lessons were undertaken as such observation provides 'rich insights into social processes and is suited to complex realities' (Denscombe, 2009, p.224). Data from different collection methods was used to establish informant triangulation which contributes to a fuller picture of the phenomenon under scrutiny (Denscombe, 2009).

Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the research committee in my institution prior to embarking on the research. The ethical stance adopted was informed by a rights-based approach to the conduct of the research. In this research, parents had to demonstrate willingness for their child to take part by signing and returning a consent form to the school. Prior to starting the fieldwork, the researcher explained the study to the children using a plain language statement. Table 4 provides an overview of the research activity.

Table 5: Data collection methods

Data Collection Method	Respondent / Source	Duration	Prompts
Field Notes	Teacher-as-researcher	During each lesson	Allows for a less fragmented study as the classroom environment as a whole is studied (Cohen et al., 2007, p.167).
Reflective Journal	Teacher-as-researcher	After each lesson	
Group Interviews	Participants	After each of the four phases	Detects how participants support, influence, agree and disagree with each other and the relationships between them (Cohen et al. 2007, p. 373). Language used among children in a group interview more revealing than adult/child exchange (Mayall, 1999). Allows researcher to plan modifications.
Audio Tape of Dialogical Exchange	Teacher-as-researcher; participants	During each lesson	As above
Questionnaire	Participants	At the end of the project	Open-ended questions to capture the richness and complexity of the classroom (Cohen et al. 2007, p. 167)
Learning Logs	Participants	At the end of the drawing strand and at the end of the construction strand	
Colleague Observation	Non-participant observer	Two periods during the phase four.	

Findings and evaluation from data

The data were analysed manually. Descriptive coding was used to note interesting bits of data (Bogdan and Bilken, 1992). A provisional coding frame was drawn up with themes and related sub-categories. This was later amended to include new themes and categories.

Sociocultural learning environment

The opportunity to work in a group during a visual arts lesson emerged during interviews and questionnaires as the main change experienced from the student perspective. Even though the researcher introduced formative assessment strategies in a planned and systematic manner during the four phase action research study these were not viewed as significant changes by the students. Data generated from interviews and questionnaires also revealed that having fun, talking and working at the same time was the most important reason to the student for 'doing group work'. This is reflective of other research (Collins and O'Leary, 2010; Kindleberger Hagen and Richmond, 2012). This reflects Cowie's (2005) findings which concluded that sociocultural learning settings put relations within the community (group) and their impact upon knowledge centre stage. Learning from each other also featured as a reason given by pupils for engaging in group work.

The presence of conversation was evident from the field notes and reflective journal however the evidence revealed students were discriminating about the type of conversation that was of value to learning. Staying in your group and not moving from group to group was identified by 10 respondents as a factor that contributed to learning. During one group interview reference was made to a student leaving regularly to interact with a student from another group. Disapproving noises were made by the other members of the group during the interview. However, learning by social participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and using assessment based upon social participation was evident because "you could have a conversation with your friend to see how you could get on better". Two students commented that talking to other students had no effect as they were able to learn and improve their work without others. Field notes, the reflective journal and transcripts of dialogue provided evidence of frequent comparison of work unprompted by the teacher which in fact was informal unplanned peer- and self-assessment. The presence of instructional conversation and non-instructional conversation in the classroom was apparent. Teemant, (2005) identifies instructional conversation as a characteristic of a sociocultural learning environment and from this study the pupils identified the presence of both types of conversation but valued the instructional conversation for learning. Even though students valued working as a group, learning is prioritised when the prerequisite social relations through language have been established (Vygotsky, 1978).

Visibility of learning

Gruber (2008) defined affective learning in the visual arts as the ability to recognise and create quality. The uniqueness and quality of the student art work was noted by the researcher and the non-participant observer even though the students could see and compare each other's

work and the original artwork used to identify signifiers of quality. The findings of Collins and O'Leary (2010) indicate that variety was evident in fabric and fibre collages when success criteria were introduced. The use of student formulated success criteria in response to viewing drawing and constructions of other artists was described by one student as "what helps you get the best results" (Collins and O'Leary, 2010). The variety of the student drawings indicated that there was no replication of an existing piece but a new piece of art created using the quality indicators or success criteria as drawn up by the students using the prompt 'What makes this a good drawing?'. Creation and recognition of quality was evident along with cognitive learning (Gruber, 2008) demonstrated by the use of the language of drawing and construction for formulating success criteria and providing oral and written peer and self-assessment. Behavioural learning (Gruber, 2008) characterised by attention to and engagement with the task was observed by the teacher but also by the students and viewed by students as a factor in the quality of the affective and cognitive learning. Self and peer assessment revealed this factor. Evidence of skilful use of materials and equipment i.e. psychomotor learning was noted in the field notes and reflective journal. Dialogue transcripts revealed that during the construction lessons the creation of psychomotor knowledge was evident when students wanted to create stability ("he can stand up by himself") in their robot figure. They realised the head was heavier than the rest of the body and in dialogue with the teacher decided to fill the robot's legs with pebbles from the school garden. Sand and clay were discussed but rejected by the students as being unsuitable. Making sure the pebbles were distributed evenly was identified as a factor that would affect stability. The visibility of learning was enhanced by the use of student formulated success criteria. Dialogue, peer and self-assessment together with transparency, challenge and accessibility to materials enabled quality learning and assessment.

Embedding assessment skills

When students were asked to record what they had learned in learning logs no specific direction was given to distinguish between process and content learning. Content and process outcomes were recorded unprompted by 13 respondents while the rest of the cohort recorded content learning outcomes only. Collaboration, group discussion and freedom helped student learning while seven students commented on the negative impact on learning outcomes of a failure to establish a quality learning environment in the group. Comments such as "it's not great when people talk to their friend in another group" and "you can't just be talking you have to get stuff done" indicate that focussing only on social interaction does not promote learning.

Evidence also suggests students were positively disposed to structured feedback provided by reference to the success criteria. Sixteen of the 25 students said telling someone how to improve their drawing was a positive and had more purpose than telling someone their drawing was good or bad. One student commented that "the truth is like advice for getting better drawing". Data from field notes and the reflective journal indicated feedback also gave students a structured opportunity to reinforce what had been well done which was used by

all students. It is interesting to note that the students were able to discriminate between formative feedback and subjective comments that offered no learning opportunity.

Three students were unable to provide oral or written feedback at first. The cognitive learning outcome had not been achieved and the students had not succeeded in learning to use the language of drawing such as the tone, texture, form or rhythm of a composition. In the reflective journal the data revealed that by observing the students giving written and oral feedback the teacher was able to assess the cognitive learning of the visual arts lesson. A teachable moment involving interactive formative assessment (Cowie and Bell, 1999) was noted in the field notes and reflective journal where the students were given the opportunity to read the explanation cards used to teach the terms. Students then looked at the exemplars of quality and practice giving oral feedback to other students using the success criteria and language of drawing.

However, it is notable that the questionnaire data suggested that, while students could provide written and oral feedback using the success criteria under the guidance of the teacher, they were not able to use this assessment method independently on their own work. Self-assessment did not emerge as an assessment strategy that had been internalised despite the non-participant observer data making reference to 'the structured and effective use of critical evaluation by the children' in the lesson. Data indicated that students still relied upon subjective, extrinsic valuation of their artwork in order to establish whether their own work was of quality. Getting 'a good comment' from the teacher or someone else was the most frequent answer given when asked how they would know if their own work was good. Effort and feeling good about your work were used as quality indicators for self-assessment. This contrasted with the data from the field notes, reflective journal and transcripts of student dialogue which revealed the informal use of unplanned verbal self-assessment by comparison of the work in the group.

Emergence of self-directed learning

The data from the group interviews showed the students attitudes shift regarding the sources of help and motivation during a lesson. Students look beyond the teacher as the sole source of assistance. Motivation shifts from getting the task completed to please the teacher to wanting to finish the task as part of a group. The theme of sharing ideas and learning from others was identified with one student commenting that if you came up against a challenge you are more likely to give up on your own but in a group you can have a conversation and then be motivated to continue. "If you are stuck you don't have to wait until the teacher isn't busy you can ask the people at your group and teacher won't say stop talking". Students availed of each other as resources and field notes indicated that students relied less on the teacher for help or answers during the drawing lessons. The non-participant observer noted that when students raised their hand others in the group volunteered help. The shift in the role of the teacher was evident in the field notes and reflective journal and the student questionnaire. Many students found this difficult and frustrating because they were used to visual arts lessons where the teacher had an instructional role and told the students what to do instead of prompting the student to find a solution through dialogue. One student

commented that “it can be frustrating because you can’t get ideas from miss”. Even though self-directed learning was observed by the researcher but only when a social relationship was established as one group took 30 minutes to engage with the drawing task during the first lesson because of the social interaction. Planned structured peer and self-assessment using comment only feedback took place as a preface to the next lesson. However, four students from that sub-group said they were disappointed by the feedback they received but agreed with the feedback. They then used it as motivation to focus upon the learning and the group for future lessons. When the gap in the behavioural learning was identified through feedback the students used it as a guide for the next stage of learning in keeping with Black et al’s (2003) conceptualisation of feedback. Hargreaves (2005) argues that self-directed learning can only take place when the feedback is given in a dialogical setting where agreement and disagreement are permitted.

Authentic oral language tasks

Students not engaged in dialogue and feedback tasks came to the attention of the teacher. This ‘noticing’ (Cowie and Bell, 1999) allowed the teacher to respond to gaps in student learning in visual arts language. The peer-and self-assessment tasks set by the teacher were authentic oral language tasks as opposed to role play which is often used to provide language tasks. The informal peer-assessment which took place in the group setting was also authentic language use. The use of AfL strategies provided formal teaching of the language of drawing and construction. This was followed by communication opportunities. Oral language assessment was then possible using teacher observation. It was clear to the teacher from the learning logs also if there were any language learning gaps. Such an approach also allows the teacher to engage in targeted observation for use of language. Such observation is a method of assessing cognitive learning (Gruber, 2008) in the visual arts.

Discussion

James (2006) emphasises the compulsory use of group work for establishing a sociocultural learning environment. The social interaction which may not be an instructional conversation is necessary to establish social relationships (Vygotsky, 1978). For a classroom teacher to establish a quality sociocultural learning environment an extra pedagogical practice of non-instructional conversation is of importance. This study showed that students demonstrated the ability to identify when the non-instructional conversation impacted negatively on learning. Success criteria formulated by the students along with teacher prompts provided the framework for instructional conversation. The ability of the teacher to ignore non-instructional conversation allows students to engage in assisted discovery of sociocultural learning. The role of the teacher in facilitating the student experience of a pedagogic practice is just as important as the domain specific or subject learning. It could be argued that even though domain specific assessment approaches are necessary it must be done with a clear understanding of the impact of pedagogical practice outside that particular subject.

Gruber (2008) argues that assessment in the visual arts must not be labour intensive or intrusive but ongoing and linked to a learning objective. The use of the formative assessment strategies of success criteria, comment only feedback, sharing learning intention and peer and self-assessment was not intrusive and are easily replicated across all strands of the visual arts curriculum (DES, 1999). High levels of satisfaction by teachers with the visual arts curriculum were reported (NCCA, 2005) and implementation was found to be 'generally successful' (DES, 2005, p, 44) with teachers demonstrating good knowledge of structure and content. Assessment was not seen as relevant. But Lindström (2006) has argued that a refusal to assess is "a concession to those who think no learning is taking place". However it would seem harsh to say teachers are refusing to assess. Nevertheless, without firm underpinning assessment may not be viewed as having a worthwhile role. With increasing accountability discourses in education and emphasis on literacy and numeracy as valued knowledge, non-intrusive and non-labour intensive formative assessment in the visual arts can provide another dimension to a student's learning and a teacher's assessment toolkit.

In order to develop domain specific assessment (Bennett, 2011) that is aligned to a learning theory and move formative assessment beyond a stand-alone pedagogy, similar studies need to be undertaken in active learning situations. Such research offers the possibility to replicate this study and generate new assessment knowledge in classrooms in other subject area/ domains.

