

# Irish Teachers' Journal

Volume 8, Number 1  
December 2020

## **Irish Teachers' Journal**

### **Editor**

Deirbhile Nic Craith, Irish National Teachers' Organisation

### **Editorial Board**

John Boyle, *General Secretary*

Noel Ward, *Deputy General Secretary*

Deirbhile Nic Craith, *Director of Education and Research*

David Geary, *Director of Communications*

Sine Friel, *Deputy Director of Communications*

Claire Garvey, *Official*

### **Editorial Assistant**

Claire Garvey, Irish National Teachers' Organisation

Editorial correspondence should be addressed to Dr Deirbhile Nic Craith, Irish National Teachers' Organisation, Vere Foster House, 35 Parnell Square, Dublin 1, D01ET35.

### **Design**

David Cooke

### **Layout**

Selina Campbell, Irish National Teachers' Organisation

ISSN 2009-6860 (Print)

ISSN 2009-6879 (Online)

© 2020 Irish National Teachers' Organisation

# Irish Teachers' Journal

Volume 8, Number 1

December 2020

---

## CONTENTS

---

- 3 Editorial
- 8 Author Notes
- 11 Irish primary teachers' beliefs about and attitudes to standardised tests of English reading and mathematics. *Zita Lysaght and Michael O'Leary*
- 25 Supporting purposeful and strategic readers: Transactional strategies instruction in a DEIS Band 1 classroom. *Ciara Barry and Patrick Burke*
- 40 Where is the support for the support teacher? A study of the Support Teacher Project in Irish primary schools. *Gemma Campion*
- 57 An investigation into the experiences and identity of special class teachers in Irish primary schools. *Deirdre Drew and Kevin Cahill*
- 73 An exploration of teachers' perceptions of the role of the cooperating teacher as part of the school placement process in three primary schools in County Cork in the Republic of Ireland. *Jean O'Sullivan*
- 92 Distributed leadership in Irish primary schools with a teaching principal. *David Brennan*
- 109 Generational diversity and principalship in modern Ireland. *Máire Nic An Fhailghigh*
- 124 Teaching entrepreneurship in the primary school: Report of a small-scale study. *Kieran Devaney*
- 141 Primary science in Ireland – 17 years on. *Cliona Murphy, Nicola Broderick, and Ben Mallon*



<b>Irish National Teachers' Organisation</b>		<b>Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann</b>
Vere Foster House		Áras Vere Foster
35 Parnell Square		35 Cearnóg Pharnell
Dublin 1		Baile Átha Cliath 1
Telephone: 01 804 7700		Guthán: 01 804 7700
Email: <a href="mailto:info@into.ie">info@into.ie</a>		Ríomhphost: <a href="mailto:info@into.ie">info@into.ie</a>
Web: <a href="http://www.into.ie">www.into.ie</a>		Gréasán: <a href="http://www.into.ie">www.into.ie</a>

General Secretary: John Boyle

Rúnaí Ginearálta: Seán Ó Baoill

**Irish Teachers' Journal**, Volume 8, Number 1, November 2020. ISSN: 2009-6860 (Print).  
ISSN: 2009-6879 (Online).

The *Irish Teachers' Journal* ([www.into.ie/media-centre/publications/the-irish-teachers-journal/](http://www.into.ie/media-centre/publications/the-irish-teachers-journal/)) is a peer-reviewed journal published annually by the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, Vere Foster House, 35 Parnell Square, Dublin 1, D01ET35.

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/media-centre/publications/the-irish-teachers-journal/](http://www.into.ie/media-centre/publications/the-irish-teachers-journal/).

### **Copyright information**

**Copyright © 2020 Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO). All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored, transmitted, or disseminated, in any form, or by any means, without prior permission from INTO, to whom all requests to reproduce copyright material should be directed.**

The INTO grants authorisation for individuals to use copyright material for private research activities, classroom or organisational instruction and related organisational activities, student assignments or as part of a scholarly, educational or cultural presentation or workshop.

The INTO allows use of links to facilitate access to the online version of the Irish Teachers' Journal. The journal may be downloaded to view, use or display on computer or personal digital device.

Enquiries to Education Section, INTO, Vere Foster House, 35 Parnell Square, Dublin 1, D01ET35. Email: [info@into.ie](mailto:info@into.ie). Tel: 00353 (0) 1 8047700.

**For more information please visit: [www.into.ie/media-centre/publications/the-irish-teachers-journal/](http://www.into.ie/media-centre/publications/the-irish-teachers-journal/).**

### **Submitting a paper to the Irish Teachers' Journal**

For information about writing an article, preparing your manuscript and general guidance for authors please contact the Education Section of the INTO at tel: 00353 (0) 1 8047700 or email: [info@into.ie](mailto:info@into.ie) or visit: [www.into.ie/media-centre/publications/the-irish-teachers-journal/](http://www.into.ie/media-centre/publications/the-irish-teachers-journal/).

**It is a condition of publication that authors assign copyright or licence the publication rights in their articles, including abstracts, to the INTO. Authors themselves are responsible for obtaining permission to reproduce copyright material from other sources.**

**Disclaimer:** The INTO make every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the 'Content') contained in our publications. However, the INTO make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by the INTO. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. The INTO shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

## ≡ Editorial ≡

The year of 2020 will long be remembered as the year of COVID-19, a year when the world of education as we knew it changed significantly. The eighth *Irish Teachers' Journal* is published in the middle of a world pandemic, a time when health, education, social and economic systems have been severely impacted, not alone in Ireland but across the world. On 12 March, the Taoiseach announced the closure of all schools, initially for a period of two weeks, but extended until the end of the summer term. Schools did not re-open until the new school year at the end of August. Between March and June 2020, the home became the place of work for teachers and the place of learning for pupils. Many parents found themselves juggling their own home-working while supporting their children's learning. Teachers found themselves exploring the whole concept of remote learning as they endeavoured to support the continuation of their pupils' learning from a distance. It was a time when the value of technology and digital learning was appreciated, but it was also a time when inequalities in our education system became more apparent.

COVID-19 and school closures resulted in a number of surveys and reports aimed at capturing the experience of teachers, children and parents during this period. Research was carried out by Maynooth University, Trinity College, National University of Ireland Galway in collaboration with the National Parents' Council, and the ESRI, among others. The longitudinal research on children's school lives, commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and carried out by University College Dublin, also included a COVID-19 dimension this year. The INTO conducted surveys of members, both North and South, in order to ascertain teachers' experiences of school closures and of being back in school. Common themes across all surveys were the impact of school closures on our most disadvantaged population, including children with special educational needs, Traveller and Roma children, and children with English as an additional language. These children benefit most from being in school, where they have access to their teachers, to support personnel and to resources.

Responses to school closures varied across the system. Schools closed with short notice and teachers had no time to prepare. Many teachers were on a steep learning curve when it came to the use of technology to support the continuation of pupils' learning. Teachers became very creative in how they responded and rose to the challenge of distance learning, going above and beyond the call of duty. It was a stressful time for teachers, particularly for principal teachers, who found their workload had increased significantly. The INTO was to the fore in uploading suggestions for teachers to our website following the school closures. The Department of Education prepared a suite of guidance for schools, the Professional Development Support Service for Teachers (PDST) offered comprehensive professional development supports in digital and remote learning, the National Educational Psychology Service (NEPS) provided guidance around wellbeing for both staff and students, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) prepared resources to support the continuation of learning for children with special educational needs, and An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG) offered supports for the Irish-medium sector. RTÉ and TG4, through *Home School Hub* and *Cúla4*, also stepped up to

support learning from home. While the Department of Education had introduced a digital learning strategy in 2015, the reliance on technology during school closures gave rise to many questions requiring answers around issues such as equity of access to digital devices and broadband, the use of video and live-streaming, data protection and child protection issues, and managing expectations.

The articles in this edition of the journal were written before COVID-19. Future articles may focus on the experience of school closures and the impact of the pandemic on pupil learning and on teachers' professional lives.

The INTO is delighted to include as guest contribution to this edition of the journal, an article based on the INTO and CARPE (Centre for Assessment Research, Policy and Practice in Education) study on standardised testing in primary schools in Ireland, by Zita Lysaght and Michael O'Leary, who co-authored the INTO/CARPE study with Darina Scully and Deirbhile Nic Craith.

The article gives a potted history of standardised testing in Irish primary schools, and then draws on the quantitative data gathered as part of the study to present a snapshot of teachers' beliefs about and attitudes to standardised testing at a time of policy change. There is no doubt that changes emanating from the *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* published in 2011 have impacted on policy and practice in primary schools regarding standardised testing. The INTO/CARPE study set out to capture this impact. The introduction of new policies and practices were not accompanied by any comprehensive professional development for teachers on assessment, of which standardised testing is part. This article suggests that the key principles which underpin the use of standardised tests are at risk of being lost due to recent policy changes in how such test results are being used and reported. However, the article acknowledges that current discussions around assessment as part of the consultation process on a redeveloped primary school curriculum being prepared by the NCCA are re-assuring.

The second and third articles in this edition of the journal are relevant to DEIS schools (Delivering Equal Opportunity in Schools). Ciara Barry and Patrick Burke's article contributes to our knowledge about reading in DEIS schools. The article describes an intervention in a class of 13 nine to 11 year olds in an urban DEIS Band 1 school over a ten-week period, where Ciara Barry was the classroom teacher. The intervention focused on exploring comprehension strategies to improve the children's comprehension and awareness of strategic reading processes. Barry and Burke outline what teachers should know and what teachers should do regarding the teaching of reading comprehension. In discussing the findings of the successful intervention, they argue for explicit instruction of comprehension strategies and include the positive views of the pupils, providing a useful insight for classroom teachers.

Our third article is also particular to disadvantaged schools. Gemma Campion draws on a small-scale study of the *Support Teacher Project*, an initiative of the Department of Education initially undertaken in 1995. While support teachers still exist in the disadvantaged schools that participated in the project on its establishment, Campion argues that the work of the support teachers has largely been ignored in more recent years and the project has never been expanded to all DEIS schools. Support teachers deal with

large complex issues associated with social deprivation, they focus on pupils' wellbeing and mental health, topics gaining increasing attention today, in addition to supporting pupils with challenging behaviour. According to Campion, they hold positive views regarding the impact of their work but feel frustrated at the lack of support, the lack of vision for the project and the lack of acknowledgement of their role. Perhaps it's time to reconsider the potential role of Support Teachers in the context of the renewed emphasis on health and wellbeing.

Deirdre Drew and Kevin Cahill write about the experiences and identity of special class teachers in Irish primary schools, drawing on a study that investigated teachers' knowledge, skills and attitudes towards inclusive environments and how the continuum of teacher education contributes to teachers' views of special classes. The number of special classes in Irish primary schools has increased substantially in the last decade. This article is particularly timely in light of the policy advice being prepared by the NCSE on the future of special schools and classes. The authors provide an overview of how special class teachers are appointed and prepared for special education teaching through initial teacher education, induction and professional development. They discuss the 'figured world' of the special class teacher and provide a brief insight into inclusive pedagogy versus specialist pedagogy. An interesting finding of their work is that teachers view the role of the special class teacher differently to that of other teaching roles, which may have implications for how inclusive education is understood in the profession.

School placement is also a topical issue this year. Many student teachers had their school placement experiences interrupted because of the pandemic. Our fifth article is an exploration of teachers' perceptions of the role of the cooperating teacher as part of the school placement process in three primary schools in Co Cork. Jean O'Sullivan presents an overview of Teaching Council policy regarding the role of the cooperating teacher, before presenting the findings of her study. Her findings highlight the significant role the class teacher plays in the student teacher's experiences, and identifies the challenge posed by different expectations of cooperating teachers by different initial teacher education providers. O'Sullivan identifies issues such as cooperating teachers as mentors, the need for mutual respect, and whether cooperating teachers should be involved in assessment among the many issues pertaining to school placement in Ireland. She draws on her experience of being a cooperating teacher in the European school system to offer interesting insights into how school placement could develop in Ireland.

Our next two articles address the topic of leadership. The first of these explores the concept of distributed leadership based on a study in five rural schools. David Brennan draws on Elmore's *Distributed Leadership Readiness Scale* (2004) in his research and, while recognising the scale's limitations, argues that it would be a useful approach to leadership in a more complex and dynamic primary educational environment. He found evidence of distributed leadership in the schools that participated in his study.

Máire Nic an Fhailghigh's article on leadership explores the theme from the perspective of the professional development and support needs of newly appointed principals. She argues that effective preparation, induction and coaching programmes for aspiring and newly appointed principals could have a significant impact on the effectiveness, retention

and success of school leadership in modern Ireland. Her focus on differences between generations of leaders, in relation to how they perceive and manage the role, offers an unusual lens through which to consider the challenges faced by school leaders, particularly by those who are newly appointed.

Our final two articles address curriculum issues and make for interesting reading now that a review of the *Primary School Curriculum 1999* has commenced. Kieran Devaney writes about teaching entrepreneurship in the Irish primary school. He describes the emergence of entrepreneurship education as an international development, refers to some initiatives supporting entrepreneurial education in Ireland, and provides an insight into the different and contested perspectives on what such education means. His study involved interviewing five primary teachers who engaged with entrepreneurship initiatives on a voluntary basis. He explored their understandings of entrepreneurship education, their use of constructivist pedagogies and a cross-curricular approach and their views on the place of entrepreneurial education in primary schools. Devaney concludes his article by recommending that consideration be given to the inclusion of entrepreneurship education in the primary curriculum, using a cross-curricular approach.

Primary science is the focus of Cliona Murphy, Ben Mallon and Nicola Broderick's article. The authors argue that a knowledge of science enables citizens to understand and advance our physical environment and that it is imperative that students should leave school as scientifically literate citizens. In their article, Murphy, Mallon and Broderick trace the development of science in the curriculum and provide an overview of science teaching and learning in practice based on research that has been carried out to date. They note the positive attitudes to science among teachers and pupils but also acknowledge that teachers lack confidence when teaching science, which impacts on how and what science is taught. Referring to the Department of Education's *STEM Education Policy Statement*, the Teaching Council's professional development framework *Cosán*, and the publication of a draft *Primary Curriculum Framework* that will underpin future curriculum development, they posit the view that now is an opportune time to consider the place of science in primary schools. They argue for professional development in science for teachers to enhance their pedagogical content knowledge, to boost their confidence in teaching science and to increase the use of enquiry-based methodologies. The authors also argue for more time to be spent on developing student teachers' conceptual knowledge of science during initial teacher education courses. It is interesting that few student teachers study science subjects in Senior Cycle in post-primary education. The authors also identify as a challenge the amount of time spent teaching science in primary schools and would like to see this time increased.

There is no doubt, as discussions on a future primary school curriculum continue into 2021 and 2022, there will be many demands made on what should be included in a redeveloped curriculum. We see the beginning of that discussion with the last two articles in this edition of the journal, and with our guest article. Any redeveloped curriculum will need to address the central role of assessment in its many forms.

As a professional and trade union organisation for primary teachers in the Republic of Ireland and for nursery, primary and post-primary teachers in Northern Ireland, the INTO



is proud of its tradition of engaging in education debate. Curriculum will continue to be contested and was the topic of the INTO Annual Consultative Conference on Education in 2019. How teachers are prepared and supported in professional learning throughout their careers is a contested topic. Digital learning received particular attention in 2020, a year that also drew attention to the under-appreciated role of our school principals and leadership teams who had to deal with the challenge of keeping education going during school closures and re-opening schools safely for the whole school community.

The *Irish Teachers' Journal* offers teachers at all levels, North and South, an opportunity to share their research on aspects of education policy and practice with colleagues, both nationally and internationally. We would like to thank all teachers who contributed articles for this edition of the journal. We also thank Zita Lysaght and Michael O'Leary for writing the guest article drawing on the INTO/CARPE research study. We are grateful to the reviewers who read the draft articles and provided constructive feedback to the authors. The INTO encourages teachers to continue writing and researching.

DEIRBHILE NICCRAITH, EDITOR

## **Author Notes**

### **Zita Lysaght and Prof Michael O'Leary**

Zita Lysaght is a member of the School of Policy and Practice at DCU's Institute of Education. A former primary teacher, she has a particular interest in the theory and practice of classroom assessment and teacher assessment literacy.

Michael O'Leary is a former primary teacher and research associate at the Educational Research Centre, Drumcondra. He now holds the Prometric Chair in Assessment at Dublin City University where he also directs the Centre for Assessment Research, Policy and Practice in Education (CARPE). He leads a programme of research at CARPE focused on assessment across all levels of education and in the workplace.

### **Ciara Barry and Patrick Burke**

Ciara Barry is a primary school teacher in Scoil na Croise Naofa, Mahon, a DEIS Band 1 school in Cork City. She graduated from Mary Immaculate College in 2014 with a B.Ed in Education and Psychology and subsequently completed an M.Ed in Educational Leadership and Management in 2018. Ciara also completed a Postgraduate Diploma in Special Educational Needs in University College Cork in 2020. She holds an assistant principal post in her school and has conducted work as a facilitator and an associate for the National Induction Programme for Teachers (NIPT), as well as tutoring on inclusion and diversity modules for Hibernia College, Dublin. Her research interests include literacy, educational disadvantage, supporting newly qualified teachers, numeracy and special educational needs.

Patrick Burke is a primary school teacher who now works as a lecturer in the Department of Language and Literacy Education, Mary Immaculate College. He formerly worked as a mainstream teacher and post-holder in Scoil Chormaic Community NS, Balbriggan, as an International Fellow in the Children's Literature Centre at Frostburg State University, Maryland, and as an advisor with the Professional Development Service for Teachers. He has recently been a member of the NCCA development group for the Primary Language Curriculum (2019). He has also participated in a number of other research projects relating to literacy and the primary school curriculum more generally.

### **Dr Gemma Champion**

Gemma Champion was awarded her PhD in Education and Social Justice from Lancaster University in February 2020. She holds a M.ED and B.ED degree from Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. Gemma has 13 years' teaching experience and is currently teaching in Aghabullogue NS, Co Cork. Gemma also works with the PDST as a health and wellbeing associate.

### **Deirdre Drew and Dr Kevin Cahill**

Deirdre Drew is a primary school teacher in Convent Primary School, Mallow, Co Cork. She has worked in special education for eight years and is currently teaching in a senior ASD class in her school. She completed a Postgraduate Diploma in Special Educational Needs and a Masters Degree in Education at University College Cork.

Kevin Cahill is a lecturer in the School of Education, University College Cork. He lectures across programmes in the school with responsibilities in the areas of inclusive education, sociology of education and pedagogy. He also researches, writes and supervises research students across these areas of interest.

### **Jean O'Sullivan**

Jean O'Sullivan is a primary school teacher in St Peter's NS, Dungourney, Co Cork. She has previously been seconded to the European School of Luxembourg 1 and has also supported primary teachers working in Eswatini, Southern Africa. In 2018, Jean completed a Master of Arts in Education with CLEO/University of Hull and has a special interest in mentoring student teachers and newly qualified teachers. .

### **David Brennan**

David Brennan, B.Ed (MIC), MSc in e-Learning design and development (CIT), MSc in business and management (UCD). David is based in Galway and is a digital technologies advisor with the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST). He is a member of the Hibernia College adjunct board for teaching, learning and assessment . David has a keen interest in coaching in educational settings and constructivist digital technologies.

### **Máire Nic An Fhailghigh**

Máire Nic An Fhailghigh holds a Doctorate in Educational Research and Development from the University of Lincoln (2014). She has been a teaching principal since 1992 in SN An Fhailghigh, Fahy, Westport, Co Mayo. Máire is an active member of the board of management in Mayo Education Centre where she held the position of chairperson from 2014 to 2017. Máire also holds advanced diplomas in life, executive and leadership coaching and mental health and wellbeing coaching from Kingstown College (2016-2018).

### **Kieran Devaney**

Kieran Devaney is a primary school teacher in County Sligo. He graduated with a Bachelor of Commerce from NUI Galway in 2009 and subsequently qualified as a Chartered Accountant. He completed his Professional Master of Education with Hibernia College in 2018 and was awarded student of the year.

### **Dr Cliona Murphy, Nicola Broderick and Dr Ben Mallon**

Cliona Murphy is an associate professor in science education in DCU's Institute of Education. She has conducted and published research and developed educational resources in the areas of science education, education for sustainability and climate change education. Dr Murphy's current roles include Chair of ALLEA's Science Education Working Group, Associate Director of the Centre for the Advancement of STEM Teaching and Learning, and Chair of the Irish Association for Primary Science Education (IAPSE).

Nicola Broderick is an assistant professor in science education in the School of STEM Education, Innovation and Global Studies, Institute of Education, DCU. Her interests include researching, developing and facilitating initial teacher education and continuous

*Author notes*

professional development (CPD) in science education. Nicola is currently in her final year of her Doctorate of Education at DCU. Nicola is a member of the Centre for the Advancement STEM Teaching and Learning (CASTeL), IAPSE and Irish Professional Development Association (IPDA) Ireland.

Benjamin Mallon is Assistant Professor in Geography and Citizenship Education in the Institute of Education, Dublin City University. He teaches and researches in the areas of climate change education, global citizenship education and geography education, with a particular focus on the development of educational systems and pedagogical practices which support educators and learners to take action towards peaceful, equitable and sustainable futures.

# ≡ Irish primary teachers' beliefs about and attitudes to standardised tests of English reading and mathematics ≡

≡ ZITA LYSAGHT AND MICHAEL O'LEARY ≡

### **Abstract**

Primary schools in Ireland are required to administer standardised tests in English reading and Mathematics in second, fourth and sixth classes, and to report the aggregated results to their boards of management and the Department of Education and Skills (DES). Since September 2017, results are used at national level as part of the process of determining the allocation of special educational teaching resources to schools. Schools are also required to share results with parents in written format using end-of-year school reports at the three mandatory testing points. The international literature on standardised testing suggests that when test scores are shared widely and used for purposes beyond internal planning, the associated sense of accountability can lead to a culture of teaching to the test and narrowing of the curriculum. Although the stakes associated with standardised testing in Irish primary education remain relatively low, recent policy changes have increased the focus on these instruments. In the wake of these changes, a survey of Irish primary teachers was conducted. A collaborative effort by the Centre for Assessment Research, Policy and Practice in Education (CARPE) and the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), the research aimed to gather information about how standardised tests are used and how teachers feel about them. In this paper, data with respect to teachers' beliefs about, and attitudes to, standardised testing are foregrounded and reveal an interesting diversity of opinion with study participants being neither wholly supportive nor wholly opposed to the practice.

**Keywords:** Ireland; standardised testing; English reading achievement; mathematics achievement; primary education policy; teachers' attitudes and beliefs.



### **Introduction**

In Ireland, as in many countries around the world, norm-referenced standardised tests are used to benchmark individual achievement against the standards achieved by a nationally representative sample of peers. Standardised test results are reported to parents or guardians and often aggregated across classes and schools to provide data for policy making at local, national or international levels. While summative in nature, standardised tests can be used for formative purposes and tracking progress over time. Although the

'stakes' attached to standardised testing in Irish primary education remain relatively low in comparison to some other countries (see, for example, Abrams et al., 2013; Shiel et al., 2010), recent policy changes described in this paper have undoubtedly increased the focus on these instruments. In the wake of these changes, a survey of Irish primary teachers was conducted in 2017. A collaborative effort by the Centre for Assessment Research, Policy and Practice in Education (CARPE) and the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), this research aimed to gather information about how standardised tests were being used and how teachers felt about them. The ultimate aim was to help inform policy making in relation to this aspect of assessment. In this paper, we present a potted history of standardised testing in Irish primary schools before drawing on a subset of the quantitative data gathered to present a snapshot of Irish primary teachers' beliefs about and attitudes to standardised testing at a time of policy change.

### **Standardised testing in Irish primary schools: a potted history**

The first Irish-normed, group administered, standardised tests used in Irish primary schools were developed at the Educational Research Centre (ERC), Drumcondra, in the early 1970s; at the time, the ERC was conducting a large-scale experimental study of the impact of a standardised testing programme on school practices, teachers, pupils and parents (Kellaghan, Madaus, and Airasian, 1982). Up to this point, and indeed until the Mary Immaculate College Reading Attainment Test (MICRA-T) was introduced in 1988, it was remedial (learning support) teachers, in the main, who used standardised tests in the context of diagnosing the needs of individual pupils experiencing learning difficulties in reading and spelling (Irish National Teachers' Organisation [INTO], 1994). As noted in the *Teacher's Handbook Part 1* of the *Primary School Curriculum* introduced in 1971: "Many teachers (found) it useful to administer standardised reading tests, particularly as a guide to individual attainment, and also as a pointer to average progress made by the class or by a group over a fixed period" (An Roinn Oideachais, 1971, p.94). Popular with teachers at the time was the Irish-normed Marino Spelling and Reading Assessments (Ó Súilleabháin, 1970) and a number of UK-normed assessments such as the Schonell tests (Schonell and Goodacre, 1971).

Throughout the 1990s, increasing access to a range of Irish-normed standardised tests (e.g., the Drumcondra Primary Reading Test, 1995; the Standardised Irish Graded Mathematics Attainment Test (SIGMA-T), 1991; the Drumcondra Primary Mathematics Test, 1997) spawned more widespread use of such tests in schools. Throughout this period, teachers enjoyed significant discretion regarding test(s) selection, the use of results and the nature and extent of their communication with parents/guardians about pupil performance. Consequently, testing policies and practices varied significantly across schools nationwide: in some cases, testing was undertaken annually in all classes from first to sixth; in others, testing was conducted less frequently and in a narrower range of classes. This situation persisted into the late 1990s despite attempts to streamline practices (see, for example, the *Green Paper Education for a Changing World* [Government of Ireland, 1992]; the National Education Convention [Coolahan, 1993]), with teachers rejecting

calls for uniform standardised testing of pupils at two points in time during their primary school years (Hall, 2000; INTO, 2010). Introduction of the Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998) and the revised *Primary School Curriculum* in 1999 (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 1999), however, ushered in two important developments. First, it became a statutory requirement for teachers to regularly assess their pupils and periodically report results to pupils and parents (although the mode of assessment remained discretionary). Second, the range and scope of assessment was broadened beyond standardised testing in the traditional areas of reading and mathematics to include use of a range of assessment modalities across the curriculum in support of greater integration of assessment, teaching and learning.

As detailed elsewhere (Lysaght, 2009), important research was undertaken during this period (e.g., DES, 2005; NCCA, 2005a; 2005b) that highlighted the need to "...engage further with assessment issues, clarify what should be assessed, and specify the assessment tools that (could) be used" (DES, 2005b, p.54). However, in parallel, the then minister for education and science, Noel Dempsey TD, announced his intention in July 2004 to make the recording and reporting of standardised test results in first and sixth class mandatory with effect from the 2006/07 school year; as stated, the intention was to secure aggregated assessment data to inform decision-making, monitor progress and allocate resources. Consultations that followed with the INTO and the NCCA focused on concerns about the creation of an assessment hierarchy (Looney, 2006) and the potentially detrimental effects of over-reliance on standardised testing, including narrowing of the curriculum and distortion of assessment purposes (INTO, 2010).

Despite these concerns, in 2006, *Circular 0138/2006* (DES, 2006) was issued mandating the compulsory assessment of English reading and mathematics with effect from September 2007<sup>1</sup>. Grant-aided by the DES to defray test purchase costs and supported by a limited national professional development programme in standardised testing, schools were given the freedom to select Irish-normed tests of their choosing and administer them either at the end of first or beginning of second class and the end of fourth or beginning of fifth class. In complement, between 2007/2008, the NCCA published, and disseminated to all schools, *Guidelines on Assessment in the Primary School in Ireland* (NCCA, 2007c); in this document, standardised testing is presented as one of eight key methods in an assessment continuum for use by teachers in support of teaching and learning.

So, how, one might ask, have we now reached the point where national education policy mandates:

- a. standardised testing of reading and mathematics in second, fourth and sixth class<sup>2</sup>, and in Irish reading, in Irish medium schools;

---

1 The abolition of the Primary Certificate Examination in 1968 was the last state mandated test in primary education until compulsory standardised testing was mandated in 2007 (Sheehan, 2016).

2 Pupils may be excluded from standardised testing if, in the view of the school principal, they have a learning or physical disability which would prevent them from attempting the tests or, in the case of migrant pupils, where the level of English required in the test would make attempting the test inappropriate.

- b. that schools report aggregated standardised test scores in the form of STens<sup>3</sup> to boards of management (BOM) and to the DES, and to parents/guardians via report cards based on NCCA templates, annually at the end of the school year;
- c. that, on receipt of confirmation of enrolment to a second-level school, primary schools furnish information about pupils' STen scores for second, fourth and sixth class using a standard report card (as part of an education passport); and
- d. standardised test results returned to the DES are used in conjunction with other criteria to inform decisions regarding the allocation of special educational teaching resources to schools?

Underpinning current assessment policy is a chain of educational reform communicated by the DES incrementally in a series of well-known policy texts (e.g., *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life* – also known as the *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy*, DES, 2011a), *Circular 0056/2011*, DES, 2011b; *Circular 0013/2017*, DES, 2017a). In hindsight, and indeed as acknowledged at the time, the tipping point for this sequence of policy moves was Ireland's perceived poor performance in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA)<sup>4</sup> in 2009. As observed by Shiel, Kavanagh and Millar (2014, p.v), the "...lack of improvement" in National Assessments since the early 1980s in literacy and numeracy coupled with "lower-than expected performance" in these areas in PISA 2009 informed the DES *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy*, triggering increased focus and reliance on standardised testing.

It is important to acknowledge that, throughout this period of assessment reform, welcome assurances to "use standardised tests, but with safeguards against an over-reliance on their outcomes" (Hislop, 2013, p.13) have been offered. However, it is also true that DES statements suggesting that it was "...considering potential revisions to the existing system of allocating Resource Teaching/Learning Support resources to schools" and "that standardised test data being returned may be used in the future to inform the development of a proposed revised model" (*Circular 0034/2016*, p.3) created legitimate tension in the education community regarding the primacy to be afforded data from standardised tests. It is in this context, and against the backdrop of the history of standardised testing in Ireland offered here, that CARPE and the INTO jointly undertook a survey of Irish primary teachers in May 2017 on the issue of standardised testing. As detailed in the sections that follow, the findings from this survey provided a unique snapshot of Irish teachers' attitudes to and beliefs about standardised testing at a key juncture in the development of assessment policy in Ireland.

---

3 STEN and STen are used interchangeably to denote the standard ten score.

4 PISA is a triennial international comparative assessment of 15-year-olds' capabilities in reading literacy, mathematics literacy, and science literacy. It is managed by the OECD and involves 70+ countries and economies.



## Study methodology

Drawing on available research literature from similar studies internationally, a questionnaire containing mainly closed items was constructed in consultation with an advisory team of practising teachers and educational leaders. The instrument, which is available at [www.into.ie/app/uploads/2019/05/CARPE-INTO-Standardised-Testing-Survey.pdf](http://www.into.ie/app/uploads/2019/05/CARPE-INTO-Standardised-Testing-Survey.pdf) (pp.98-109), is in three parts. The first asks teachers to provide biographical and school-related background information. In part two, 14 questions are posed focused on standardised testing practices in participants' schools, teachers' attitudes to, and experiences of, using standardised tests and teachers' professional development needs. The final question (number 14) asks 'What two pieces of advice would you offer to Irish educational policy makers about the practice of standardised testing in reading and maths in Irish primary schools?': it is the only open item in the questionnaire. In part three, four further questions are posed in relation to teachers' prior exposure to professional development in standardised testing and their continuing needs.

Following a series of pilot studies, the INTO database which, in 2017, included approximately 98% of practicing primary teachers in the Republic of Ireland, was used to create a sampling frame from which a simple random sample of 5,000 teachers was chosen. The sample size was rationalised on the basis that prior INTO studies typically attracted a 20% response rate and the decision to survey teachers in the month of May was taken because, typically, schools administer standardised tests at that time of year. The survey was issued in hard and ecopy: 50% of teachers were selected to complete the survey online using *eSurveyCreator* and the remaining 50%, who received hard copies in the post, were also given the option of completing it electronically.

Returned hard-copies of the questionnaire were scanned and the quantitative data combined with those received digitally via *eSurveyCreator*. The quantitative data were subsequently analysed using the *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences* (SPSS).

## Response rates

1,564 questionnaires were returned. This represented a response rate of 31%, 11% higher than most previous recent INTO surveys. Online completion of the questionnaire was 4% higher than the number completed in hard copy.

Demographic and professional data from part one of the survey mirrored national statistics for the primary teaching profession at that time (DES, 2017b). 85% of the respondents were female; the percentages for very early (1-5 years), early (6-10 years), middle (11-20 years) and later (20+) career stages were 15%, 26%, 28% and 31%, respectively. Mainstream class teachers were somewhat under-represented in the sample (population 62%; sample: 54%). In contrast, learning support, resource and EAL teachers were over-represented (population: ~25%; sample: 31%). As reported, approximately equal percentages of respondents (~16%) were teaching across the different class levels when surveyed.

Regarding the profile of respondents' schools, for the most part, the sample was representative of the population. 84% of teachers indicated that they worked in mixed urban schools (63%) with vertical structures (85%) underpinned by a denominational ethos

(77%). There were, however, some notable discrepancies in terms of the location, type and size of respondents' schools and these should be borne in mind when interpreting the research findings. For example, in the sample, schools with a DEIS Urban 1 status were over-represented (population: 6%; sample: 19%) and schools with 200 pupils or fewer were under-represented (population: 66%; sample: 40%) whereas schools with more than 200 pupils were over-represented (population: 24%; sample: 61%). It is not surprising that larger schools were over-represented in the survey, as the majority of teachers (respondents) teach in such schools.

## **Findings**

Due to the volume and quality of teachers' responses to the CARPE/INTO survey, very rich quantitative and qualitative data were collected. In this paper, we focus on the quantitative information derived from two questions in the survey questionnaire. Questions 13 and 19 shared a similar layout: teachers were presented with a list of statements and requested to use a five-point Likert scale (ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree) to indicate the extent to which they agreed/disagreed with each one. Statements from both questions were used to create table 1<sup>5</sup> of this paper and, for the sake of parsimony, the response options were collapsed from five categories to three (Agree, Undecided, Disagree). The statements in the table are ranked in descending order by percentage agreement and numbered to aid identification.

In order to determine how best to group the statements, factor analysis was applied. The two-colour, two-pattern coding scheme employed in table 1 signals the various themes identified by this analysis:

- theme 1: gray, statements relating to validity in standardised testing;
- theme 2: tiled pattern, statements relating to the communication and reporting of standardised test results;
- theme 3: white, statements relating to the potentially positive effects of standardised testing;
- theme 4: spotted pattern, statements relating to potentially negative effects of standardised testing).

In the section that follows, the key findings in respect of each theme are presented beginning with statements relating to validity.

---

5 Data from statements that appeared in the original questionnaire as 13h and 13k are omitted from the discussion of data presented in table 1.

Table 1. Respondents' beliefs about and attitudes to standardised testing\*

	% Agree**	% Disagree	% Undecided***
1. Some pupils in my class are not capable of taking standardised tests in reading and mathematics due to learning difficulties.	76	6	19
2. Some pupils in my class are extremely anxious about taking standardised tests.	76	6	18
3. Performance differences in pupil achievement on standardised tests in my school reflect differences in the characteristics of pupils rather than teacher effectiveness.	70	21	9
4. Standardised test scores in reading and maths should be included on my pupils' summer report cards.	65	13	22
5. A pupil's age-based STEN score can be a more valid reflection of achievement than the class-based STEN score I am required to report to the BOM and DES.	57	32	11
6. Parents of pupils in my class take the results of standardised tests in reading and maths too seriously.	55	22	24
7. Standardised testing in reading and maths has made my school more accountable.	51	23	26
8. High scores on standardised tests represent high levels of achievement in reading and maths in my school.	49	24	28
9. Standardised test scores accurately reflect my pupils' mastery of basic skills in reading and maths. <sup>6</sup>	42	23	35
10. Standardised testing focuses my attention on higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills in reading and maths.	41	18	40
11. Standardised tests focus my attention on basic skills in reading and maths.	41	16	43
12. Standardised tests are a good measure of what my pupils learn in reading.	41	24	36
13. The requirement to report STEN Scores in reading and maths to the DES supports good educational policy making.	37	28	35
14. Standardised tests help me to clarify which learning goals are the most important in reading and maths.	31	22	47
15. Standardised testing is an appropriate way of encouraging teachers to focus on the impact of their teaching on children's achievement in maths and reading.	31	28	41
16. Standardised tests are a good measure of what my pupils learn in maths in my class. R	29	23	48
17. The importance placed on standardised test results encourages teachers in my school to teach to the test.	26	22	52
18. The quality of teaching and learning in reading and maths has improved in my school because of the use of standardised testing.	24	35	41
19. There's no difference between what I think should be taught and what the reading and maths tests emphasise.	21	26	53
20. Standardised testing challenges weaker teachers to do a better job.	21	23	56
21. Parents of pupils in my class have a good understanding of how Standard Scores, STEN scores and Percentile Ranks in reading and maths should be interpreted. R	19	14	68
22. Standardised testing in reading and maths has helped me to be a better teacher.	18	21	61
23. Standardised testing improves my pupils' learning in reading and maths. <sup>7</sup>	14	28	58
24. My school is more interested in increasing standardised test scores in reading and maths than in improving overall pupil learning.	14	12	74
25. The standardised test results in my school are a good way of helping prospective parents to understand how good the school is.	14	15	72
26. The standardised test scores in my school are an accurate measure of what EAL pupils know/can do in reading and maths. <sup>8</sup>	5	27	68

\*Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number

\*\*Combined percentage: Strongly Agree and Agree

\*\*\*Combined percentage: Strongly Disagree and Disagree

<sup>8</sup> To avoid response sets, some statements were negatively worded in the questionnaire. For ease of interpretation, each have been positively worded in this table, with percentages 'agreeing' and 'disagreeing' recoded accordingly.

- 6 In relation to statement # 9 and #11, Gerry Shiel notes that teachers may hold varying views on what is meant by basic skills (personal communication, 7 December 2018).
- 7 While Gerry Shiel's critique (personal communication, 7 December 2018) that it is not testing that brings about improvement, but the uses made of test scores is accepted, the use of the phrase standardised testing in the statement rather than standardised tests is intended to capture this nuance.

### **Theme 1: Statements relating to validity in standardised testing (gray)**

Turning first to the issue of validity, it is important to note that in this paper we conceptualise validity as pertaining to the decisions made on the basis of standardised test outcomes. Thus, our primary interest is in construct validity (the degree to which standardised tests allow for good decision-making because they measure what they purport to measure in reading or math) and consequential validity (the degree to which the use of standardised tests leads to positive rather than negative outcomes for pupils, teachers, schools and the educational system in general (AERA et al., 2014)).

The data from this study suggest that the majority of participants agreed that some pupils in their class were not capable of taking standardised tests due to learning difficulties (#1) and that performance differences in standardised tests reflected differences in the characteristics of pupils rather than differences in teacher effectiveness (#3). More than two-thirds (68%) also held the belief that standardised test scores were not an accurate measure of EAL pupils' achievements (#26). While, at the point of writing, there are no specific guidelines concerning the EAL issue, policy in Ireland at the time of the survey held that teachers could exempt pupils from sitting standardised tests on the basis of a learning difficulty and this aligns well with the views expressed by teachers.

That said, the data also signal a distinct lack of consensus amongst teachers in relation to other important aspects of validity. For instance, while 49% of respondents agreed that high standardised test scores represented high levels of achievement in reading and mathematics in their schools, 28% disagreed and a further 24% reported that they were unsure (#8). A general absence of consensus is evident also in teachers' responses to statements about basic skills (#9) and those specifically focused on reading (#12) and mathematics (#16). Significantly, the percentages of teachers in the study signifying that standardised tests in reading (#12) and mathematics (#16) captured the entirety of pupil learning in their classrooms was relatively low (41% and 29% respectively). It is also noteworthy that, although 21% of the respondents agreed that there was no difference between what should be taught and what the standardised tests emphasised, over half took the opposite view and a quarter reported being unsure (#19) on this issue. These findings warrant further enquiry to determine the basis for teachers' contrasting perspectives.

### **Theme 2: Statements relating to the communication and reporting of standardised test results (tiled pattern)**

Data on the communication and reporting of standardised test outcomes evidenced contrasting opinions, also. Interestingly, although many teachers expressed reservations about the meaning of standardised test scores, a clear majority (65%) agreed that standardised test scores should be included on summer report cards (#4). However, teachers' opinions on the use of standardised testing for school accountability (#7) and educational policy-making (#13) purposes differed: 51% agreed with the accountability statement while others either disagreed or indicated that they were unsure. The issue of reporting STen scores to the Department of Education and Skills (DES) as a mechanism of supporting informed policy-making also divided teachers: almost identical percentages took opposite points of view. In terms of the specifics of reporting to the DES and parents, 57% indicated that they

considered age-based as more appropriate to grade-based scores (#5), 68% disagreed that parents had a good understanding of how to interpret standardised test scores (#21) and 72% rejected the proposition that standardised tests results helped prospective parents evaluate a school (#25).

### **Theme 3: Statements relating to the potentially positive effects of standardised testing (white)**

With regard to the potential value of standardised tests, the diversity and range of opinion was also apparent. For example, while 41% of teachers agreed that standardised testing had focused their attention on higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills in reading and mathematics, 40% held the opposite view (#10). Divided opinion was also evident on the extent to which standardised testing focused teachers' attention on basic skills (#11), helped respondents to clarify which learning goals were important (#14), focused teachers' attention appropriately on the impact of teaching on pupils' achievement (#15), or improved the quality of teaching and learning in their schools (#18). Further, while about one in five respondents agreed that standardised testing challenged weaker teachers to do a better job (#20) resulting in improvements in their own teaching (#22), more than half disagreed in both cases. The statement "Standardised testing improves my pupils' learning in reading and maths" (#23) yielded just 14% in agreement responses: a further 58% disagreeing and 28% were undecided. These data suggest the need for further analysis of these issues in future studies.

### **Theme 4: Statements relating to potentially negative effects of standardised testing (spotted pattern)**

There was greater consistency in teachers' responses to statements focused on the potentially negative effects of standardised testing. Three out of four respondents agreed that some pupils in their classes were extremely anxious about taking standardised tests (#2) but disagreed that their schools were more interested in increasing standardised test scores than in improving overall pupil learning (#24). However, teachers were more divided on the seriousness attributed to standardised test results by parents (#6). Of particular interest (in the context of an increasingly 'high stakes' testing climate nationally) were teachers' responses to statements about 'teaching to the test' (#17). One in four (26%) agreed that colleagues within their own schools prepared pupils in this way: 10% strongly agreed; 52% disagreed and 22% disagreed strongly. The remaining 22% selected the 'undecided' option.

## **Discussion**

Across the four themes presented in this paper, the diversity of teacher opinion stands out: those surveyed were neither wholly supportive, nor wholly opposed to standardised testing. On the one hand, it is evident that a cohort of teachers who participated viewed standardised tests as a valid approach to measuring pupil achievement in reading and mathematics and supported the view that the tests helped them in identifying important learning goals, focusing attention on the impact of teaching on pupil achievement and

improving the quality of teaching and learning in schools. In almost equal measure, however, teachers expressed concern about questionable test preparation/administration practices and the undue anxiety and pressure to perform that standardised testing can cause. Teachers' opinions were also divided on the fundamental issues of whether standardised test results should be reported to parents and the use of standardised test results for school accountability and policy making purposes.

Consequently, the data, as reported, could be used variously to support or dissuade the use of standardised tests in Irish primary schools, depending on one's standpoint. A more balanced interpretation would seek to highlight both sides of the argument. Clearly, standardised tests provide value over and above other assessments in allowing the benchmarking of an individual pupil's performance against national norms. Information of this kind serves to broaden the focus of decision-making within classrooms and across schools, as acknowledged by many proponents of standardised testing in this study. Further, aggregated data from standardised tests from a census of schools provide important information about achievement that complement the less fine-grained data from sample-based national assessments – as such, both have a part to play in informing national policy decisions.

However, it would be naive and foolhardy in the extreme to underestimate the potentially detrimental effects of an imbalanced assessment system that promotes and prioritises standardised testing at the expense of evidence-based alternatives. Moreover, as a wealth of evidence and argument in the literature spanning 30 years attests (see, for example, Madaus, 1988a, b), serious difficulties arise when attempts are made to use the same tests for both formative teaching and learning, and monitoring and evaluating, purposes in schools and classes (e.g. Haladyna, 2006; Kohn, 2000; Polesel et al., 2014; Wiliam, 2010). In effect, we are at a critical juncture in Irish primary education at this point. Mandatory testing and reporting has ushered in a new accountability system, albeit standardised testing remains relatively low stakes in comparison with other jurisdictions worldwide. However, the auguries suggest that increasing attention is being paid to the outcomes of standardised tests by teachers, principals, managers, parents, policy makers and – as data from this survey (unreported in this paper) suggest – pupils (see also, MacRuairc, 2009, McNamara, 2010). Indeed, as noted, a number of teachers surveyed opined that some of the negative consequences associated with raised 'stakes', including low-level teaching-to-the-test and a narrowing of children's experiences of the curriculum, are already in evidence in Irish primary schools.

In response, we argue that if standardised testing is to continue as currently employed at primary level, a set of guiding principles should underpin their use and a number of initiatives actioned. In summary, we propose the following:

1. In all policy documents and programmes of professional development, standardised testing should be conceptualised as an integral part of the teaching and learning process and the outcomes of standardised tests used by various stakeholders (pupils, teachers, policy makers and others) to enhance learning.
2. In terms of the balance between summative and formative assessment (see O'Leary, 2006; Lysaght and O'Leary, 2017), policy makers (the DES, government ministers)

should make it clear that, while standardised testing is important, it does not supersede in importance and value other types of assessments that teachers and their pupils carry out in the course of everyday classroom activity.

3. It is emphasised in policy documents that standardised tests in English reading and mathematics measure an important but incomplete range of pupils' achievement in literacy and numeracy<sup>8</sup>.
4. Given the concerns expressed in this study about the emphasis being placed on standardised tests, the principle that single assessments are a poor basis for making important educational decisions must be stated or reiterated and highlighted in all official policy documents. Allied to that should be statements advocating that the results of standardised assessments should never be used in isolation but should always be considered in light of other relevant assessments, such as teacher judgements and information on pupil progress and achievement gathered over time.
5. High quality norm-referenced standardised tests are constructed specifically to measure achievement along a continuum from very low to very high in a way that seeks to ensure that, for example, 50% of test takers will always score below the mean. They were never designed to be measures of teacher effectiveness. This principle must be stated, reiterated and highlighted whenever standardised testing is a focus for teachers, parents and policy makers.

## Conclusion

Survey data shared in this paper suggest that, due to policy changes in how standardised tests results are being used and reported, the five principles proposed here are in danger of being lost. Consequently, the value to teachers and learners of the different assessment approaches across the continuum of types needs to be reiterated. The fact that all of these issues are being raised currently by the NCCA in the context of consultations with key educational stakeholders about redevelopment of the primary school curriculum is reassuring. In support of their efforts, we recommend that the following initiatives are actioned as soon as possible:

1. Findings from the survey support the argument that rigorous validity studies of all standardised tests in use in Irish primary schools should be commissioned by the DES and carried out to ensure that the tests remain content and construct-relevant and that they continue to be used in a way that measures real achievement and supports sound decision-making (the analysis conducted of standardised test results returned

---

8 In the *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* document, literacy is defined as "the capacity to read, understand and critically appreciate various forms of communication including spoken language, printed text, broadcast media and digital media... speaking and listening, as well as communication using not only traditional writing and print but also digital media." Similarly, numeracy is "not limited to the ability to use numbers to add, subtract, multiply and divide" but also "encompasses the ability to use mathematical understandings and skills to solve problems and meet the demands of day-to-day living in complex social settings" (DES, 2011a, p.8).

by schools to the DES for 2011/12 and 2012/13 school years being a case in point [DES, 2016]).

2. Rigorous validity studies examining the intended and unintended consequences<sup>9</sup> of standardised testing on teaching, learning and national policy should be commissioned by the DES and undertaken on a cyclical basis (e.g. every five years) to ensure that any of the potentially negative effects highlighted in this survey are identified and addressed early on.

## References

- Abrams, L., Pedulla, J., and Madaus, G. (2003). Views from the Classroom: Teachers' Opinions of State-wide Testing Programs. *Theory into Practice*, 32(1), 18-29.
- American Educational Research Association (AERA), American Psychological Association (APA), and National Council on Measurement in Education (NCME). (2014). *Standards for educational and psychological testing*. Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.
- An Roinn Oideachais. (1971). *Primary School Curriculum: Teacher's Handbook – Part 1*. Dublin: Department of Education.
- Coolahan, J. (1993). *National Education Convention*. Dublin: Stationary Office.
- Department of Education and Science (DES). (2005). *Literacy and Numeracy in Disadvantaged Schools: Challenges for Teachers and Learners*. Dublin: Stationery Office.
- Department of Education and Skills (DES). (2006). *Circular 0138/2006: Supporting Assessment in Primary Schools*. Athlone: DES.
- Department of Education and Skills (DES). (2011a). *The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy Strategy Among Children and Young People 2011-2020*. Dublin: Stationery Office.
- Department of Education and Skills (DES). (2011b). *Circular 0056/2011: Initial Steps in the Implementation of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy*. Athlone: DES.
- Department of Education and Skills (DES). (2016). *Standardised Achievement Tests: An Analysis of the Results at Primary School Level for 2011-12 and 2012-13*. Dublin: DES Inspectorate. Available at: [www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/Standardised-Achievement-Tests-An-analysis-of-the-results-at-Primary-school-level-for-2011-12-and-2012-13.pdf](http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/Standardised-Achievement-Tests-An-analysis-of-the-results-at-Primary-school-level-for-2011-12-and-2012-13.pdf) (Retrieved 11 December 2018).
- Department of Education and Skills (DES). (2017a). *Circular 0013/2017: Special Education Teaching Allocation*. Athlone: DES.
- Department of Education and Skills (DES). (2017b). *Teacher Payroll Statistics*. Athlone: DES.
- Department of Education and Skills (DES). (2018). *Action Plan for Education*. Dublin: Stationery Office.
- Government of Ireland. (1992). *Education for a Changing World* [Green Paper]. Dublin: Stationary Office.
- Government of Ireland. (1998). *The Education Act*. Dublin: Stationery Office.

---

<sup>9</sup> Also described as consequential validity studies in the research literature.



- Hall, K. (2000). *A Conceptual Evaluation of Primary Assessment Policy and the Education Policy Process in the Republic of Ireland. Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 30(1), 85-101.
- Haladyna, T.M. (2006). Perils of Standardised Achievement Testing. *Educational Horizons*, 85(1), 30-43.
- Hislop, H. (2013). *Current policy trends and issues in teacher education and curricular reform*. Paper presented at the Cohort PhD Education Public Symposium University College Cork. Available at: [www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Speeches/2013-Speeches/SP13-02-22.html](http://www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Speeches/2013-Speeches/SP13-02-22.html) (Retrieved May 2020).
- Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO). (1994). *Remedial Education: A Review*. Dublin: Irish National Teachers' Organisation.
- Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO). (2010). *Assessment in the Primary School: Discussion Document and Proceedings of the Consultative Conference on Education 2008*. Dublin: Irish National Teachers' Organisation.
- Kellaghan, T., Madaus, G., and Airasian, P. (1982). *The Effects of Standardised Testing*. Boston: Springer.
- Kohn, A. (2000). *The Case Against Standardised Testing: Raising the Scores, Ruining the Schools*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann.
- Looney, A. (2006). Assessment in the Republic of Ireland. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practices*, 13(3), 345-353.
- Lysaght, Z. (2009). *From Balkanisation to Boundary Crossing: Using a Teacher Learning Community to Explore the Impact of Assessment on Teaching and Learning in a Disadvantaged School*. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Dublin.
- Lysaght, Z., and O'Leary, M. (2017). Scaling Up, Writ Small: Using an Assessment for Learning Audit Instrument to Stimulate Site-based Professional Development, One School at a Time. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice*, 24(2), 271-289.
- MacRuairc, G. (2009). Dip, Dip, Sky Blue, Who's It? NOT YOU: Children's Experiences of Standardised Testing: A Socio-Cultural Analysis. *Irish Educational Studies*, 28(1), 47-66.
- Madaus, G. (1988a). The Distortion of Teaching and Testing: High-Stakes Testing and Instruction. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 65(3), 29-46.
- Madaus, G. (1988b). The Influence of Testing on the Curriculum. In: L. Tanner (Ed.) *The Politics of Reforming School Administration*. London: Farmer Press.
- McNamara, M. (2010). *Exploring the Impact of Standardised Assessment in the Primary School Classroom*. Master of Education Thesis, National University of Ireland, Galway.
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). (1999). *Primary School Curriculum: Introduction*. Dublin: Stationery Office.
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). (2005a). *Primary School Curriculum Review, Phase 1. Final Report with recommendations*. Dublin: NCCA.
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). (2005b). *Supporting Assessment in Schools*. Dublin: Stationery Office.
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). (2007). *Assessment in the Primary School: Guidelines for Schools*. Dublin: NCCA.

- O'Leary, M. (2006). Towards a Balanced Assessment System for Irish Primary and Secondary Schools. *Oideas*, 52, 7-24.
- Ó Súilleabháin, S. (1970). *The Marino Graded Word Reading Scale*. Dublin: Longman, Browne and Nolan.
- Polesel, J., Rice, S., and Dulfer, N. (2014). The Impact of High-stakes Testing on Curriculum and Pedagogy: A Teacher Perspective from Australia. *Journal of Education Policy*, 29(5), 640-657.
- Schonell, F., and Goodacre, E. (1971). *The Psychology and Teaching of Reading*. London: Oliver and Boyd.
- Sheehan, J. (2016). *Assessment in Primary Education in Ireland*. PhD Thesis, University College Cork.
- Shiel, G., Kellaghan, T., and Moran, M. (2010). *Standardised Testing in Lower Secondary Education*. Dublin: Educational Research Centre.
- Shiel, G., Kavanagh, L., and Millar, D. (2014). *The 2014 National Assessments of English Reading and Mathematics. Volume 1: Performance Report*. Dublin: Education Research Centre.
- William, D. (2010). Standardised Testing and School Accountability. *Educational Psychologist*, 45(2), 107-122.

# ≡ Supporting purposeful and strategic readers: Transactional strategies instruction in a DEIS Band 1 classroom ≡

≡ CIARA BARRY AND PATRICK BURKE ≡

## **Abstract**

Teachers regularly attest to the challenges experienced in supporting both reading comprehension and engagement. In this article, we describe a ten-week intervention, conducted in a classroom in a DEIS Band 1 school, consisting of 13 pupils, aged between nine and 11 years old, which explored the effect of teaching reading comprehension strategies explicitly on enabling children to gain a better understanding of text. Based on the *Transactional Strategy Instruction* framework (Brown et al., 1996), pupils were supported in using strategies in small, mixed-ability groups to analyse and discuss high-quality picture books. Post-intervention measures showed that all pupils showed improved comprehension scores and an enhanced awareness of strategic reading processes. This article also depicts the challenges and successes as documented by the first author, who was also the classroom teacher, throughout the ten weeks.

**Keywords:** reading comprehension, comprehension strategies, transactional strategies instruction, picture book, DEIS Band 1 school.



## **Introduction and background**

This article describes a ten-week intervention that was conducted in a primary school class in Ireland, consisting of 13 pupils (eight boys, five girls) aged between nine and 11 years. Typically, reading comprehension instruction in this class consisted of reading from a student workbook or a class novel and then writing answers to simple questions or completing cloze exercises. However, as the class teacher and first author of this paper, I was not satisfied that merely answering these questions demonstrated that pupils understood what they had read. It was evident to me, from engaging in pupil-teacher conferencing, that some pupils matched the words in the question to the words presented in the text and simply transcribed that line of text as an answer. This was a 'go-to' survival strategy which, for the most part, gave the pupils the correct answers. Allied with this, when reading class novels, pupils could decode words and sound like they were indeed 'reading', yet they could not determine the main message of the text after reading it.

The need to attend to literacy achievement was made all the more pressing by the

context in which this study was conducted. Situated in an area of significant disadvantage, the school was classified as having DEIS<sup>1</sup> Band 1 status. Therefore, I was cognisant of the impact of broader factors on children's literacy development (Eivers et al., 2004). The most recent international assessments indicate that, while the disparity in reading achievement for Irish pupils is less pronounced (in terms of the literacy achievement) than many other countries, there nonetheless exists a significant gap between reading achievement in DEIS and non-DEIS schools (McKeown et al., 2019). Determined to provide high quality learning experiences for my pupils, I decided to investigate the habits of good readers and examine how best to bridge the gap between the literacy attainment of my pupils and that of their peers who live in more advantageous areas. This investigation commenced with a careful examination of the previous research on reading comprehension, which would later become the basis for significant change in my classroom practice.

### **Helping children to construct meaning – what should teachers know?**

The research on how children come to understand what they read, and how teachers can support this understanding, is extensive (Brown, 2008; Block and Pressley, 2003; Allington and Johnston, 2002; Block, 1999). Looking back on more than 50 years of research on theory and practice, explanations of reading comprehension depend, to varying degrees, on factors relating to the text, the reader, and the context (Pearson and Cervetti, 2015). While texts vary substantially, characterised by differing structures, linguistic features and measures of complexity, so too do readers, who bring varying background knowledge and levels of motivation to the act of reading. Contextual features acknowledge that readers do not engage with text in a vacuum; they are influenced and shaped by both local and societal influences that may be largely beyond the reader's control.

Comprehension is an active process that requires the deployment and integration of significant cognitive skills and resources (Kendeou et al., 2016). In order to understand what we are reading, we must decode the printed symbols (letters) on the page, take meaning from the decoded words, and integrate this meaning with relevant background knowledge, while continuously updating our overall understanding of the meaning represented by the text (Kintsch, 1988; Kintsch and Rawson, 2005). The complexity of these processes can prove challenging for young readers. For example, pupils who exert significant effort decoding may have limited capacity available to process the substance of what the text is about. Difficulties with decoding typically align with a dyslexic profile and can be contrasted with pupils who have accurate word-reading skills but poor comprehension (Hulme and Snowling, 2011).

Such poor comprehension can be caused by a plethora of different factors (Cain and Oakhill, 2006). Poor comprehenders have been found to score poorly on general measures of oral language proficiency, often from the early grades of elementary school (Catts et al., 2006). For example, a pupil may have a shallower store of vocabulary or

---

1 Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools

difficulty understanding and using more complex syntactic structures in sentences. In order to understand more complex ideas in text, we need to read between the lines and fill in information that is implicitly stated. Studies have shown that the ability to infer can sometimes be lacking, leading to difficulties with comprehension (Cain and Oakhill, 1999). Importantly, readers also need to monitor their comprehension. A lack of metacognitive awareness can lead to a continuation with 'reading' despite the fact that understanding of the text has broken down (Hulme and Snowling, 2009). In addition, a number of other factors can impair comprehension, including poor understanding of text structure, gaps in background knowledge, and working memory difficulties (Kilpatrick, 2015).

A significant portion of the research on reading comprehension has focused on the strategies used by competent readers to make sense of text (Pressley and Allington, 2014). These readers question themselves and the text while reading; they consider the most important points encountered; they skim and scan to find relevant information quickly and they visualise characters, settings, and other details from the texts. The importance of these strategies has been underscored in reviews of teaching in this area (Shanahan et al., 2010; Kennedy et al., 2012). Having an understanding of the knowledge and skills that my pupils needed was a start, but I also needed an instructional framework that could support the diverse learners in my class. The research on good comprehension teaching proved to be instructive.

### **Teaching comprehension – what should teachers do?**

Drawing on studies of the strategies used by good readers, a number of approaches have been shown to be effective in promoting strategic reading (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000; Shanahan et al., 2010). Significantly, studies on the effectiveness of comprehension teaching have repeatedly underscored the value of the gradual release of responsibility model (Pearson and Gallagher, 1983) when scaffolding students' strategic reading. The model generally involves a transfer of responsibility from teacher to students, starting with explicit direction on the strategy (and when it should be used), clear modelling of the strategy (often involving thinking aloud), collaborative practice on how the strategy can be put into action, guided student practice of the strategy, and, finally, independent student use of the strategy (Duke et al., 2011; Shanahan et al., 2010).

Studies that have focused on improvements in comprehension have regularly included a focus on the strategic use of comprehension strategies (Clarke et al., 2010; Palincsar and Brown, 1984). Promisingly for the current study, the teaching of comprehension strategy instruction through the gradual release of responsibility has been shown to be effective with diverse populations, such as students with a language impairment (Wright et al., 2015), students with autism (El Zein et al., 2014) and students in high-poverty settings (Kennedy, 2014). While a number of instructional frameworks were available, a selection of core features of transactional strategies instruction (TSI) (Brown et al., 1996) showed promise. TSI is the term given to peer-led collaborative groups who construct personal knowledge of a text while simultaneously modelling strategy-use for one another

(Pressley et al., 1992). The term 'transactional' is derived from the fact that the meaning is constructed simultaneously between readers and the text, rather than in the text or by the reader alone (Pressley and Allington, 2014). Many studies report that pupils who engage with TSI and become strategic readers can enhance their comprehension. Seminal work in this area found that just 30 hours of TSI instruction can significantly improve students' reading abilities (Pressley et al., 1992), while a year-long quasi-experimental study of 30 low-achieving second grade readers in five US classrooms found that those who had experience of TSI in their classrooms showed significant reading improvements compared to their peers who had not been taught using TSI (Brown et al., 1996).

### **Planning for the teaching of comprehension – what does the curriculum say?**

Recent years have seen significant curricular changes in Irish schools, first seen in the publication of the *Primary Language Curriculum* for junior infants to second class in 2015, followed by an updated version of the curriculum to incorporate third to sixth class (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2019). These curriculum documents have been accompanied by reviews of the relevant national and international research (Kennedy et al., 2012; Shanahan, 2019). The reading strand of the English (language 1) curriculum features comprehension as a learning outcome. For example, at the end of fourth class, pupils should be able to:

Compare and select comprehension strategies flexibly and interchangeably and use background knowledge to engage with text in a variety of genres independently or collaboratively (DES, 2019, p.27).

It is noteworthy that this learning outcome attends to the role of background knowledge in comprehension, in line with the influences on comprehension seen in the previous review. The outcome also places significant emphasis on the use of comprehension strategies to facilitate pupils' understanding of text.

While these strategies were the main focus of the current study, it is important to note that all of the learning outcomes detailed in the reading strand (and indeed many of the outcomes in oral language and writing) contribute to comprehension. For example, the ability to use phonics/word recognition knowledge (learning outcome 5) (DES, 2019, p.26) and to understand relevant vocabulary (learning outcome 6) (DES, 2019, p.26) are crucial in understanding text. Pupils' engagement and motivation (learning outcomes 1 and 2) (DES, 2019, p.26) also impact on their success in reading comprehension. Therefore, while particular comprehension strategies are worthy of explicit teaching, all of the learning outcomes in the curriculum contribute to pupils' understanding of what they read.

## Methodology

### Making a change: The intervention

In choosing to implement transactional strategies instruction (TSI), attention was directed to the explicit teaching and teacher modelling of prediction, connection, visualisation, questioning, clarifying, determining importance, inferring and summarising. These are skills advocated by Pressley et al. (1992), Courtney and Gleeson (2007), Block (1999), Brown (2008) and Brown et al. (1996), in studies relating to the explicit teaching of comprehension strategies.

Equipped with the necessary theory and empirical findings, I then began to investigate the type of texts I had been using in my classroom. The use of picture books was suggested in the literature (Guthrie, 2013; Roche, 2011) as one method that could motivate pupils to become actively engaged with reading. Although picture books are widely used in early years education, their potential for use with older pupils at the more senior levels of primary school is often ignored (Pearson, 2005). Picture books can enable teachers to engage in fruitful and effective dialogue with pupils. Not only are they rich in illustrations, they also explore themes that pique the curiosity of pupils. In order to understand text, pupils need to make connections to its meaning. Reading picture books not only provides the opportunity to connect to the words in the book, but pupils can also make connections to pictures. Using the picture books suggested by Courtney and Gleeson (2007) as a guide, texts were sourced which were of high interest to the students in the class and suitable for use during TSI. It was important to strike a balance between enhancing comprehension while also not selecting texts that were so complex that they reduced motivation to read or prevented students from deriving pleasure from the process. A list of the texts and authors selected is shown below in table 1.