The student and teacher in this study have experienced the transferrable skill of establishing themselves in a sociocultural learning environment. Structuring and facilitating feedback using student formulated success criteria is not a domain-specific skill for teachers. However, identifying quality and success and sharing learning intentions are domain specific and transferrable if the teacher has strong subject knowledge. Formative assessment and sociocultural learning are not effective without strong subject knowledge. Even though the skills involved may be viewed as transferrable research should acknowledge the strength of the domain specific knowledge of the teacher as a factor in the use of formative assessment in a sociocultural learning environment.

Conclusion

The research project set out to examine the impact of using quality formative assessment in a socio-cultural learning environment within the area of visual arts. The significance of student relationships and dialogue was highlighted. From a student perspective, the change in assessment approach was not significant; of greater significance was the change in learning environment. Prior to the research project learning was not synonymous with enjoyment. Students were surprised that learning in a socio-cultural environment was enjoyable but not without challenges. Frequent, informal, unplanned and unprompted oral self and peer assessment was evident. Higher levels of oral language using terms from the visual arts curriculum were also evident. Authentic linguistic opportunities were provided through feedback and drawing up success criteria. Those students not engaged in social interaction and dialogue were more likely to come to the teacher's attention. This 'noticing' (Cowie and Bell, 1999) allows the teacher to respond to the students' learning needs. Otherwise such

students may have gone unnoticed. This represented a shift in classroom culture where previously questioning and discussion was teacher-led without all students being engaged. Therefore, formative assessment in the visual arts in a sociocultural setting has a valuable role to play in making learning visible, providing authentic oral language tasks and giving teachers the tool to really find out if what has been taught has been learned.

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On 19 November 2012, Ruairí Quinn, as Minister for Education and Skills, announced guidelines for SSE which, having been piloted with a number of schools, was to be incorporated into all school systems as a new technology of quality assurance and evaluation (QAE). SSE is an evidence-based instrument for evaluation and quality assurance which, according to the Department's guidelines, "enables schools to take the initiative in improving the quality of education that they provide to their pupils" (DES, 2012a, p.2). It is a method whereby schools collect information on, and evaluate, their own performance; schools then feed this information to the Inspectorate via whole-school evaluations (WSEs), in addition to disseminating it to parents. Accordingly, it demands data-collection as its starting point.

As outlined in DES guidelines (2012), the first phase of SSE will have an overarching theme of teaching and learning, focusing on literacy, numeracy, and one other (discretionary) area of the curriculum. There are three sub-themes: learner outcomes, learner experience, and teacher practice.

SSE is a six step process, which involves gathering evidence, analysing the evidence, drawing conclusions, completing an evaluation report, developing a school improvement plan, and implementing and monitoring this plan (DES, 2012a). It has an achievement orientation and "is an integral part of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy" (DES, 2012a, p. 21). Emphasis is on self-reflection of the teacher and the school as a whole, and on SSE being integrated into the day-to-day work of schools: "in Ireland, school self-evaluation is seen as an important aspect of quality assessment in schools, and inspections areas are informed by the results of self-evaluations. Inspections in turn are expected to complement the school's quality assurance" (Ehren et al, 2013, p.22-23). The SSE report, therefore, forms part of an inspector's external evaluation of the school.

National context: Ireland's externalised gaze

Since joining the European Union (formerly the EEC) in 1973, Ireland has maintained a strong and active involvement in Europe. Ireland also has a long history of engagement with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD); the Education Act (1998), which was in part informed by the OECD's 1991 report (Coolahan, 1999), illustrates the power of this relationship. The OECD and World Bank strongly influence how Ireland sees itself both in terms of its domestic education policy, and how this positions Ireland in relation to the rest of the world (McNamara and O'Hara, 2008). Ireland is not alone in this. Drudy (2009), drawing on the work of Grek, has observed that "the OECD is generally regarded as playing a significant role in framing and steering education policy at a European and global level" (p. 44).

The Irish Inspectorate has a long history of engaging with and drawing from other countries' policies: "visits by inspectors and other staff to European centres were commonplace in the period prior to 1922 and introduced new curricular ideas from international centres" (Ó Buachalla, 1988, p. 316). This continued after the foundation of the State with, for example, the borrowing of the free school books policy from the UK as a result of "visits to Belfast and London in the thirties... [and] when these international contacts were resumed in the

late fifties they proved to be very fruitful sources of policy initiatives especially the contacts with OECD in the sixties" (Ó Buachalla, 1988, p.316).

The Inspectorate has continued its involvement with international bodies and its involvement with projects such as the Programme for International School Assessment (PISA) is testimony to this. Additionally, it is represented internationally on the OECD's Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI), and in Europe it is a member of the Standing International Conference of Inspectorates (SICI).

Ireland in the neoliberal context

Neoliberalism has become the hegemonic discourse which is presented as the common sense approach to interpreting the contemporary world. From a neoliberal perspective, the relationship of the citizen to the state is mediated by the market, with the shift in language from pupil to customer representing an example of how, as citizens, we are being redefined (Lynch, 2013). According to neoliberal logic, state involvement in the provision of services to its citizens disrupts economic processes and therefore should be kept to a minimum, allowing market forces to operate with the least interference (Harvey, 2005). Olssen (2003) and Apple (2000) point out that, in recent years, there has been a shift away from the more traditional liberal resistance to any state involvement in the provision of services to its citizens, and that "neo-liberalism has come to represent a positive conception of the state's role, seeing the state as the active agent which creates the appropriate market by providing the conditions, laws and institutions necessary for its necessary (sic) operation" (Olssen, 2003, p. 199).

Europeanisation and globalisation

Whatever we may think about the much contested concept of globalisation, in the words of Zygmunt Bauman, "we are all being globalised" (1998, p. 1). More and more, we are being encouraged to see ourselves as existing on a global stage. Education is no exception. As Buenfil-Burgos (2000) observes "no one would call into question that globalisation is a key concept in contemporary educational policies" (p. 1).

According to Grek et al. (2009a), the initial construction of a European education space centred around the voluntary exchange of ideas between nationally disparate and independent systems. She observes that as a result new "urgent technologies of persuasion" (Grek et al., 2009b, p. 129) needed to be constructed. Soft governance, in the form of data for comparison purposes was introduced post-Lisbon in the form of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) to meet this need. This type of governance, as opposed to the traditional top-down imposition of rules and regulations, is "self-imposed and self-adhered; it is effective, manageable and economical; it looks optional and 'light-touch'; it seems objective and forward-looking" (Grek et al., 2009b, p. 129).

Political and cultural globalisation is central to understanding the concept of Europeanisation according to Grek et al. (2009a), for whom Europeanisation is a political, spatial, networked phenomenon which is a specific element of globalisation dealing with the new transnational state which affects many interactions within it... it is simultaneously located in and produced by the global, the idea of the European and the national. (p. 122).

In a move towards establishing Europe as a strongly competitive knowledge economy within this globalised framework, individual countries' educational policies are increasingly being dictated to by the sharing of travelling policies in an effort to competitively place European educational policy on the global stage. Policy-making is, to an ever-increasing extent, being impacted upon by transnational and international influences (Grek et al., 2009a).

Scheurich's policy archaeology methodology

"Policy archaeology tries to describe the 'complex group of relations' that make social problems and policy choices possible" (Scheurich, 1994, p. 301). Drawing on Foucault's archaeological approach, "rather than beginning after social and education problems have emerged into social visibility, policy archaeology studies the social construction of these problems" (Scheurich, 1994, p. 297). In this way, policy archaeology problematises both how a social or educational problem is permitted to gain legitimacy and what policy solution is allowed to emerge as possible within a society's dominant discourses.

Policy archaeology intends to bring the origins of the problem and its policy solution into the open, recognising that these are not neutral. The purpose of this approach is to attempt to uncover what the function of the policy is and whose interests it serves: rather than concluding that social and education problems, policy solutions and policy studies are created by the conscious interplay of the free agents of history, policy archaeology proposes that a grid of social regularities constitutes what is seen as a problem, what is socially legitimised as a policy solution, and what policy studies itself is (Scheurich, 1994, p. 297).

To facilitate his Foucauldian methodology, Scheurich (1994) divides policy archaeology into four arenas: the social regularities arena, the social (or educational) problem arena, the policy solution arena, and the policy studies arena.

The social regularities arena

From Scheurich's (1994) perspective, "widely different social and education problems and policy solutions are... constituted by the same grid of social regularities" (p. 301), and he makes four particular points regarding these.

Firstly, while these regularities are not consciously constructed by any particular group or individual in society, different social groups can and do benefit from them. Social regularities represent "both categories of thought and ways of thinking" (Scheurich, 1994, p. 302) which are evident in everyday social practices and interactions.

Secondly, social regularities do not exist outside of social problems, and nor do they dictate their policy solutions from an external position. In this way, social regularities are not deterministic because, true to their Foucauldian roots where power is conceptualised as generative rather than repressive and constrictive (Foucault, 1985; 1998), social regularities encompass discourses beyond the dominant; although it is recognised that the less dominant discourses do not necessarily have the same social visibility and credibility as their dominant counterparts.

Thirdly, social regularities are spatially and temporally specific. At different historical junctures and within different social and cultural contexts, certain social regularities will be

foregrounded; some will recede over time as new ones emerge. In this way “historical shifts may lead to shifts in the grid of regularities that shape the emergence or visibility of particular social problems and policy solutions” (Scheurich, 1994, p. 303).

Fourthly, drawing on Foucault, Scheurich (1994) asserts that “all is surface... meaning everything happens at the surface, i.e. within the context of human activity” (p. 303). However, while everything happens at the level of human activity, people are not necessarily conscious of the social regularities which underpin their behaviour, attitudes, and subjectivity.

The social/educational problem arena

This arena problematises the a priori nature of the problem as presented within social discourse, thereby disrupting the tranquillity of the problem. In this way, policy archaeology refuses to accept the natural emergence of a social problem, and its analysis, therefore, begins prior to the appearance of the problem on the policy landscape. Policy archaeology questions why this particular social problem has been allowed to “emerge from a kind of social invisibility into visibility” (Scheurich, 1994, p. 300) at this particular time.

The policy solution arena

Just as social problems are constructed within the constraints of the grid of social regularities, so too are the range of policy solutions which can emerge in response. The grid of social regularities will, within certain contexts and at certain times, permit the emergence of particular policies as representing the only, or the most logical, solution to the social or educational problem which the same grid has allowed to gain legitimate visibility, thereby sanctioning certain solutions as being ‘possible’ while deeming others ‘impossible’.

The policy studies arena

Similar to the social problem and policy solution arenas, Scheurich (1994) argues that policy studies itself is constituted, and restricted, by the same grid of social regularities. Therefore, certain policy studies are granted legitimacy and voice within this grid and should be read in a way that is cognisant of this.

A policy archaeology of SSE

While Scheurich outlines these four arenas distinctly and consecutively, he stresses the permeability of the boundaries of the four arenas. He also emphasises that the policy archaeology process is iterative where “work in any one arena may refashion or alter what has already been done in another arena” (Scheurich, 1994, p. 303).

Social regularities

A number of social regularities which existed at the time of the introduction of SSE allowed for the situation to arise where QAE in schooling could emerge into visibility as an educational problem for which SSE could be constructed as the policy solution. It would be beyond the scope of this paper to outline every social regularity which was at play, therefore, the following analysis will focus on some of the more significant social regularities, namely, new

managerialism in Irish education, data as governance, and policy sharing and policy borrowing.

New managerialism in Irish education

According to Lynch (2013), new managerialism is a mode of institutionalising the neoliberal agenda. Simply put, new managerialism (or new public management as it is also known) refers to the “application of managerial thought and techniques to public administration” (Simons et al., 2009, p. 14). The rise of new managerialism since the 1980s has seen a shift in how education is conceptualised and framed (Apple, 2000; Galvin, 2009; Lynch, 2012, 2013), and has led to the “reconstituting of the educational person” (Lynch, 2013) from pupil to customer/client.

Key features of new managerialism include delegation, performance targets, improved outputs, streamlining services, choice, competition, constructing the citizen as a consumer/client, and decentralisation (Galvin, 2009; Lynch, 2012, 2013). Hence this framework includes both a strong reform agenda and an analytical lens through which public policy problems are interpreted in terms of managerial problems related to efficiency, effectiveness, economy objectives, and clients.