Table 1

Picture Book	Author	Picture Book	Author
When Jessie Came Across the Sea	Amy Hest	My Lucky Day	Keiko Kasza
Henry's Freedom Box	Ellen Levine	Music for the End of Time	Jen Bryant
Lost and Found	Oliver Jeffers	Jumanji	Chris Van Allsburg
The Butterfly	Patricia Polacco	One Boy's War	Lynn Higgins Cooper
Zoo	Anthony Browne	Grandfather's Journey	Allen Say
Silly Billy	Anthony Browne	Ape	Martin Jenkins
The Silver Swan	Michael Morpurgo	Voices in the Park	Anthony Browne
The Man Who Walked Between the Towers	Mordicai Gerstein	The Cats in Krasinski Square	Karen Hesse
Amazing Grace	Mary Hoffman	The Stranger	Chris Van Allsburg
The Emperor's Egg	Martin Jenkins	The Wall	Eve Bunting
The Blue Whale	Nicola Davies	See the Ocean	Estelle Condra
Ice Bear	Nicola Davies	La La La	Kate DiCamillo
Baseball Saved Us	Ken Mochizuki	Probuditi!	Chris Van Allsburg
Teammates	Peter Golenbock	Tea With Milk	Allen Say
Barack Obama	Nikki Grimes	Two Bad Ants	Chris Van Allsburg

The success of TSI sessions in my classroom would largely become dependent on two factors; (a) the ability of the pupils to understand, discuss and use the strategies, and

(b) the ability to work in a co-operative and supportive group. When implementing TSI, each pupil is allocated a role within their group which related to a particular strategy, for example; leader, prediction expert, questioning expert, declunking expert, clarifying expert, inference expert or summariser, similar to the *Building Bridges of Understanding* programme by Courtney and Gleeson (2007). The purpose of each role is to internalise each strategy as determining when and how to use the strategy is an integral part of carrying out the role. The assigning of roles can be viewed as a method of differentiation, therefore, pupils with diverse needs can assume a full and valued role within the TSI process.

Three sessions of TSI were implemented per week for the duration of ten weeks. During lesson one of each week (Monday), I explicitly modelled the reading strategies for the pupils while reading a high-quality picture book. In the subsequent two sessions (Tuesday and Thursday), pupils worked in small collaborative groups with each group member being allocated a role relating to a particular strategy. Table 2 depicts an example of the teaching and learning schedule across the week.

Table 2

Group	Book	Day	Methodology
Whole Class	<i>Baseball Saved Us</i> by Ken Mochizuki	Monday	Explicit teaching of comprehension strategies. Teacher modelling of strategies. Gradual release of responsibility to pupils.
Group A	<i>Teammates</i> by Peter Golenbock	Tuesday and Thursday	TSI in small mixed ability groups with role cards. Collaborative learning. Teacher circulates to scaffold and support. Pupils revisit the text on Thursday to conclude reading and continue discussion.
Group B	<i>Barack Obama</i> by Nikki Grimes	Tuesday and Thursday	TSI in small mixed ability groups with role cards. Collaborative learning. Teacher circulates to scaffold and support. Pupils revisit the text on Thursday to conclude reading and continue discussion.

**Teaching comprehension strategies: The central role of explicit teacher modelling and 'think alouds'**

Before pupils commenced work in their small groups, explicit teacher modelling of each strategy was undertaken with ample time provided for pupils to observe the strategy in action and then try it for themselves. This explicit modelling usually took the form of 'think alouds' which involved me, the teacher, explicitly modelling both how and when to use each strategy. The cover illustration was a perfect place to start using comprehension strategies with students. A 'think aloud' sequence undertaken while focusing on the strategy of



prediction using the cover of the book *When Jessie Came Across the Sea* by Amy Hest, is described below:

Me: I predict that Jessie is on a boat sailing to America and she will have a new and happy life there. Does anybody else have a prediction, or guess, as to what might happen in this story? Remember your prediction does not have to be right, it is just a guess.

As I read aloud and different pupils applied the pre-taught strategies, other pupils could follow their lead and began to agree or disagree with what their classmates had said. This provided a catalyst for rich classroom discussion and critical thinking.

After explicit modelling across a wide range of texts and making provision for the pupils to use each strategy, it was then time to release the responsibility to the pupils gradually, and facilitate them working in small groups with a text. At first, each pupil was given a particular strategy to focus on in their group. However, with more practice pupils requested that this practice be halted – they wanted to employ the necessary strategies when they felt the need in the text, rather than just when their particular strategy was relevant. From this pupil input, I then removed the practice of individually allocating strategies to pupils, which demonstrated that pupils were not only interested in using the pre-taught strategies, but also realising their role in assisting meaning construction.

Through gradually enabling pupils to work without my constant support, I found it difficult to withdraw from being at the centre of students' learning. Despite circulating and scaffolding for each group when necessary, there was a shift in the locus of control within the classroom. This initially proved to be difficult, however, providing pupils with opportunities to practise their comprehension strategies was essential. After reading work by Brown (2008), I stumbled upon one of the most simple and effective methods of encouraging children to participate in TSI and whole class reading. This was to ask the short and basic question, 'What are you thinking?'

## **Data collection and analysis**

### **Quantitative measures**

The *Strategic Reading Processes Questionnaire* (Schmitt, 1990) and the *Neale Analysis of Reading Ability* (Neale, 1989) were distributed to pupils before and after the intervention. The *Strategic Reading Processes Questionnaire* (Schmitt, 1990) is a 25-item, four-option, multiple choice questionnaire that asks pupils about the strategies they could employ before, during and after reading. It assesses pupils' awareness of a variety of metacognitive behaviours that fit within six broad categories:

- a. predicting and verifying,
- b. previewing,
- c. purpose setting,
- d. self-questioning,

- e. drawing from background knowledge, and
- f. summarising and applying fix-up strategies.

Responses are given one mark and every participant receives a score out of 25.

The *Neale Analysis of Reading Ability* (NARA) (Neale, 1989) was used to compare reading comprehension abilities at pre- and post-intervention. This test consists of two standardised parallel forms of six graded passages of text to form in a continuous reading scale for pupils aged from six to 12 years. After pupils complete a practice passage, they progress to passage one, reading aloud and answering comprehension questions without looking back at the text. The reading of each text is timed in seconds. Accuracy in reading is recorded by calculating the child's reading errors. If a pupil obtains more than 16 errors on any of the first five passages of text, or an error total of 20 on passage number six, the test is stopped. Standardised scores are calculated including percentile ranks, stanines and reading ages for accuracy, comprehension, and rate of reading. The benefits of undertaking this test were numerous as the results provided tailored information on a pupil's comprehension achievement. However, caution must be exercised with the interpretation of a pupil's results on the NARA test (Neale, 1989), as pupils with additional educational needs who have difficulty with fluency and decoding text, but who may contribute meaningfully to classroom discussion, may not show an improvement on their score on the NARA test as when they make 16 reading errors on passages one to five, the test is stopped. Pupils with dyslexic tendencies are one such example. The results of both the *Strategic Reading Processes Questionnaire* (Schmitt, 1990) and the *Neale Analysis of Reading Ability* (Neale, 1989) were analysed using *Statistics Package for the Social Sciences* (SPSS).

### **Qualitative measures**

Semi-structured interviews took place at pre-, mid- and post-intervention to delve into pupils' thoughts about the TSI process. I kept an observational diary for the duration of the intervention, to further document and analyse the changes, if any, that would occur in pupils' comprehension. This proved to be an essential learning tool for me as a mainstream teacher. Excerpts from this diary and the semi-structured interviews are presented in the Results section with pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of the participants in this study.

Data gathered using qualitative methods were analysed using the inductive approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Observations were coded and grouped to generate patterns of re-occurring themes and issues.

## **Results**

### **Reading comprehension**

The NARA test (Neale, 1989) indicated that there was a significant increase in comprehension scores from pre-intervention ( $M = 31.77$ ,  $SD = 23.16$ ) to post-intervention ( $M = 52.08$ ,  $SD = 33.44$ );  $t(12) = -4.77$ ,  $p < .001$  (two-tailed). The eta squared statistic was .69, indicating a large effect size. On average, each pupil increased their comprehension by 19 points. This finding suggests that TSI was successful in improving pupils' reading comprehension.

### Awareness of strategic reading processes

The pupils were also tested on their awareness of strategic reading processes using the *Awareness of Strategic Reading Processes Questionnaire* (Schmitt, 1990) at pre- and post-intervention. Results revealed that pupils' awareness of strategic reading processes significantly changed from pre-intervention ( $M = 9.00$ ,  $SD = 3.65$ ) to post-intervention ( $M = 17.77$ ,  $SD = 3.75$ );  $t(12) = -9.31$ ,  $p < .001$ . The eta squared statistic was .88, indicating a large effect size. Therefore, the explicit teaching of comprehension strategies and the implementation of TSI were effective in improving pupils' awareness of strategic reading processes.

### Qualitative findings

#### What about the pupil voice?

It was noted in the following excerpt from the observational diary that pupils really enjoyed listening to the picture books being read aloud to them during the Monday session each week:

Anna: I love the times when you are the reader in the reading in the circle and we all just do the skills and listen.

Barbara: The picture books are good because like sometimes like big novels can get boring and then we have to keep reading them for weeks and weeks... If I wasn't interested in the title of one picture book then at least it's over in like one or two days and not going on for weeks.

Peter: Picture books are the best... You get to read the whole story... Not like half of the story or a piece of the story so you get the ending all the time and I like that.

Peter's comment is interesting because it can be interpreted in terms of most picture books having a beginning, middle and a logical ending, while Barbara's comment may be something for teachers to bear in mind when selecting novels. Themes and issues should appeal to all pupils in the class as they will probably be reading and working on them for a considerable period of time. Not only were pupils becoming more motivated to read, I was also experiencing success with reading comprehension in the classroom. This was a source of great satisfaction for me and also contributed to my own motivation as a teacher in terms of providing effective literacy instruction. Reading aloud in a circle to pupils and sharing thoughts with them generated an atmosphere of mutual respect and interest, which contributed to the development of an encouraging and pleasant pupil-teacher relationship.

Interestingly, wordless picture books provided significant opportunities for modelling higher-order skills associated with comprehension, including inference, in particular. I found that *La La La* by Kate DiCamillo was one of the most thought-provoking and insightful reading sessions I had with my class. This book, which consists only of the words 'La La La' throughout, directed students' attention to the detail in illustrations and the colours used by the illustrator. The focus for students shifted to the comprehension strategy of inference, a strategy which struggling readers have difficulty developing. However, Kispal

(2008) argues that struggling readers need inference more than accomplished readers, as they use cues and prompts from the information they can see and are then able to read to make meaning. John, a student who presented with literacy difficulties and who had been largely unmotivated to read, subsequently told me about his favourite picturebooks:

John: *Silly Billy* and *La La La* were my favourite books... remember I read them both out loud with no mistakes ... That was good now wasn't it?

Finally, I knew that my efforts in striving to develop a literacy-rich classroom were not in vain when John arrived late for school one day. Upon entering the classroom his one and only concern was about reading:

John: Did you do them teacher?

Me: Do what?

John: The reading groups?

John's motivation and interest in reading was remarkable and it would previously have been unthinkable that he would have feared missing out on reading.

### **The influence of text structure and format**

In this study, pupils were exposed to various elements of presentation and typography which can have a lasting effect (Gambrell, 2011). Pupils became excited by the fold-out page in *The Man Who Walked Between the Towers* by Mordicai Gerstein as, typically, schoolbooks follow traditional formats and structure. As the TSI groups were working on different texts, one group did not get the opportunity to work with this book. However, after such enthusiastic reviews by their peers, the other pupils became curious. When questioned about the appeal of this book above all the others, it was the fold-out page in the middle of the book which really captured the attention of the pupils. Perhaps it could be the lack of reading materials children in disadvantaged areas have at home, but the pupils thought it was exceptionally clever of the author to do such a thing, and many had never seen it done before. There was always a scramble to retrieve this book from the class library and it was held in very high regard amongst the pupils, not just because of its story line, but because it was a novelty in terms of structure and format. This book became so popular that I had to source another copy of it and organise for both copies to be taken home by different pupils each day. This was one of the most insightful, yet simple, learning experiences for me in terms of developing a literacy-rich classroom.

### **Limitations**

Scores on the NARA test (Neale, 1989) and the *Awareness of Strategic Reading Processes Questionnaire* (Schmitt, 1990) at pre- and post-intervention allowed for ease of comparison at both stages. However, the results of this research reflect one class group in one school and thus suffer from a lack of generalisability. Using score comparisons at pre- and post-

intervention to draw definite conclusions about a pupil's reading ability may not be accurate, as one test score on one particular day may not accurately reflect ability. The duration of the intervention is short, and thus the long-term impact of implementing TSI in the classroom remains unexplored. Ten weeks of TSI could only skim the surface of the benefits the explicit teaching of comprehension strategies could potentially hold for pupils in a DEIS Band 1 school. Performance on the NARA test (Neale, 1989) and on the *Awareness of Strategic Reading Processes Questionnaire* (Schmitt, 1990) at pre- and post-intervention may have been influenced by other factors, such as the teaching of reading that took place in the classroom each day (buddy reading, novel study, library visit), outside of this intervention.

### **Discussion, recommendations and conclusions**

The findings demonstrated that TSI was a successful method of improving pupils' reading comprehension. Struggling readers are more likely to learn essential reading skills and strategies if the explicit model of instruction is part of the teacher's repertoire of teaching methods (Rupley et al., 2009). In a meta-analysis of over 40 studies of reading comprehension in special education settings, Berkeley et al. (2010) concluded that teaching pupils to attend more carefully or to think more systematically about text as it is being read improves pupils' comprehension. Scope exists for further studies in the Irish context pertaining to the use of comprehension strategies and TSI with pupils who have special educational needs. Similarly, the shift towards in-class support under the new special educational needs model and *Circular 0013/2017* (DES, 2017) could provide some scope for TSI to be used as an in-class intervention. As this intervention took place in a senior class and all of the strategies were in use when implementing TSI, further studies could investigate which strategies are developmentally appropriate at each class level and when exactly pupils can work in small collaborative groups during TSI. Perhaps early implementation of TSI with fewer strategies in the early years can result in a spiral and developmental nature of implementation across the school.

One significant learning point for the first author, as the teacher, was how much the pupils struggled with the skill of determining importance. This skill, otherwise termed summarising, was not one which I had thought the pupils would struggle with. They could not decipher the main points of the text in a concise manner and tended to include irrelevant detail. This may have been because the students' perception of what summarising meant was incorrect:

James: Yeah like when we were doing it [summarising] first, I thought you [teacher] were checking if we were listening, so I wrote down absolutely everything I could think of and remember about the book and it was a full page long... [giggles].

James's comment was insightful in terms of deciphering my next teaching points. In order to really peel back the level of complexity, I resorted to reading simple nursery rhymes with the class and asked them to tell me in one, short, sentence what the rhyme

was about. It helped to tell the students to pretend they were explaining the rhyme to a pupil in a younger class. It is also interesting how the preoccupation with assessing pupils' knowledge was intertwined with James's beliefs about the task. Similarly, it has been suggested that motivation to read wanes in the later years of primary school and in to post-primary school as reading tasks become focused on outputs, where reading is then perceived as a task, rather than a pleasurable activity (Rosenblatt, 2005; Tyre and Springen, 2007). Providing pupils with a forum for discussing books can help them to think critically and this discussion is also crucial for the promotion of comprehension (Shanahan et al., 2010).

This study demonstrated that explicit instruction is a powerful means of developing proficient comprehenders. While this article presents findings from a relatively small and particular context, it does provide a striking example of the impact that research-informed instruction can have on students in Irish schools. While I was hopeful that adopting a more strategic approach to comprehension would prove fruitful for my pupils, I could not have envisaged the impact that the intervention would have on the quality of engagement and discussion in my classroom. The essential ingredients of high-quality comprehension instruction, plentiful opportunities for co-operation in groups, and carefully chosen picture books, had a remarkable impact on my classroom and pupils. The interaction and dialogue promoted by TSI groups can facilitate all students, no matter their reading difficulty, to take part in high quality discussion about text.

However, effective strategy instruction, no matter how comprehensively validated it may be in research, can never reach its true potential if it is not implemented in real world classroom settings. It is hoped that the content of this article will aid teachers to help their pupils to become purposeful, strategic readers. Exploring picture books with children and discussing their contents is one of the most rewarding and interesting experiences a classroom teacher can have. This, combined with attention to research-informed teaching strategies, can have a truly meaningful impact in our classrooms.

## References

- Allington, R.L., and Johnston, P.H. (2002). *Reading to Learn: Lessons from Exemplary 4th Grade Classrooms*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Berkeley, S., Scruggs, T.E., and Mastropieri, M.A. (2010). Reading Comprehension Instruction for Students With Learning Disabilities, 1995-2006: A Meta-Analysis. *Remedial and Special Education*, 31(6), 423-436.
- Block, C.C. (1999). The case for exemplary teaching, especially for students who begin first grade without the precursors for literacy success. In: T. Shanahan (Ed.) *49th Yearbook of the National Reading Conference*. Chicago: National Reading Conference, 71-85.
- Block, C.C., and Pressley, M. (2003). *Comprehension Instruction: Research Based Best Practices*. New York: Guilford.
- Braun, V., and Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Brown, R. (2008). The Road Not Yet Taken: A Transactional Strategies Approach to

- Comprehension Instruction. *The Reading Teacher*, 61(7), 538-547. <https://doi.org/10.1598/RT.61.7.3>
- Brown, R., Van Meter, P., Pressley, M., and Schuder, T. (1996). A Quasi-Experimental Validation of Transactional Strategies Instruction with Low-Achieving Second-Grade Readers. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 88(1), 18-37. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.88.1.18>
- Cain, K., and Oakhill, J. (1999). Inference making ability and its relation to comprehension failure in young children. *Reading and Writing: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 11(5-6), 489-503. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1008084120205>
- Cain, K., and Oakhill, J. (2006). Profiles of children with specific reading comprehension difficulties. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 76(4), 683-696. <https://doi.org/10.1348/000709905X67610>
- Catts, H.W., Adlof, S.M., and Weismer, S.E. (2006). Language deficits in poor comprehenders: A case for the Simple View of Reading. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 49(2), 278-293. [https://doi.org/10.1044/1092-4388\(2006\)023](https://doi.org/10.1044/1092-4388(2006)023)
- Clarke, P.J., Snowling, M.J., Truelove, E., and Hulme, C. (2010). Ameliorating children's reading-comprehension difficulties: A randomized controlled trial. *Psychological Science*, 21(8), 1106-1116.
- Courtney, A., and Gleeson, M. (2007). *Building Bridges of Understanding*. Mary Immaculate College: Curriculum Development Unit.
- Department of Education and Skills (DES). (2017). *Circular 0013/2017: Special Education Teaching Allocation*. Available at: [www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/clo013\\_2017.pdf](http://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/clo013_2017.pdf)
- Department of Education and Skills (DES). (2019). *Primary Language Curriculum* (online). Department of Education and Skills: Dublin. Available at: [https://curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/2a6e5f79-6f29-4d68-b850-379510805656/PLC-Document\\_English.pdf](https://curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/2a6e5f79-6f29-4d68-b850-379510805656/PLC-Document_English.pdf)
- Duke, N.K., Pearson, P.D., Strachan, S.L., and Billman, A.K. (2011). Essential elements of fostering and teaching reading comprehension. *What Research Has to Say about Reading Instruction*, 4, 286-314. <https://doi.org/10.1598/0829.03>
- Eivers, E., Shiel, G., and Shortt, F. (2004) *Reading Literacy in Disadvantaged Primary Schools*. Dublin: Educational Research Centre.
- El Zein, F., Solis, M., Vaughn, S., and McCulley, L. (2014). Reading comprehension interventions for students with autism spectrum disorders: A synthesis of research. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 44(6), 1303-1322. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-013-1989-2>
- Gambrell, L. (2011). Ask the Expert. *The Reading Teacher*, 64(6), 459-459.
- Guthrie, J.T. (2013). Best Practices for Motivating Students to Read. In: L. Morrow, and L. Gambrell (Eds.) (2014). *Best Practices in Literacy Instruction*. Guilford Press: New York.
- Hulme, C., and Snowling, M.J. (2009). *Developmental Disorders of Language Learning and Cognition*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Hulme, C., and Snowling, M.J. (2011). Children's reading comprehension difficulties: Nature, causes, and treatments. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 20(3), 139-142.
- Kendeou, P., McMaster, K.L., and Christ, T.J. (2016). Reading Comprehension: Core Components and Processes. *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 3(1), 62-69. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2372732215624707>

- Kennedy, E. (2014). *Raising literacy achievement in high-poverty schools: An evidence-based approach*. London: Routledge.
- Kennedy, E., Dunphy, E., Dwyer, B., Hayes, G., McPhillips, T., Marsh, J., and Shiel, G. (2012). *Literacy in Early Childhood and Primary Education (3-8 years)*. Dublin: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.
- Kilpatrick, D.A. (2015). *Essentials of Assessing, Preventing, and Overcoming Reading Difficulties*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley and Sons.
- Kintsch, W. (1988). The role of knowledge in discourse comprehension: A construction-integration model. *Psychological Review*, 95(2), 163-82.
- Kintsch, W., and Rawson, K.A. (2005). Comprehension. *The Science of Reading: A Handbook*, 209-226. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470757642.ch12>
- Kispaal, A. (2008). *Effective Teaching of Inference Skills for Reading – Literature Review*. National Foundation for Educational Research. Available at: <http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/7918/1/DCSF-RR031.pdf> (Accessed 04 December 2019).
- McKeown, C., Denner, S., McAteer, S., Shiel, G., and O'Keeffe, L. (2019). *Learning for the Future: The Performance of 15-Year-Olds in Ireland on Reading Literacy, Science and Mathematics in PISA 2018*. Educational Research Centre: Dublin.
- National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. (2000). *Report of the National Reading Panel. Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and its Implications for Reading Instruction*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institutes of Health.
- Neale, M.D. (1989). *Neale Analysis of Reading Ability*. Great Britain: NFER-Nelson.
- Palincsar, A.S., and Brown, A.L. (1984). Reciprocal Teaching of Comprehension-Fostering and Comprehension-Monitoring Activities. *Cognition and Instruction*, 1(2), 117-175. <https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532690xcio102>
- Pearson, P.D., and Cervetti, G.N. (2015). Fifty years of reading comprehension theory and practice. In: P.D. Pearson, and E.H. Hiebert (Eds.) *Research-Based Practices for Teaching Common Core Literacy*, pp.1-24. New York, NY: Teachers College Press. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09640560701402075>
- Pearson, M. (2005). *Big Ideas in Small Packages: Using Picture Books with Older Readers*. Worthington, OH: Linworth Publishing, Inc.
- Pearson, P.D., and Gallagher, M.C. (1983). The instruction of reading comprehension. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 8, 317-344. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0361-476X\(83\)90019-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/0361-476X(83)90019-X)
- Pressley, M., and Allington, R.L. (2014). *Reading Instruction that Works: The Case for Balanced Teaching*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Pressley, M., El-Dinary, P.B., Gaskins, I., Schuder, T., Bergman, J.L., Almasi, J., and Brown, R. (1992). Beyond direct explanation: Transactional instruction of reading comprehension strategies. *Elementary School Journal*, 92, 513-556. <https://doi.org/10.1086/461705>
- Roche, M. (2011). Creating a dialogical and critical classroom: reflection and action to improve practice. *Educational Action Research*, 19(3), 327-343. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2011.600607>
- Rosenblatt, L. (2005). *Making Meaning with Texts: Selected Essays*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.



- Rupley, W.H., Blair, T.R., and Nichols, W.D. (2009). Effective Reading Instruction for Struggling Readers: The Role of Direct/Explicit Teaching. *Reading and Writing Quarterly*, 25(3), 125-138.
- Schmitt, M.C. (1990). A Questionnaire to Measure Children's Awareness of Strategic Reading Processes. *The Reading Teacher*, 43(7), 454-461.
- Shanahan, T. (2019). *Improving Reading Comprehension in the Primary Classes*. NCCA: Dublin.
- Shanahan, T., Callison, K., Carriere, C., Duke, N.K., Pearson, P.D., Schatschneider, C., and Torgesen, J. (2010). *Improving Reading Comprehension in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade. What Works Clearinghouse Practice Guide*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, US Department of Education.
- Tyre, P., and Springen, K. (2007). Fourth grade slump; In the pressure cooker world of the nations elementary schools, its hard to be 9 years old. *Newsweek*, 149(8), 47.
- Wright, A., Mitchell, S., O'Donoghue, A., Cowhey, S., and Kearney, M. (2015). Making sense of it: A brief programme to improve reading comprehension in adolescents with language impairments in main stream school. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*, 50(6), 776-787. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1460-6984.12170>



water as it weathers the storm of ambiguous policy landscape continually cropped up in teacher interviews. This experience expresses the deep feeling of uncertainty regarding the management and future provision of the STP. Teachers interviewed expressed feelings of isolation as they voyage through a sea of cyclical disadvantage issues with minimal support, leading one participant to ask – "Where is the support for the support teacher?" This article puts forward the argument that this lack of support is not in the best interests of the project and is in stark contrast to the goals of the Irish government in tackling educational disadvantage to safeguard the welfare of our most vulnerable pupils. This runs counter to a myriad of research and policy recommendations on the importance of mental health promotion and emotional supports in schools, specifically for those most at risk of early school leaving (ESL) (Joint Oireachtas Committee, 2010; Downes, 2008, 2011; EU Council Recommendations, 2011; Thematic Working Group Final Report on ESL, 2013). The current static pilot phase also raises questions regarding the approach to educational disadvantage policies, whereby schools with similar levels of disadvantage are not being given equal opportunities to access the invaluable resource of support teachers.

This study occurs at a time when educational debate is dominated by the concern that accountability and performance-driven goals diminish the aim of education to merely an economic aim (see Apple, 2006; McCarthy et al., 2009). This concern is juxtaposed sharply with the recent surge in policy documents concerning increased efforts to emphasise child-centred aims of health and wellbeing in schools (DES, 2015; NCCA, 2017). This concern is even more significant in the DEIS context, as children living in low-income families are especially vulnerable to mental health difficulties (see Downes, 2011; Esch et al., 2014). According to the latest *Survey on Income and Living Conditions* (SILC) data (CSO, 2018), there were 230,000 children living in poverty in Ireland in 2017. This means "children are the single biggest group of the population living in poverty" (Ward, 2019). Poverty has detrimental impacts on wellbeing as it limits life chances, generates feelings of inferiority and shame and "destroys the human spirit" (ibid.). Evidence from a recent report by the *Growing Up In Ireland* (GUI) study shows economic hardship generates stress in families, resulting in less parent-child interaction and a greater risk of socio-emotional difficulties in children and mental health issues in parents (Nixon, Layte and Thornton, 2019). The STP is one example of a much-needed initiative emphasising the importance of social, emotional and behavioural support for pupils in DEIS primary schools. Literature, educational research and discourse on the STP are extremely limited and, as a result, the key focus of this small-scale study is to offer a more nuanced understanding of the support teacher role as expressed by the support teachers themselves.

### **Theoretical framework**

The STP is seen as a mechanism which can enable pupils in DEIS schools to build up their social and emotional capital (see Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Hence the study, on which this article is based, is framed by the theoretical work of Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002). Bourdieu's concepts of habitus (the way that individuals perceive the social world around them and react to it), field and differing forms of capital are pivotal to understanding

the multiple complex issues underlying educational disadvantage. Bourdieu argued that an individual's social position is influenced not only by economic capital but also by social, cultural, and symbolic capital. Taking Bourdieu's perspective it is, therefore, more accurate to talk about educational disadvantage not just in terms of social class, but as an accumulation of varying degrees of capital available to an individual at a given time. The interaction of these capitals can result in "one form of capital compounding another, creating a multiplying effect" (Warin, 2015, p.691). This multiplier effect is clearly demonstrated in the many complex and cyclical social disadvantage problems demonstrated in DEIS schools. Bourdieu's theory provides an invaluable conceptual lens through which educational disadvantage policies may be investigated and evaluated.

Bourdieu's theory has been expanded in recent years to include identity capital (see Warin, 2015) and emotional capital (Reay, 2000; 2004; 2015). These additional forms of capital resonate very much with the most beneficial aspects of the STP, which supports social and emotional learning through the creation of a positive and safe climate that allows children to develop their self-awareness and affective aspects of human life. The disparity between the habitus of school and family life can help us to better understand the more challenging behaviours and disengagement more commonly displayed in DEIS Band 1 schools. This mismatch can lead to feelings of not fitting in and can result in early school leaving (Darmody, Smyth and McCoy, 2008, Ingram, 2011). The emotional consequences of bridging home and school fields can lead to internal conflicts and a dividing of one's habitus (Ingram, 2011, Reay, 2015). This inner turmoil and confrontation between the two fields can play a heavy price on pupils' social and emotional psyche and lead to the high levels of frustration, anxiety and anger often displayed by some pupils in DEIS schools. As research indicates, there is a clear relationship between mental ill-health and indicators of social exclusion (see Joint Oireachtas Committee on ESL, 2010) hence the STP, while merely scratching the surface of mental health issues, is one method of providing invaluable and essential emotional supports in DEIS schools.

### **Data collection and analysis**

The teacher data findings are presented to prompt discussions around the STP within the public domain. This is most timely considering the recommendation from the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO, 2017) to retain the much-appreciated role of the support teacher and the need for the project to be expanded to other DEIS schools. With the publication of the DEIS plan in 2017 it was hoped the role of the support teacher (ST) would be revitalised. However, it remains invisible, failing to be mentioned at all in the policy document. Unfortunately, this is another missed opportunity and it seems to have been subsumed into the new and much promised Inclusion Support Service (ISS) unit, which will incorporate the visiting teachers for children with hearing and visual impairment (VTHVI) and the National Behavioural Support Service (NBSS) for primary schools. What will happen to support teacher posts in this new remodelling is yet to be clarified, and an unfortunate oversight of the *DEIS Plan 2017* (DES, 2017), especially in light of the fact that the lack of mental health and wellbeing focus were major flaws of the

previous DEIS plan (Downes, 2017; INTO, 2015).

It is important to note that, while I have worked in a DEIS school, I am not a support teacher myself, nor do I currently work in a DEIS school. This study aims to give voice to stakeholders of the project who, up to this point, had never been asked for their opinion. One flaw of the study in its bid for democratic practices, is the lack of pupil voice. However, for the purpose of this small-scale study, it focuses solely on the teacher perspective to obtain a deeper understanding of the support teacher role. Data was collected from eight support teachers working in DEIS Urban Band 1 primary schools in two provincial cities. The Social Inclusion Unit of the DES supplied a list of all schools participating in the STP and, from this list, I selected 12 schools through non-probability, convenience sampling and contacted them by email and phone. All schools contacted were supplied with a support teacher questionnaire to act as a springboard for further discussion during teacher interviews. Out of the 12 schools contacted, eight teachers filled out the questionnaires, with four of these teachers willing to be interviewed. This form of non-probability, purposive sampling derives from the "researcher targeting a particular group, in the full knowledge that it does not represent the wider population; it simply represents itself" (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000 p.102).

Findings from eight teacher questionnaires and four teacher interviews will be presented throughout this article in an integrated approach. All teacher names have been changed to ensure anonymity. Responses will be cited with either (TQ) indicating teacher questionnaire response or (TI) indicating teacher interview. After collecting the questionnaires and transcribing the interviews, the constant comparative method of data analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994) was employed, which involved going over and over data to emerge with themes and categories which interconnect. This form of thematic analysis allows for patterns and triangulation of data to occur more effectively (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The themes included mental health, leadership, collaboration, and early intervention. These themes will be discussed in greater detail in the later section of this article.

### **History of the Support Teacher Programme (STP)**

The STP, formerly named the *Teacher/Counsellor Project*, was initiated in 1995. Teacher posts were assigned to individual schools designated as disadvantaged to assist in supporting pupils with emotional difficulties and disruptive behaviour. Out of the 640 primary schools included in the current DEIS action plan (DES, 2017), only 41 schools have had access to the STP. After comprehensive literature review and online research, including email correspondence to many relevant agencies such as the DES, the Social Inclusion Unit in the DES, Tusla (Child and Family Agency), and the School Completion Programme (SCP), it was evident just how overlooked the programme had become with a remarkable lack of awareness of basic questions such as 'Who is co-ordinating the pilot?'; 'Has it been reviewed in recent years?'; 'What are the future plans for the pilot programme?' There was no evidence of a review or future plans and the lack of awareness and availability of information were frustrating and highlighted the need for such an evaluation.