New managerialism, when applied to education, has “redefined what counts as knowledge, who are the bearers of such knowledge and who is empowered to act – all within a legitimate framework of public choice and market accountability” (Lynch et al., 2012, p. 4). From a new managerialist perspective, teachers are expected to deliver within an education system which is relevant to, and serves the needs of, the market; and its emphasis on data-collection and reporting is creating a “culture of self-display, fabrication and of course competition” (Lynch, 2013).

Within education, this drive towards new managerialism has resulted in “a bifurcation of power that allow[s] control to remain centralised while responsibilities [are] decentralised” (Lynch et al., 2012, p. 11). It could be argued that this is true of SSE which has increased the workload and responsibilities at school level, while leaving ultimate control in the hands of the Inspectorate; thereby representing a devolution of responsibility without a devolution of power.

Data as governance

New managerialism is impelled by performance and results (Galvin, 2009). At an international level, testing such as PISA, Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), and Progress in International Reading and Literacy Study (PIRLS) have acquired a regulatory purpose and constitute what Lingard et al. (2013) have identified as a global panopticism, where the global eye functions in a regulatory capacity across and within nation states. Consequently, through data-generation, the OECD continues to play an increasingly important role in the global governance of education (Lingard et al 2013). At the global level, testing and league tables have become meta-policies “steering educational systems in particular directions” (Lingard et al, 2013, p. 540) and, consequently, they impact considerably on education systems at the level of the nation state.

At a European level, education is governed by the OMC, and this move towards standardisation of data and performance indicators is supporting the construction of Europe as a “legible, governable, commensurate policy space” (Grek et al., 2009a, p. 122). While Europeanisation is not new “the audit turn which has seen an increasing focus on governing European education through benchmarking and number is” (Grek et al., 2009b, p. 127). In this way, in the words of Kathleen Lynch (2013), Europe and the OECD are “governing without being seen to govern” through performance indicators and league tables.

According to Grek et al. (2009), international data will impact on national policies disparately. In Ireland, the focus on improving PISA rankings was included in the aims of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (DES, 2011) which, in turn, requires schools to engage in SSE. This illustrates just two instances of how international data are impacting on Irish educational policy. And, as is happening elsewhere, this new form of governance is being introduced very softly in Ireland, within a rhetoric of increased autonomy for local schools. According to the guidelines (DES, 2012), SSE will require schools to produce and analyse an increasing amount of data, which could be viewed as constituting another layer of governance.

Policy sharing and policy borrowing

Within the European and wider global policy arenas, it is evident that countries are increasingly looking beyond their own borders when contemplating policy reform (Croxford et al., 2009). As outlined at the beginning of this paper, the Irish Inspectorate has a long history of engaging with, and borrowing policies from, other countries. It continues this tradition through its involvement in European and international organisations, such as SICI, and CERI.

SSE is increasingly common in QAE across Europe (Grek et al., 2009b). However, how it has been adapted and incorporated into existing national structures has been very much context-dependent, as “different traditions in education policy are influenced (differently) by the arrival of (travelling) ‘globalisation policies’” (Simons et al., 2009b, p.71.).

The educational problem

QAE emerged as a problem within a matrix of other problems and, hence, should be viewed within the larger context of the problem of the global economic crisis (and, specifically, the Irish economic crisis), within which education was framed as an important tool for facilitating Ireland’s economic recovery (Quinn, 2012). The emergence of QAE as a problem should also be juxtaposed with the move within the DES towards reforming the Inspectorate (Coolahan, 2009), and against the backdrop of increased media pressure on teachers to perform better (Holden, 2012).

When the current government took office in early 2011, its main concern was to lead Ireland out of its economic crisis and, from the beginning, education was seen to constitute a tool for doing just that (Fine Gael and Labour Party, 2011). The previous Minister for Education and Skills, Ruairí Quinn, on a number of occasions, reiterated this position; for example, when he asserted that “education is universally regarded as a key driver of social and economic progress” (Quinn, 2012, para. 1). It is from within this interpretation of

education as an important tool for economic recovery that QAE in primary schools gained purchase as a concept in Ireland. While evaluating quality in education is not new, the language of quality assurance does, however, represent a departure from more traditional concepts of what constitutes quality in education.

Ruairí Quinn repeatedly stressed that his was a reform-driven ministry. For quite a number of years, pressure had been applied to the Irish government to reform the Inspectorate: the OECD report of 1991 called for “significant policy changes for the Inspectorate” (Coolahan, 2009, p.306); this was echoed in the Deloitte and Touche (1999) and Cromien (2000) reports.

“The power of the media to create agendas in education is increasingly evident in Ireland as elsewhere” (Lynch et al., 2012, p. 17). In recent years, the media have taken up Ireland’s positioning on PISA as representing (almost to the exclusion of everything else) the state of Irish education. This was to be heard in media commentaries such as: “two years ago, the OECD/Pisa (sic) study showed standards of reading and maths among Irish teens have fallen dramatically... It was the sharpest drop in standards among any developed nation but the Junior Certificate failed to track it” (Flynn and Faller, 2012), and “in response to our ‘falling down the ranks’ the Inspectorate asks if ‘a quarter of post-primary maths teachers are failing to deliver in the classroom’” (Holden, 2012, p. 2). Such commentary conflated poor PISA results with poor educational standards, without critically examining PISA and other international league tables in any way. Comments like these represent two articles of many which looked to PISA as an indicator of the country’s general educational well-being at the time, and asserted that the quality of teaching and learning needed to improve if we were to improve our PISA ranking position. This re-characterisation of success in education represents a radical redefinition of the purpose of education from human right to marketable good.

The problem of QAE gained visibility at a time when the government was trying to cut spending on education while, at the same time, significantly reform the education system and, according to Drudy, “this ideology and the undermining of education as a public good in the media and politics [was] crucial to legitimating cuts” in the education budget (2009, p. 41). Within this context, it could be argued that the problems which were allowed to become legitimately visible were those which could be solved without an increase in expenditure. While according to the DES Circular (0039/2012), SSE can be supported within the existing infrastructure of the schools and the Inspectorate, McNamara and O’Hara (2008) and MacBeath (1999, 2000) have argued that if SSE is to be successful there needs to be investment in upskilling those involved.

The policy solution

According to Grek et al. (2009), “the management of flows of information through quality assurance can be examined as a new form of governance, not just at the national level but within the broad policyscape of the European Union” (p. 121). Within the Irish system, the introduction of SSE in 2012 can trace its roots back to the establishment of the school development planning initiative (DES, 1999b), which was set up for the post-primary sector and was concerned with quality assurance and best practice.

In 2003, in an effort to extend support for quality assurance and self-evaluation to the primary sector, the Inspectorate published *Looking at our school: An aid to self-evaluation in primary schools* (DES, 2003). This outlined, amongst other things, themes for self-evaluation for primary schools, and placed SSE in Irish schools within a broader European framework: "Ireland, along with other European countries, is adopting a model of quality assurance that emphasises school development planning through internal school review and self-evaluation, with the support of external evaluation carried out by the Inspectorate" (DES, 2003, p. viii).

The move towards self-evaluation in schools was advanced by the current coalition government, and its more formal adoption by primary schools was outlined as an aim in their programme for government (Fine Gael and Labour Party, 2011). The SSE policy was framed in a language of devolution of responsibility, parental choice, and the development of a knowledge society in an effort to emerge from the economic crisis. Grek et al. (2009) identify PISA as being globally dominant "as the key comparative measure of the effectiveness of schooling systems" (p.7/8). Advancing Ireland into the top ten countries in PISA was a stated government aim (Fine Gael and Labour Party, 2011), and SSE, within the national literacy and numeracy strategy, has been identified as a tool for achieving this.

Conclusion

A child-centred model of education was formally introduced in Ireland in the 1971 curriculum, and was reiterated in the revised curriculum of 1999 (DES, 1999a). While child-centred rhetoric continues, it could be argued that education is becoming more economy-centred than child-centred.

Irish educational policy is increasingly being located in an international setting (Drudy, 2009; Lynch, 2012, 2013) where the global economic context feeds into Irish social, cultural, and educational contexts. This throws into question who exactly is determining the policy agenda within nation states, as the European and global policy fields would appear to be increasingly setting the agenda for Irish educational policy. As Foucault (1991) observed "maybe, after all, the state is no more than a composite reality and a mythicised abstraction, whose importance is a lot more limited than many of us think" (p. 103). This is set against a backdrop where international comparative data are being taken up by the media, and in many cases PISA has become paramount in judging our national educational well-being, which is often conflated with Ireland's economic prospects (Lynch et al., 2012).

This paper has suggested that both the construction of the problem of QAE in primary schools, and the emergence of SSE as its policy solution, can be read as highlighting the increasing momentum of new managerialism within Irish education, where the pupils have been recast as consumers, and education itself is portrayed as a marketable commodity which serves the economy like any other commodity, as opposed to constituting a human right (Lynch, 2013). I would echo the fear expressed by Lynch et al. (2012) that pupils who are not 'achieving' could be deemed undesirable by schools in their ever-increasing race to present themselves as successful. It is this author's view that SSE, which has been portrayed by the government as a progressive policy which puts power in the hands of individual

schools to guide their own outcomes (DES, 2012), has an inegalitarian underbelly where “the vulnerable become a nuisance” (Lynch, 2013).

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Self-evaluation in Irish primary schools: Implications for leadership

≡ DERRY O'CONNOR ≡

Abstract

Given the increasing emphasis being placed on self-evaluation in recent years, this study uses a variety of perspectives on school leadership (Transformational Leadership, Transactional Leadership, Distributed Leadership, Instructional and Shared Instructional Leadership, Hybrid Leadership) as a means of exploring possible effects of and responses to self-evaluation in the context of school leadership in Irish Primary Schools. The concept of self-evaluation is first examined to determine what exactly it is, as well as identifying possible opportunities and challenges that it poses for school leaders. Consideration is given to how and why self-evaluation practices have developed over time in Ireland as well as drawing comparisons with notable examples internationally. The key role of Organisational Learning in the self-evaluation process is also explored. The evidence shows that school leaders have a vital role to play in ensuring effective self-evaluation in schools.

Keywords: self-evaluation, school leadership, organisational learning, school evaluation

Introduction

In recent years self-evaluation has had an increasing influence on education systems throughout the world, with Ireland's being no exception in this case (McNamara and O'Hara, 2008). As a means of monitoring and improving educational attainment in schools, self-evaluation is endorsed and advocated by national and international organisations concerned with education policy including the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (Pont, Nusche and Moorman, 2008), The European Parliament and Council of Europe (2001), Ofsted (DfES, 2004) in Britain and the Department of Education and Skills Inspectorate (2012a, 2012b). This paper aims to explore self-evaluation using a variety of perspectives on school leadership to consider how this new approach to school evaluation in Irish primary schools is impacting on leadership practice. In doing so, the concept of organisational learning, which has close links with self-evaluation (MacBeath, 2008) will also be addressed. To begin with, the meaning of self-evaluation will be outlined along with some arguments for and against this approach to school evaluation; following on from this, the background to the School Self-Evaluation (SSE) initiative undertaken in Ireland in 2012 will be discussed, illustrating the gradual shift towards this new approach by the DES Inspectorate over recent years. This is followed by a brief exploration of some characteristics of self-evaluation around the world which may be relevant to the Irish context. While the

✉ Email: author@into.ie

ISSN: 2009-6860 (Print) 2009-6879 (Online)
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requirement for self-evaluation in Irish schools is relatively recent, all schools have by now engaged with the process. This paper will prove helpful to school leaders and others in reviewing their experiences of self-evaluation to date as well as in planning for future self-evaluation practices within schools and across the wider education system.

What is self-evaluation?

Before considering self-evaluation in more detail, we should first identify what is meant by this term. Given its increasing prominence, self-evaluation has been widely written about; in summary self-evaluation is a collaborative process involving the gathering and analysis of information on school performance, undertaken by those within the school in order to inform future policy and decision-making to bring about improvements in school performance (DES, 2012a; MacBeath, 1999; Schildkamp, Vanhoof, van Petegem and Visscher, 2012). As stated previously, self-evaluation is being increasingly promoted by both national and international organisations concerned with education policy. It is important for us to ask what the justification for this is. Many positive effects on school development are attributed to self-evaluation by existing research (Peddar and MacBeath, 2008; Yeung, 2011). MacBeath (1999) outlines myriad arguments in favour of self-evaluation: all schools are different and located within their own unique contexts; therefore they cannot be judged using a one-size fits all model of external top-down evaluation. Real and meaningful insights into pupil learning cannot be gained by external evaluation in the form of short periods of observation but instead long-term dialogue and collaboration between teachers and students is required. There is an increasing accountability agenda across public services globally, not least schools. Self-evaluation can allow for this accountability demand to be met with real and meaningful knowledge and information provided by those who are most familiar with individual schools and their unique contexts – teachers themselves. Reeves (2004) refers to this as “real accountability” (p.3) stating that teachers’ active participation in the evaluation process enables them to firstly influence the shape and design of the evaluation process and secondly to explore, discover and learn more about themselves and their students while working through the process.