The last evaluation of the STP, then called the Teacher/Counsellor Project, was in March 1998 and was carried out by the Inspectorate and the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) (DES, 1998). As a result, the title of the project was changed to the *Support Teacher Project* to reflect more accurately the nature of the work and skills involved, and a revised specification for the role of the teachers involved was introduced in December 1998. The evaluation recommendations included the appointment of a national coordinator and the expansion of the project to other DEIS schools (INTO, 2004). It must be noted that this is the only evaluation ever conducted in its 20 years of implementation and, while it was overwhelmingly positive, no extra support teachers have been allocated to schools of similar disadvantage.

The government's approach to educational disadvantage policies and measures seems to be somewhat ambiguous. As Downes (2017, p.46) argues strongly in regards to resource allocation under the *DEIS Plan 2017*, the concept of fairness is questionable, which "defies even the limited goal of equality of opportunity that is named as the very acronym and meaning of the original DEIS scheme." Downes goes on to question whether there is an unacceptable vision of "satisfactory disadvantage" rather than of ending inequality in education. This is a view echoed by Burns (2015), who states that policy discourse perceives inequality as given and that the best we can do is try to ameliorate, rather than eliminate, it. Most worrying for the STP, "there doesn't appear to be any clear plan to extend these programmes to same-area schools, which experience the same levels of disadvantage" (INTO, 2000, p.7).

The job specification brief drawn up by the Special Education Section of the DES in December 1998, because of the evaluation, is very precise and states: "Teaching posts have been allocated to schools for the purpose of supporting schools in their efforts to manage the behaviour of pupils who are most disruptive/disturbed/withdrawn, and to enable the schools to teach these pupils and their peers effectively" (DES, 1998).

This description seems to conceptualise very much the notion of 'support' from the support teacher as a form of behaviour management. This revised job specification seems to point to an ideological shift from conceptualising support as a form of counselling (Morgan, 1998) to now seeing it more as a behaviour management role; hence the change in name from *Teacher/Counsellor Project*. From the 1998 document it is clear the target group of the STP is children whose learning is affected by their behaviour. Support teachers focus on social, emotional and personal development through the use of creative activities such as art, drama, discussion and play (DES, 2003).

The former national co-ordinator of the STP, Dr Bríd Laffan from the Special Educational Needs Department in St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, who sadly passed away in April 2006, helped design the original job specification mentioned above. Unfortunately, some support teachers interviewed, who are currently in the role today and who have not had any in-service training, were not even aware of its existence. This lack of training and development are contrary to the positive DES 1998 evaluation which recommended the extension of the STP to further schools of similar disadvantage. The INTO also advocated its expansion:

It is clear that this scheme, which is perceived to be highly successful, should be offered to every school designated disadvantaged. The scheme involves the allocation of one teacher per school at present and is, therefore, an unintensive but, nonetheless, much appreciated support. Its extension to every school designated disadvantaged, on a pro rata basis of one support teacher for every ten class teachers or part thereof, is an immediate priority (INTO, 2000, p.15).

Unfortunately, since the INTO called for this extension in 2000, no expansion of the programme was implemented and it no longer seems to be a priority of any government department. No national coordinator has been appointed since 2006, in contrast to the importance of such a role advocated by the DES 1998 recommendations. Meanwhile, the huge level of need continues to grow. This is seen most evidently in recent waiting list figures (see Barnardos, 2018) for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Barnardos report that 2,621 children were on the CAMHS waiting list in July 2018, with 327 of these waiting longer than one year to access services (2018, p.3). Even more worrying are the figures from the Primary Care Psychology Service, who in theory should "be able to alleviate some of the pressure on CAMHS waiting lists" (ibid.), with 6,293 children waiting for services in August 2018, 1,607 of whom were waiting longer than a year. Support teachers at the forefront of dealing with the dire state of mental health services spoke of the frustration of witnessing children who were emotionally and behaviourally disturbed and who were struggling and had little access to adequate help. This is the reason that an evaluation into the STP is so essential so that a discussion can occur. This will lead, in turn, to a renewed interest in the project and in children's mental health issues in general.

## **Findings**

### **Positive feedback**

The feedback from teachers regarding STP was overwhelmingly positive. It was evident all participants placed a huge value on the project:

I think it is one of the most invaluable roles ever designed by the department who subsequently forgot all about it. It is invaluable and I think it should be in every single DEIS Band 1 school without issue. (Mary TI)

It became clear from teachers' responses that the STP was an effective method of building pupils' social capital fostering positive norms of behaviour such as empathy, resilience, self-esteem and a sense of belonging. As one participant highlighted:

Children can come out to me to learn about and practice such things as coping skills and self-regulation skills and then return to the classroom and practice these. You do see a change in classroom behaviour and self-esteem. (Elaine TQ)

Participants spoke of the huge level of need and being inundated with nominations:

It should be in every DEIS Band 1 school because it's absolutely critical to some children. I mean, I'm over prescribed here as in the nominations. I won't be able to see all those children in one year. It is actually frightening the scale of it. It is huge, the scale of need is huge. (Mary TI)

Because there's only one of me in a school of 450, there's huge demand of your service. Every day, I've a knock on the door could you please take such a person, so the level of need doesn't match the support we have. (Andrea TI)

This high demand leads to huge pressure on teachers' timetables, which also must allow for a varied and flexible day as illustrated by participants:

It's just so many different things within a day and that's the thing about the timetable is that somebody kicks off or somebody is bullying someone, my day is never what you had planned. It's always kind of something will throw up during the day that you have to stop and deal with. (Elaine TQ)

The flexibility referred to above is often seen as a key positive aspect as it allows each school to implement the role in a way that best suits their pupils and the local community. As illustrated by Elaine, it also allows time to deal with the immediate, disruptive or critical things that materialise regularly in DEIS schools. One participant mentioned their need for flexibility in the timetable was not looked on favourably by a member of the Inspectorate during the course of a whole school evaluation visit:

He did say the one-on-one slots that we have were a bit vague, but you need them because if you've timetabled groups the whole time and something comes up then you've to cancel a group and then they're disappointed and you're letting them down so you need a little leeway. (Kate TI)

The disparity between neoliberal goals of accountability and progressive, child-centred education goals for social justice are highlighted in the above teacher statement and can be seen to be juxtaposed in the current education system.

### **Emphasis on pupil wellbeing and mental health**

The irony is that the lack of development or expansion of the STP is occurring in a climate of increased focus on research and educational discourse with regard to pupil mental health and wellbeing (see DES, 2015; NCCA, 2017; Fitzpatrick, Twohig and Morgan, 2014; Tynan and Nohilly, 2018). This critical analysis of policy concerning the development of social and emotional needs of pupils is occurring while support teachers, who are allocated to schools to support the development of pupils' social and emotional needs, are mentioned rarely in the particular policies or department guidelines. One such example is the publication by the DES along with the Department of Health (DOH) and the Health Service Executive (HSE) stressing the importance of mental health promotion in schools from an early



age (see DES, 2015). Support teachers could be an invaluable asset in addressing and devising mental health guidelines to meet the social and emotional needs of our most vulnerable pupils. They have been doing this very work for the last 20 years. The expertise and experience that they have built up over this prolonged phase would be invaluable to drafting guidelines on pupil wellbeing in DEIS schools and their input or recognition is another missed opportunity. Creating opportunities to share this expertise would be a step forward to building collaboration in and between schools and relevant state bodies in an integrated, multidisciplinary approach.

A joint DEIS conference by the INTO and Educational Disadvantage Centre (2015, p.5) outlined the urgent need to place pupils' mental health at the forefront of teaching in our DEIS schools:

An explicit focus on pupils' mental health, wellbeing and their social and emotional development has been missing from the DEIS support programme and from evaluations. For some children, behavioural challenges arising from unmet social and emotional needs are the greatest barrier to their learning.

As a limited focus on pupil wellbeing and mental health was a major flaw of the previous DEIS scheme, it is positive to see the inclusion of wellbeing programmes in the *DEIS Plan 2017* such as the *Incredible Years* programme. However, there is also a continued policy neglect in relation to the STP and the complete failure to even mention its existence. This urgent need for more support in dealing with mental, social and emotional difficulties in DEIS schools was further evident from the array of mental health problems presenting themselves in participants' schools ranging from crippling anxiety to self-harm and suicidal thoughts:

Mental health is such an important issue in this country and the amount of children who are displaying signs of mental health issues at such a young age is worrying. (Elaine TQ)

There's some topics now this year you'd be dealing with especially in the senior end like self-harm remarks and suicide. That's kids in fifth class. (Elaine TQ)

The scale of mental health issues amongst Irish youth was also outlined in the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills' report on early school leaving (ESL) with self-harming behaviours "found to be strongly indicative of other problems or underlying trauma" including family difficulties, bullying, bereavement and physical or sexual assault (2010, p.52). Critical interventions are essential and it is clear that the STP plays a vital role in supporting these children. Support teachers are placed in a vulnerable position in dealing with these serious issues with inadequate training and guidance to deal with these topics, as Elaine strongly portrays in the statement below:

Nobody's here to tell me what I'm doing right and you're dealing with quite stressful stuff... and it all kinds of impacts on you a little bit and you don't realise it. You're teaching yourself how to deal with stuff. I'm not a counsellor I haven't got the qualifications. Some of it is totally out of my realm. We've had two children this year self-harming and, like, they are going to CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service) but they spend most of their time coming out to me every day... so I'm actually the one they're seeing the most out of all these other agencies who are qualified from colleges and counsellors. You would just be kind of questioning yourself and kind of making sure you are saying the right things and doing the right things. (Elaine TQ)

The frustration and anxiety expressed by support teachers who are in a vital position dealing with mental health issues in our schools is, understandably, extremely high. This raises the issue of whether or not teachers should be put in this essentially therapeutic role at all. The level of training and in-service needed to fulfil such a role needs to be given due consideration. As strongly advocated by Downes (2003; 2011; 2016), while these initiatives around pupil wellbeing are very welcome, they are a poor substitute for provision of qualified emotional counsellors or play therapists in schools. School completion planning (SCP) funding is often used by schools to employ counsellors and therapists "however, it is an indictment of current approaches that these vital services depend on local voices rather than national systemic strategy" (ibid. 2016, p.6). While pupils' social and emotional wellbeing have gained greater attention, "targeted emotional counselling services in schools remain the elephant in the room" (ibid.). This inevitably is of huge concern to the support teachers as stressed by Elaine's comment above.

Downes (2003) proposes a three-tier approach to supporting mental health and trauma in schools, consisting of mental health promotion, stress prevention and therapeutic support. He acknowledges that schools have a direct role to play at the first two levels, while there is a need for qualified therapists for the final level. Perhaps the remit of the STP in the future will be to support schools and pupils in implementing the first two levels and also working with outside agencies to access specialised supports as recommended in the *Final Report of the Thematic Working Group on ESL* (2013). Of course, there is the additional difficulty of accessing that specialised help. Alternatively, perhaps the system should be investing in specialised therapeutic training for support teachers.

The evidence of mental health issues arising in primary schools in the Republic of Ireland is even more alarming when you take into consideration the recent report by UNICEF 2017, stating that Ireland has the fourth highest teen suicide rate in the EU. This does not include the 9,500 people attending hospitals annually for self-harming (Costigan, 2015). Costigan states that suicide is the result of "intolerable emotional and psychological pain inflicted on ordinary people" by social norms, as "failure to fit in with those norms identifies an individual as flawed or inferior in some way. When people feel they have to hide their true identity because they don't fit into society, suicide may become an option to take away the pain of isolation."

This resonates strongly with the inner turmoil mentioned earlier regarding pupils in

DEIS schools, which is caused by conflicting fields (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) when one is stretching their habitus to the limit by trying to fit in (Ingram, 2011; Reay, 2015).

### **Managing challenging behaviour**

Schools with a higher socio-economic status have fewer behavioural issues, as well as higher levels of student compliance while, on the other hand, DEIS schools experience a more unpredictable working environment (Smyth and McCoy, 2009). Teachers are no longer just teaching the curriculum; they are facing multi-layered issues and complex needs on a daily basis. When one takes into consideration the difficult home situations of some of these pupils, such as drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence, and poverty, it is understandable that these pupils come to school with major psychological demands. Some teacher responses were clearly sensitive to these emotional needs:

Withdrawing children who are introverted and clearly depressed, maybe emotionally shut down, and we've a lot of children like that so it's vital to have a safe place to help them so that they can get back to learning. (Andrea TI)

These concerns emphasise the need for DEIS schools to be especially equipped to nurture children's psychological wellbeing and to enable children to "use a range of techniques for dealing with overwhelming emotions" (Fitzpatrick, Twohig and Morgan, 2014, p.277). Helping children to become resilient and better able to cope was considered a priority by many of the participants. It is important that political rhetoric around pupil wellbeing in DEIS schools does not fall into the trap of emphasising the need to develop personal qualities such as resilience "to mitigate against inequalities, rather, we show that these students are faced with greater challenges due to structural inequalities. The solution lies in challenging the structures rather than expecting more of individuals" (Bathmaker et al., 2016, p.146). The fact that the STP is only available in a small number of DEIS schools suggests current policymakers rely heavily on working class pupils to overcome such challenges and "to make the best of a bad situation" (Lumby, 2012). Perhaps instead of depending on pupils' resilience and "buoyancy" (ibid.) to struggle through, we need to expand services, such as the STP, to help pupils overcome the situational hurdles impacting their educational success and engagement.

One of the key roles of the STP is to help manage and support challenging behaviour that presents itself in the DEIS Band 1 primary schools because of the emotional strains mentioned above. A similar role in post-primary schools, called the Positive Behaviour Liaison Teacher (PBLT) Programme, was initiated in 2008/2009 by the National Behaviour Support Service (NBSS), which provides support and expertise to partner post-primary schools on issues related to behaviour. As one can see from the job description on the NBSS website, there is a direct correlation with the STP: "The aim of the programme is to explore the ways in which individual teachers, allocated 11 hours per week, can effectively implement, coordinate and develop a proactive, behaviour improvement plan with the view to creating sustainable positive teaching and learning environments within their school communities" ([www.nbss.ie/home/positive-behaviour-liaison-teacher](http://www.nbss.ie/home/positive-behaviour-liaison-teacher)).

Unfortunately, no consistency between the two initiatives is evident to date, suggesting a lack of interrelated thinking between agencies within the DES. While no clarity is available yet, it is possible the Integrated Support Service will address this fragmentation. The PBLT for post-primary comes a decade after the STP has been operating with minimal guidance or in-service. The DES started this similar endeavour for post-primary before fully implementing or evaluating the STP at primary level. This flies in the face of the vast amount of research on value of early intervention and the cost effectiveness of early investment (Frawley, 2014, Smyth et al., 2015). The lack of management issues of the STP point to a need of multidisciplinary approaches and inter-agency work and it is obvious the amalgamation of the NBSS and STP would have provided synergies in terms of expertise and experience, and ensured a consistence of approach in dealing with pupils who had already been identified as being at risk.

### **Early years investment**

The cost effectiveness of early intervention in reducing disengagement and early school leaving has been widely reported both internationally and nationally (Frawley, 2014, Smyth et al., 2015). Early intervention with antisocial behaviour can reduce the development of more serious challenging behaviours and minimise the devastating effects, such as academic failure, social exclusion, and impaired mental health (O'Leary, 2011). However, the impact of expenditure cuts in recent years, in conjunction with the economic recession, has meant the STP has not been fully funded or implemented nationally, while at the same time DEIS schools see a rise in students with complex needs. This balancing act has led to inadequate support to match the huge level of demand as expressed by the support teachers earlier. Understandably, support teachers on the ground are exasperated as the DES appears to be at cross-purposes regarding its policies:

On the one hand they're about to axe the teacher counsellors in secondary schools and us in 2012 yet at the same time they are talking about mental health and getting in early. Early intervention and making it ok to talk about your problems and share your worries and let your anxieties out. Where is the joined-up thinking? If you don't start in primary you're not going to save a fella in the middle of secondary school you know or indeed as a 21 year old if you haven't started early. They're too cool for it at that stage. I mean they seriously need it, but they can't be seen to need it. While in primary they're much more willing, they're more open and you can get it established early that it's ok to talk about these things, it's ok to look for help, it's ok to say I'm not feeling great. Today I have worries, I am a little anxious and that's ok to say you know, you're teaching that early, so it doesn't become something you're ashamed of. (Mary TQ)

Mary highlights powerfully the importance of early intervention and investment in DEIS schools to better support mental health problems before they appear in later life. This valuable input outlines the importance of evaluations as inquiry, as only through the allocation of this knowledge into the public domain can we influence considerations at

policy level. Worryingly, due to the constant threat of cutbacks, these teachers have not felt they can raise concerns or demand necessary training and funding. There is a fear that, by making too much noise, this vital service might be cut: "we're almost afraid to highlight ourselves in case they think of it again and pull the plug" (Andrea TI). This paper strongly argues that, instead of threats to its viability, the STP urgently needs to be expanded. In an age of democratic governments all advocating social inclusion, it is most disconcerting that these schools feel they must remain silent. Mary described what happened in 2012 when the role was in jeopardy:

They left the role, but they stopped the grant. We used to get money every year, around €500 to purchase specific programmes, or therapeutic games, whatever you'd need... so anyway they left the role but they stopped the money because of course it was all a money-saving exercise. That's what they were all at that point, so we remained then floating and we're floating ever since. (Mary TI)

This decrease in funding and provision is at odds with international evidence that early intervention is much more likely to have a greater impact and can be more cost-effective in the long term (Frawley, 2014). The findings suggest that it is of utmost importance that STP funding needs to be increased and rebalanced to ensure its feasibility.

#### **Lack of leadership: "We have been left out to sea... rudderless"**

Another alarming finding to come out of this study was the lack of leadership. Several participants spoke about the complete lack of support or direction from a coordinator of any sort. The untimely death of the former national coordinator was mentioned by one of the participants as having knock-on effects on the STP:

It's unfortunate, I imagine if the lady who founded it first day, if she was still alive today we wouldn't be having this conversation because she drove the whole thing. Her design was exceptional. (Mary TQ).

It is a testament to the late Dr Bríd Laffan that the job specification she originally designed for the post is still so relevant today, 20 years on. What is most unfortunate and distressing is the fact that only participants who had been in the role since its early days and received initial in-service seem to have knowledge of this brief. The fact the pilot is only in such a small number of DEIS schools meant that, without leadership, the teachers felt isolated with no real direction from state bodies. This resulted in some support teachers feeling unsure whether they were doing their job correctly or as intended. The lack of knowledge of the original brief and a complete lack of in-service feeds into this uncertainty as expressed below:

You have to kind of figure it out as you go along. I know it's different for every support teacher because every school will have different needs or you'd be dealing with different things but it would be just great to have some idea of what you

should be doing, what you shouldn't be doing. You're totally in charge of what you do which is kind of even more stressful. (Elaine TI)

This level of uncertainty and lack of leadership to coordinate training and collaboration are, as pointed out by Elaine, unquestionably adding to the pressure and anxiety of these teachers. It is an injustice to the teachers, the pupils and the communities they serve to allow the STP to continue in this manner.

**Collaboration: "Where is the support for the support teacher?"**

It was clear that all participants wanted this lack of leadership to be rectified. All the support teachers feel isolated and bereft due to continuing lack of leadership and guidance.

Nobody seems to know it exists bar the schools it's working in. They don't know. They haven't a clue. (Mary TI)

This lack of awareness again conveys a lack of vision and implementation regarding the STP. As a result of being 'captain-less at sea', there is very minimal training organised, leading to very isolated support teachers with minimal collaboration. As Mary (TI) aptly points out "where is the support for the support teacher?" While all the teachers spoke positively of their role and really believed in its power to ease the burden and emotional baggage some children carry around with them, it is clear the teachers themselves are also feeling unsupported and emotionally drained:

It's isolating because there's only one of you and nobody else really knows what you do, and you wonder to yourself do I know what I'm doing? You don't have colleagues that you can talk to... I suppose you're dealing with damaged, difficult, disturbed children all day long and that in itself is wearing. Self-care is important but there's no facilities for that because obviously they don't even know you exist in the first place so you kind of just have to look after yourself. (Andrea TI)

Collaboration to facilitate peer support and a sharing of ideas and expertise could go a long way to building a sense of community and collaborative culture for the STP.

Training is another missed opportunity by the DES to share expertise and to create a community of learners and practitioners. Surprisingly, in a role as demanding and complex as that of support teacher, many participants spoke of having little to no training:

There's no formal training we would have had years ago, three days in-service a year in the initial scheme but that was way, way back you're talking years ago and none of that has happened since to my knowledge. (Mary TI)

Support teachers are finding themselves in a systemic no man's land as Kate described:

I'm not a learning support teacher and I'm not a resource teacher and I'm not a class teacher so I've had to make up my own kind of documentation and you just don't know what's enough and what isn't. (Kate TI)

Collaboration between support teachers would have given Kate a network of colleagues with whom to learn from, question and share knowledge resources and expertise.

### **Lack of vision**

It is clear there is a complete lack of vision for the STP. The evidence presented in this study strongly advocates the expansion and development of this vital role. Recommendations regarding planning and vision are required. A large-scale inclusive evaluation comprising all 41 schools included in the pilot scheme and all relevant stakeholders needs to be established urgently so that guidelines and plans for the future of the project can be recommended. The STP needs to be developed and expanded from its current pilot phase to include more DEIS schools, in particular DEIS Band 1 schools. The grant needs to be reinstated and proper in-service training is a necessity. A decision on where the responsibility for the STP lies needs to be clarified, presumably within the NBSS within the new ISS, with an established coordinator to establish clusters for collaboration and training:

I'd like a guarantee that it will continue and it won't be put under risk to get rid of. As I say, every year we're worried this will be the last year of it so kind of a copper fast on that. (Andrea TI)

Support teachers need recognition that the work they are doing is vital and will continue to be an integral part of DEIS schools.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, when I commenced this research project, my knowledge of the role was limited due to minimal literature or educational discourse on the STP and, as a result, the study on which this article is based was very much a learning process. It helped empower participants who had never been asked for their opinion before and opened gates for communication and shared expertise. It is hoped that by presenting the teacher data here, ripple effects of discussion around the STP can be reignited along with discourse on pupils' mental health and emotional support services.

The key findings of this study highlight the worrying prevalence of mental health issues, including self-harming behaviours, in DEIS primary schools and the pervasive service gap between schools and mental health specialist supports. The study also emphasises the need for early intervention in the prevention of social and emotional difficulties to help mitigate the factors of school disengagement. Participants strongly highlighted the policy lacunae around their role and the feeling of being completely isolated, unsupported and silenced by fears of the role being cut altogether. There was a complete lack of leadership, collaboration

or training as a result of the Government's inaction regarding the STP. This paper strongly advocates a large-scale evaluation of the STP to include the pupil voice, so we can hear from those who benefit directly from this extra teaching support in DEIS schools. The findings of this study support the expansion of the STP to other DEIS schools with similar levels of disadvantage, and cohesion between the STP and other relevant agencies such as the NCSE, NEPS and CAHMS. The expertise and skills developed through the STP should be capitalised on to support schools in emphasising mental health promotion, self-esteem, stress prevention and the development of the social and emotional wellbeing of young people.

## References

- Apple, M.W. (2006). *Educating the "Right" way*, 2nd ed. New York and London: Routledge.
- Barnardos (2018). *Winter Waiting List Report November 2018*. Available at: [www.barnardos.ie/media/2798/barnardos-2018-winter-waiting-list-report.pdf](http://www.barnardos.ie/media/2798/barnardos-2018-winter-waiting-list-report.pdf) (Accessed 11 April 2019).
- Bathmaker, A., Hoare, A., Bradley H., Abrahams J., Ingram N., and Waller R. (2016) Higher Education, Social Class and Social Mobility. *The Degree Generation*. London: MacMillan
- Bourdieu, P., and Passeron, J.C. (1977). *Reproduction in Education, Culture and Society*. London: Sage.
- Braun, V., and Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3:2, 77-101.
- Burns, G. (2015) *Challenges for Early Career Teachers in DEIS Schools*. Conference paper for joint conference: INTO and Educational Disadvantage Centre. Dec 2015, St Patrick's College, Drumcondra. Review of DEIS: Poverty and Social Inclusion in Education.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., and Morrison, K. (2000). *Research Methods in Education* (5th edition). London: Routledge.
- Costigan, L. (2015). *The People of Ireland are living in a 'Suicide Box'*. Available at: [www.irishexaminer.com/lifestyle/features/the-people-of-ireland-are-living-in-a-suicide-box-351649.html](http://www.irishexaminer.com/lifestyle/features/the-people-of-ireland-are-living-in-a-suicide-box-351649.html) (Accessed 11 April 2019).
- Darmody, M., Smyth, E., and McCoy, S. (2008). Acting up or opting out? Truancy in Irish secondary schools. *Educational Review*, 60:4, 359-373.
- Department of Education and Science (DES). (1998). *Evaluation of the Teacher/Counsellor Project*. Dublin. Inspectorate and the Psychological Service.
- Department of Education and Science (DES). (2003). *Summary of All Initiatives Funded by the Department to help Alleviate Educational Disadvantage*. Dublin: Government of Ireland
- Department of Education and Skills (DES). (2015). *Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion: Well-being in Primary Schools*. Department of Education and Skills, Health Service Executive, and Department of Health: Ireland
- Department of Education and Skills (DES). (2017). *DEIS Plan 2017*. Dublin: Government of Ireland
- Downes, P. (2003). The new curriculum of Social, Personal and Health Education in Irish post-primary schools: Self-awareness, introversion and the role of the teacher. *Kwartalnik Pedagogiczny (Journal of Education, Poland)*, 4 (190), 93-112.



- Downes, P. (2008). Mental health strategy for deprived children missing from education plan. *Action on Poverty Today*, 21, 4-5.
- Downes, P. (2011). The neglected shadow: European perspectives on emotional supports for early school leaving prevention. *The International Journal of Emotional Education*, 3 (2), 3-36.
- Downes, P. (2016). *Call for Consultation: Department of Education and Skills Statement of Strategy 2016-2018*. Educational Disadvantage Centre: Dublin.
- Downes, P. (2017). New DEIS Action Plan. *InTouch*, April edition, p.46-47. Dublin: INTO Publication.
- Esch, P., Bocquet, V., Pull, C., Couffignal, S., Lehnert, T., Graas, M., Fond-Harmant, L., and Annseau, M. (2014). The downward spiral of mental disorders and educational attainment: a systematic review on early school leaving. *BMC Psychiatry*, 2014, 14:237.
- EU Council. (2011). *Recommendations on Policies to Reduce Early School Leaving*. Available at: <https://eurlex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2011:191:0001:0006:en:PDF> (Accessed 11 April 2019).
- Fitzpatrick, S., Twohig, M., and M. Morgan. (2014). Priorities for primary education? From subjects to life-skills and children's social and emotional development. *Irish Educational Studies*, 33:3, 269-286.
- Frawley, D. (2014). Combating educational disadvantage through early years and primary school investment. *Irish Education Studies*, 33:2, 155-171.
- Ingram, N. (2011). Within School and Beyond the Gate: The Complexities of Being Educationally Successful and Working Class. *Sociology*, 45(2) p. 287-302.
- Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO). (2000). *A Fair Start: an INTO Plan Towards Ending Educational Disadvantage*. Dublin: INTO Publication.
- Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO). (2004). *Tackle Disadvantage Now*. Dublin: INTO Publication.
- Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), and Educational Disadvantage Centre. (2015). *Review of DEIS: Poverty and Social Inclusion in Education*. St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Ireland. Available at: [www.spd.dcu.ie/site/news/documents/FINAL\\_BROCHUREDeisConference.pdf](http://www.spd.dcu.ie/site/news/documents/FINAL_BROCHUREDeisConference.pdf) (Accessed 14 March 2018).
- Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO). (2017). *Response to the DEIS Action Plan 2017*. Dublin: INTO Publication.
- Joint Oireachtas Committee. (2010). *Report for Education and Science on Early School Leaving. Staying in education: A new way forward - School and out of school factors protecting against early school leaving*. Dublin: Government Publications.
- Lumby, J. (2012). Disengaged and Disaffected Young People: Surviving the System. *British Educational Research Journal*, 38:2, 261-279.
- Miles, M., and Huberman, M. (1994). Data Management and Analysis Methods. In: N.K. Denzin, and N.S. Lincoln (Eds.) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 428-444.
- McCarthy, C., Pitton, V., Kim, S., and Monje, D. (2009). Movement and stasis in the neoliberal reorientation of schooling. In: M. Apple, W. Au, and L.A. Gandin (Eds.) *The Routledge International Handbook of Critical Education*. London: Taylor and Francis

- Nixon, E., Layte, R., and Thornton, M. (2019). *Growing up in Ireland: The Effects of Economic Recession and Family Stress on the Adjustment of 3-year-olds in Ireland*. Infant cohort, report 8. Dublin: Stationery Office.
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). (2017). *Junior Cycle Wellbeing Guidelines*. Available at: [www.ncca.ie/media/2487/wellbeingguidelines\\_forjunior\\_cycle.pdf](http://www.ncca.ie/media/2487/wellbeingguidelines_forjunior_cycle.pdf) (Accessed 11 April 2019).
- O'Leary, S. (2011). *Supporting Behaviour Management in School for Students with Behavioural, Emotional and/or Social Difficulties (BESD) Practical data-based approaches to selecting, implementing, monitoring and evaluating interventions at multiple levels of behaviour support*. Available at: [www.sess.ie/sites/all/modules/wysiwyg/tinymce/jscripts/tiny\\_mce/plugins/filemanager/files/Categories/Emotional\\_Disturbance/BESD\\_SESS\\_2011.pdf](http://www.sess.ie/sites/all/modules/wysiwyg/tinymce/jscripts/tiny_mce/plugins/filemanager/files/Categories/Emotional_Disturbance/BESD_SESS_2011.pdf) (Accessed 11 April 2019).
- Reay, D. (2000). A useful extension of Bourdieu's conceptual framework? Emotional capital, women and social class. *The Sociological Review*, 48, 568-585.
- Reay, D. (2004). It's all becoming a habitus: Beyond the habitual use of habitus in educational research. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 25:3, 431-444.
- Reay, D. (2006). The Zombie Stalking English Schools: Social Class and Educational Inequality. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 54:3, 288-307.
- Reay, D. (2015). Habitus and the psychosocial: Bourdieu with feelings. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 45 (1) p. 9-23.
- Smyth, E., and McCoy, S. (2009). *Investing in Education: Combating Educational Disadvantage*. Dublin: Barnardos/ESRI.
- Smyth, E., McCoy, S., and Kingston, G. (2015). *Learning from the Evaluation of DEIS*. The Economic and Social Research Institute. Dublin: ESRI.
- Thematic Working Group on Early School Leaving. (2013). Available at: [http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/archive/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/archive/index_en.htm) (Accessed 11 April 2019).
- Tynan, F., and Nohilly, M. (2018). *Wellbeing in Schools Every Day*. Curriculum Development Unit: Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, Ireland.
- UNICEF. (2017). *Building the Future: Children and the Sustainable Development Goals in Rich Countries*. *Innocenti Report Card 14*. UNICEF Office of Research: Innocenti, Florence.
- Ward, T. (2019). *Did you hear about the toddler stealing food from a crèche?* Available at: [www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/did-you-hear-about-the-toddler-stealing-food-from-a-creche-1.3792678](http://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/did-you-hear-about-the-toddler-stealing-food-from-a-creche-1.3792678) (Accessed 11 April 2019).
- Warin, J. (2015). Identity Capital: an application from a longitudinal ethnographic study of self-construction during the years of school. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 36 (5), 689-706.

≡ An investigation into the  
experiences and identity of special class  
teachers in Irish primary schools ≡

≡ Deirdre Drew and Kevin Cahill ≡

**Abstract**

The presence of special classes within the Irish education system has become dramatically more widespread in the last decade. This research project investigates teachers' knowledge, skills and attitudes towards inclusive learning environments, how these are developed through the continuum of teacher education and how they, in turn, contribute to teachers' views of special classes as an inclusive measure within schools. The study explores teachers' experiences of special classes along with how the role and identity of a special class teacher is developed. Eight teachers participated in this study, providing detailed and honest accounts of their thoughts, feelings and experiences of special classes.

*Keywords:* **special class teacher, special class, teacher identity, teacher education.**



**Introduction**

Special classes within the Irish education system have grown dramatically in recent years (Banks et al., 2018). With this expansion comes a concomitant growth in the number of teachers teaching in such settings, which has brought with it a new dynamic to Irish primary schools along with a variety of challenges. Special classes are intended to be inclusive learning environments within schools. However, this research explores how they can sometimes operate as a segregated measure within a school. Teachers are being appointed as 'special class teachers' and this research suggests that those teachers are identifying as 'different' or 'separate' to other teachers within the school. The concept of a 'figured world' is explored in this research in the context of a special class teacher, whereby their identity is formed subconsciously through experiences, interactions and conversations naturally occurring within the environment (Holland et al., 1998). Special class teachers can sometimes be perceived as an 'expert' or specialist teacher within the school, and this can contribute to them being figured differently.

This study investigated how special classes are perceived by practising primary school teachers, exploring teachers' experiences of special classes along with how they are provisioned across primary schools. It investigated teachers' knowledge, skills and attitudes towards special class settings, how these are developed through the continuum of teacher

education, and how they contribute to teachers' views of special classes as an inclusive measure within schools. Eight teachers participated in this study, providing detailed and frank accounts of their thoughts, feelings and experiences of special classes. Indeed, this research has become even more relevant given the current debate surrounding provision through special classes, and indeed special schools. The ideas addressed here have come into clear focus with the Irish government's ratification of the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (NCSE, 2019).

## **Literature review**

### **The role of special classes**

"Special classes are part of a continuum of educational provision that enables students with more complex special educational needs to be educated, in smaller class groups, within their local mainstream school" (NCSE, 2016a, p.2). Such classes can be defined as intending to cater exclusively for students with special educational needs (SEN) by providing a more individualised and tailored instruction to students who may not be able to access the curriculum in a mainstream class (Ware et al., 2009). Ireland operates a multi-track approach in provision for the inclusion of pupils with SEN (EADSNE, 2003) and within that falls the role of the special class. It is evident throughout the literature that major concerns exist regarding the degree of inclusivity of such classes within mainstream schools. It is reported that they are not operating as 'fluid' as intended, with pupils spending most of their time in the 'separated' class (Ferguson, 2008; NCSE, 2016b). The research suggests that unless a conscious effort is made to ensure special classes are included as active participants in mainstream school activities, there is a danger that they become segregated (Ó Sioráin et al., 2018; NCSE, 2014; Ware et al., 2009).

### **The appointment of special class teachers**

The National Council for Special Education's (NCSE) qualitative study (2016b) on special classes identified challenges faced by principals in placing teachers in special class settings, noting a resistance among staff to enter into this educational provision. Reports varied on how teachers were appointed to these classes, with some stating that teachers with particular interest or expertise in SEN volunteered to move into the class while other reports stated that teachers were asked to take on the role (NCSE, 2016b). Principals spoke about making informed decisions by "identifying teachers with particular expertise and aptitude for the role" (NCSE, 2016b, p.47). This method of appointing teachers could be considered quite personal and subjective, contradicting a perspective put forward by Forlin (2010b) suggesting that all teachers should be capable and have the necessary skills to meet the needs of all pupils, regardless of ability. This does not appear to be reflected in practice by principals. A study conducted by Shevlin et al. (2013), which gathered information on teachers' attitudes about inclusion and perceived constraints in creating inclusive learning environments, found that personal skills and qualities such as diplomacy, patience, openness and flexibility were critical factors for teachers being appointed to special classes. Even though the need for more formalised training was acknowledged, the study reported

that teachers who demonstrated a willingness to learn through trial and error tended to have positive experiences of teaching in inclusive learning environments.

### **The continuum of teacher education**

The continuum of teacher education in Ireland is made up of initial teacher education (ITE), induction, and continuing professional development (CPD) (Teaching Council, 2011). Even though the need for more formalised training was acknowledged, the study reported that teachers who demonstrated a willingness to learn through trial and error tended to have positive experiences of teaching in inclusive learning environments. Ireland provides a multi-track approach in provision for pupils with SEN and, as a result, ITE is organised in a generic manner, i.e. one general teaching programme qualifies you to teach in both general and special education.

### **Initial teacher education (ITE)**

All ITE programmes in Ireland are guided by the *Initial Teacher Education: Criteria and Guidelines for Programme Providers* (Teaching Council, 2017). These guidelines outline the programme aims, design and content to be incorporated by each institution. Under regulations for registration with the Teaching Council (2009), "newly qualified teachers must have fulfilled inclusion and diversity, meeting diverse needs including children with Special Educational Needs, educational disadvantage and intercultural education" (Crawford et al., 2012, p.26). Inclusive education is listed as one of the specific elements to be included on the programme. However, some variability appears to exist in both definition and content between the providers, an issue highlighted by Kearns and Shevlin (2006) and Hick et al. (2018; 2019). Hick et al. (2018; 2019) have documented the variety of provision regarding inclusive education across ITE. Similarly, Banks et al. (2016) in their study of special classes, noted varying degrees of preparation amongst teachers in terms of readiness to teach in a special class. O'Gorman and Drudy (2010) also found that such modules at pre-service level were very much directed at the general teacher teaching in mainstream environments. The discrepancy in the delivery of these modules suggests that some graduating teachers may have very different experiences, levels of knowledge and competencies in terms of inclusive education and teaching pupils with SEN (Ware et al., 2009).

Even with compulsory modules on inclusion and SEN, some teachers still express dissatisfaction with the content of their ITE in preparing them for teaching pupils with SEN, not just in Ireland but internationally (Florian and Rouse, 2010; Forlin, 2010a). This is of major concern and needs to be addressed urgently in order to meet the needs of the growing community of schools with special classes.

### **Induction**

The National Induction Programme for Teachers (NIPT) delivers a series of workshops for newly qualified teachers (NQTs) which aim to promote "the professional development of NQTs by way of systematic support in their first year of teaching, thus laying the foundations for subsequent professional growth and development" (NIPT, 2018). Some

planning guidelines for teaching in special classes are available on the NIPT website, however, the quantity is nowhere near that of the resources and support available for teaching in mainstream classes. Thirteen workshops in total are offered throughout the year but there is no mention of guidelines for teachers specifically in special classes within any of these workshops.

### **Continuous professional development (CPD)**

CPD is considered a lifelong learning process and a core element of teaching, which has led to increased funding from the Department of Education and Skills (DES) for such practices (O'Gorman and Drudy, 2010). The Teaching Council (2015) recently launched *Cosán*, a framework for teachers which acknowledges the learning that teachers already engage in and helps them map a pathway for their future learning in order to meet the diverse needs of pupils. It encourages learning through a variety of processes and is rooted in three core values: shared professional responsibility, professionally-led regulation and collective professional confidence.

Much of the CPD available for teachers in SEN settings is provided by the NCSE, which prioritises providing specialist support to teachers who are currently employed in special classes. This highlights a difficulty in the provision of CPD, suggesting that it is difficult for a teacher with little to no experience of teaching in a special class to be deployed into that setting with adequate skills and knowledge due to barriers accessing CPD prior to their appointment.

The DES currently offer a one-year postgraduate diploma in SEN to teachers, which is provided by universities and colleges of education. This course is offered at Dublin City University, University College Cork, University College Dublin, Mary Immaculate College (University of Limerick), St Angela's College, Sligo, and National University of Ireland, Galway.

Rouse (2010, cited in Symeonidou and Phtiaka, 2014, p.11) suggested that teacher education on inclusion and SEN "needs to be re-evaluated at all levels, to ensure teachers efficiency in 'knowing' (knowledge), 'being' (values) and 'doing' (skills)", a concern focused upon in this research.

### **Demands of a special class teacher**

There is an assumption among teachers and throughout the literature that the job demands of special class teachers are more complex than those of other teachers, which contributes to the challenges faced by principals in appointing teachers to special classes (Lavian, 2015). Cains and Brown (1998) identified some of these demands, such as continually having to adapt teaching approaches all day every day, working intensely with parents, constantly dealing with emotional aspects, having to produce frequent reports and records, collaborating and planning with outside agencies, and needing a good understanding of formal special needs procedures and policies. Lavian described how special education teachers are admired for "their type of profession, their commitment to the profession, their belief in its importance" (2015, p.109). It is clearly identified as a different role and the

notion of 'expertism' arises throughout the literature, suggesting that special class teachers are separate and different to mainstream class teachers, as they provide a specialist pedagogy which could not be provided by their mainstream counterparts (O'Gorman and Drudy, 2010). There is a constant tension and debate in existence between ideas regarding specialist and general provision in schools but the focus here is upon the world of the special class teacher.

### **The 'figured world' of a special class teacher**

Holland et al. (1998, p.52) introduced the concept of 'figured worlds' as a "socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters or actors are recognised, significance is assigned to certain acts and particular outcomes are valued over others". A figured world is a social process, formed through everyday activities and events that occur in it (Holland et al., 1998). Urrieta (2007, p.108) described how people 'figure' who they are "through the activities and in relation to the social types that populate these figured worlds and in social relationships with the people who perform these worlds". Identities are formed by individuals operating within and outside of these figured worlds. These identities are not formed solely by the individual themselves but are instead "negotiated in social interaction that take form in cultural spaces" (Nasir and Saxe, 2003, p.17).

This concept of figured worlds can be applied to the identity of special class teachers where their role and identity may sometimes be constructed by themselves and other teachers based on everyday encounters, sociocultural experiences and beliefs from their own school setting and teacher education (Thorius, 2016). Teachers' experiences of special classes and social interactions with other teachers contribute to the social and cultural construction of the figured world of a special class teacher which is open to interpretation depending on those encounters.

Messemer (2010) discussed the concept of 'self-efficacy' experienced by special class teachers, suggesting that effective teaching can be impacted by a teacher's belief in his or her ability to meet the needs of the students they teach. She described how teachers who are "faced with the daily struggles of teaching non-achieving or disruptive students, often develop a faltering sense of self-efficacy" (Messemer, 2010, p.18). Thorius (2016) found that special class teachers characterised themselves as being different to that of their general educator colleagues and reported feelings of marginalisation within their own school community. Students with SEN can be perceived by mainstream class teachers as 'someone else's problem' and not their responsibility (Florian and Rouse, 2010). This can result in feelings of isolation among special class teachers emphasising the importance of teacher collaboration, shared responsibility, developing a whole-school approach to inclusion and meeting the diverse needs of all pupils (Lavian, 2012; Thorius, 2016). O'Gorman and Drudy (2010, p.165) suggest the need for "distributed expertise among the whole school staff... a pro-active dimension to enkindle a culture of inclusivity among the whole school community". This approach may be a social process that helps construct a more positive figured world of the role of the special class teacher along with preventing the negative and segregated feelings experienced by some teachers.

## **Inclusive pedagogy versus specialist pedagogy**

As mentioned previously, ITE in Ireland is organised as a universal model which allows teaching in both general and special education. In other countries where a two-track approach to provision is in place, such as Belgium and Germany, an ITE programme is designed specifically for special education teachers (Nash and Norwich, 2010). This opens up the debate surrounding the teaching of specific instructional methods for pupils with SEN which can be seen as "diagnostic-prescriptive teaching" (Florian and Rouse, 2010, p.189). Giangreco et al. argue that the "foundational principles of teaching and learning do not change because a student has a disability label, though these principles may need to be applied differently or used more systematically" (2010, p.251). Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) similarly advocate for 'inclusive pedagogy' as opposed to 'specialist pedagogy' when teaching pupils with diverse needs. However, research has been conducted to prove the effectiveness of certain 'specialist pedagogy' for certain categories of SEN such as the TEACCH approach for pupils with autism spectrum disorders (Wong et al., 2015).

Kearns and Shevlin (2006) analyse the different models of SEN instruction within ITE programmes. The three models are:

1. A single SEN input (provided by most higher education institutes (HEI) in Ireland);
2. Serial units in inclusion or equality studies; and
3. Permeated SEN content.

The single SEN input is very much based on the psycho-medical model of disability, whereas the permeated SEN content model could be seen as a more social model in response to the diverse needs of all learners, regardless of learning profiles, gender, religious beliefs, economic status, race or ethnic background (Pearson, 2009; UNESCO, 2005). The permeated SEN content model might be more beneficial in that it encourages teachers to identify inclusive practices as part of their everyday work, as opposed to something distinct and separate. However, it has been criticised as being inadequately focused and varying in quality (Kearns and Shevlin, 2006).

Along with the single SEN input model in ITE, the existence of explicit CPD courses by the NCSE relating to particular teaching methodologies and strategies for teaching pupils with specific SEN contributes to the notion of 'specialist' and 'expertism' experienced by some teachers. This may also contribute to special class teachers being identified as separate and different to mainstream class teachers because they provide a specialist pedagogy not necessarily required or feasible in mainstream class settings. This research highlights the significant need for a move towards a more inclusive approach across the continuum of teacher education in order to break down this 'figured world' of a special class teacher that currently exists.

## **The profile of inclusive teachers**

The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE, formerly known as EADSNE) has developed a framework for teacher education for inclusion which is designed to "identify the essential skills, knowledge and understanding, attitudes and



values needed by everyone entering the teaching profession" (EADSNE, 2012, p.5). They argue that, if inclusion is to be achieved across Europe, changes need to occur in ITE which will "prepare all teachers to work in inclusive education considering all forms of diversity" (2012, p.9). The framework is made up of four core values relating to teaching and learning:

- Valuing learner diversity
- Supporting all learners
- Working with others
- Continuing personal professional development

This framework is an exemplary resource that could help shape future approaches and positive attitudes of teachers towards inclusive practices and it is already being used effectively to shape research on initial teacher education for inclusion in Ireland (Hick et al., 2018; Hick et al., 2019).

### **Methodology**

The main research question underpinning this study was: 'How do teachers perceive teaching in special classes?' This question was supported by the following subsidiary questions which helped in providing answers to the overall investigation:

- What knowledge, skills and attitudes do teachers have in relation to teaching in special classes?
- How does teacher education (ITE/induction/CPD) contribute to these knowledge, skills and attitudes?
- How do schools organise special class provision?

Qualitative data were generated in order to acknowledge the varying contexts of participants and to obtain a variety of perspectives and interpretations of meanings (Mertens, 2005). A purposeful attempt was made to select participants with varying teaching roles and backgrounds in order to give a deep and rich understanding of teachers' experiences. A total of eight teachers participated in this study, all of whom had varying professional backgrounds (Appendix A) but had some connection with special classes (early intervention, ASD, mild/moderate general learning difficulty class), i.e. they were teachers in a school with special classes, are currently teaching in a special class, had previously taught in a special class or are a principal of a school with special classes. Participants were from various sites and so this allowed for credibility and a broader representation of findings.

Data were generated using the following qualitative research methods:

- Qualitative questionnaires,
- Semi-structured interviews,
- Research diary.

The questionnaire was a form of 'initial screening' which allowed participants to start thinking about their thoughts, feelings and experiences relating to the topic, prior to

engaging in the interview. The questionnaire also allowed the researcher to gather initial raw data, identify areas that needed further investigation, clarification and possibly more 'teasing out'.

Semi-structured interviews allowed for the exchange of rich and indispensable knowledge about various aspects of teachers' experiences of special classes (Kvale, 1996). An advantage of using this method included the capturing of multiple views of a particular theme, such as attitudes towards teaching in special classes and how participants "themselves formulate in a dialogue their own conceptions of their lived world" (Kvale, 1996, p.11).

A research diary was kept throughout the study for the purpose of critical reflection and reflexivity. Notes included initial responses to the data along with thoughts and critical reflections that developed and emerged over the course of the research project. Full ethical protocols were devised and deployed in line with Denzin and Lincoln (2008).

Thematic analysis was the primary analysis method used and this was achieved through the use of coding. Thematic analysis identifies, analyses and reports patterns (themes) within the data.

## **Findings and analysis**

### **Knowledge, skills and attitudes**

The teachers interviewed in this study were very much in favour of the provision of special classes but the willingness to teach in such settings was somewhat less desirable. The main reasons for not wanting to teach in a special class emerged as not knowing what to expect, 'fear of the unknown', feeling 'ill-equipped', not being able to cope with the challenging behaviours and emotional stress along with having to manage a team of special needs assistants (SNAs). Overall, it is seen as a far more demanding and complex role than that of a mainstream class teacher. However, when the participating special class teachers were asked to identify the skills they feel are necessary for teaching in such an environment, there was common agreement that attributes such as patience, flexibility, interest, organisation, empathy and good communication were required. These skills are not exclusively needed for teaching in inclusive learning environments but are instead skills required by all teachers regardless of their educational setting.

These findings support the argument put forward by Robinson (2017) who found that, despite the fact that teachers were in favour of the principles of inclusive education, they are reluctant to take on the role of special class teacher. The challenging aspects of the role that teachers identified in their responses mirrors Cains and Brown's (1998) description of the complex nature of the role of a special class teacher.

A participating principal described a special class teacher as "just an ordinary teacher who is able to differentiate" which reflects Giangreco et al. (2010) argument that teaching principles remain the same regardless of disabilities, but slight adaptations need to be applied in certain situations. Later in that same interview, however, he described his experience of interviewing candidates for a position in a special class and mentioned how the selection board were "looking for a particular skill set", which slightly contradicts his

previous statement. This contradiction may suggest that, theoretically, there should be no difference in teachers' skills. However, when it comes down to appointing a teacher to a special class, particular personal qualities are sought after.

The data revealed contrasting attitudes among teachers towards teaching in special classes. The teachers' decision to work in that environment and their school's approach to the provision of special classes appeared to play a significant role in determining their attitudes.

Some teachers presented with very positive attitudes towards teaching in special classes and common features among those were the presence of supportive principals, a rotating teacher policy within their school and the fact that they were the first teachers within their school to teach in a special class. One teacher spoke of how the figured world of a special class teacher is sometimes constructed negatively, with friends and colleagues asking: "Oh my God, did you get thrown in there because you were on career break?" "Oh God don't do it like, don't if you've a choice".

However, upon taking up the position, the teacher reported a very positive experience but insisted that it depends on how well the teacher is supported in their own school. Teachers from this study who had positive experiences reported that it was largely due to the support of their principal and colleagues along with the existence of a teacher rotation policy.

These teachers were also the first teachers to teach in newly opened special classes and so no previous experiences or preconceptions had been cultivated in the school. One teacher predicted that, due to her positive experience and support within the school, "When that three-year cycle is up... maybe people will opt to go in there".

These teachers' positive attitudes have had an effect on the whole school attitude towards the provision of special classes, confirming a theory by Nasir and Saxe (2003) which suggests that identities are formed through social interactions within their own environment. These special class teachers, along with their supportive principals, have created this positive figured world (Holland et al., 1998; Thorius, 2016) of inclusion within their schools through their uplifting experiences of special classes.

On the contrary, other teachers did not report such positive attitudes and displayed a more negative outlook towards teaching in special classes. Two teachers expressed feelings of isolation and a lack of support during their time as special class teachers. One teacher emphasised that these feelings were mainly due to a "lack of support and resources... and the frustrations".

The two teachers who displayed positive attitudes towards teaching in special classes willingly opted to teach in the special class. The other two teachers who presented with more negative views did not want to teach in the special class but found themselves in that role due to varying reasons. This would suggest that teachers who are appointed to such settings unwillingly will have a more negative outlook towards that role. However, it is acknowledged that this can apply to all class settings.

## **Teacher education**

There is consistency across the data to attest that content in ITE regarding teaching in inclusive settings, in particular special classes, is inadequate. There is also evidence to suggest that there are differences and discrepancies in the delivery of inclusive education and SEN modules across the various ITE programmes in Ireland.

One teacher, who completed an online postgraduate diploma in primary education, recalled that "the idea of inclusion was mentioned but there was no specific course on it... we definitely didn't have any teaching practice in any kind of special educational setting".

Another participant, who completed a face-to-face postgraduate diploma in primary education similarly recalled that "teaching practice was all mainstream classes... we got two lectures on autism and that was as good as we got".

However, teachers who completed the undergraduate bachelor degrees in primary education spoke about modules they carried out in SEN and visits to schools on alternative or inclusive education placements. This finding is consistent with the work of Kearns and Shevlin (2006) and Hick et al. (2018; 2019) regarding the variety of provisions across the HEIs. It raises some questions about programme consistency and alignment with the Teaching Council's criteria and guidelines for ITE programme providers (2017), suggesting the possible need for further development in relation to inclusive practices.

There appears to be a general lack of awareness, knowledge, exposure and experience relating to teaching in special classes among teachers upon completion of their ITE. One teacher described the SEN and inclusion content in her ITE programme as "just an overview and a snapshot of everything, nothing in detail or in depth". Another described how:

Everybody had to complete a module on SEN which was quite broad... it didn't really teach you about physically or practically operating a special class... it was mostly focused on children with special needs within the mainstream class.

This supports the study by O'Gorman and Drudy (2010) which identifies the content of such modules being directed at the general teacher teaching in mainstream settings.

The presence of a compulsory module on SEN is a positive aspect of ITE programmes. However, one teacher admitted that even having engaged in a further elective module in SEN, "If we had ... been told ... that we were going on teaching practice out there [special class setting], I don't think it would have left us equipped with the necessary skills that you do need to have".

Another issue that came to light from the data was the limited opportunities to study inclusion and/or SEN in some ITE programmes due to places in these optional modules being capped. This implies that, even if the interest and demand is there to study inclusion further, students may not necessarily be able to access these modules. This practice does not reflect the considerable growth in the number of special classes nationwide, with demand for teachers in such settings increasing dramatically. It identifies a mismatch between provision at ITE and requirements of schools which needs to be addressed.

Teachers admitted that prior to teaching in a special class, they would not have engaged in much CPD, in particular for inclusion, because, "I didn't see a need for it at the time... I probably would be more open to it now if I was going back into a mainstream class".

This presents as a problem for teachers who may potentially move into teaching in inclusive settings, within which a variety of needs will undoubtedly exist. CPD for inclusion is not engaged in until it is deemed necessary, making it a reactive rather than pro-active practice. This finding also demonstrates a significant shift in attitude towards CPD after spending some time teaching in a special class and engaging in a variety of CPD practices.

In general, there was very positive feedback from teachers regarding the provision of CPD from bodies such as the Special Education Support Service (SESS), NCSE and Middletown Centre for Autism, all providing in-depth, practical and relevant courses on teaching in inclusive settings.

### **Teachers' experiences**

There was general agreement among participants that the role of a special class teacher is "more demanding... more expected of you, more responsibility and more accountability" which mirrors the theories put forward by Lavian (2015; 2012) and Cains and Brown (1998). Some of the extra demands and duties that were mentioned included care needs, dealing with challenging behaviours, managing SNAs, paper-work, planning, report writing, preparation of activities along with collaboration with other teachers and professionals.

Some of the teachers used phrases such as "thrown in at the deep end", "sink or swim" or "fish out of water" to describe their experience of initially going in to teach in a special class. They expressed feelings of isolation and segregation from the rest of the school feeling somewhat different to their colleagues. They often experience unintentional social exclusion, e.g. by being on different breaks to mainstream. One principal described the special classes in his school as being like "a school within a school", which suggests that they are operating as an internal segregated fixture as opposed to a more inclusive and fluid provision as highlighted in various reports (NCSE, 2014; Ware et al., 2009).

Teachers' feelings of isolation could possibly be linked with the fact that no participants in this study had any experience of other teachers collaborating with them or having an input into the education of pupils in the special classes. The special class teachers appear to have little to no support from any other teachers, which verifies arguments put forward by Florian and Rouse (2010), who highlight how children with SEN can be perceived as "someone else's problem" and emphasise the importance of teacher collaboration and a whole school approach.

Both principal teachers who took part in this study spoke of the resistance there was among teachers to teach in special classes, which is consistent with findings from an NCSE report (Daly et al., 2016). Both principals admitted that they approached teachers who may be 'willing' to engage in extra CPD, who may be a bit more 'amenable' and may be interested in taking up the role. However, this presents as a very subjective and personal approach to appointing teachers and could be open to interpretation as one teacher describes:

You can take it personally or you can look at it as a compliment but if you get put in the special class you can either feel like... it's because I'm getting the bottom of the barrel or it's because they think that I'll be able and other people might not cope as well, it's up to yourself really.

None of the participating principal teachers had teacher deployment or rotation policies in place in their schools, as they both stated "it's not for everyone" and that they would "never force someone into a special class". This can be interpreted as an empathetic and understanding approach to deploying teachers. However, with no clear policy or guidelines on the deployment of teachers to special classes, teachers who are selected to teach in these classes as a result may be left feeling unhappy, marginalised and isolated, echoing findings from Stevens and O'Moore (2009).

All teachers who had experience in special classes spoke about the invaluable benefits of teaching in such a setting and how it has contributed to themselves, both personally and professionally, developing more empathy, understanding, a range of new teaching skills and a new way of thinking.

## **Conclusion**

It became evident from this study that teachers view the role of a special class teacher very differently to that of other teaching roles. Teachers appear to have constructed a preconceived figured world (Holland et al., 1998) of teaching in a special class. It is viewed as being a more demanding, challenging and complex role compared to other teaching positions. Teachers are in favour of the special class setting and support such provisions being made to allow for the inclusion of pupils with particular needs in local primary schools. However, despite teachers demonstrating a positive attitude towards special classes, teachers are reluctant to volunteer to teach in such environments due to a variety of reasons including a lack of knowledge on how to teach in such a different environment, and feeling inadequately equipped with the necessary skills, along with expressing concerns regarding the need to manage a team of SNAs and dealing with challenging behaviours.

It appears that due to some variability in the delivery of SEN and inclusion modules in ITE programmes, along with the absence of a formal assessed teaching placement in a special education setting, teachers are graduating from ITE with variable practical knowledge and skills for teaching in such settings along with adverse attitudes towards teaching in them. CPD is presented as a very personal and individual element of teacher education. Even with the assistance of the *Cosán* framework (Teaching Council, 2015) in developing teachers' learning, unless CPD is made mandatory only certain personalities will engage in this element of teacher education.

Teachers in special classes who engaged in CPD appeared to have developed a very positive attitude towards participating in CPD, becoming more reflective, critical and much more willing to engage in further learning. This emerged as one of the main advantages of teaching in a special class.

Based on the findings from this study, the following recommendations are suggested:

- ITE programme providers could include a special education placement that is formally assessed and contributes to students' overall qualification.
- ITE programme providers could consider content relating to specific practical strategies for working in a special class such as leading and managing a team of SNAs, dealing with parents and professionals, and coping with behaviour and cognitive difficulties.
- The Teaching Council, under the framework of *Cosán*, could consider making a certain amount of CPD in inclusive practices mandatory for all teachers annually, incorporating a wide variety of areas such as, literacy, maths, ICT, etc., in order to address broader educational issues and keep teachers up to date on latest developments.
- Due to special class teachers having additional duties in comparison with their mainstream colleagues, the DES could consider providing a certain number of administration days to those teachers in order to carry out additional paperwork, writing of reports, meeting with professionals and parents or collaborating with other staff members.

Special classes serve some of the most marginalised pupils in Ireland and there is evidence to show that the DES is taking positive steps towards addressing the range of diverse needs in primary schools by providing inclusive educational opportunities for all pupils. However, attention needs to be given to teachers, in particular how their knowledge, skills and attitudes towards inclusive practices can be developed throughout the continuum of teacher education. This study unveiled the lack of exposure and experience teachers have in relation to special classes, which highlights the need to address the content and models of instruction being delivered at the various levels of teacher education. This study will hopefully serve pupils, teachers and teacher education providers by informing future planning and provision of inclusive learning environments in an effort to provide an inclusive and meaningful education for all pupils in their local primary schools.

## References

- Banks, J., McCoy, S., Frawley, D., Kingston, G., Shevlin, M., and Smyth, F. (2016). Special Classes in Irish Schools Phase 2: A Qualitative Study. *Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) Research Series*, 24, 1-224.
- Braun, V., and Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners*. London: Sage.
- Cains, R.A., and Brown, C.R. (1998). Newly qualified teachers: a comparison of perceptions held by primary and secondary teachers of their training routes and of their early experiences in post. *Educational Psychology*, 18(3): 341-352.
- Crawford, S., O'Reilly, R., and Flanagan, N. (2012). Examining current provision, practice and experience of initial teacher training providers in Ireland preparing pre service teachers for the inclusion of students with special education needs in physical education classes. *European Journal of Adapted Physical Activity*, 5(2): 23-44.

- Daly, P., Ring, E., Egan, M., Fitzgerald, J., Griffin, C., Long, S., McCarthy, E., Moloney, M., O'Brien, T., O'Byrne, A., O'Sullivan, S., Ryan, M., Wall, E., Madden, R., and Gibbons, S. (2016). *An Evaluation of Education Provision for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Ireland*. Trim: NCSE.
- Denzin, N., and Lincoln, Y. (2008). *The Landscape of Qualitative Research (third edition)*. California: Sage.
- Department of Education and Skills (DES). (2018). *Circular 0004/2018: Post-graduate diploma programme of continuing professional development for special education teachers - 2018/2019*. Available at: [www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/clo004\\_2018.pdf](http://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/clo004_2018.pdf) (Accessed on 28 January 2018).
- European Agency for Development of Special Needs Education. (2012). *Teacher Education for Inclusion: Profile of Inclusive Teachers*. Odense: European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education.
- Florian, L., and Black-Hawkins, K. (2011). Exploring inclusive pedagogy. *British Educational Research Journal*, 37(5): 813-828.
- Florian, L., and Rouse, M. (2010). Teachers' professional learning and inclusive practice. In: R. Rose (Ed.) (2010). *Confronting Obstacles to Inclusion: International Responses to Developing Inclusive Education*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Forlin, C. (2010a). Developing and implementing quality inclusive education in Hong Kong: Implications for teacher education. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 10(s1): 177-184.
- Forlin, C. (2010b). Teacher education for inclusion. In: R. Rose (Ed.) (2010). *Confronting Obstacles to Inclusion: International Responses to Developing Inclusive Education*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Giangreco, M., Carter, E., Doyle, M., Suter, J., and Rose, R. (2010). In: R. Rose (Ed.) (2010). *Confronting obstacles to inclusion: International responses to developing inclusive education*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Griffin, S., and Shevlin, M. (2007). *Responding to Special Educational Needs, an Irish Perspective*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan.
- Hick, P., Solomon, Y., Mintz, J., Matziari, A., Ó Murchú, F., Hall, K., Cahill, K., Curtin, C., and Margariti, D. (2018). *Initial Teacher Education for Inclusion Phase 1 and 2 Report: NCSE Research Report No. 26*. Trim, Co Meath: NCSE.
- Hick, P., Matziari, A., Mintz, J., Murchú, F.Ó., Cahill, K., Hall, K., Curtin, C., and Solomon, Y. (2019). *Initial Teacher Education for Inclusion Final Report: NCSE Research Report No.27*. Trim, Co Meath: NCSE.
- Holland, D., Lachicotte, W., Skinner, D., and Cain, C. (1998). *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*. Harvard: University Press.
- Initial Teacher Education Provider (2018). Programme description. Online (Accessed 8 May 2018).
- Kearns, H., and Shevlin, M. (2006). Initial teacher preparation for special educational needs: Policy and practice in the north and south of Ireland. *Teacher Development*, 10(1): 25-42.
- Kvale, S. (1996). *InterViews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*. California: Sage.
- Lavian, R.H. (2012). The impact of organizational climate on burnout among homeroom teachers and special education teachers (full classes/individual pupils) in mainstream schools. *Teachers and Teaching*, 18(2): 233-247.