A number of writers, while recognising the potential benefits of self-evaluation, have also sounded notes of caution; Peddar and MacBeath (2008) warn that there is little value in self-evaluation processes that are closely associated with external inspection; these are formulaic rather than truly striving to create organisational learning. Such claims have previously been made about self-evaluation in Irish schools (McNamara, O’Hara, Lisi and Davidsdottir, 2011); this will be addressed in more detail later. A narrowly focused, formulaic approach would certainly fail to bring about “real accountability” as envisaged by Reeves (2004). Sugrue (2006) suggests that self-evaluation adds to a growing performativity agenda and furthers the marketisation of public education. Ball (2015, 2010) also writes of the dangers of performativity which he describes as a culture that links the value and worth of an organisation or individual with specific measurable outcomes. Selection and monitoring of the outcomes to be measured will impact greatly upon the outcome of any evaluation – be it self-evaluation or otherwise. Such warnings are a timely signal to those involved in

education to be mindful of the values we seek to foster and monitor when engaged in self-evaluation in schools. Nevo (2001) states that self-evaluation's intrinsic value is questionable owing to its perceived lack of credibility and objectivity; therefore, it should exist in addition to rather than instead of external evaluation. Consideration will now be given to the development of the current self-evaluation regime in Irish schools.

Self-evaluation in Ireland

For the most part school evaluation in Ireland has been dominated by external evaluation carried out by a centralised Inspectorate (McNamara and O'Hara, 2012). While the SSE initiative was launched in 2012, there had been moves towards self-evaluation for almost a decade before this. Since the rollout of Whole School Evaluation (WSE) in 2003 there was an attempt, at least according to official policy, to blend external inspection with internal self-evaluation (McNamara and O'Hara, 2012). To facilitate the self-evaluation aspect of WSE, a self-evaluation framework, *Looking at Our School* (LAOS), was developed (DES, 2003). The principal motivation for this was that self-evaluation would be an ongoing process and the role of external inspection was to ensure effective implementation of internal systems of self-evaluation (McNamara and O'Hara, 2012). McNamara and O'Hara (2012) conducted focus group research with a total of 18 principals/deputy-principals from a variety of Irish school contexts to identify the reality as opposed to the official policy of self-evaluation practice in Irish schools. They found that the aspirations and intentions of the LAOS policy did not become actual practice. They suggest a number of reasons for this, LAOS was over ambitious, schools did not possess the capacity or skills required to gather and analyse data and evidence, and no training or resources were provided to assist schools with the self-evaluation process. One of the most critical problems that they identify was the unavailability of sufficient data on which to base judgements. McNamara and O'Hara go so far as to say that "no process that could be remotely described as systematic self-evaluation was occurring in schools" (p.93).

Between the emergence of LAOS in 2003 and SSE in 2012, there were a number of indications that self-evaluation needed further development in Irish schools with the Inspectorate themselves acknowledging that "a rigorous system of school self-review needs to emerge" (DES, 2006, p.85) to achieve continuous improvement in schools. A European Commission funded project, the Effective School Self-Evaluation Project, had the aim of improving self-evaluation practice across Europe by comparing self-evaluation approaches in participating countries and learning from each other's experiences. The project's final report (Standing International Conference of Inspectorates, 2003) made a number of recommendations regarding self-evaluation in Ireland including: developing exemplars and other resources to assist schools' implementation of self-evaluation and providing training and assistance to management and teachers. Significantly, these issues were also identified by McNamara and O'Hara as shortcomings of LAOS. Self-evaluation again came to the fore in The National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (DES, 2011), which repeatedly states that self-evaluation will be used to target improvements in literacy and numeracy. It also commits to providing principals and deputy-principals with advice and support in implementing

self-evaluation. Shortly after this in 2012, the SSE initiative was officially launched with all schools required to implement self-evaluation initially in either literacy or numeracy (DES, 2012b). While steps have been taken to address the shortcomings of LAOS, most notably the provision of training for school leaders, it remains to be seen if all difficulties have been fully resolved. We can learn much from international experiences of self-evaluation however and we now turn our attention to a sample of countries which may help to indicate the future of self-evaluation in Ireland.

Self-evaluation around the world – lessons for Ireland

In all parts of the developed world, evaluation of schools is moving more towards internally based self-evaluation models (MacBeath, 1999; Yeung, 2011). Across Europe in particular, self-evaluation is becoming increasingly important as a means of enhancing accountability and facilitating school improvement. To this end, there has been increased cooperation between policy-makers and inspectorates throughout Europe to share experiences and possibly create common instruments by which to evaluate European schools (Barzano 2002; Grek, Lawn, Ozga and Segerholm, 2013). MacBeath (1999) gives a detailed account of the implementation of self-evaluation practice throughout Europe. While many changes have occurred since MacBeath's research was conducted, it is noteworthy that he recognises that the implementation of self-evaluation in schools necessitates a recasting of the role of pre-existing national inspectorates. This is an important point for self-evaluation in Irish primary schools as school evaluation here has been dominated by external measurement, carried out principally by the Inspectorate (McNamara and O'Hara, 2012). MacBeath also describes how some very successful self-evaluation initiatives, with Finland given as an example, have arisen from schools themselves rather than from a mandated or strictly prescribed model. In this author's opinion, the current SSE framework provides schools with the appropriate structure to uphold the core principles of the self-evaluation process while allowing schools the space to be innovative and dynamic in their approach.

Parallels can also be drawn between the latest model of Whole School Evaluation (WSE-MLL) being carried out in Irish primary schools and the evaluation of schools in Hong Kong. School self-evaluation began in Hong Kong in 1997, in 2003 the evaluation system was reformed to create a more structured and complementary relationship between internal and external evaluation. All schools now go through a continuous three-four year cycle whereby self-evaluation feeds into external review (Yeung, 2011). While there are similarities between this and WSE-MLL, the Hong Kong model has a more explicit and formalised link between internal and external evaluation, providing more rigid oversight of self-evaluation by external agents than is the case in Ireland. While initial implementation of new initiatives may require and benefit from increased external support and oversight, it has also been found that trusting school leaders and teachers and allowing them greater freedom in their internal evaluation can be empowering and allow for more meaningful engagement with the evaluation process (Yeung, 2011). Based on interviews with school leaders in Hong Kong, Yeung concludes that in this case the dual internal-external approach to evaluation is skewed towards creating a culture of performance for external evaluation rather than a culture of continuous school

improvement. While there is a danger of this happening in Ireland, in this author's opinion it is unlikely. The self-evaluation process in Hong Kong is hugely focused upon preparation for external evaluation, giving individual schools limited control over how self-evaluation can be best implemented to meet their actual needs.

McNamara, O'Hara, Lisi and Davidsdottir's (2011) comparative study of experiences of self-evaluation in Ireland and Iceland reveals findings which may be instructive for the advancement of self-evaluation in Ireland. In both countries, the requirement to carry out such evaluation is relatively recent and both countries are similar in terms of size and population. The introduction of self-evaluation signalled a major change in the existing culture of Icelandic schools where independence and individual autonomy were valued over collaboration to achieve common goals. An evaluation team was established in each school to lead self-evaluation which is viewed as having been critical to its successful establishment. While SSE in Ireland is envisaged as a collaborative process, a formalised team structure is not part of the process as outlined by the Inspectorate (2012a). The emphasis in Iceland has been on "student-centred accountability" (McNamara, O'Hara, Lisi and Davidsdottir, 2011 p.75), finding ways of better meeting students' needs rather than passively implementing an obligatory initiative. This is in stark contrast to findings on previous efforts at self-evaluation in Irish schools which, admittedly prior to the current SSE initiative, showed that self-evaluation was widely viewed as another task to be completed in preparation for external inspection rather than as an ongoing process for accountability and improvement. The same research by McNamara, O'Hara, Lisi and Davidsdottir found that Irish school leaders saw little value in the self-evaluation process. By contrast, in Iceland the actions of the school principal were found to be vital in developing successful self-evaluation in schools. In Iceland the importance of the principal's role is based largely on the perception that the principal has an important role in teachers' professional development (McNamara, O'Hara, Lisi and Davidsdottir, 2011). While such a view of the principal's role is not unheard of in Irish schools and has been acknowledged more generally in relevant literature (Fraser, Kennedy, Reid, and McKinney, 2007; Loxley, Johnston, Murchan, Fitzgerald and Quinn, 2007; Moretti, Ropar and Moretti, 2013; Slegers, Thoonen, Oort and Peetsma, 2014), many Irish school principals find themselves unable to facilitate teachers' professional development as a result of their increasingly heavy workload (Loxley et al., 2007). The more general issue of principal workload may therefore pose a significant obstacle to effective school self-evaluation in Irish schools.

Perspectives on school leadership

In this section the possible leadership implications are further explored by using a variety of perspectives on school leadership as a lens through which to consider self-evaluation. The leadership perspectives to be used are: Transformational Leadership, Transactional Leadership, Distributed Leadership, Instructional and Shared Instructional Leadership and Hybrid Leadership. In addressing each of these perspectives, their potential to facilitate organisational learning will be considered. To this end we begin firstly, by discussing the links between organisational learning and self-evaluation.

Organisational learning

According to Peddar and MacBeath (2008) organisational learning is “inextricable from a well-articulated and sophisticated approach to self-evaluation” (p.212). Strong links between the two concepts can be identified in other literature on organisational learning also, with the emphasis on collaboration, reflection, gathering evidence and working towards improvements in teaching and learning aligning closely with the principles of SSE (DES, 2012a; Hord, 2004; Lai, 2014; Liljenberg, 2015). Organisational learning occurs when educators examine and interrogate the fundamental assumptions, beliefs and reasons behind what they do and why and how they do it. As a result of this critical reflection, learning occurs through the modification of knowledge, assumptions and beliefs. Such critical reflection needs to occur both individually and collectively (Peddar and MacBeath, 2008). This newly formed knowledge can then be used to improve organisational performance. Effective and meaningful implementation of self-evaluation can create a culture of collaboration and critical reflection within the school, allowing for organisational learning which is an essential requirement for improving the quality of teaching and learning (Hargreaves, 1995; Pedder and MacBeath, 2008). If, however, self-evaluation is used merely to give a snapshot of the situation in the school at a particular time without challenging, questioning and engaging with the evidence, then the self-evaluation process is of very limited value. Similarly, if the process is narrowly focused on rigidly set criteria rather than being open to following the evidence, then learning cannot occur and improvements in school performance are unlikely to follow. (Peddar and MacBeath, 2008).

It is widely acknowledged that the principal has a vital role in successful educational change and in establishing and maintaining the school as a learning organisation (Lai, 2014; Liljenberg, 2015). Lai’s (2014) research into school leaders’ actions to build capacity for organisational change and learning makes repeated references to a collaborative school culture. Deal and Peterson’s (2009) work has established the crucial role that school leaders have in fostering, shaping and communicating the school culture. Principals cannot create a learning organisation on their own but they can do much to foster an appropriate culture whereby they can then work with others as part of a learning organisation. In order for this to happen, Fleming (2004) recommends that principals must develop “collegial relationships” (p. 23) with their staff. This underlines the highly social nature of leadership and particularly of organisational learning which is fundamentally a social process. Fleming endorses a move away from traditional hierarchical structures to a school environment where all staff members work and lead together i.e. distributed leadership. This will be addressed in greater detail later.

Another major challenge for school leaders in nurturing organisational learning is providing sufficient time and appropriate structures for teachers to engage in collaborative and critical reflection (Hord, 2004; Peddar and MacBeath, 2008). This is especially true in the context of an increasing “performance culture” (Peddar and MacBeath, 2008, p. 221) across education where individuals may not wish for their own practice to be open to critique by others. This highlights the need for supportive conditions and a shared commitment to improving teaching and learning. There is also the more practical matter of simply finding time for such practices. It is essential that such difficulties are overcome as Hord (2004)

refers to a great deal of research that identifies teachers' involvement in structured reflection, discussion and shared feedback as a prominent factor in facilitating organisational learning. The potential of various leadership perspectives to facilitate organisational learning as well as self-evaluation will be considered in the following sections.

Transformational and transactional leadership

Transformational leadership is widely perceived as a means of improving teaching, learning and student achievement in schools (Sun and Leithwood, 2012). Transformational leadership is concerned with motivating everyone within the organisation to work together for the realisation of shared goals and values rather than as individuals in pursuit of personal interests. Owing to their belief in these shared goals and values, individuals are willing to act collectively beyond normal expectations (Eyal and Kark, 2004; Sun and Leithwood, 2012). Leithwood and Jantzi's (2005) review of transformational school leadership research, based upon 32 empirical studies conducted from 1996-2005, shows that there are noteworthy links between transformational leadership and changes in teacher practice; increasingly there are indications that such approaches impact positively on student outcomes (Hattie, 2015; Leithwood and Jantzi, 2005; Sun and Leithwood, 2012). While it has been established that these are indirect positive effects mediated through various means, most notably individual teachers (Leithwood, Patten, and Jantzi, 2010; Leithwood and Sun, 2012), their full extent has yet to be established, with further research required into the influence of various mediators (Sun and Leithwood, 2012).

Through their research Leithwood and Jantzi (2005) have identified a set of transformational leadership behaviours. Significantly, they found that such behaviours are widely used by school leaders in Britain in implementing national education reform policies; therefore it might be argued that such an approach could also be used in Irish schools to implement national reform initiatives such as SSE. Unsurprisingly there are many similarities between the behaviours identified by Leithwood and Jantzi and the characteristics of schools where organisational learning occurs (Hord, 2004) with a clear emphasis on collaboration, shared vision and mutual support for colleagues. There are also parallels between the SSE process (DES, 2012a) and Tichy and Devanna's (1990) three stage process of transformational leadership. These stages are outlined below:

- ◆ recognising the need for change which could occur by gathering and analysing evidence and making judgements as part of SSE;
- ◆ creating a new vision which could occur by writing the SSE report and school improvement plan;
- ◆ and institutionalising change which could occur while implementing and monitoring the school improvement plan.

Studies carried out by Geijsel, Slegers, Leithwood and Jantzi (2003) have found that the transformational leadership behaviours of vision building and intellectual stimulation have the greatest impact on teachers' extra effort and commitment to change. They go on to make the point that when reform initiatives, such as SSE, are being implemented extra effort and commitment from teachers are required to ensure their success. It is therefore incumbent

upon principals to enact leadership behaviours that can increase teachers' effort and commitment to change if reform initiatives to improve teaching and learning are to be successful. It can also be argued that these leadership behaviours facilitate organisational learning. Vision-building leads to teachers feeling a sense of involvement in developing the school's vision and goals while intellectual stimulation leads to teachers feeling that their professional growth is encouraged and supported by the principal and other leaders (Geijsel et al., 2003). Such conditions resonate with the characteristics required for organisational learning, discussed earlier: namely a shared culture, broadening of decision-making, supportive conditions and a commitment to improving teaching and learning.

Transformational leadership cannot be viewed in isolation but instead it must be considered alongside transactional leadership (Geijsel et al., 2003; Leithwood and Jantzi 2005; Sun and Leithwood, 2012). Transactional leadership occurs where individuals carry out a task in exchange for something of value to them as opposed to collaborative pursuit of a shared goal (Geijsel et al., 2003). Bass (1995) asserts that while transformational and transactional leadership behaviours can be viewed as opposite sides of a continuum, they are also carried out simultaneously. Leithwood and Jantzi (2005) take up this point stating that transformational practice cannot replace transactional but instead adds to and improves it. To this end, Leithwood and Jantzi have included a number of transactional behaviours in their set of transformational leadership behaviours. They describe these as being of considerable importance in facilitating transformational leadership practices. Transactional leadership involves a high level of centralised control as well as close monitoring of teachers by school leaders (Eyal and Kark, 2004). Geijsel et al., (2003) view transactional leadership as a means of maintaining a school's current level of performance as opposed to facilitating changes to improve school performance. Therefore it does not appear to possess any great value in facilitating organisational learning on its own; yet its value in facilitating and enhancing transformational leadership should not be overlooked.

Distributed leadership

As with self-evaluation, there has been a growing interest in distributed leadership over recent years. While it is widely acknowledged that there is some ambiguity over the meaning of the term (Harris and Spillane, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2007; Mayrowetz, 2008) there are a number of key aspects upon which many writers agree. A distributed leadership perspective acknowledges that leadership is shared across an organisation between many people rather than being focused solely on one individual. It takes account of the collective skills, knowledge and expertise of all those who exercise leadership either formally or informally as well as of the interactions between them (Bush and Glover, 2012; Harris, 2013; Harris and Spillane, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2007; Mayrowetz, 2008). What, if anything, can a distributed leadership perspective add to self-evaluation practice?

Both Mayrowetz (2008) and Leithwood et al. (2007) have explored the leadership practices that are most commonly distributed. They both include capacity-building which MacBeath (2008) identifies as being a pivotal element of self-evaluation. Capacity-building may be an explicit distributed leadership function, whereby the task of motivating and empowering those at all levels of the organisation is distributed amongst senior managers

as suggested by Locke (2003). It may also occur implicitly as outlined by Mayrowetz (2008). He proposes that when a greater number of people work together in leadership roles they will each learn more about themselves and about the school. As part of this collective learning; each person develops his/her own expertise increasing the capacity of the organisation to implement, change and bring about improvements. This facilitates a form of organisational learning. Both Mayrowetz (2008) and Leithwood et al. (2007) also include improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the organisation. By allowing those with the appropriate expertise to be involved in decision making, Mayrowetz (2008) suggests that changes can be implemented more efficiently. Leithwood et al. (2007) assert that school improvement efforts require flexibility in organisational structures and that distributed leadership allows for such flexibility as those with the greatest relevant expertise can be involved in responding to the school's evolving needs at the most appropriate time. Flexibility is of course one of the principles of SSE (DES, 2012a). Mayrowetz (2008), Harris (2013) and Harris and Spillane (2008) point to research showing the positive effects of distributed leadership on both organisational and student learning as well as capacity-building within schools. They acknowledge that the research remains limited but it consistently shows strong links between distributed leadership and improved organisational outcomes. Based on such evidence, a distributed leadership perspective may be useful in reaching key goals of self-evaluation: namely capacity-building, organisational change and improved school performance. Further research into this specific area is required however.

There are many considerations that school principals must keep in mind regarding distributed leadership. Harris (2013) makes the important point that distributed leadership must be used in a "managed and strategic way" (p.584) in order to be effective. Distributed leadership can only occur where it is promoted and encouraged by the school principal; its success or failure is almost entirely dependent on the attitude and values of the principal (Leithwood et al., 2007). Teachers as well as principals must be willing to view their role differently if distributed leadership is to be successful. Harris (2013) writes that effective leaders promote distributed leadership by moving their organisation from traditional hierarchical structures towards a flatter structure, giving individuals greater opportunity to take initiative for leadership functions. This can be challenging for school leaders who may feel undermined and vulnerable due to a perceived loss of influence and authority (Harris, 2013; Leithwood et al., 2007). Encouraging colleagues to take on greater leadership responsibilities can be challenging at any time, but is particularly difficult currently given the significant loss of middle management posts as well as other cutbacks in Irish schools. O'Brien, McNamara and O'Hara (2014) identify such structural barriers as significant obstacles to effective self-evaluation in Irish schools.

There are of course arguments against the use of distributed leadership in schools. Lumby (2013) is particularly critical of distributed leadership approaches. She argues that while it may at first appear to be democratic and inclusive, it is in fact quite the opposite. She portrays it as a centrally controlled mechanism to place additional work onto teachers. She argues that rather than bringing about new and innovative practices, the same practices as before will be carried out behind a façade of empowerment and inclusivity. She asserts that despite claims of leadership opportunities being open to all by distributed leadership,

the same groups as ever continue to be denied access to leadership roles. Distributed leadership takes no account of nor does it provide any solution to existing barriers to leadership (e.g. race, age, gender). In this author's opinion, Lumbly is correct to point out the shortcomings of distributed leadership which have perhaps been overlooked by other authors. Harris (2013) takes a more balanced view however and concludes that distributed leadership can have positive outcomes in schools. Its effectiveness is influenced by the motivation behind the distribution of leadership and successful approaches require strategic and planned engagement throughout the organisation. Those in existing leadership positions, have a vital role to play in ensuring that this happens.

Instructional and shared instructional leadership

The concept of instructional leadership emerged initially during the 1980s with the aim of improving and providing greater accountability for student performance (Purinton, 2013) by improving the standard of teaching in schools. More recently, an increasing emphasis on accountability has brought instructional leadership to the fore again (Hallinger, 2005). In its initial form responsibility for bringing about such improvements was vested entirely in the principal, making it a very hierarchical approach (Hallinger, 2005; Marks and Printy, 2003; Purinton, 2013; Tan, 2012). Marks and Printy (2003) put forward a revised model, which they call shared instructional leadership. It is again primarily concerned with improving outcomes for students. In this conception however, it is no longer solely the concern of the principal but is a shared responsibility of principal and teachers, creating many parallels with distributed leadership. Hallinger (2005) supports Marks and Printy's reconceptualisation of instructional leadership, arguing that the burden of school leadership is too great to be adequately carried by any one individual.

Hallinger identifies three dimensions where instructional leadership is practiced in schools:

- ◆ defining the school's mission,
- ◆ managing the instructional program,
- ◆ promoting a positive school learning climate (p.225).

According to traditional conceptions of instructional leadership, the act of defining the school's mission would be dominated by the principal who would have determined and communicated the school's mission and values with a focus on high standards of teaching and learning (Hallinger, 2005). The highly directive and hierarchical nature of such approaches runs contrary to the principles of SSE as well as the characteristics required to facilitate organisational learning. Taking a shared instructional approach however, allows for collaboration with all staff and the wider school community while still allowing the principal to communicate, support and model high standards of teaching and learning (Hallinger, 2005; Marks and Printy, 2003).

Managing the instructional programme requires a great deal of curricular expertise as well as close involvement in the teaching and learning process (Hallinger, 2005). By taking Marks and Printy's (2005) shared instructional approach, a form of distributed leadership can occur whereby the principal facilitates those teachers who possess the appropriate

knowledge and expertise in each curricular area. In addressing the final dimension, promoting a positive school learning climate, Hallinger (2005) emphasises the importance of developing “high standards and expectations for students and teachers” as well as “a culture of continuous improvement” (p.226). He goes on to say that the principal must instigate and model appropriate practices to achieve this; which is true but in keeping with Marks and Printy’s shared instructional approach, principals cannot do this on their own. Instead it is a responsibility to be shared amongst all teachers. Shared instructional leadership can facilitate organisational learning as it allows for the principal and other leaders to act as role models in developing values and practices for improved teaching and learning. In this author’s experience, such collaborative leadership approaches are increasingly in practice in Irish schools and have been widely promoted through the Leadership Development Programmes of the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST). While school leaders are being increasingly encouraged to take a greater instructional role, many are simply unable to do so. Research shows that school leaders currently spend more time on administrative than pedagogical leadership tasks (Loxley et al., 2007; OECD, 2013). Shared leadership approaches have significant potential to ease the burden on school principals and others in leadership positions, thereby facilitating effective self-evaluation. The current moratorium on posts of responsibility may prove to hinder the development of shared leadership approaches as well as undermining existing shared leadership practices.