- Lavian, R.H. (2015). Masters of weaving: the complex role of special education teachers. *Teachers and Teaching*, 21(1): 103-126.
- Maria, U.E. (2013). Teachers' perception, knowledge and behaviour in inclusive education. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 84: 1237-1241.
- Mertens, D. (2005). *Research and Evaluation in Education and Psychology: Integrating Diversity With Quantitative, Qualitative, and Mixed Methods*. California: Sage.
- Messemer, M. (2010). *General education teacher perceptions regarding inclusion of students with autism spectrum disorder*. Unpublished PhD thesis: Walden University, Minnesota, USA. Available at: <https://search.proquest.com/docview/520326624?pq-origsite=gscholar> (Accessed on 27 January 2018).
- Nasir, N.I.S., and Saxe, G.B. (2003). Ethnic and academic identities: A cultural practice perspective on emerging tensions and their management in the lives of minority students. *Educational Researcher*, 32(5): 14-18.
- Nash, T., and Norwich, B. (2010). The initial training of teachers to teach children with special educational needs: A national survey of English post-graduate certificate of education programmes. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 26(7): 1471-1480.
- National Council for Special Education (NCSE). (2014). *Understanding Special Class Provision in Ireland - Phase 1: Findings from a National Survey of Schools (Research report no.16)*. Trim, Co Meath: NCSE.
- National Council for Special Education (NCSE). (2016a). *Guidelines for Setting up and Organising Special Classes*. Trim, Co Meath: NCSE.
- National Council for Special Education (NCSE). (2016b). *Special Classes in Irish Schools – Phase 2: A Qualitative Study (Research report no.24)*. Trim, Co Meath: NCSE.
- National Council for Special Education (NCSE). (2019). *Policy Advice on Special Schools and Classes: An Inclusive Education for an Inclusive Society*. Trim, Co Meath: NCSE.
- O'Gorman, E., and Drudy, S. (2010). Addressing the professional development needs of teachers working in the area of special education/inclusion in mainstream schools in Ireland. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 10(1): 157-167.
- O'Sioráin, C.A., Shevlin, M., and McGuckin, C. (2018). Discovering gems: Authentic listening to the voice of experience in teaching pupils with autism. In: B. Mooney (Ed.) *Ireland's Yearbook of Education 2018-2019*. Ireland: Education Matters.
- Robinson, D. (2017). Effective inclusive teacher education for special educational needs and disabilities: Some more thoughts on the way forward. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 61: 164-178.
- Shevlin, M., Winter, E., and Flynn, P. (2013). Developing inclusive practice: teacher perceptions of opportunities and constraints in the Republic of Ireland. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 17(10): 1119-1133.
- Stevens, P., and O'Moore, M. (2009). *Inclusion Or Illusion?: Educational Provision for Primary School Children with Mild General Learning Disabilities*. Dublin: Blackhall.
- Symeonidou, S., and Phtiaka, H. (2014). My colleagues wear blinkers... If they were trained, they would understand better. Reflections on teacher education on inclusion in Cyprus. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 14(2): 110-119.

- Teaching Council. (2015). *Cosán, Framework for Teachers' Learning*. Available at: [www.teachingcouncil.ie/en/Publications/Teacher-Education/Cosan-Framework-for-Teachers-Learning.pdf](http://www.teachingcouncil.ie/en/Publications/Teacher-Education/Cosan-Framework-for-Teachers-Learning.pdf) (Accessed 8 May 2018).
- Teaching Council. (2017). *Initial Teacher Education: Criteria and Guidelines for Programme Providers* (revised edition). Available at: [www.teachingcouncil.ie/en/Publications/Teacher-Education/Initial-Teacher-Education-Criteria-and-Guidelines-for-Programme-Providers.pdf](http://www.teachingcouncil.ie/en/Publications/Teacher-Education/Initial-Teacher-Education-Criteria-and-Guidelines-for-Programme-Providers.pdf) (Accessed 8 May 2018).
- Teaching Council. (2011). *Policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education*. Available at: [www.teachingcouncil.ie/en/Publications/Teacher-Education/Policy-on-the-Continuum-of-Teacher-Education.pdf](http://www.teachingcouncil.ie/en/Publications/Teacher-Education/Policy-on-the-Continuum-of-Teacher-Education.pdf) (Accessed 8 May 2018).
- Teaching Council. (2009). *Teaching Council Registration Regulations*. Available at: [www.teachingcouncil.ie/en/Publications/Registration/Documents/Registration-Regulations-20091.pdf](http://www.teachingcouncil.ie/en/Publications/Registration/Documents/Registration-Regulations-20091.pdf) (Accessed 8 May 2018).
- Thorius, K.A. (2016). Stimulating tensions in special education teachers' figured world: An approach toward inclusive education. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 20(12): 1326-1343.
- UNESCO. (2005). *Guidelines for Inclusion: Ensuring Access to Education for All*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Urrieta, L. (2007). Figured worlds and education: An introduction to the special issue. *The Urban Review*, 39(2): 107-116
- Ware, J., Balfe, T., Butler, C., Day, T., Dupont, M., Harten, C., Farrell, A.M., Mc Daid, R., O'Riordan, M., Prunty, A., and Travers, J. (2009). *Research Report on the Role of Special Schools and Classes in Ireland*. Trim, Co Meath: NCSE.
- Wong, C., Odom, S.L., Hume, K.A., Cox, A.W., Fettig, A., Kucharczyk, S., Brock, M.E., Plavnick, J.B., Fleury, V.P., and Schultz, T.R. (2015). Evidence-based practices for children, youth, and young adults with autism spectrum disorder: A comprehensive review. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 45(7): 1951-1966.

## Appendix A - Participants' teaching roles and backgrounds

Participant	Current role	No. of years teaching	Initial Teacher Education Programme	Any further qualifications	Teaching experience in special class
Paul	Principal	33	B.Ed	Postgraduate diploma in learning support	No
Mary	Principal	37	B.Ed	Postgraduate diploma in M.Ed Ph. D. Education	No
Donal	Mainstream class teacher	1	B.Ed (New 4 year course)	No	No
Jane	Mainstream class teacher	7	B.Ed	M.Ed	No
Ann	Mainstream class teacher	6	B.Ed and Psychology	No	Yes - 3 years
Michael	Special class teacher	14	Postgraduate diploma in Education	No	Yes - 1 year
Conor	Special class teacher	9	Postgraduate diploma in Education	No	Yes - 3 years
Sarah	Special class teacher	10	B.Ed	M.Ed	Yes - 1 year

# ≡ An exploration of teachers' perceptions of the role of the cooperating teacher as part of the school placement process in three primary schools in County Cork in the Republic of Ireland ≡

≡ JEAN O'SULLIVAN ≡

## Abstract

This article is based on research completed as part of a MA dissertation entitled: *An exploration of teachers' perceptions of the role of the cooperating teacher as part of the school placement process in three primary schools in County Cork in the Republic of Ireland*. It has its origins in the conviction that cooperating teachers can have a huge influence, positively or negatively, on student teachers. Changes to the Initial Teacher Education programmes have led to student teachers spending more time in Irish primary classrooms. The research focus was on the level of understanding of the role as a cooperating teacher, the degree of confidence teachers have in taking on this role, the gap between policy and current practice as well as exploring possible improvements that could be made to enhance the role of the cooperating teacher. The data was analysed and reveals that considerable inconsistencies occur in current practice.

**Keywords:** cooperating teacher, student teacher, school placement, mentoring, roles and responsibilities.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Introduction

Since the introduction of the four-year Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) in 2012 and the two-year Professional Master of Education (PME) programmes in 2014, student teachers are required to spend almost double the amount of time on placement. This means that 25% and 40% of student time over the respective programmes is allocated to school placement (Teaching Council, 2017). School placement replaces the term 'teaching practice' and more accurately reflects the nature of the experience as one encompassing a range of teaching and non-teaching activities (Teaching Council, 2013, p.6).

A cooperating teacher is a teacher in the placement school who supports and guides the student teacher and who acts as a point of contact between the higher education institution (HEI) and the school (Teaching Council, 2013, p.5). The role of the cooperating

teacher is an important one and can influence the student teachers, both positively and negatively (Anderson, 2009). Essentially, the cooperating teacher takes on a mentoring role and the writer was interested to find out how teachers felt about taking on this role. In its first iteration of *Guidelines on School Placement* (2013), the Teaching Council defines mentoring as:

Mentoring encompasses all those means by which the student teacher on placement is supported, advised and encouraged and his/her practice and thinking is affirmed and challenged, as appropriate. It is acknowledged that the process of mentoring student teachers is distinct from the process of mentoring newly qualified teachers.

The Teaching Council *Guidelines on School Placement* (2013, p.21) state that HEIs will support schools hosting student teachers and that "at a minimum, this support will include guidance and documentation so that the cooperating teacher is clear about the HEI's expectations of the cooperating teacher".

The writer has spent a number of years teaching in the European School in Luxembourg, which is part of the network of European schools and hosts student teachers from a number of countries, including Ireland, each year. As a cooperating teacher, I have experience of using the *Common Reference Framework* (Anglo-French Bilateral Piloting Committee, 2007), which is used in the Anglo-French training exchanges for future primary teachers. This document clearly explains the role of the cooperating teacher, which includes setting targets and reviewing lessons with the student teacher, as well as providing regular feedback on the lessons observed. In this paper, the cooperating teacher is referred to as a 'host teacher' and the student teacher is referred to as a 'trainee'. The Teaching Council in Ireland first published *Guidelines for School Placement* in 2013 and included in these guidelines is a section which outlines, in prescriptive detail, the role and responsibilities of the cooperating teacher (2013, p.19).

This article will focus on the findings of a research study completed by the writer while undertaking a master's degree. This research was undertaken in three primary schools in Co Cork, including an urban, rural, and suburban school. A total of 60 teachers participated in this research, including 54 cooperating teachers, three student teachers and three principal teachers. The focus of this research was on the perceptions of participants of the role of the cooperating teacher in school placement.

Qualitative and quantitative research methods were used to gather data from teachers in the research schools. Questionnaires were completed by teachers and semi-structured interviews took place to gain further insight into the views of principals and student teachers on the topic. The findings are particular to the research context and could provide the basis for an extended study. The next section will explore school placement.

## School placement

The *Policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education* (Teaching Council, 2011, p.13) states that the school placement experience "should be regarded as a valuable opportunity for student teacher development and not merely as a means of assessing student teacher performance". It advocates the development of innovative models based on a partnership approach whereby "higher education institutions (HEIs) and schools actively collaborate in the organisation of the placement" (ibid.). The *Kellaghan Report* (Government of Ireland, 2002, p.122) states that:

the fundamental purposes of teaching practice should be to assist students in the integration, interpretation, and application of the various elements of their preparation in the context of the classroom, school, and community; to engage in analysis of learning and teaching, and to identify and address persistent problems.

The Teaching Council's policy (Teaching Council, 2011, p.13) goes on to state that, "structured support would include mentoring, supervision and critical analysis of the experience as well as observation of, and conversations with, experienced teachers".

In Scotland, the student placement system (SPS) is operated and maintained by the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) and the SPS allocates students to schools (Corrigan, 2018). All schools are expected to take students; it is not an option. This is the opposite of the current situation in Ireland which relies heavily on goodwill. The *Kellaghan Report* (2002, p.120) writes that teaching practice is "conducted on an informal basis" and that "the extent to which schools and teachers become involved varies, but generally is not great". This report further states that "schools and teachers provide facilities on a goodwill basis, and do not have specified responsibilities for the supervision and assessment of students" (ibid.). The Teaching Council (2013, p.7) also acknowledged this tradition of goodwill, stating that, "teachers work with student teachers in the interests of sharing, developing, and supporting good practice and many school communities give generously of their time and experience".

Current practice in Ireland is that some school placements are organised by the HEIs and others must be found by the student teachers themselves. Maher (2018) identified issues with the drip feed of emails principals receive from students trying to secure a placement. Communication in this regard needs to be reviewed and improved for the benefit of all stakeholders.

Since the introduction of the new programmes, student teachers now undertake extended school placements, special education needs (SEN) and Gaelscoil experiences (NUIM, 2018). They have opportunities to observe teaching and learning in a variety of contexts and collaborate with the cooperating and other teachers in the schools. Student teachers engage constructively and collaboratively in a broad range of professional experiences as part of the school placement process (Teaching Council, 2013, p.19).

The student teacher requires structured support from those involved in the student placement process and the *Kellaghan Report* (2002, p.122) identified that:

Helping students accomplish the tasks they will encounter in their teaching practice is a labour-intensive operation, and ideally should involve close contact between supervisors, mentors, or teacher, advising, preparing, and debriefing students individually or in groups.

Corrigan (2018) noted that, in Scotland, one of the duties of all registered teachers is outlined by the Scottish Negotiating Committee for Teachers (SNCT) as follows: "maintain and develop knowledge and skills and contribute to the professional development of colleagues including probationary and student teachers" (SNCT, 2007, 2.8 (g)). It is interesting to note that, in Scotland, the focus is on meeting the standard rather than a grade and that students and teachers are working with the same professional standards (Corrigan, 2018). Maher (2018) states that one of the goals of school placement is to provide a meaningful experience for both the student and school. The cooperating teachers are in a unique position to provide structured support as they are with the student teacher for the entire duration of the school placement and it is vital to explore and further develop this role. This will require continued encouragement and, indeed, facilitation by school principals also. The principal plays a key role in creating the culture and structures that enable strong mentoring practices to develop.

### **The role of the principal**

Principals contribute to the development of others, through coaching and mentoring, and networking opportunities (GTCS, 2012, p.20). Kruger et al. (2009, p.89) describe the school principal as "the partnership lynchpin".

The principal who knows the strategies and tools that comprise mentor and beginning teacher work – observing and giving feedback, analysing student work, accessing school and community resources, planning lessons – avoids misunderstandings and aligns support. Knowing the role and responsibilities of both mentor and new teacher sends a clear message of support and respect. (Watkins, 2016, p.1).

The Teaching Council outlines the responsibilities of school principals in the *Guidelines for School Placement* (2013, p.20). The principal works in collaboration with the HEIs and placement tutors to ensure that adequate support is provided during the school placement. It also stated that principals "assign student teachers to cooperating teachers as appropriate" (ibid.). Principals will "encourage the student teacher to seek advice and support when needed" and "are available to student teachers for professional support and advice" (2013, p.20). The principal is often the first person the student teacher will meet in the school at the beginning of their placement and, therefore, the Teaching Council states that school principals "provide a school orientation to the student teacher at the outset of the placement" (ibid.). This now leads us onto the key role of the cooperating teacher.

### **The role of the cooperating teacher**

The Teaching Council (2013, p.5) defines the cooperating teacher as "a teacher in the placement school who supports and guides the student teacher and who acts as a point of contact between the HEI and the school". This definition highlights the importance of the

role of the cooperating teacher in the school placement experience as a supportive figure who guides the student teacher throughout their placement. The cooperating teacher plays a key role in being the link person between the student and the HEI. This defines mentoring processes in a significant way. It is important that the student teacher engages in self-reflection and targets can be set with the cooperating teacher. Internationally, the promotion of reflective practice has become the dominant espoused model of teacher education (Conway et al., 2009: xviii). Moran and Dallat (1995) recognised reflection as a crucial component of the mentoring process for structuring the analysis of teaching but considered it a complex and challenging activity. The Teaching Council policy (2011) identifies the key guiding principle that initial teacher education should foster reflective, critical, and research-based learning. The Teaching Council (2013, p.16) stresses that, "the observer should seek to engage the student teacher in critical reflection on his/her practice, so as to identify strengths, areas for improvement and possible strategies for improving practice".

The role of the cooperating teacher in providing structured support and guidance to student teachers is described as 'pivotal' by the Teaching Council (2013, p.15), although it is acknowledged that this is not evaluative, as the cooperating teachers are not currently involved in the assessment of student teachers. It is interesting to note that Ní Áingléis et al. (2012, p.320) found that both student teachers and HEI's placement tutors involved in the *Partnership with Schools Project* welcomed the enhanced role of the cooperating teacher and agreed that the cooperating teacher can take a collegial approach, which avoids the development of a power imbalance in the relationship between them and the student teacher. This power imbalance is avoided as the student teacher knows that the cooperating teacher is not involved in the formal assessment of the school placement. This is important as there are inherent vulnerabilities that are part of being a student teacher in an examination context. Ní Áingléis et al. (2012, p.317) found in their research that:

the role of the classroom teacher, realised through active observation of a specific lesson followed by a feedback session and the production of an observation report, was to mentor and advise the student in a clear and focused context. The consistency of feedback which this process facilitated was clearly appreciated by students in this study.

The Teaching Council (2013, p.15) states that:

structured support may include the provision of advice and guidance, sharing ideas and approaches, co-planning, team teaching, opportunities for student teachers to observe teachers teaching, and opportunities for the student teacher to be observed.

It is worthy of note that in other countries the role of the cooperating teacher, while incorporating many of the same elements, also includes an evaluative aspect. The roles of all parties involved in the school placement process are clearly outlined and suitable

documentation is provided to facilitate the mentoring sessions between cooperating and student teachers as well as templates for target setting and formative assessment. The *Common Reference Framework* (2007, p.15) outlines the role and responsibilities as follows. Host teachers are asked to:

- Reflect on the expectations of the *Common Reference Framework* and the personal target of their trainees at the beginning of the placement.
- Negotiate a programme of classroom activities to meet these targets.
- Arrange weekly timetabled meetings to monitor progress.
- Give formative and diagnostic feedback to trainees.
- Ensure that trainees teach a variety of subjects to small groups and to the whole class.

In the writer's experience, it was beneficial to have a set time each week for the mentoring session. The document provided a focus with specific questions which student and cooperating teachers had to sign off on. This enabled professional dialogue to take place throughout the placement. The previous week was reviewed, and targets were set for the following week based on progress to date.

Corrigan (2018) notes that, in Scotland, the cooperating teacher mentors the student and provides feedback and support to the student. The focus is on 'joint evaluation' and the final report on the student is prepared in consultation with the cooperating teacher and is based on evidence from the observation of lessons that were undertaken with the HEI tutor.

Although the suggestion has not been implemented in Ireland, it is worth noting that the Inspectorate in *Learning to Teach* (DES, 2006, p.37) suggested that teachers could be involved in the assessment of student teachers as they state:

The teacher will know the pupils and the school context factors intimately and could therefore be in a position to contribute to the assessment of the student's practice. Additionally, by sharing their expertise, experience and insights with students, the class teachers can make a valuable contribution to their professional development. The collegiality thus established could have long-lasting benefits for both the student and the teacher. An assessment system that involved class teachers would also recognise and enhance the contribution that practising teachers can make to the development of teaching as a profession.

The student teacher is in a learning environment and their roles will be examined in the following section.

### **The role of the student teacher**

The student teacher is a key stakeholder in the school placement process and their roles and responsibilities are outlined clearly in the Teaching Council's *Guidelines on School Placement* (2013, p.19). The key statement is that student teachers engage constructively and collaboratively in a broad range of professional experiences as part of the school placement process (ibid.). This is the initial phase of a teaching career and is a vital time



for student teachers. O'Flynn et al. (2003) state that there are different stages in a teacher's career and at each stage they bring particular strengths to their role as teacher. However, it is also acknowledged that "each stage of development brings with it its own challenges and frustrations" (ibid.). Student teachers are expected to meet the school principal and cooperating teacher in advance of the placement to plan the activities to be undertaken. The student teachers are expected to "take a proactive approach to their own learning and seek and avail of support as a collaborative practitioner" (Teaching Council, 2013, p.19). While they are in the school, they engage in team teaching and other activities as they are encouraged to engage with the whole school community. The Teaching Council outlines that they, "in collaboration with the cooperating teacher and other teachers in the school as appropriate, seek and avail of opportunities to observe and work alongside other teachers" (ibid.).

Student teachers prepare and deliver lessons while considering the needs of the learners. The Teaching Council acknowledges that student teachers have the potential to offer their talents and have a positive impact during their school placement as they state that student teachers "recognise that they have much to contribute to the school community" (ibid.). O'Flynn et al. write: "the enthusiasm and energy of the trainee teacher mark this stage" (2003, p.133). Field and Philpott (2000) suggest that the process of hosting student teachers is potentially an important contributory factor to school improvement, especially in relation to the quality of teaching and learning. The Teaching Council (2013, p.20) "recognise (sic) that the student teacher can bring new and innovative practices to the classroom which may benefit the school and its community".

We now examine what a specific framework can offer to enhance the understanding of the role of the student teacher in school placement. The roles and responsibilities of student teachers are outlined in the *Common Reference Framework* (2007, p.15) which states that they are expected to be accountable for their own learning. Student teachers are expected to:

- understand the purpose of the placement within the teacher training programme of their home institution;
- understand the expectations of the exchange placement and negotiate individual targets with their home trainers;
- communicate these targets to their host teachers and work with them towards their achievement;
- maintain a professional log, including records of formative assessment, discussions, and outcomes (ibid.).

In the words of Hayes, (2002, p.47), "student teachers have to be willing to question, reflect, ponder and establish an intelligent dialogue with those who are responsible for their mentoring and training".

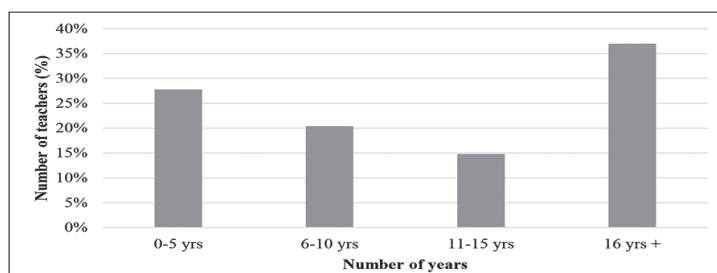
## Presentation of research findings

This research was carried out in three primary schools in Co Cork as part of a master's degree. The aim of the research was to explore participants' experience and understanding of the role of the cooperating teacher in the school placement process. The research proposal and research tools were submitted to the ethics committee in the University of Hull and were approved. Cooperating teachers completed questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were carried out with student teachers and principals. All 60 participants received an information letter and consent was obtained.

### Profile of teachers in this research study

26 (48.2%) participating teachers in this study had less than ten years' teaching experience. This almost equals the number of teachers that have over ten years' teaching experience (51.8%) (n=28).

Fig 1: Number of years of teaching experience of participants in this study



Therefore, there is a blend of youth and experience within the teaching staff of the research schools. Both principals and student teachers identified this as an important factor in the success of the mentoring relationship that develops between the student teacher and the cooperating teacher.

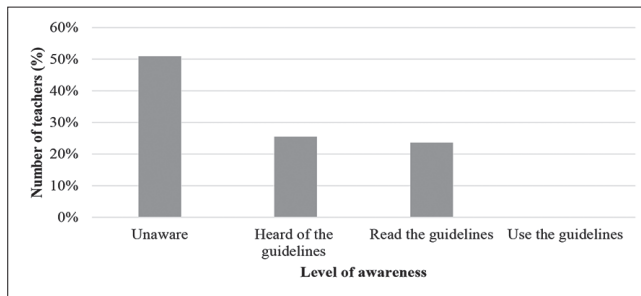
The Teaching Council *Guidelines on School Placement* published in 2013 outline the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders involved in the process.

### The Teaching Council *Guidelines on School Placement* (2013)

The guidelines were issued to "provide a clear blueprint for all involved in facilitating quality school placement experiences" (Teaching Council: 2013, p.3). Only 24% of participants stated they had read these guidelines, while 26% stated they had heard of the guidelines. No participant in this study used these guidelines when hosting a student teacher on school placement. This could be related to the age profile of the staff, as those who most recently completed school placement may have been made aware of these guidelines by the HEIs. However, it is concerning to note that the majority of participants in this study were unaware of the existence of such guidelines, given that many of the teachers in the research schools have hosted student teachers on previous occasions. It clearly shows that inconsistencies will continue to occur as teachers take on this role without knowing the defined roles and responsibilities for cooperating teachers and what exactly is expected of them. Recent research conducted by the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO)

found that 25% of those surveyed were not aware of the Teaching Council guidelines (NicCraith, 2018). Work needs to be done to promote awareness of the existence of these guidelines so that they can be used as envisaged. The reality is that currently there is a significant gap between the theory and the practice in the research schools.

*Fig 2: Participants' awareness of Teaching Council Guidelines on School Placement*



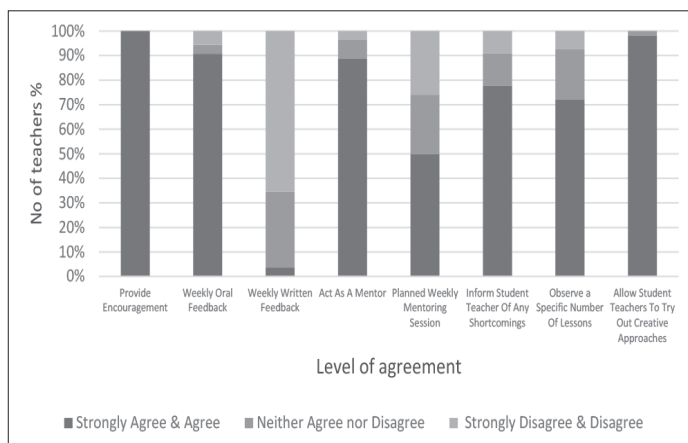
Research in British Columbia acknowledged that the current practices for ensuring that cooperating teachers are professionally prepared for their work are inadequate and fail to address some of the most basic issues associated with their supervisory work (Glickman and Bey, 1990; Knowles and Cole, 1996). Without a clear understanding of the ways in which cooperating teachers participate – or are expected to participate – in teacher education, it is difficult to know how best to support or facilitate that work (Clarke et al. 2014, p.164).

One must explore and understand how the cooperating teachers perceive their role.

### **Exploring the understanding and experiences of participants of the role of the cooperating teacher**

Participants in this study provided an insight into their understanding of this key position and shared reflections based on their experiences of the role of the cooperating teacher. In my research, all student teachers placed a strong emphasis on the importance of the cooperating teacher during their interviews. One principal stated that "young trainee professionals really need people who have patience with them and people who they feel believe that they can, in time, do the job with the correct supports". This sentiment was echoed by another principal who stated that "there's huge influence from the cooperating teacher and they can make or break the placement in many ways".

Fig 3: Participants' perceptions of the role of cooperating teacher



Almost 90% of the teachers described the cooperating teacher as a mentor; a person offering support to the student teacher. One principal observed that "the mentor needs to approach their role in a specific, caring fashion to nurture the student teachers". All participants agreed that the cooperating teacher should provide encouragement to the student teacher. This is linked directly to the Teaching Council's definition of the cooperating teacher. However, one principal commented that "the role of the cooperating teacher seems to be different according to which college you're in". It was felt by many of the participants in the study that the cooperating teacher does not have any significant or meaningful contact with the HEIs. This is a cause for concern, as the Teaching Council (2013, p.7) points out that "school placement is a critical part of initial teacher education". The reality is that currently there is no time allocated for cooperating teachers to meet with HEI placement tutors. Constraints such as this impact on the effectiveness of the experience. Partnership is the guiding spirit that prevails in the relationships between schools and HEIs and in all matters relating to school placement. HEIs design, implement and oversee school placement in a spirit of partnership and collaboration with host schools having regard to the Teaching Council's criteria and current national and international research on ITE (2013, p.18).

It was interesting to note that almost all teachers (98.2%) felt that student teachers should be allowed to try out creative approaches to teaching during their placement, even if these are unfamiliar to the cooperating teacher. One student teacher remarked that "the classroom was a really safe space for me as a teacher, trying to learn and to try to figure out the rights and wrongs", while another highlighted that "the teacher in the class is the person you learn from". Ó Néill (2018) also highlighted that the world of the student teacher on school placement is a complex world and that there is a dual struggle as student teachers have to teach, while they themselves have to learn to teach. The majority of participants (72.2%) agreed that student teachers should be able to settle on a specific number of lesson observations with the cooperating teacher. These findings show that most teachers in the research schools displayed a willingness to engage with, and formed a

positive and supportive relationship with, student teachers. The cooperating teacher plays a critical role as the student teacher's model and mentor and has great influence over the student teacher's learning experience.

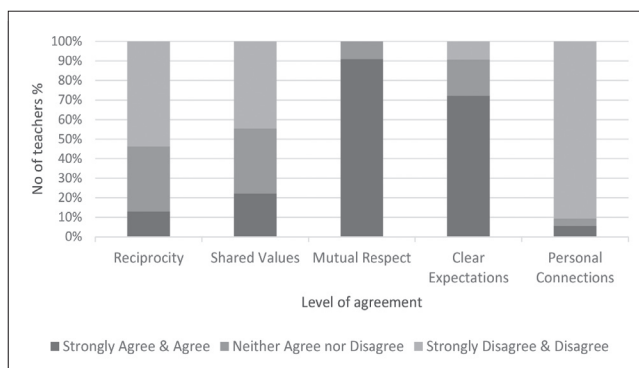
### **Mentoring**

The Teaching Council (2013) definition of mentoring, as given in the introduction to this article, parallels the responses given by the participants in this study. Almost all of the participants (89%) agreed that the cooperating teacher acts as a mentor to the student teacher, while half of the teachers felt that the cooperating teacher should engage in a planned weekly mentoring session with the student teacher. These responses demonstrate a good understanding of the role of the cooperating teacher and a willingness to be involved with the student teachers. Weekly mentoring sessions are standard practice for those working with the Common Reference Framework (2007). The *Kellaghan Report* (2002) and the Teaching Council (2013) both advocate the positive role of cooperating teachers in the development of student teachers. Interestingly, in my own research study, several principals highlighted the need to be aware of the "wellbeing of the student teacher", while student teachers reported that they feel nervous as they want to do well. The area of wellbeing has been highlighted in recent years, leading to the development of *Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion: Well-being in Primary Schools* (2015). School placement can be a difficult time for student teachers as they can feel under pressure to perform, particularly when their HEI placement tutor is in the classroom. HEIs need to promote and support student wellbeing, particularly in relation to school placement:

A focus on teacher wellbeing is helping many individuals and learning environments deal with the very real demands of teaching. That is not to say that many external factors do not need to be addressed, but focusing on wellbeing gives teachers the strength and optimism to challenge and change the way they work without burning out or giving up. Teacher wellbeing is both an individual and a collective responsibility. It is holistic and focuses on the spiritual, physical, mental, and social wellness of teachers as professionals. In practice, it looks different person to person, and place to place. (Teaching Council New Zealand, 2019).

Many student teachers expressed their belief that the valuable opportunity to observe lessons being taught by experienced teachers had helped them to develop as teachers. This corroborates the views expressed in the *Kellaghan Report* (2002). One student teacher commented that "the cooperating teachers are role models, and they are mentors and I think they should take pride in the fact that they can actually teach us as well as their class". However, one principal interviewed was vehemently opposed to teachers having to take on such responsibility without adequate training and remuneration.

Fig 4: Participants' views on the characteristics of successful mentoring relationships



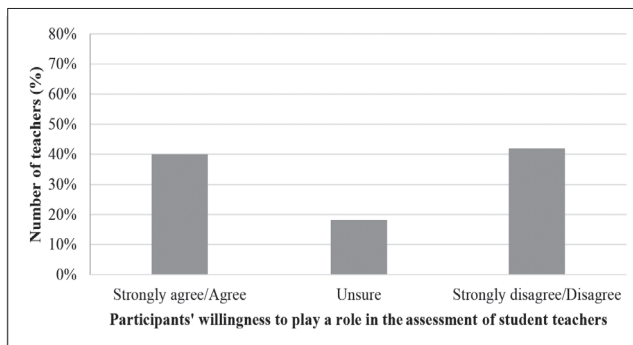
Almost all of the participants in this study (91%) felt that mutual respect is the key characteristic of a successful mentoring relationship. This is fundamental to the guiding principle of partnership in school placement and is one of the key values of the *Code of Conduct for Teachers* (2016). Student teachers confirmed this response when interviewed. Given five characteristics, it was interesting that teachers felt personal connection was the least important aspect to have a successful mentoring relationship (Straus et al., 2013). Principals and student teachers in this study stated that the cooperating teacher needed to be positive and open and, as one student teacher put it, "willing to let the reins go a little" so as to ensure that the school placement is a positive experience for the student teachers. As one principal observed: "willingness on both sides to cooperate and communicate helps to develop a respectful relationship". Another principal stated that it is a two-way system and there must be two-way communication between the cooperating and student teachers. The foundations for developing this successful mentoring relationship are largely dependent on the individuals involved and both parties need to work together to ensure the best outcomes are achieved.