Hybrid leadership

Having discussed self-evaluation in the context of a range of perspectives on school leadership, all appear to possess certain elements which lend themselves to the self-evaluation process. Perhaps it would be worthwhile if we were to combine elements of these approaches in a form of hybrid leadership as espoused by Gronn (2009). The constantly evolving and highly complex challenges of school leadership cannot be neatly encapsulated by any one theory but instead require school leaders to adopt and adapt a range of strategies and approaches in surmounting the challenges they face in their schools every day (Gronn, 2009). Hybrid leadership is not a new perspective of its own but as Gronn says it is an acknowledgement of the reality that various forms of leadership coexist in schools. Gronn argues that distributed leadership may be better understood as a form of hybrid leadership: a mix of individual and shared forms of leadership constantly evolving in response to the needs and context of the school. Crawford (2012) and Bush and Glover (2012) support this approach, recognising that it may allow for a more realistic view of how leadership is distributed given that the concept is generally shrouded in ambiguity and it also acknowledges that where distributed leadership occurs a great deal of influence over the process is retained by principals. Acceptance of hybrid leadership also recognises the flexibility allowed by mixed patterns of leadership; principals can draw on the most appropriate skills and knowledge available to them, be they from themselves, other senior members of staff or teachers from all and any levels of the school. In so doing they can maximise the effectiveness of the school’s response to its own unique context and set of challenges (Gronn, 2009; Marks and Printy, 2003). Surely such an approach should lie at the heart of self-evaluation, whereby schools can identify their areas of greatest need based on their own evidence, plan how they can better meet those needs

using the skills and resources of their own school community and finally implement, monitor and enhance their efforts to bring about improvement.

Conclusion

This paper set out to explore the implications of self-evaluation on leadership in Irish primary schools. Having outlined the background and justification for self-evaluation, it is clear that it signals a major shift in the culture and practice of evaluation in Irish schools and therefore requires school principals to alter their practice significantly within this changed context. After exploring self-evaluation in the context of various leadership perspectives, there are a number of essential points that stand out. Firstly, the principal's role is crucial; their steadfast commitment and support is imperative to create appropriate conditions for successful self-evaluation. Furthermore school principals can be significant role models in advancing the mission and values of their school; they have a role therefore in promoting the values and practices necessary for successful self-evaluation.

Despite the great responsibility placed upon the principal, self-evaluation cannot be done by principals alone but requires involvement and commitment from all members of staff and the wider school community. To achieve this, it is necessary to move away from traditional hierarchical structures towards a flatter structure where leadership can be shared. Principals may face great challenges in dealing with the changing nature of their role in this context.

The complex nature of school leadership and specifically of self-evaluation necessitates hybrid or mixed patterns of leadership practice. This will endow principals and schools with the flexibility to engage with and respond to the school's evolving needs throughout the continuous self-evaluation process.

Finally, while the principal's role is critical to successful self-evaluation, this can only happen if they are given the appropriate resources, guidance and support. While steps have been taken to address this following the failure of the LAOS initiative, it remains to be seen if these steps are sufficient to make SSE a truly worthwhile and transformative reform initiative in Irish primary schools.

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The effect of fixed playground equipment on primary school children's fitness levels

≡ CLAIRE HENEGHAN ≡

Abstract

Schools are seen as one of the core agents for the delivery of interventions to promote activity and combat the obesity epidemic. Research has shown that permanent playground equipment in schools can influence physical activity in children.

The objective of this study was to evaluate the effect of fixed playground structures on children's fitness levels during the first year of primary school. The intervention school had daily access to a fully equipped playground while the control had an equipment free play area. The EUROFIT test battery consisted of five test items measuring aerobic capacity, muscular strength, muscular endurance and flexibility.

Results showed an increased level of physical fitness in the intervention school in the sit-up test ($F(1, 44) = 38.75, p < 0.0001$), balance test ($F(1, 44) = 44.03, p < 0.0001$) and shuttle run test ($F(1, 44) = 18.82, p < 0.0001$).

Providing permanent playground equipment in school was found to be effective in increasing fitness levels in young primary school children.

Keywords: children, school break-time, playground, fitness

Introduction

Schools have been acknowledged by international and national policy as being a key setting for the promotion of physical activity (PA) in children (Layte and McCrory, 2011; WHO, 2011). The annual requirement of attendance for children in Irish primary schools is 183 days (Department of Education and Skills, 2012). As a result schools are seen as key settings to promote physical activity and cardiovascular fitness (Tudor-Locke, Lee, Morgan, Beighle, and Pangrazi, 2006). The school environment can provide ample opportunity for children to be physically active, including physical education (PE) lessons and break-times.

Many intervention studies have found that PE class fails to supply adequate activity to help children meet the recommendation of 60 minutes or more of moderate to vigorous physical activity on five or more days per week (Friedman, Belsky and Booth, 2003; McKenzie, Marshall, Sallis and Conway, 2000). As curriculum time scheduled for PE is

limited (60 minutes weekly), break-time (40 minutes daily) is a key opportunity for the promotion of PA.

Consequently, the break-time environment should promote PA in children. Relatively positive benefits have been shown by adapting playgrounds and installing fixed playground equipment and playground markings to encourage more PA in children at primary school (Farley, Meriwether, Baker, Rice and Webber, 2008; Ridgers, Stratton, Fairclough and Twisk, 2007; Sutterby, Brown and Thornton, 2004). Little research has been carried out on the impact of permanent playground equipment on physical fitness in children during break-time. To date there seems to have been no Irish study, and very few international studies, that have investigated the influence of fixed playground equipment at break-time on children's fitness levels.

Aim

The aim of this study was to evaluate and compare fitness levels of primary school children (aged five to six years) during the first year of primary school that had regular access to permanent playground equipment and compare them to children of similar age with an equipment-free school play-area.

Methodology

Participants and settings

The research project was executed in the east of Ireland from September 2012 to June 2013. Two primary schools participated in the project. School A had daily access to a fully equipped playground (intervention group) while school B had an equipment-free play area (control group). School A's fully equipped playground (see Figure 1) was built in the summer of 2012. The children participating in the study were aged five to six years and had never used the equipment prior to commencing school on 3 September 2013. It consisted of one large swing, two slides, monkey bars, balance beams, hanging bars of various sizes, see-saw and merry-go-round, all of which was stated as being a 'rare commodity' in Irish schools (Marron, 2008). The cost of the playground to the school was €85,000. No published data on the number of schools in Ireland with fixed playground equipment was available at the time of print. Yet in one Irish study analysing break-time play in 391 Irish primary schools, fixed playground equipment in schools was defined as 'scarce and basic' (Marron, 2008). School B had an equipment-free play area (see Figure 1).



School A's play area



School B's play area

Figure 1: fixed playground equipment (school A) versus equipment-free play area (school B)

Information relating to break-time characteristics in the two observed schools are reviewed in Table 1. This comprises of the activities observed during break-time, the equipment available, type of yard surface as well as games observed. Neither school had a school policy on break-time play. Break-time duration was forty minutes daily in both schools. Lunch was eaten prior to break-time.

Table 1: Break-time related characteristics of the two observed schools

Characteristics	School A	School B
Enrolment for 2013/14 academic year	442	398
Description of school play area	Fully equipped playground consisting of one large swing, two slides, monkey bars, balance beams, hanging bars of three varying sizes (600 cm, 1 metre, 1.5 metres), see-saw and merry-go-round.	Equipment-free schoolyard space.
School yard surface	Rubber playground surfacing	Tarmacadam surface
Equipment available at break time	Fixed playground equipment	No equipment provided
Break time policy when it is raining	Sedentary play with games in their classroom.	Sedentary play with games in their classroom.
Dress code	School uniform consisted of a navy tracksuit with black/navy running shoes.	School uniform consisted of a navy and green tracksuit and black/navy running shoes.
Games observed	Climbing and hanging games; travelling under, over and through apparatus; chasing games; engaging in play on the see-saw, merry-go-round, swings and slide; running races.	Chasing games; running races; cartwheels and handstands; clapping games.

The participating schools were neighbouring schools within 500 metres of each other, with similar socio-economic backgrounds and comparable access to sports and/or facilities locally. The study population included 50 five to six-year-old children from the two observed schools. During the collection of data, four children from school B were excluded from further analyses due to sickness on the days of measurement. As a result, a sample of 46 children was evaluated ($n=46$). The intervention group (school A) consisted of 27 children (13 girls and 14 boys, mean age: 5.7 ± 0.6 years). The control group (school B) consisted of 19 children (9 boys, 11 girls, mean age: 5.8 ± 0.7 years).





In both groups the children were supervised during free play but no coordinated activities were conducted at break time during the intervention. The evaluation was considered to be part of the physical education programme provided by the schools for which all parents signed a consent form. The research in both schools was carried out by the author, who was also the class teacher for the participants from the intervention school, school A. The study protocol was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Applied Sciences of the University of Chester.

Procedure

Test items

The *EUROFIT* fitness test (Council of Europe, 1993) was selected as the most applicable to this age group (Fjørtoft, 2000; Fjørtoft, Pedersen, Sigmundsson and Vereihken, 2011). From the literature reviewed on children's fitness testing, the *EUROFIT* motor fitness test (Council of Europe, 1993) is for five to seven year old children with very slight modifications recommended (Fjørtoft, 2000). Throughout this model compound activities are targeted, for example endurance, running speed, agility, strength, balance and flexibility (Fjørtoft, 2000; Fjørtoft, et al. 2011; Haga, 2008; Haga, 2009). Familiar pursuits that children engage in during play are focused on, ensuring cognitive understanding. For the purpose of this study and the age-group being tested, static balance will be assessed using the standing balance test as recommended by Clark and Watkins (1984), as the reproducibility was rated low on EUROFIT's Flamingo Balance test for the five to seven-year-old age group (Fjørtoft, 2000). The sit and reach test measures flexibility. Strength is tested by the bent arm hang test and the sit-up test. Running speed and agility is tested by a 10x5 metre shuttle run (Council of Europe, 1993). See Table 2.

Table 2: Details of fitness tests used in the study (based on the EUROFIT model)

Fitness Test	Aim	Procedure
10x5 metre shuttle run 	This test measures speed and agility.	The test records the amount of time required to run 10x5 metres (measured in seconds).
Sit and Reach Test 	The sit and reach test assesses flexibility.	This assessment involves the participant sitting on the floor with both knees locked out and the soles of the feet positioned flat against the box. The participant then stretches forward down the measuring line with their palm faced downwards and hands positioned side by side. The distance is then documented.
Bent Arm Hang 	The bent arm hang test measures upper body strength and endurance.	The participant is helped into position in order for their chin to be equal with the horizontal bar. The hands are in an overhand grip and shoulder width apart. The participant is timed from when they are released. The stopwatch is stopped when the chin falls below the height of the horizontal bar.
Standing Balance Test 	This balance test measures balance levels.	The participant stands on one leg for as long as possible. The stopwatch is halted as soon as the raised foot reached the ground or the participant loses their balance position.
Sit-up test 	This test was used to measure the endurance of the abdominal and hip-flexor muscles.	The participant executes as many sit-ups as possible in thirty seconds. They are instructed to lie on the mat with feet flat on the floor, knees bent at right angles, and fingers interlocked behind the head. When directed they elevate the chest so that the upper body is vertical and then return to the mat.

The fitness tests were carried out by the author on the participating children four times from September 2012 to June 2013, as follows:

- ◆ 4 September 2012 – Start of term one.
- ◆ 8 April 2013 – Start of term three.
- ◆ 8 January 2013 – Start of term two.
- ◆ 27 June 2013 – End of academic year.

Each test was carried out individually on the children after a general warm-up. Warming up is essential in preparing the body appropriately for involvement in exercise (Government of Ireland, 1999). The warm-ups during the course of this study were consistent prior to each administered test and involved a gentle jog followed by mobility and stretching exercises. The course of fitness assessments was carried out in school A and school B's respective school gymnasiums, so weather was not a factor in collecting the data. Each assessment was allotted a clearly marked zone. Clear instructions and demonstrations were given on each test item prior to commencement. All tests were carried out twice with the greater attempt recorded. If a technical error was made, the child made another attempt after the test item was re-explained and demonstrations were shown again. Data was recorded on Microsoft Excel after each procedure.

Data analysis and results

All data was analysed using SPSS (19.0). ANOVA was used on subject effects and between subject effects.

Shuttle run test

Table 3 shows the results of the 10x5 metre shuttle run test which measures speed and agility.

Table 3: Shuttle run fitness test results: Mean times +/- standard deviation (SD) for 10x5 metre shuttle run fitness test (measured in seconds)

Date of measurement	School A (seconds)	School B (seconds)
Time 1: 4.9.2012	140 +/- 40 seconds	138 +/- 39 seconds
Time 2: 8.1.2013	89 +/- 29 seconds	127 +/- 43 seconds
Time 3: 8.4.2013	56 +/- 29 seconds	110 +/- 42 seconds
Time 4: 27.6.2013	19 +/- 13 seconds	91 +/- 38 seconds

Participants from school A with fixed playground equipment had significantly faster times than children in school B. A significant difference between schools was also seen, $F(1, 44) = 18.82, p < 0.0001$. There was a significant interaction between time and school (see Figure 2.1 in Appendix 2) also detected, $F(2.35, 103.48) = 37.23, p < 0.0001$.

Additionally, the results show a noticeable improvement in the speed and agility of participants from school A over the ten-month study. There was a significant effect of time points (Time 1, Time 2, Time 3 and Time 4) on the 10x5 metre shuttle run scores, $F(2.35, 103.48) = 194.22, p < 0.0001$. Mean scores of the 10x5 metre shuttle run results systematically decreased over time in both groups (see Table 6).

Table 6 and the interaction graphs (see Figure 2.2 in Appendix 2) show that mean times are very similar at Time 1 (school A: 140 SD +/- 40 seconds; school B: 138 SD +/- 39 seconds), but that at Times 2, 3 and 4 there is a clear effect and significant difference between school on the obtained results. At Time 2 there is a mean difference of 38 seconds (SD +/- 36 seconds) between the schools (school A: 89 SD +/- 29 seconds; school B: 127 SD +/- 43 seconds).

Consistently, increases were seen in Time 3 and 4 between the schools. There was a mean difference of 54 seconds (SD +/- 36 seconds) at Time 3 and 72 seconds (SD +/- 26 seconds) at Time 4 between the schools, with school A again scoring lower than school B. This verifies the pattern of increase in speed and agility in school A compared to school B throughout the course of the study.

Sit and reach test

The results of the sit and reach scores improved over the ten-month study in both schools (see Table 4), yet no significant difference between schools was detected ($F(1, 44) = 2.23, p > 0.05$). There was no significant interaction between time and comparison schools either (see Figure 3.2 in Appendix 2), $F(2.21, 97.19) = 0.91, p > 0.05$.

Table 4: Sit and reach fitness tests results: Mean scores +/- standard deviation for sit and reach fitness test (measured in centimetres)

Date of measurement	School A (centimetres)	School B (centimetres)
Time 1: 4.9.2012	83+/-55 centimetres	64+/-49 centimetres
Time 2: 8.1.2013	96+/-53 centimetres	75+/-48 centimetres
Time 3: 8.4.2013	106+/-53 centimetres	83+/-48 centimetres
Time 4: 27.6.2013	122+/-50 centimetres	96+/-49 centimetres

A significant effect of time points (Time 1, Time 2, Time 3 and Time 4) on sit and reach scores was detected, $F(2.21, 97.19) = 71.21, p < 0.0001$. Mean scores of sit and reach results systematically increased over time in both groups (see Table 7). At Time 1 there was a mean difference of 19 centimetres (SD +/- 52 centimetres) between the schools (school A: 83 SD+/-55 centimetres; school B: 64 SD+/-49 centimetres). A mean difference at Time 4 of 26 centimetres (SD +/- 50 cm) existed between the schools at the end of the intervention, with school A having greater flexibility results than school B.

Bent arm hang test

There was no significant difference between school A and B in terms of strength as measured by the bent arm hang test. There was a noticeable increase in children's strength, however, in both schools over the course of the ten-month study (see Table 5).

Table 5: Bent arm hang test results: Mean scores +/- standard deviation for bent arm hang fitness test (measured in seconds)

Date of measurement	School A (seconds)	School B (seconds)
Time 1: 4.9.2012	52+/-51 seconds	83+/-54 seconds
Time 2: 8.1.2013	85+/-54 seconds	92+/-50 seconds
Time 3: 8.4.2013	106+/-51 seconds	93+/-48 seconds
Time 4: 27.6.2013	126+/-44 seconds	102+/-42 seconds

There was no significant effect of school (see Figure 4.1 in Appendix 2) on scores of bent arm hang results, $F(1, 44) = 0.00, p > 0.05$. Yet a significant interaction between time and school (see Figure 4.2 in Appendix 2) was detected, $F(2.03, 89.05) = 25.31, p < 0.0001$.

A significant effect of time points (Time 1, Time 2, Time 3 and Time 4) was also seen on bent arm hang scores, $F(2.03, 89.05) = 66.16, p < 0.0001$. Mean scores of bent arm hang results systematically increased over time in school A (see Table 5). A mean difference of 74 seconds (SD +/-48 seconds) existed between Time 1 (mean: 52 SD+/- 51 seconds) and Time 4 (mean: 126 SD+/- 44 seconds) in school A, showing the increase in children's strength after the intervention. In school B there was also a visible increase between times, but not to the same extent as school A. Time 1 (mean=83 SD+/- 54 seconds), Time 2 (mean=92 SD+/- 50 seconds), Time 3 (mean=93 SD+/- 48 seconds) and Time 4 (mean=102 SD+/- 42 seconds) all showed improvements in strength over the study.

Standing balance test

There was a significant difference in results on balance levels between school A and B over the ten-month study, as measured by the standing balance test (see Table 6).

Table 6: Standing balance test results: Mean scores and standard deviation for standing balance test (measured in seconds)

Date of measurement	School A (seconds)	School B (seconds)
Time 1: 4.9.2012	97+/- 42 seconds	38+/- 30 seconds
Time 2: 8.1.2013	113+/- 40 seconds	45+/- 35 seconds
Time 3: 8.4.2013	128+/- 39 seconds	57+/- 36 seconds
Time 4: 27.6.2013	150+/- 36 seconds	63+/- 34 seconds

A significant effect of time points (Time 1, Time 2, Time 3 and Time 4) on the standing balance scores was also detected, $F(2.15, 94.5) = 128.01, p < 0.0001$. A significant interaction between time and school was also identified, $F(2.15, 94.5) = 15.14, p < 0.0001$.

Mean scores in school A were noticeably higher (time 1: mean 97 SD+/- 42 seconds) than school B (time 1: mean 38 SD+/- 30 seconds) at the beginning of the intervention. Mean scores of the standing balance results systematically increased (see Table 6) over time in both groups, although the slope of the line is noticeably flatter in school B (see Figure 5.1 in Appendix 2). The difference in the slopes is further supported by in the fact that a significant effect of the school (see Figure 5.2 in Appendix 2) was detected, $F(1, 44) = 44.03, p < 0.0001$.

A mean difference of 53 seconds (SD +/- 39 seconds) existed between Time 1 (mean: 97 SD+/- 42 seconds) and Time 4 (mean: 150 SD+/- 36 seconds) in school A, showing a significant increase in balance after the provision of outdoor play equipment. Less of a significant mean difference (25 seconds SD +/- 32 seconds) existed between Time 1 (mean: 38 SD+/- 30 seconds) and Time 4 (mean 63 SD+/- 34 seconds) in control school B. There was a mean difference of 87 seconds (SD +/- 35 seconds) in Time 4 between school A (mean: 150 SD+/- 36 seconds) and B (mean: 63 SD+/- 34 seconds), showing the increased balance levels of participants from the intervention school.

Sit-up test

Children in school A were able to perform significantly more sit-ups than their counterparts in school B (see Table 7). School A also had a higher level of improvement in this test over the ten-month study.

Table 7: Sit-up test results: Mean scores and standard deviation for sit up fitness test (number executed in thirty seconds)

Date of measurement	School A (number executed in 30 seconds)	School B (number executed in 30 seconds)
Time 1: 4.9.2012	5 +/- 3	5 +/- 2
Time 2: 8.1.2013	11 +/- 3	7 +/- 2
Time 3: 8.4.2013	15 +/- 3	8 +/- 3
Time 4: 27.6.2013	20 +/- 3	10 +/- 3

There was a significant effect of time points (Time 1, Time 2, Time 3 and Time 4) on the sit-up scores, $F(2.065, 90.86) = 235.65, p < 0.0001$. Mean scores of the sit-up results systematically increased (see Table 7) over time in both groups, although the slope of the line is noticeably flatter in school B (see Figure 6.1). The difference in the slopes is supported by the fact that a significant effect of the school type (see Figure 6.2) was detected, $F(1, 44) = 38.75, p < 0.0001$. Additionally, a significant interaction between time and school was also identified, $F(2.065, 90.86) = 42.13, p < 0.0001$.

A mean difference of 15 sit-ups completed in 30 seconds (SD +/-3) existed between time 1 (mean: 5 sit-ups/30 seconds SD +/-3) and Time 4 (mean: 20 sit-ups/30 seconds SD +/-3) in school A. Less of a significant mean difference (5 sit-ups/30 seconds SD +/-3) occurred between Time 1 (mean: 5 sit-ups/30 seconds SD +/- 2) and Time 4 (mean: 10 sit-ups/30 seconds SD +/-3) in the control school B. A mean difference of 10 sit-ups/30 seconds (SD +/-3) occurred in time 4 between school A (mean: 20 sit-ups/30 seconds SD +/-3) and B (mean: 10 sit-ups/30 seconds SD +/-3) after the intervention. This verified the increase in endurance of the abdominal and hip-flexor muscles in school A compared to school B after the ten-month study.

Discussion

The World Health Organisation (WHO, 2004) stresses the importance of playground facilities for the promotion of PA and fitness in schools. The aim of this study was to evaluate the effect of fixed playground facilities on children's fitness levels during the first year of primary school.

In this study, the presence of fixed playground equipment had a significant effect on the fitness levels of children in three of the five *EUROFIT* fitness tests assessed in the areas of endurance (sit-up test: $F(1, 44) = 38.75, p < 0.0001$), balance (standing balance test: $F(1, 44) = 44.03, p < 0.0001$), speed and agility (shuttle run test: $F(1, 44) = 18.82, p < 0.0001$). In these three tests, school A (intervention) performed statistically better than school B (control) over the course of the ten-month study. There was no significant difference between schools

in the sit and reach flexibility test ($F(1, 44) = 2.23, p > 0.05$). Additionally no significant difference between schools was seen in the bent arm hang test ($F(1, 44) = 0.00, p > 0.05$), which measured children's strength and endurance. Yet a significant interaction was detected between time points and school in both the sit and reach test ($F(2.21, 97.19) = 71.21, p < 0.0001$) and bent arm hang test ($F(2.03, 89.05) = 25.31, p < 0.0001$). This indicates that an increase occurred in participant's flexibility, strength and endurance over the ten-month study, which were both highlighted to be more significant in the intervention school.

There was a significant difference in children's individual times and scores in all five fitness tests throughout the ten-month study. Improvements were seen in most participants from both the control and intervention schools. Improvements were particularly apparent in the shuttle-run test (mean difference between school A and B in time 4: 72 seconds SD +/-26 seconds) and the balance test (mean difference between school A and B in time 4: 87 seconds SD +/- 35 seconds). This may be due to the age group being tested (five to six years) as research has shown that younger children can have a greater biological instinct to be physically active (Rowland, 1998). McKenzie, Sallis and Elder (1997) found that children ($n=287$; mean age of 6.6 years) engaged in moderate to vigorous physical activity (MVPA) 48% of break-time when equipment was in place in the school playground. This percentage is more favourable than the threshold of 40% MVPA during break-time, which is advocated for health benefits in children (Stratton and Mullan, 2005).

The improvement in children's fitness levels from data collected is also a positive finding in regards to the intervention school. Recent research has suggested that playground equipment has a convincing effect on children's activity and fitness levels, but a decrease can be seen on the effects after six months (Ridgers, et al. 2010). This was not the case in this study. The results are consistent with previous research advocating that developing the physical school environment can increase physical activity participation during break-time (Jago and Baranowski, 2004; Sallis, Bauman and Pratt 1998; Story, Nanney, and Schwartz, 2009; Stratton and Mullan, 2005). However, most of these studies concentrate on the equipment's effects on children's physical activity levels and do not focus on fitness, which was the aim of this study. Research has suggested that physical fitness rather physical activity is a more satisfactory predictor of health outcomes (Blair, Cheng and Holder, 2001). Data collected from an extensive study proposed that increasing physical activity is deficient as the risk of cardiovascular disease is more reliant on physical fitness instead of how much physical activity is performed (García-Artero, Ortega, Ruiz, Mesa, Delgado and González-Gross, 2007). Further studies are needed on the intensity, duration and frequency of physical activity needed to elevate fitness to a favourable level in children, which can help alleviate health risks later in life, such as obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, osteoporosis and cancer (Blair, et al. 2001).