### Assessment of student teachers

In Ireland, the cooperating teacher currently has no role in the formal assessment of the student teacher. Under half of the participants in this study (40%) reported that they would be happy to have a role in assessing the student teacher. However, almost the same percentage (42%) strongly disagree or disagree, while many participants were unsure. Recent research by the INTO (2018) found that 52% of teachers felt they should be involved in the assessment of student teachers. It is of note that the student teachers reported during interviews that it would be a "good idea" and "very beneficial" as the "cooperating teacher is present from the beginning to the end of the placement – on both good and bad days" and it would give a "more rounded view of your teaching". The student teachers' comments support the views expressed by the Inspectorate in *Learning to Teach* (2006) as they advocated for the involvement of cooperating teachers in the assessment of students undertaking placement in their classrooms. However, principals in my research study were more divided on this issue and they felt that having teachers involved in assessment of

student teachers would require training for those involved, as one principal commented that "teachers have no training to assess students and that kind of assessment can be quite subjective". Principals stated that they would welcome a consultative approach so that teachers could speak with the HEI tutors with one participant stating, "I definitely think they (HEIs) should take on board what the impression of the school would be". This was corroborated by the findings of the INTO (2018), which stated that 85% of teachers would be "happy to discuss the student teachers' progress with their tutor", while 79% of principals said that "teachers who host STs should give informal feedback to STs' placement tutors". However, another participant in my study stated that "the parameters of it would have to be very clearly delineated" if this consultation was to occur as the feedback could influence the tutor.

*Fig 5: Cooperating teachers and involvement in the formal assessment of student teachers*



Research undertaken with students in Maynooth University presented by Ó Néill (2018) showed that student teachers generally feel well supported in schools and by the HEI tutors, although students expressed concerns about the level of consistency among HEI placement tutors as they felt there were many differing opinions. Interestingly, Corrigan (2018) stated that one aspect of the role of the HEI placement tutor at the University of Strathclyde is to undertake a joint and shared assessment with the class teacher based on the GTCS standards. This presents a new possibility to allow the cooperating teacher and tutor to sit together to observe a lesson and agree a grade between them based on the evidence in their notes which offers a compromise, balancing the views expressed by student teachers and principals in this study. Since the introduction of the new programmes there are opportunities for student teachers to engage in a range of teaching and non-teaching activities within the school during the extended placement.

### **Benefits of hosting student teachers for the wider school community**

The principals involved in this study felt that the student teachers brought a freshness, as well as up-to-date strategies and teaching methodologies to the school. They commented that "it is always good to get an influx of fresh ideas and enthusiasm". This corresponds with the findings of Martin (2011) and Ní Áingléis et al. (2012). The recent research by

the INTO (2018) corroborates this, as 73% of principals and 67% of teachers agreed that "the staff are exposed to new and current thinking and practice". As the level of negative response in my study is low, it is possible to infer that the schools have experienced hosting student teachers as being very positive. This finding shows that teachers are aware of the value of fertilisation of new ideas that acts as a counter impetus to stagnation within the research schools. One principal commented that the school placement can be a "very enriching experience for all concerned", while Maher (2018) stated that one of the goals of school placement is that student teachers begin to understand the nature of the profession and its core business – teaching and learning.

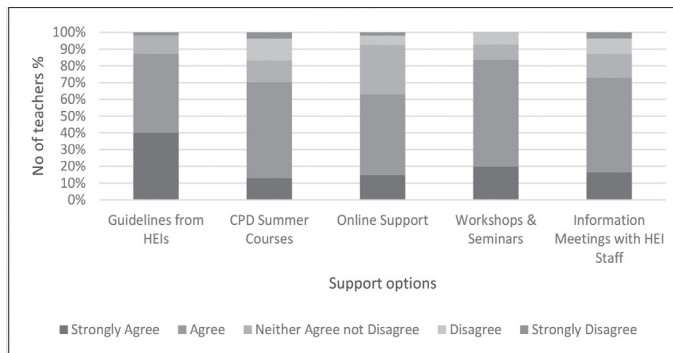
Mentoring student teachers is a challenging responsibility to undertake, given the need to support and guide them during their school placement. Cooperating teachers are responsible for moving student teachers from a focus on theory to a focus on application and pupil learning.

### **Supporting cooperating teachers in the future**

All participants agreed that continuing professional development (CPD) would help them as they take on the role of cooperating teacher. Remy (2015, p.4) argued that "the mentor's role must be supported", and it was clear that the participants in this study agreed; 73% of participants displayed their caring nature towards student teachers as they stated they would like information meetings with HEI staff on the role of the cooperating teacher, while 87% would welcome guidelines from HEIs. This finding shows there is a high degree of willingness within the research schools to undertake CPD. However, given that one eighth of the teachers in the research schools are unwilling, this could cause problems, as it indicates a level of resistance is present also. This finding supports the Teaching Council's statement (2013) that HEIs have a significant role to play in fostering the learning of cooperating teachers and the wider school community. Maher (2018) stated that the professional work done by schools as part of the school placement process is very valuable and he would welcome professional induction/placement 'markers' (protocols) for schools and subsequent accreditation as 'teaching schools'. He advocates a career path for teachers in the future so that there would be "linkage to a longer term of accredited CPD for the practising teachers that sustains and develops them throughout their career". The INTO research presented in April 2018 found that, with regards to professional learning, 72% of principals agreed that "hosting a student teacher is a valid form of professional development", while 84% of teachers surveyed believed that "hosting a student teacher should be recognised as a valid form of professional development". This finding is contradictory to the views of the principals interviewed for this study who believed that hosting a student teacher, while worthwhile, was not really providing CPD for the cooperating teachers.



Fig 6: Cooperating teachers and support options for the future



The concept of partnership between HEIs and schools is a key concept in the school placement process. Ó Néill (2018) raises the question "How can collaborative partnerships be developed between schools and universities?" and highlights the views of Harford and O'Doherty (2016), which "question the limited concept of partnership that has emerged from the policy context and cite the absence of investment and resources as a significant impediment to the development of a meaningful partnership model".

Hall et al., (2018, p.15) reported that school-HEI partnerships are developing with high levels of communication and sharing of documentation from HEIs to schools, including communication between student teachers and schools about the requirements of their school placement. Workshops, seminars, online support and summer courses provided in local education centres were other options that would be beneficial ways to help cooperating teachers in their role according to the participants in this study. In recent years, seminars have been hosted in the HEIs to further explore the role of stakeholders within the school placement process. It is worth noting that as far back as 2014, a joint INTO-St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, seminar took place on the topic of 'School Placement: Roles and Relationships – Challenges and Opportunities'. However, it became clear during interviews that the principals in the research schools had never been invited to attend these seminars and were unaware that such seminars had taken place. One principal was advocating that such opportunities should become available as a support to principals and cooperating teachers. They stated that it is important to meet with the HEIs and have round table discussions so that all involved in the process can tease out the issues and share information. It is worth extending the invitation to attend these joint seminars to a wider audience and allow for feedback and suggestion to come from interested parties, representing the stakeholders involved in school placement.

In this whole educational process, the key person is the cooperating teacher who links with the HEI, and is the person delegated by the principal to support and mentor the student teacher for the duration of the placement. Supports are needed for the cooperating teachers to enhance their role and the guiding principle of partnership between HEIs and schools needs to be developed in practice. O'Grady's study (2017, p.149) suggests that:

CTs are the invisible partners in SP partnerships, whose expertise will be needed to help both schools and HEIs develop more collaborative partnership practices in the future. The development and communication of a shared understanding by all stakeholders concerning partnerships, the language of partnerships, and the formalisation of necessary resources for their sustainability are required.

## Conclusion

As a cooperating teacher during my secondment to the European School in Luxembourg, I found it was very beneficial to have a framework document which guided the weekly reflections between the cooperating and student teacher. Weekly mentoring sessions are standard practice for those working with the *Common Reference Framework* (2007). These meetings take place at an agreed time each week and allow for reflection and discussion between cooperating and student teachers. Feedback on lesson observations and the review and setting of targets are facilitated by the clear structured templates given in the document. A similar document for use in Irish primary schools would be beneficial and the Teaching Council could use their existing guidelines to develop such a structured support document. Training would have to be provided to teachers so that the document could be used successfully by teachers during school placements. This could be achieved through the local education centres running seminars and workshops.

There is a need for the Teaching Council to ensure that all teachers are made aware of the *Guidelines for School Placement* (2013). It is vital that a consistent approach is taken by all teachers who take on the role of cooperating teacher. It is a hugely influential role and student teachers have expressed their concerns based on the various approaches taken by cooperating teachers that they have experienced during their school placements to date. The Teaching Council and the HEIs should consider a joint venture where resources would be shared and communicated more effectively with teachers and schools in relation to school placement, so that a more positive outcome is achieved which would benefit all involved in the process.

This matter could be addressed by having a designated liaison person assigned responsibility for the student placement process within each school. This role would mean that one person on staff could take responsibility for the coordination of hosting student teachers, communicating with all parties involved and ensuring that all relevant documents, such as the Teaching Council *Guidelines on School Placement* (2013) and the guidelines from the HEIs, are given to the cooperating teachers. A booklet for student teachers with useful and practical information, such as timetables and school routines, could be designed so that student teachers could gain an insight into the school. The *Guidelines on School Placement* are currently being reviewed. The Working Group on School Placement was due to report in September 2019 and the second edition of the *Guidelines on School Placement* is expected to follow.

HEIs need to find more ways to engage in a meaningful manner with the schools they are partnering with to provide school placement. Workshops and seminars that

facilitate discussion and allow for all stakeholders to present their views on the benefits and challenges they are experiencing as part of the process would be welcome. An annual review with all concerned could inform changes to ensure a much more positive and successful experience for all involved. However, this adds extra burden to HEIs, and human resources are already stretched.

The INTO carried out research on this topic and presented the findings at a joint INTO/Froebel NUIM seminar on school placement in April 2018. Seminars such as the latter could be used to inform changes to policy and practice, as all stakeholders are represented and the constructive dialogue that takes place seeks to ensure that school placement provides a valuable learning experience for student teachers. It is anticipated that the survey findings together with feedback on the day will allow the INTO to inform policy better and seek to address the current challenges of school placement.

My research study unearthed significant levels of willingness among teachers to support student teachers through their school placements. However, it also discovered that cooperating teachers feel unsupported in their role by the HEIs, the Department of Education and Skills or the Teaching Council, and points to features of such support that are vitally needed, as "not only is it important to look after the student teachers but also the class teachers who are giving their time, their expertise, their patience and their class to the students" (INTO, 2017, p.15).

"Leadership in any context, including that of the professional, is a lifelong journey, a process of learning" (Teaching Council, 2013, p.2). Leadership from all stakeholders in the school placement process is required now to ensure that improvements can be made to the system which will enhance the educational journey of all involved. Working together and building on partnerships between all of the stakeholders that have been established will help to deliver the best possible school placement experiences in the future.

Student teachers consider cooperating teachers to be one of the most important contributors to their development as teachers. Therefore, the ways in which cooperating teachers participate in initial teacher education are significant for the future of education in Ireland.

## References

- Anderson, D. (2009). *The Impact of Cooperating Teachers on the Teaching Perspectives of Student Teachers*. Melbourne: Common Ground Publishing.
- Anglo-French Bilateral Piloting Committee (2007). *Cadre Commun D'Objectifs/Common Reference Framework*. Available at: [www.ecml.at/Portals/1/CCO-CRE\\_2007.pdf](http://www.ecml.at/Portals/1/CCO-CRE_2007.pdf) (Accessed 6 January 2017).
- Clarke, A., Triggs, V., and Wendy, R. (2004). Cooperating Teacher Participation in Teacher Education: A Review of the Literature. *Review of Educational Research*, June 2014, Vol. 84, No. 2, pp.163-202.
- Corrigan, A. (2018). *Joint Seminar on School Placement: School College Partnerships – 4 years of progress*. Unpublished presentation. NUIM: Saturday, 14 April.

- Conway, P., Murphy, R., Rath, A., and Hall, K. (2009). *Learning to Teach and its Implications for the Continuum of Teacher Education: A Nine-Country Cross-National Study*. Maynooth: The Teaching Council.
- Department of Education and Skills (DES), National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), Health Service Executive (HSE), Department of Health. (2015). *Well-Being in Primary Schools – Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.
- Department of Education and Science (DES). (2006). *Learning to Teach. Students on Teaching Practice in Irish Primary School*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.
- Field, K., and Philpott, C. (2000). The impact of hosting student teachers on school effectiveness and school improvement. *Journal of In-Service Education*, 26:1, 115-137.
- Glickman, C.D., and Bey, T.M. (1990). Supervision. In: W.R. Houston, M. Haberman, and J. Sikula (Eds.) *Handbook of research on teacher education*, pp.549-566. New York: Macmillan.
- Government of Ireland (2002). *Preparing teachers for the 21st century: Report of the Working Group on Primary Pre-service Teacher Education. (The Kellaghan Report)* Dublin: The Stationery Office.
- Hall, K., Murphy, R., Rutherford, V., and Ní Áingléis, B. (2018). *School Placement in Initial Teacher Education Final Report*. Maynooth: The Teaching Council.
- Harford, J., and O'Doherty, T. (2016). The Discourse of Partnership and the Reality of Reform: Interrogating the Recent Reform Agenda at Initial Teacher Education and Induction Levels in Ireland. *Center for Educational Policy Studies Journal*, Vol. 6, No.3 pp:37-58.
- Hayes, D. (2002). *Foundations of Primary Teaching Second Edition*. Great Britain: David Fulton Publishers Ltd.
- Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO). (2017). *Colleges of Education/Initial Teacher Education Providers and Schools. School Placement: Experiences, Challenges and Possibilities*. Joint INTO-Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, Seminar, April 2016. Dublin: INTO.
- Knowles, G.J., and Cole, A.L. (1996). Developing practice through field experiences. In: F.B. Murray (Ed.) *The Teacher Educator's Handbook: Building a Knowledge Base for the Preparation of Teachers*, p. xv. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Kruger, T., Davies, A.C., Eckersley, B., Newell, F., and Cherednichenko, B. (2009). *Effective and sustainable university-school partnerships: Beyond determined efforts by inspired individuals*. Canberra: Teaching Australia. Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership.
- Maher, M. (2018). *School Placement: A Whole School Approach*. Unpublished presentation. NUIM. Saturday, 14 April.
- Martin, M. (2011). *Teacher Professional Development Partnership with Schools Project: Evaluation Report*. Dublin: St Patrick's College.
- Maynooth University. (n.d.). [www.maynoothuniversity.ie/sites/default/files/assets/document/Overview%20of%20SP\\_o.pdf](http://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/sites/default/files/assets/document/Overview%20of%20SP_o.pdf) (Accessed: 24 July 2019).
- Moran, A., and Dallat, J. (1995). Promoting reflective practice in initial teacher training. *International Journal of Educational Management*, Vol. 9 No. 5, pp.20-26.

- Ní Áingléis, B., Murphy, P., and Ruane, B. (2012). Student teacher voice and school placement: What we can learn if we listen. In: F. Waldron, J. Smith, M. Fitzpatrick, and T. Dooley (Eds.) *Re-Imagining Initial Teacher Education: Perspectives on Transformation*, pp.307-328. Dublin: Liffey Press.
- Nic Craith, D. (2018). *School Placement – INTO Survey Results*. Unpublished presentation. NUIM: Saturday, 14 April.
- O'Flynn, S., Kennedy, H., and MacGrath, M. (2003). *Get Their Attention! How to gain the respect of students and thrive as a teacher*. Great Britain: David Fulton Publishers Ltd.
- O'Grady, S. (2017). *Policy, practice and partnership: An exploration of the perspectives of postprimary school-based teacher educators in relation to school placement*. Doctoral Thesis. Available at: <http://doras.dcu.ie/21971/1/S.OGrady.2017.EdD.Thesis.12272582.Registry..pdf>.
- Ó Néill, S. (2018). *Joint Seminar on School Placement: School College Partnerships*. Unpublished presentation. NUIM. Saturday, 14 April.
- Remy, P. (2016). Tutoring and Mentoring: An A.R.C. Model for Future Teachers: Affective, Reflexive and Cognitive Orientation to Self-Regulated Learning. *Practice and Theory in Systems of Education*, 10(4), pp.323-328.
- Scottish Negotiating Committee for Teachers (SNCT). (2007). *SNCT Handbook*, 2.8, g. Available at: [www.snct.org.uk/wiki/index.php?title=Part\\_2\\_Section\\_2](http://www.snct.org.uk/wiki/index.php?title=Part_2_Section_2).
- Straus, S., Johnson, M., Marquez, C., and Feldman, M. (2013). Characteristics of Successful and Failed Mentoring Relationships: A Qualitative Study Across Two Academic Health Centers. *MD Academic Medicine*, 88, (1) pp.82-89.
- Teaching Council of Ireland. (2011). *Policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education*. Maynooth: The Teaching Council.
- Teaching Council of Ireland. (2013). *Guidelines on School Placement*. Maynooth: The Teaching Council.
- Teaching Council of Ireland. (2016). *Code of Professional Conduct for Teachers: 2nd edition*. Maynooth: The Teaching Council.
- Teaching Council of Ireland. (2017). *Initial Teacher Education: Criteria and Guidelines for Programme Providers Revised Edition*. Maynooth: The Teaching Council.
- Teaching Council of New Zealand. (n.d.). *The very real value of teacher wellbeing*. Available at: [teachingcouncil.nz/content/very-real-value-of-teacher-wellbeing](http://teachingcouncil.nz/content/very-real-value-of-teacher-wellbeing). (Accessed: 24 July 2019).
- The General Teaching Council for Scotland. (2014). *Student Placement System*. Available at: [www.gtcs.org.uk/home/student-placement-system.aspx](http://www.gtcs.org.uk/home/student-placement-system.aspx). (Accessed: 15 April 18).
- The General Teaching Council for Scotland. (2012). *The Standards for Leadership and Management: supporting leadership and management development*. Available at: [www.gtcs.org.uk/web/files/the-standards/standards-for-leadership-and-management-1212.pdf](http://www.gtcs.org.uk/web/files/the-standards/standards-for-leadership-and-management-1212.pdf). (Accessed: 24 July 2019).
- Watkins, A. (2016). *Role of the Principal in Beginning Teacher Induction*. Available at: <https://newteachercenter.org/wp-content/uploads/Role-of-Principal-in-Teacher-Induction.pdf>. (Accessed on 24 July 2019).

# ⇒ Distributed leadership in Irish primary schools with a teaching principal ⇒

⇒ David Brennan ⇒

## Abstract

School leadership from a distributed perspective is influenced by the dynamic interaction between followers and leaders and the positional situation of followers in a school. Developments within the educational sector have increased the roles and responsibilities of those who work in our schools and have driven the need to broaden our approach to understanding the concept of leadership in our schools. This research focused on gaining a sense of the existence of distributed leadership from an Irish perspective, specifically in primary schools in rural Ireland. Teachers discussed distributed leadership under seven assigned dimensions and provided examples of how it was evident in their own school. Following analysis of the interviews, teachers wanted strong leaders that could make clear consistent decisions. They thought individuals with a good knowledge of the education system could positively lead the school and facilitate distributed leadership. They wanted a principal that had the ability to balance being a leader in the school and giving them the autonomy to make decisions in their own classrooms while contributing to leadership practices in the school. The principals' acceptance of distributed leadership and the degree of its facilitation in the school proved noteworthy.

*Keywords:* distributed leadership, principal autonomy, school structures, school culture.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Conceptual framework for studying distributed leadership in this research project

Elmore (2004) created the *Distributed Leadership Readiness Scale* which incorporated the dimensions of mission, vision and goals, school culture, decision-making, evaluation and professional development, and leadership practices. This was adapted by Gordan (2005) and reduced to mission, vision and goals, school culture, shared responsibility, and leadership practices. The researcher studied these conceptual frameworks and combined them with a report by the European School Heads Association in 2013, which identified seven factors of distributed leadership (Duif, 2013) that were congruent with both Gordon (2005) and Elmore (2004) dimensions. This proved suitable to utilise within this research as it was relevant to the Irish primary school context and was a more contemporary examination of distributed leadership in schools.

The report was commissioned by the European Policy Network of School Leaders and undertaken by European Trade Union Committee for Education and European School

Heads Association (Duif, 2013). The factors examined in the report include the effect that a formal school structure has on distributed leadership. A formal structure allows staff members the opportunity to participate in decision-making in a school. Leadership practices provide insights into how school leaders act and the leadership routines within the structure of the school (Spillane et al., 2004). The report also examined the existence of a shared vision within a distributed educational environment. Vision in schools is a core aspect of effective leadership, "it is not a luxury but a necessity; without it, workers drift in confusion or, worse, act at cross-purposes" (Nanus, 1992). It serves to provide "a sense of direction, motivates the workforce, provides meaning for the work being done and provides a basis for organisational norms and structures" (Gill, 2011).

The guidelines for establishing a vision provided by Yukl (2006) could provide a good starting point for primary schools; involve stakeholders, identify strategic objectives, link to core competencies, evaluate credibility of vision and continually review. Collaborative vision creation can build commitment among staff (Leithwood and Jantzi, 2000) and it has the possibility of meeting the needs of all stakeholders (Kotter, 1996). Values and beliefs within a school can be seen as an important element of distributed leadership. Elmore (2000) explains how important common values are in distributing leadership: "In a knowledge-intensive enterprise like teaching and learning, there is no way to perform these complex tasks without widely distributing the responsibility for leadership among roles in the organisation, and without working hard at creating a common culture, or set of values, symbols, and rituals". Collaboration and cooperation should be facilitated throughout a school's leadership structure, with teachers working cooperatively towards school goals. The structure of the decision-making process within a school environment was valid in conceptualising distributed leadership. It was noticeable that, when teachers were given time to make their own decisions in relation to their own work and organisation, there was a greater sense of collective responsibility for the subsequent decisions (Duif, 2013). Accountability and responsibility were important. Staff remained accountable for their own actions and a peer feedback structure was in place. Sharing responsibility reinforces the idea that there is not one leader and the responsibility should be shared between the staff members (Storey, 2004). As Elmore (2000) proposes, this should be formed according to the interests, skills, experience, and areas of expertise of each member. The implementation of initiatives into the school and individual teachers' classrooms was encouraged in a distributed school, with each teacher's expertise being acknowledged and a general expectation that staff would contribute their own ideas to initiatives (Duif, 2013).

The primary educational environment in Ireland is evolving constantly and the 21st century schooling of children will require a modern approach to leadership and leadership capacity (OECD, 2008). Hallinger (2009) states that distributed leadership can contribute to the academic improvement in schools, which can contribute indirectly to student learning outcomes. Distributed leadership has been examined through various concepts and can be quite difficult to define. This can lead to it being challenging to identify in practical operations and lead to ineffectiveness if it is not effectively planned and implemented in a school environment. As a leadership model, distributed leadership has limitations but may be a beneficial addition to a school's leadership strategy. It can create a collaborative

and cooperative learning environment based on trust and professional accountability. It prepares staff members to assume new responsibilities at work and promotes active involvement by creating a sharing and open environment. Distributed leadership is gaining more prominence in contemporary leadership research, although there is only emergent empirical research to support this form of leadership. Bennett et al. (2003) note in their review of the literature on distributed leadership, "there were almost no empirical studies of distributed leadership in action". Increased research and examination of the subject is needed in order to understand further to what extent distributed leadership exists in Irish primary schools. From reviewing literature on leadership, the need to re-conceptualise leadership practice in modern primary schools is becoming more apparent to meet the new demands of the educational sector. Distributed leadership may occur and exist in primary schools naturally and increasing the amount of research in this area may prove beneficial to further understanding and adapting it as a relevant model of leadership.

### **Research design**

A mixed methods approach was used. Using a combination of research methods provides a more comprehensive picture to examine if distributed leadership exists in Irish primary schools. It provides a more accurate method to explore phenomena and reduces limitations evident in each method (Creswell, 2007). A semi-structured interview following a previously administered questionnaire aids a better understanding of the findings obtained and allows the researcher the opportunity to examine participants' thoughts and actions (Kendall, 2008). This structure also enabled the researcher to include aspects in the quantitative element of the study that arose in the qualitative element (Bryman, 2006). A questionnaire was issued to ten teachers and five teaching principals to examine the existence of distributed leadership in their schools. The research was carried out in five Irish primary schools that contained a teaching principal. The questionnaire helped to structure the questions for a semi-structured interview which was held with a selection of the same participants. Teachers discussed distributed leadership under seven assigned dimensions and provided examples of how it was evident in their own school. The dimensions include school structure, vision for education, values and beliefs, collaboration and cooperation, responsibility and accountability, decision-making and initiatives in schools in the study sample. For the purposes of this study, distributed leadership is defined as a leadership practice which involves leadership and responsibility sharing in a school (Spillane et al., 2004).

### **Participants and sample size**

Participants were selected by the researcher with  $N=15$ . Two teachers were selected from each of the five primary schools by non-probability sampling (ten teaching participants). The five teaching principals were selected from the same schools (five teaching principal participants). Three of the study schools were in County Galway with two schools in County Meath. Both sets of participants (teachers and teaching principals) needed to be



included in the research to have a balanced view from the perspective of those in formally designated leadership positions and from the perspective of followers.

**Results and discussion on findings**

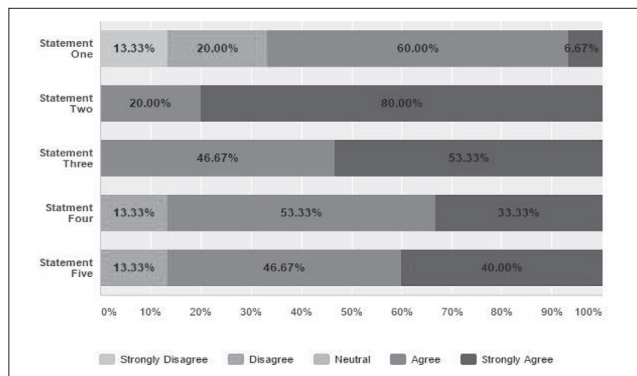
The research conducted highlights evidence of distributed leadership practice within the five primary schools that took part in the study under the seven areas examined in the questionnaire and expanded upon in the post semi-structured interview. The questionnaire administered was broken up into seven sections. For convenience, and in order to maintain a structure on the reporting and discussion on findings, the researcher has used these headings in this part of the research project. The researcher includes relevant graphs and data analysis in the discussion of results.

**School structure**

**Statement:** To what extent do you agree with the following statements about your school?

1. Tasks and responsibilities are hierarchically decided by the principal and leaders in our school.
2. At our school there are formally agreed leadership roles.
3. School staff make decisions within predetermined boundaries of responsibility and accountability.
4. The school structure formally provides everyone with opportunities to participate in decision-making.
5. The formal structure in our school facilitates informal leadership at all levels in the organisation.

*Fig 1: Stacked horizontal bar reflecting percentage results from section 1 of questionnaire*



Responses from the first set of statements identified that a traditional school structure was in place in the five primary schools that were included in the research sample. 80% of participants strongly agreed that a principal was the main authority figure within a school. This was reflected in question three of the questionnaire, with all individuals either

agreeing or strongly agreeing that staff make decisions within predetermined boundaries of responsibility. One participant, during the interviews conducted, mentioned that, "although we as a staff all have our own responsibilities, the principal of the school in general has the last word on matters". 66.67% of respondents further believed that tasks and responsibilities are decided by principals in a school. This highlights the importance of the role of the principal as reviewed in the literature review in a distributed environment.

86.66% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the structure in the school supported collaborative decision-making, which is evident in a distributed leadership environment, along with 86.67% believing it further supported informal leadership at all levels in the school. Upon further elaboration during the semi-structured interview, interviewees felt that teachers perceived themselves to be leaders within their schools.

The context of leadership for the teachers involved leadership within their own classroom domain. This manifests itself through being leaders of their students within the classroom and having a direct influence on their learning. Interview participants spoke of being able "to lead in their own classroom and set the standard and monitor and support student learning", they also felt that "the school environment had sufficient systems in place to support them, particularly with the introduction of the self-evaluation process where the school is now analysing results of examinations such as the Micra-T and using the data to review practices".

Outside of the classroom, their leadership influence was varied and included "taking responsibility for a certain sport – its training and organising of matches – one teacher is in charge of the music aspect of the school, another is assigned a role as drama and arts coordinator. In general, teachers are assigned subject curricular areas and they work as coordinators organising resources and making sure that best practice is being enforced".

Upon expansion of this topic in the semi-structured interviews, the respondents identified a number of leadership practices in their schools that encouraged the taking on of responsibility. These included the design and annual review of school policies with a particular focus on improving students' academic achievement through the development of a high-quality learning environment, which enhances the overall educational experience of pupils in schools. One of the schools in the study is categorised as a DEIS rural school. The principal was able to show the researcher a recently compiled draft school leadership policy which had a section on distributed leadership. The points outlined include:

1. Ensure staff work cooperatively together and provide opportunities of collaboration on both academic and extra-curricular initiatives undertaken in the school.
2. Discussing school development priorities at staff meetings.
3. Professional development on whole-school issues.
4. Collectively prioritising specific actions to improve learning.
5. Senior management promotes commitment among staff to the whole school.
6. Staff have commitment to the whole school.
7. Staff are encouraged to take on leadership roles.
8. Staff take responsibility for intervening when they see something which runs against school policy.
9. There is a shared vision among staff as to where the school is going.

One point that arose when examining the school structure was the involvement of pupils in the decision-making process in schools. Although, as stated in the literature review, it was not feasible to include students in the study structure, it proves an interesting concept for further research examining the processes for involving pupils in decision-making. Along with students, the principal was keen to stress that parents are encouraged to take on leadership roles: "Our pupils thrive because they are supported, encouraged, cared for and feel a real sense of belonging. Leadership is fostered through the establishment of the Students' Council, the Green School Committee, the Diversity Committee, the Active School Committee, and the Health Promoting School Committee. All children learn the importance of teamwork, acting responsibly and showing respect for one another".

The formal structure in the schools examined was identical to the structure outlined in the literature review. All five schools that were part of the research project were Catholic and were led by a board of management and the principal of the school. The formal role of the principal was expanded upon during the semi-structured interview. The interviewees who had experience working in a number of schools stated that the principal can have either a positive or negative impact on a school environment and on distributed leadership. The teachers that were interviewed felt that the principal promoted teachers to take on responsibilities within a school by acknowledging their contributions and valuing the extra effort that teachers put into school every day. They also ensured that teachers were recognised adequately to the best of the principal's ability. One interviewee gave an example of: "at the end of the school year all staff who undertook extra-curricular activities within the school or were involved in the implementation of a school initiative were invited out to dinner by the board of management". The same interviewee also stated that, within the school, there was an awareness of who was undertaking extra responsibilities and members of staff would offer support, their time, and any additional resources that the individual might need.

One principal interviewee identified open communication as a key aspect of any efficiently run school that contained distributed leadership. He felt that it was a communal leadership effort to educate a student.

Our whole school community nurtures a proactive partnership between the pupil, the school and the home. Parents/guardians are extremely supportive, and we encourage regular contact both formally and informally throughout their children's time with us. By working in partnership, we can build the foundations for a strong and bright future for them.

Overall, the schools examined demonstrated a sufficient structure to support distributed leadership in general. The role of principals was highlighted and the importance they play in facilitating distributed leadership in a school was apparent. Results from the survey and evidence from the semi-structured interviews highlighted the existence of distributed leadership in several areas.

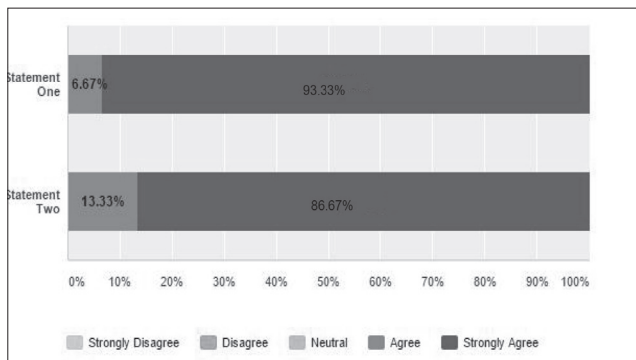
### Vision for education in our school

Results from the questionnaire highlight the existence of a collaborative vision in the primary schools examined. It also supports the existence of professional accountability and highlights that staff take ownership of their own tasks and activities.