Assessment of one play area in New Orleans demonstrated that children were between 3.3 to 12.6 times more likely to be active in equipped play areas compared to equipment free areas (Farley, et al. 2008). Additionally the amount of permanent play facilities in school playgrounds was associated with a higher PA level (3.2%) in 5-12 year old children ($n=441$) compared with equipment free playgrounds in a New Zealand study (Taylor, Farmer, Cameron, Meredith-Jones, Williams and Mann, 2011). Fixed playground equipment in school

in an American study by Sutterby, Brown and Thornton (2004) resulted in a significant increase in children's (n=120) heart rates in comparison with heart rate levels of children in equipment free play areas. Across all age groups in the school with fixed equipment, elevated heart rates in the children were found during break-time, highlighting the positive effect of playground equipment on activity levels.

Limitations

There are several limitations of this study that should be noted. A small sample size (n=46) was investigated. The researcher was the children's class teacher in School A and the influence of this on their use of playground facilities was not examined. The researcher, perhaps had greater professional knowledge about physical fitness than the teacher of the class in school B, which may be a possible influence on the progress of children in School B, aside altogether from the lack of equipment, and these factors may have led to an impact on effect size. Further studies might seek to replicate these findings with teachers with similar levels of expertise and knowledge about young children's physical fitness. The influence of teacher's encouragement on the children's use of playground facilities was also not examined. Research has shown that children respond favourably to encouragement and support from teachers and other adults (McKenzie, et al. 1997). The relationship between participant's BMI, body composition and their effect on fitness levels recorded was not investigated. Body composition and BMI have been related to physical fitness in children (Hussey, Bell, Bennett, O'Dwyer, and Gormley, 2007) and this is a topic that warrants further research.

Conclusion

Childhood obesity has emerged as one of the most significant public health challenges of the 21st century (WHO, 2004). Schools are seen as one of the core agents for the delivery of interventions to promote physical activity and fitness, and combat the obesity epidemic (Story, Nannery and Schwartz, 2009). The results from this study show that fixed playground equipment had a significant effect on children's fitness levels in the areas of endurance, balance, speed and agility. There was no statistical data available at the time of print on the number of schools with fixed playground equipment in Ireland but evidence would suggest that school A, with a fully equipped playground, is in the minority.

Permanent play equipment and facilities in school playgrounds are associated with an elevated level of both physical activity and fitness in children, as shown by this study. With a recent extensive Irish study (Layte, et al. 2011) revealing that only 25% of children (n=8,568) met the recommendation of sixty minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity per day, promotion of PA and fitness and investment in these areas in schools are urgently required. Break-time, with an allotted 40 minutes per school day, is a key period to target. Whether altering school playground environments is an affordable and feasible option in order to promote physical fitness and activity is yet to be seen. Yet can we afford not to make these changes and investments?

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Definitions relevant to the study

Obesity is usually caused by an imbalance between calories consumed and calories utilised (WHO, 2011).

Physical fitness can be defined as a characteristic that has been attained in the performance of physical activity, which is physical movement created by the contraction of muscle that consequently creates energy expenditure (Caspersen, Powell and Christenson, 1985).

Physical activity (PA) is any bodily movement generated by muscles that cause energy expenditure.

Break-time is a forty minutes recreational period daily for Irish primary school children. It is known as recess in the USA.

Free play is play without organised instruction where children play in the school playground during break-time supervised.

Supervised play is conducted by teachers during break-time. Their role is to make sure children are safe and respond accordingly when accidents take place. They do not play a role in organising or instructing activities.

Fixed equipment at break-time is equipment that cannot be easily repositioned e.g. swings, slide, climbing frames, balance beams, basket ball nets and goal posts.

Loose equipment are small play items used during break-time e.g. hoops, balls, frisbees and skipping ropes.

MVPA stands for moderate to vigorous physical activity.

PE stands for physical education.

Appendix 2: Interaction graphs of interaction between fitness test scores between school A and B and within school A and B

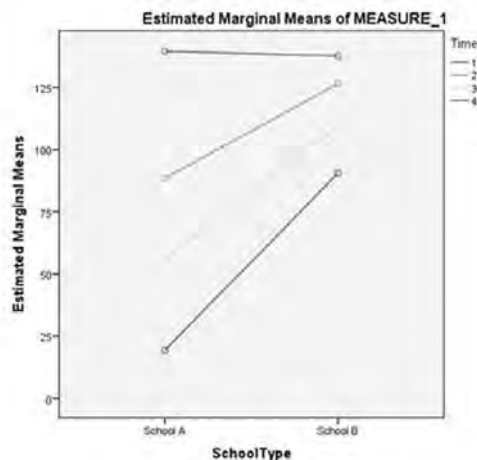


Figure 2.1: Interaction graph in shuttle run scores between school A and B

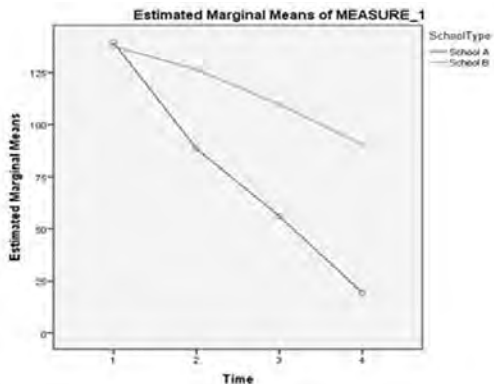


Figure 2.2: Interaction of shuttle run times within school A and B

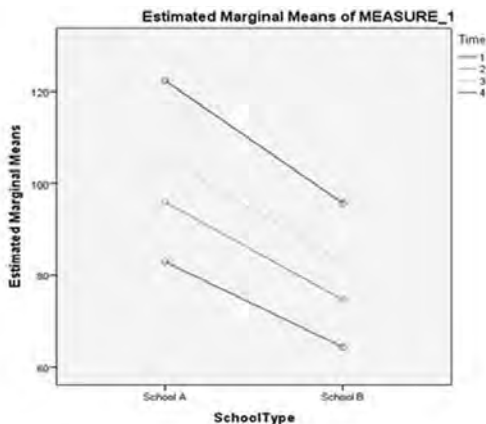


Figure 3.1: Interaction graph in sit and reach scores between school A and B

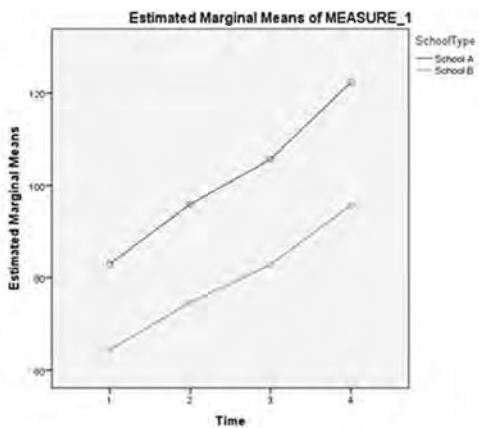


Figure 3.2: Interaction of sit and reach times within school A and B

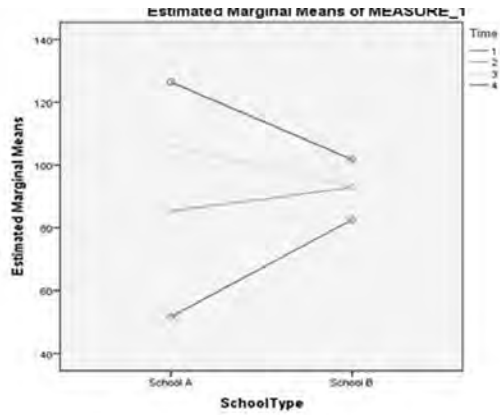


Figure 4.1: Interaction graph in bent arm hang scores between school A and B

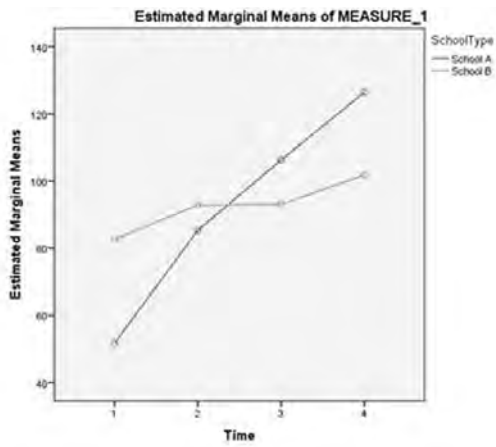


Figure 4.2: Interaction of bent arm hang times within school A and B

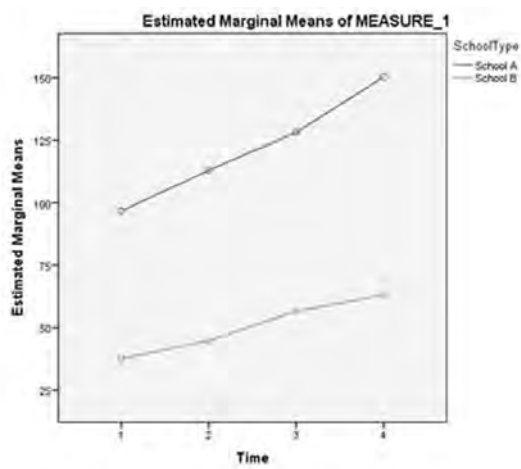


Figure 5.1: Interaction of simple standing balance test times within school A and B

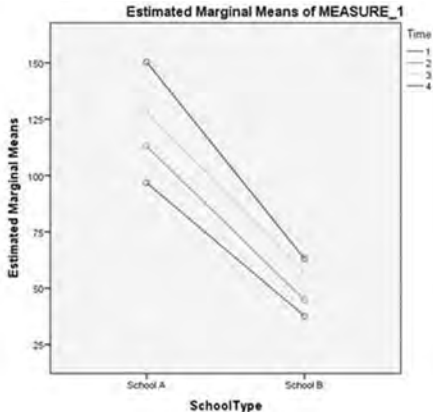


Figure 5.2: Interaction graph in simple standing test scores between school A and B

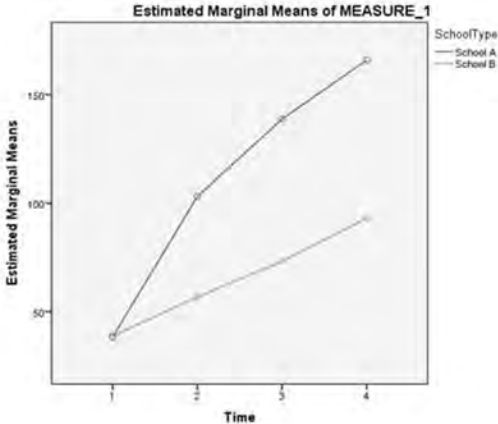


Figure 6.1: Interaction of sit up times within school A and B

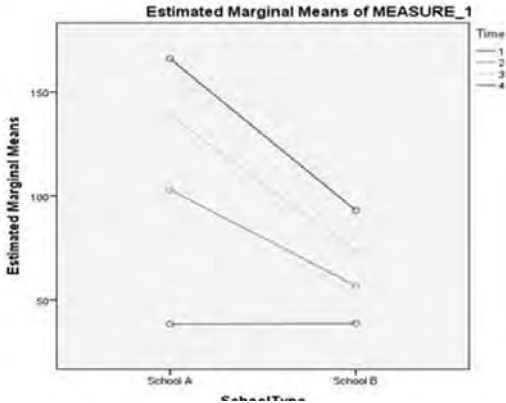


Figure 6.2: Interaction graph in sit up times between school A and B

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Irish National Teachers' Organisation
35 Parnell Square
Dublin 1

Telephone: 01 804 7700
Email: info@into.ie
Web: www.into.ie
Mobile web: m.into.ie

General Secretary: Sheila Nunan

Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann
35 Cearnóg Pharnell
Baile Átha Cliath 1

Guthán: 01 804 7700
Ríomhphost: info@into.ie
Gréasán: www.into.ie
Suíomh móibleach: m.into.ie

Árd Rúnaí: Sheila Nunan