**Statement:** To what extent do you agree with the following statements about your school?

1. At our school we have a shared vision.
2. Staff take ownership of their own tasks and activities.

Fig 2: Stacked Horizontal Bar reflecting percentage results from section 2 of questionnaire



Respondents agreed unanimously and strongly with both statements on the administered questionnaire. Upon elaboration during the conducted interviews, participants highlighted the importance of the school vision statement, the collaborative approach staff members take to ensure its implementation, and the role that the principal plays in ensuring a shared vision among staff members. All interviewees noted that the vision for their school was guided by the Catholic ethos and was included on the school website to ensure that all members of the school community had access to it. Interviewees further elaborated on the point and agreed that all members of staff took responsibility to ensure that the school was meeting its vision. Another interviewee further elaborated on this point and highlighted their own school's vision which was irrefutably entwined with the Catholic ethos and vision. The vision for their school was "Each person through positive learning experiences will be stimulated to achieve his/her full potential, face life confidently, find fulfilment and be respectful in an ever-changing world."

All interviewees believed that all staff members were working towards their school's vision and that the principal led by example and had a key role to play in ensuring its effective implementation. This point supports the researcher's literature review that highlighted the role a principal has in ensuring distributed leadership in Irish primary schools.

Principal interviewees further elaborated on the leadership role teachers played in regard to students and the school communities' pastoral care. They felt that it was one of the predominant factors in the successful running of a school and was a noteworthy addition into any examination of distributed leadership or leadership in a primary school. A community-led approach to the education of students was the most beneficial, according

to interviewees.

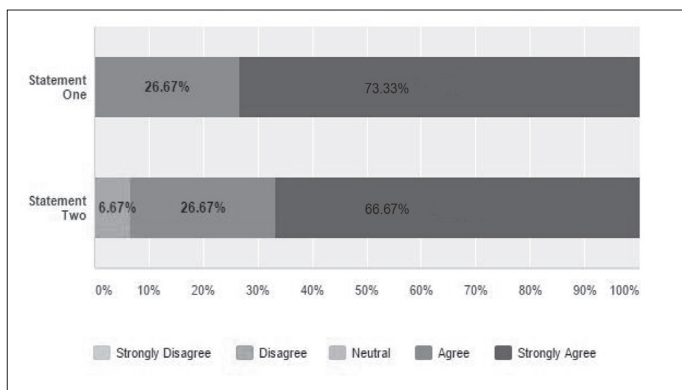
One interviewee stated that there was an adaption in leadership approaches in recent years and an improvement in the overall climate within the school. They stated that the principal had made extraordinary efforts to ensure that all members of the school community began to work together cooperatively. A review was made of all formal and informal leadership positions in the school and all teachers over time were given the opportunity to assume a leadership position in a certain area. Cooperation, rather than competition, was promoted as the best way to promote productivity and a positive work environment in the school. Staff morale, motivation and the overall school environment improved immensely due to this adaption according to the interviewee.

### Values and beliefs in our school

**Statement:** To what extent do you agree with the following statements about your school?

1. Colleagues have confidence in each other's abilities.
2. There is mutual respect among the professionals in our school.

*Fig 3: Stacked horizontal bar reflecting percentage results from section 3 of questionnaire*



From responses from the questionnaire and further elaboration through the semi-structured interviews, trust, loyalty and hard work were attributes that were acknowledged as being core values and beliefs in the primary schools examined. There was a consensus that there was always an expectation of a high standard of professionalism in the school, with one interviewee stating that, "staff go to great lengths to ensure that anything that they put their hand to, they do so to the best of their ability".

Respondents also further highlighted the professional respect all staff had for each other with 93.34% of questionnaire respondents either agreeing or strongly agreeing with the second statement.

During the conducted interviews, interviewees stated that teachers and the principal often discussed ideas for lessons, initiatives, and shared anecdotal stories about students' progress in the staff room.

One of the principal respondents referred to a recent visit from departmental inspectors, stating that "they too had acknowledged the hard work teachers were doing in their own classes and the commitment they showed".

For the respondent, it further supported his trust in the staff's leadership abilities. He felt that everyone in the school was working towards a common objective of ensuring that students received the best possible education and were provided with every possible opportunity during their formative years. The principal went on to elaborate about the various voluntary leadership roles that staff assumed in the school. These encompassed the following areas – initiatives implemented (Green Flag, Active Schools, Digital Schools of Distinction), sports integration, community-driven initiatives (Tidy Towns), and cultural and musical schemes.

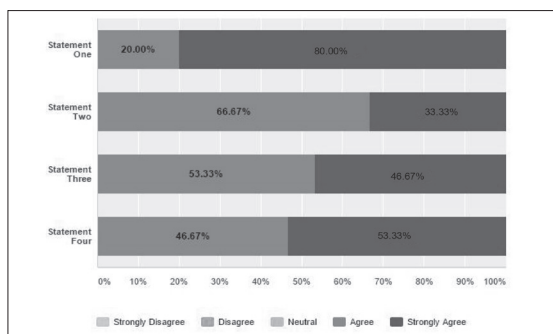
Loyalty was seen as being an important aspect of creating a friendly, effective school. Teachers supporting each other and developing good professional relationships was actively encouraged in the classrooms through initiatives, such as team teaching and in-class resource support. Open communication between all staff in the school was stated by one interviewee as being essential. Results from both research media suggest that within the study group there was a strong consensus that staff colleagues have respect and confidence in each other's abilities. This aspect is a necessary component in schools that demonstrate distributed leadership and may further support its existence in the schools examined.

### Collaboration and cooperation in our school

**Statement:** To what extent do you agree with the following statements about your school?

1. We work collaboratively to deliver school results.
2. We express our opinions on a regular basis.
3. We share our knowledge and experiences with one another.
4. We help one another to solve problems and are provided sufficient time to collaborate with our colleagues on work related issues.

Fig 4: Stacked horizontal bar reflecting percentage results from section 4 of questionnaire



Responses from the questionnaire administered highlighted a collaborative atmosphere where teachers are encouraged to share their experience and express their opinions within

the schools examined in this study. Upon expansion of this point during the interview process, teachers felt that they had a cooperative working relationship with the principal and work colleagues. The interviewees expanded on this point highlighting a number of areas where distributed and collaborative leadership was evident between them and the principal.

During the implementation of the Active Flag and Digital Schools of Distinction initiatives this year we both worked in tandem to ensure they were successfully completed.

We worked as a team to review the school policy on anti-bullying this year and to implement a new anti-bullying strategy into the school. In addition, each staff member was assigned a leadership role in reviewing, drafting and implementing a school policy at the start of the year.

Interviewees also highlighted the various formal and informal leadership roles that existed in their own schools. Although responsibilities and leadership roles were seen to be distributed; senior members "do have more of a say in certain aspects". One interviewee did mention that they found it quite stressful that this was a common occurrence and gave the following example:

Last year was the first year our school participated in the Active Flag initiative. I was assigned the coordinator role as I was most qualified in the school, holding a Master's degree in this area and having experience in the health and wellness sector outside of the educational environment. As the year progressed, I found myself – although in the coordinator leadership role position – having to get the approval of the physical education duties post holder on some aspects namely accessing resources for the implementation of the initiative. This individual although was very helpful did in fact take a lot of the credit for the eventual successful award.

The responses from the questionnaire illustrate that staff collaboratively work together and this is further evident in the results from the semi-structured interview responses, where one participant responded that, "staff are involved in many school activities, particularly recently we held a Croke Park hour meeting in relation to the new school building currently being constructed. All members of staff were asked to assess the proposed plans and contribute any additional ideas they may have to the building project".

Other respondents from the interview illustrated the cooperation evident in their school by explaining the structure that was in place in their school. Teachers in the school, along with the principal, were assigned as a leader in a curricular area, their job was to ensure that the school was adequately meeting the needs of this area through ensuring that resources were available, staff were made aware of professional development courses and school policies were up to date and reflected best practice. This is similar to Lambert's (1998) observation that where teachers work together, they construct meaning and

knowledge collectively.

In addition, the implementation of curricular initiatives was mentioned during the interview. The school had been involved in math hour and literacy hour to improve literacy and numeracy levels within the school. All members of staff were assigned leadership roles to ensure the effective implementation of the initiatives. Along with these initiatives the participant elaborated on the planning that occurred in their school where teachers worked cooperatively together. This further encouraged teachers to assume leadership responsibilities for the review of curricular areas.

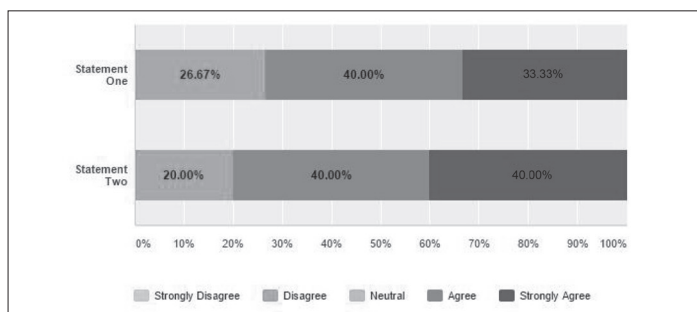
The general feeling through the semi-structured interviews was that there was a congenial relationship between all members of staff and the principals. This supported and encouraged teachers to assume leadership roles within their schools. All participants spoke in positive terms and agreed that all staff members treated each other with respect and as equals. They meet outside the school in addition to the professional relationship developed within the school environment and all interviewees felt they could express their opinions freely.

### Responsibility and accountability in our school

**Statement:** To what extent do you agree with the following statements about your school?

1. We share collected responsibilities for each other's behaviour.
2. All staff are encouraged to express their opinion regardless of their formal status.

Fig 5: Stacked horizontal bar reflecting percentage results from section 6 of questionnaire



The respondents from the interview indicated that there was not a hierarchal relationship between the principal and the teachers in the school at times. A friendly atmosphere existed in the school staff room and topics were discussed openly. One interviewee stated that this had not been the situation previously, but that the current principal adapted a more communal approach to leading the school which involved everyone. An anecdote that reflects this viewpoint is, in the past, there existed two staff rooms where "more senior members of staff stayed in one and newer teachers or external people coming to visit the school such as trainee teachers and parents stayed in the other one". This, the interviewee stated, had a detrimental effect over time on the running and success of the school.



Accountability was evident throughout the interviews conducted and the questionnaire administered with 73.33% either agreeing or strongly agreeing with staff having shared responsibility for each other's behaviour. This was evident from the interviews in the form of teachers being accountable for their own class's progress academically, behaviourally, and socially.

Teachers mentioned the leadership areas with which they were assigned. In particular, through the introduction of initiatives in the school and the opportunity the principal gave to them in regard to resources and extra time allocated to them. The principal of one school highlighted a school policy in utilising teachers' interests and expertise and assigning them areas of responsibility which reflected distributing leadership practice in the school. He mentioned the recent whole-school evaluation which commended the school on this.

Every teacher in any school in general has a passion or interest. In our school we have always tried to harness this and promote teachers taking on the responsibility for different areas such as sport, ICT, music...

There was a sense of a positive approach to teachers taking on responsibility from the principals' perspective in different areas and a feeling of pride by teachers that they were responsible and accountable for their assigned tasks. One interviewee stated that it made her "enjoy her work more in the school". She highlighted the fact that:

...teaching itself can be quite an isolating position and the fact that she was in charge of the school athletics meant that she could get out of the classroom more and be more proactive in the school community...

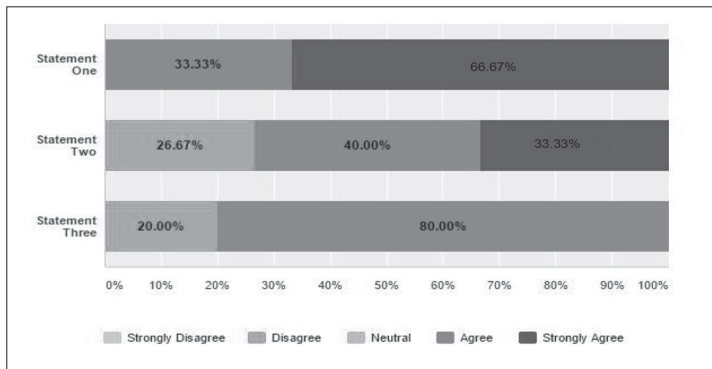
This reflects Steyn's (2002) idea that teachers' morale and motivation increase when they are given more responsibility and additional recognition.

Within the results of the questionnaire, 26.67% of respondents disagreed that there was collective responsibility for an individual's behaviour in a school. One participant during the semi-structured interview commented that it was the responsibility of individual teachers how they conducted themselves within the school's environment and that, although there was a collective responsibility for the success of the school as a whole, individual teachers should be personally held accountable for their own behaviour. 20% of respondents disagreed with being able to express their opinion freely. This aspect was mentioned during an interview conducted. It was felt that, at times, new teachers and individuals on specific short-term contracts were restricted in giving honest opinions, preferring instead to accept the consensus of the majority in order to maintain future employment in the school. This was relevant to the overall leadership and structure of the education sector where influence within the school was based on seniority.

## Decision-making in our school

**Statement:** To what extent do you agree with the following statements about your school?

1. I can make my own decisions on how to organise my work and any that is related to the content of my work.
2. In our school it is common that everyone is involved with decision-making.
3. Staff in our school have the opportunity for input into the decision-making process along with the principal and board of management.



Results from the questionnaires highlighted a communal approach to decision-making was evident, particularly in regard to teachers organising their own work with 66.7% strongly agreeing to the first statement in the questionnaire. When this issue was developed during the semi-structured interviews, participants agreed that within the school set up teachers had the opportunity of giving their own opinions on matters, particularly in relation to the academic development of the school.

The questionnaire highlighted the predominance of a communal distributed approach to decision-making, with 80% of respondents strongly agreeing that they had a part in the decision-making process in the schools. Financial and school investment in resources were, to an extent, discussed as a method to which distributed leadership was evident in schools in the semi-structured interviews.

However, it was mooted that "a lot of the discussion about investment in resources was associated with the academic progression of students in teacher's classes". This reflects Lieberman and Miller's (2005) view that where teachers are directly involved in students' academic progression they are a key factor in change occurring.

One other interviewee mentioned the development of the school's ICT structure and the fact that:

Particularly last September a new teacher was hired. The principal had mentioned that he would be specifically looking for someone with advanced ICT skill sets to develop the school's network. We were going for the Digital Schools of Distinction Flag and the new teacher was to be assigned a leadership coordinator post.

One principal that was interviewed highlighted the decision-making process that was evident in his own school.

During Croke Park Hours staff are asked their honest opinions on subjects that are important to the school. At the end of the discussion a show of hands is used to see if it will pass or fail. One example I can give is to whether there was a need to develop the school yard as there had been complaints from the Parents' Association on health and safety matters.

He further explained that, in his own position, he was retiring in the coming few years due to changes in the public service and he felt comfortable in his own leadership capacity to be able to talk openly to his staff about matters; to give them a taste of the difficult leadership role he has played working as a principal. He also explained that there most probably would be a leadership position arising in the school due to the circumstances and he wanted, over the past while, to give people a chance to take more active responsibility in the running of the school. This reflects the literature review of leaders developing leaders and Katzenmeyer and Moller's (2001) view of developing teachers' leadership skills beyond the classroom.

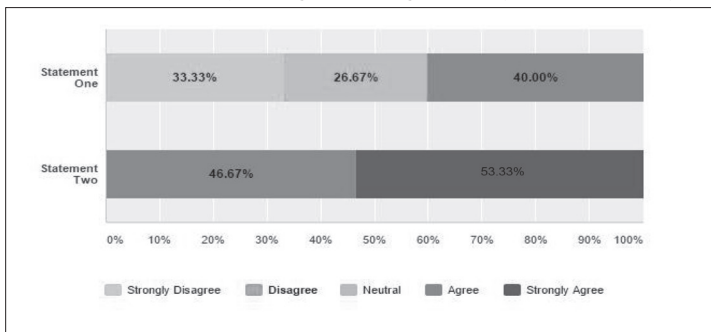
A teacher that was interviewed further stated that, in general, there was almost a team element to most decisions that occurred in the school. The principal and the teachers in the school made decisions jointly and that there was no difference between the teachers and formal leadership role of the principal. However, although not from the same school, another interviewee stated that there was a lot of misplaced time allocated to discussing some decisions and a more authoritative approach by the school principal might be more appropriate to avoid time being wasted.

**Initiatives in our school**

**Statement:** To what extent do you agree with the following statements about your school?

1. Initiatives and ideas mainly come from the principal and leaders at the top.
2. There is sufficient amount of freedom to contribute your own ideas to improve the work.

*Fig 6: Stacked horizontal bar reflecting percentage results from section 7 of questionnaire*



The literature review highlighted that initiatives may be an important measure of whether distributed leadership was evident in schools. Respondents acknowledged that ideas and initiatives generally come from a variety of areas rather than from the leaders at the top. 60% of questionnaire respondents either strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement that ideas come predominantly from principals. In contrast, 40% of respondents felt that, in fact, ideas and initiatives came predominantly from principals. This was an interesting addition to the results gathered and may suggest that although there is a distribution of responsibilities when initiatives are being implemented, initially they require the approval of the principal in the study schools.

Interviewees in the semi-structured interview stated that a broad range of initiatives were evident in the school with each teacher taking on a leadership role in their implementation. One respondent stated:

We have secured seven green flags from the Green School Programme based on the following themes: litter and waste, renewal, energy, water, travel and biodiversity, and global citizenship. We were also shortlisted and nominated for the Green Awards 2014 in the Green School/College Award category. We have been awarded eight Discovery Science and Maths Awards of Excellence as a result of our participation in the Discovery Science Programme.

They were keen to express that these were only successful due to the motivation of teachers and their willingness to give up their time to complete these extra-curricular activities. This further highlights the leadership and participation of teachers in initiatives. One respondent felt that this participation in initiatives was a motivational factor for him in becoming a teacher in the first place. Upon reflection, the respondents felt that students in general acknowledge and appreciate the effort and leadership of teachers when undertaking initiatives. This is reflected in Barth's (1999) view that teachers taking on new leadership responsibilities has a positive effect within the classroom. According to one interviewee, students "are more attentive and eager to please". This can be supported by Snowden and Gorton's (2002) view that motivated teachers are key to a student's academic success as an unmotivated staff member may weaken educational programmes.

One interviewed principal acknowledged that assigning teachers and staff members roles and the responsibility of implementing an initiative was a good internal management system and proved to be a rewarding and motivational experience. The principal interviewed highlighted that the effectiveness of the assigned leadership roles and responsibilities "were varied according mainly to the nature of employment in the school whether they are on a rolling annual contract or less or permanent, the number of years' experience the individual has and the relationship that the staff member has with other work colleagues".

All respondents in the questionnaire either agreed or strongly agreed that they had significant amount of freedom to contribute their own ideas to the school. Interviewees from the semi-structured interview felt that they were supported in proposing new initiatives and introducing new teaching methods into their classrooms.

## Conclusion

Distributed leadership has become more prominent in recent years and may prove an effective leadership approach to a more complex and dynamic primary educational environment from the literature examined by the researcher. Examining leadership in primary schools through this perspective may result in a need to re-examine the traditionally held views of leadership coming from one individual, to a more collaborative group effort who share leadership roles and responsibilities.

From the research study conducted, distributed leadership is evident in the five Irish primary schools that were examined during this study. Respondents from the research conducted could identify areas within the parameters examined in this study of school structure, vision for education, values and beliefs, collaboration and cooperation, responsibility and accountability, decision-making and initiatives where leadership was distributed in their schools. It became apparent that the structure and role of the principal in a distributed leadership environment were important. This formal traditional structuring of the school resulted in the formal leader making the ultimate decision on school matters, with staff being assigned leadership roles in relation to the completion of their own work. This is reflective of findings in the Hay Group Report (2003), which highlights the possibility of distribution of leadership through delegation and consultative methods by the principal. Distributed leadership within the five schools examined is evident with schools offering teachers the opportunity to contribute, in a leadership capacity, to their school and where teachers are encouraged in general to contribute to decisions and initiatives.

## References

- Barth, R.S. (1999). *The Teacher Leader*. Providence: The Rhode Island Foundation.
- Bennett, N., Wise, C., Woods, P., and Harvey, J.A. (2003). *Distributed Leadership: Full Report*. Nottingham, UK: National College for School Leadership. Available at: [www.ncsl.org.uk/mediastore/image2/bennett-distributed-leadership-summary.pdf](http://www.ncsl.org.uk/mediastore/image2/bennett-distributed-leadership-summary.pdf) (Accessed: 16 May 2015).
- Bryman, A. (2008). *Social Research Methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Creswell, J.W. (2007). *Educational Research, 3rd ed.* Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- Duif, T., Harrison, C., Van Dartel, N., and Sinyolo, D. (2013). *Distributed Leadership in practice: A descriptive analysis of distributed leadership in European schools*. European Policy Network of School Leaders. Available at: [www.schoolleadership.eu/sites/default/files/esha-etuice\\_report\\_on\\_dl.pdf](http://www.schoolleadership.eu/sites/default/files/esha-etuice_report_on_dl.pdf) (Accessed: 2 April 2015).
- Elmore, R.F. (2000). *Building a new structure for school leadership*. Washington, DC: The Albert Shanker Institute.
- Elmore, R.F. (2004). *School Reform from the Inside Out: Policy, Practice, and Performance*. Cambridge: Harvard Education Press.
- Gill, R. (2011). *Theory and Practice of Leadership, 2nd Edition*. London: SAGE.
- Gordon, Z. (2005). *The Effect of Distributed Leadership on Student Achievement*. Doctoral Dissertation, Central Connecticut State University.

- Hallinger, P. (2009). *Assessing the Contribution of Distributed Leadership to School Improvement and Growth in Math Achievement*. Paper presented at AERA Conference. Available at: [www.jstor.org/stable/40284858](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40284858) (Accessed: 28 May 2015).
- Hay Group Management Consultants. (2003). *Defining the Role of the Primary Principal in Ireland*. Dublin: Author. Available at: [http://ippn.ie/index.php?option=com\\_mtreeandtask=att\\_downloadandlink\\_id=7andcf\\_id=24](http://ippn.ie/index.php?option=com_mtreeandtask=att_downloadandlink_id=7andcf_id=24) (Accessed: 25 May 2015).
- Katzenmeyer, M., and Moller, G. (2001). *Awakening the Sleeping Giant: Helping Teachers Develop as Leaders, 2nd Ed*. Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Press.
- Kendall, L. (2008). The conduct of qualitative interview: Research questions, methodological issues, and researching online. In: J. Coiro, M. Knobel, C. Lankshear, D. Leu (Eds.). *Handbook of Research on New Literacies*. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Kotter, J. (1996). *Leading Change*. Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business School Press.
- Lambert, L. (1998). *Building Leadership Capacity in Schools*. Alexandria: USA ASCD.
- Leithwood, K., and Jantzi, D. (2000). The effects of different sources of leadership on student engagement in school. In: K. Riley, and K. Louis (Eds.) *Leadership for Change and School Reform*. London: Routledge.
- Lieberman, A., and Miller, L. (2005). Teachers as Leaders, Essays. *The Educational Forum*, 69(2), 151-162.
- Nanus, B. (1992). *Visionary Leadership: Creating a Compelling Sense of Direction for Your Organization*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- OECD (2008). *Improving School Leadership. Policy and Practice*. Available at: [www.oecd.org/dataoecd/6/49/41686541.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/6/49/41686541.pdf) (Accessed: 10 June 2015).
- Snowden, E., and Gorton, R. (2002). *School Leadership and Administration*. Boston: McGraw Hill.
- Spillane, J., Halverson, R., and Diamond, J. (2004). *Towards a Theory of School Leadership Practice: Implications of a Distributed Perspective Journal of Curriculum Studies*.
- Spillane, J.P. (2006). *Distributed Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Spillane, J., Diamond, J., Sherer, J., and Coldren, A. (2005). Distributing Leadership. In: M. Coles, and G. Southworth (Eds.) *Developing Leadership: Creating the Schools for Tomorrow*, Chapter 3. New York: OU Press.
- Steyn, G. (2002). The changing principalship in South African schools. *Educare*, 31:251-274. Available at: [http://uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/232/arsteyn\\_changingprincipalship.pdf?sequence=1](http://uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/232/arsteyn_changingprincipalship.pdf?sequence=1). (Accessed: 24 June 2015).
- Storey, A. (2004). The problem of distributed leadership in schools. *School Leadership and Management*, 24, pp.249-265.
- Yukl, G. (2002). *Leadership in Organizations, 5th Edition*. Upper Saddle River: Prentice-Hall.
- Yukl, G. (2006). *Leadership in Organizations, 6th Edition*. New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall.

# ≡ Generational diversity and principalship in modern Ireland ≡

≡ MÁIRE NIC AN FHAILGHIGH ≡

### Abstract

I'll stay for another year anyway. I can't see it for longer than five... I'd say five years and I'd maybe like to do something else...

I think my age will be a big issue, especially with the staff. I do think my youth is an issue, but that's only a staff management issue. I'll just have to sort it out...  
(Principal Della).

The profile of school principals has changed dramatically, both in Ireland and internationally, and this may be a significant issue for educational leadership. Research suggests that, to ensure the retention of leaders, new principals need positive socialisation experiences and supports through induction, mentoring and coaching very early in their tenure. Traditionally in Ireland, the post of principal teacher was viewed as being a 'job for life' and principals tended to remain in their post until they retired, with leadership skills often being learned in an incidental manner as their career progressed. However, due to the changing nature of the principal's role internationally, there is a recruitment and retention issue; this is further compounded by the arrival of the new generation of leaders who are of a younger age with a particular set of values and perceptions of the world and work. There is a strong possibility that this new generation of leaders may have very different expectations and approaches to leadership development than their predecessors. This paper focuses on the need for relevant support and effective integration of these new generational leaders emerging in modern day Ireland within their first year. It draws on findings from a qualitative study with ten newly appointed principals at three different stages during their first year as principals and builds on the work of Sugrue (2015) and Crow (2007) as the needs of newly-appointed leaders are outlined, with special emphasis on the need to offer suitable preparation programmes for new generational leaders. This article argues that effective preparation, induction and coaching programmes for aspiring and newly-appointed principals could affect and determine the effectiveness, retention and success of school leadership in modern Ireland (Donnelly, 2017, *Action Plan for Education*, 2018). It concludes by suggesting that relevant preparation, induction, mentoring and coaching programmes be made compulsory for all aspiring and newly-appointed leaders, especially as in today's primary school there may be up to four generations – all with different characteristics and expectations – working side by side with a new school leader who is of a different generational cohort to the previous principal.

**Keywords:** generational diversity in school leadership; novice school leaders; Generation X; Generation Y; leadership preparation; leadership development.



## **Introduction**

A mixture of successes and failures. Maybe failure is too strong a word, but ups and downs. After about a month the problems started to arise and the honeymoon period was over; a much more difficult position and situation than I had expected. I was aware that I needed to have good people skills but... I realised that my people skills need to be much stronger... (Principal Ian).

Teachers in Ireland and internationally are currently taking up the post of principal at a much younger age and often with different approaches and values than heretofore (Nic An Fhailghigh, 2014; Lambert et al., 2016; Edge et al., 2017). This generational shift, together with differences and dynamics which exist in a modern diverse workforce, brings many challenges to our schools and, in particular, to the area of leadership. Values and attitudes are more diverse in general, and there is not the same consensus on values as existed in Ireland for years. School staffs are becoming age-diverse in many instances, very often with a teacher from an older generation working with a much younger principal, thus requiring effective leadership and a deep knowledge and understanding of the traits, needs and expectations of different generations.

Some principals in Ireland appear to be 'handing back the keys' or going back to the classroom (Ryan, 2003; IPPN, 2005; Sugrue, 2015); other principals step down or retire due to burnout, staff difficulties or the inability to cope with the many challenges they face. A high percentage of school principals are engaged in full-time teaching whilst also being responsible for a myriad of managerial, administrative and leadership duties. This research revealed that many younger principals, known as Generation X (Gen. X) and Generation Y (Gen. Y) indicate that they do not intend to stay in the post for very long, which ties in with international studies about the typical traits of Gen. X and Gen. Y workers. Gen. X refers to people born between 1960 and 1980, while Gen. Y refers to people born between 1980 and 2000. The shortage of people interested in taking up a post as leader is also commonplace in England and elsewhere (Kelly, 2012). Many explanations for this phenomenon have been explored, such as ever-increasing workloads, accountability, and pressures of the post (Sugrue, 2005, 2015; Fuller and Young, 2009; Crow and Weindling, 2010; IPPN, 2010).

This article explores the importance of leadership preparation for all principals before focusing explicitly on the impact and significance of generational diversity in leadership and the particular challenges associated with this. The study on which this article is based considers the existence of a new generation of leaders in modern Ireland and seeks to gain an understanding of the socialisation of new principals and to identify the areas in which modern day principals may need professional development, training and support. The findings in this article report on the research which aimed to explore:

- the aspirations of the new Gen. X and Gen. Y leaders prior to taking up their post;
- the processes of professional and organisational socialisation experienced by the principals during year one;
- the experiences that influenced the effectiveness of the new leader.



## Research design

The research draws on the perceptions of newly-appointed school principals and gives them a voice and, therefore, is qualitative in nature. A case study approach using semi-structured interviews was employed to gather the data. While this case study applies to a particular cohort of ten principal teachers in Ireland during their first year in post only and, as such, is a one-off detailed study, the conclusions drawn may have wider application. Data analysis was inductive in nature with the data being transcribed and emerging themes and sub-themes identified. All participants in research are entitled to confidentiality, privacy and anonymity, and it is incumbent on all researchers to offer this to each participant, as was the case in this study (British Educational Research Association (BERA), 2004). All participants were assured of anonymity and privacy from the outset. They were offered an outline of the nature and purpose of the research, including information on procedures for the possible future use and publication of findings (Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), 2010).

## An overview of early leadership

This article focuses on the following aspects and areas of early leadership:

- Preparedness
- Socialisation
- Concerns and Challenges of Beginning Principalship
- Generational Diversity
- Coaching and Mentoring

### Leadership preparedness

The role of the principal has been studied in many countries (Hall and Southworth, 1997; Day et al., 2008; DES, 2017). Understanding the needs, beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of newly-appointed principals (NAPs) must be considered so that they are prepared for the post in the most effective manner. At present, Ireland does not have a national training college for aspiring school leaders. Hall and Mani (1992) suggest that a lack of training and induction programmes for new principals may be detrimental to a successful entry into principalship for NAPs. There is recognition at all levels of the importance of effective preparation for NAPs, and there is a move in Ireland at present towards providing such training for principals (Programme for Government, 2016; Donnelly, 2017; *Action Plan for Education*, 2019). The *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* (DES, 2011) in Ireland recommends "considering the possibility of making successful completion of an accredited leadership development programme" mandatory for leaders (DES, 2011, p.41) while the *Programme for Partnership Government* (2016, p.90) states that "newly-appointed school principals will take a preparation course in advance of taking up their role". The need to prepare new principals is thus endorsed by the *Programme for a Partnership Government* (2016) and 2019 *Action Plan for Education* (DES). The Centre for School Leadership (CSL) was established in 2015, giving formal recognition to the importance of the role of the principal and the necessity for school leaders to be supported.

The first year of a principal's life in their new post is a critical one (Fuller and Young, 2009, Burkhauser et al., 2012). The experiences of principals, also referred to as socialisation, at the time of transition into principalship will influence their career in many ways. Effective leadership has long been recognised as being linked to school improvement (Earley and Weindling, 2004; Donnelly, 2017; *Action Plan for Education*, 2019; Acquaro, 2019). It is, therefore, important to focus on the effective leadership development and on building leadership capacity in our schools.

Rich and insightful research has been carried out in many countries to map the career trajectory of the principal (Parkay and Hall, 1992; Day and Bakioglu, 1996; Pascal and Ribbins, 1998; Reeves et al., 1998). This 'stages approach' explores the different stages a principal may go through during their careers. Earley and Weindling (2004, p.17) suggest that the stages theory of headship may be used as a "research tool and to assist the development of heads and prospective heads". It must be noted, however, that the majority of the models and frameworks of leadership development available at an international level cover large spans of time and years with little focus on the beginning year and without any acknowledgement of, reference to, or concern for, generational leadership.

Many schools in rural Ireland are now being led by Gen. X principals (Nic An Fhailghigh, 2014). The importance of professional learning for principals is widely acknowledged in the research (Acquaro, 2019; King and Nihill, 2019). New leaders must learn to become competent when dealing with diversity in the workplace (Srinivasan, 2012; Chavez, 2015). Where there are different generations working together, it is incumbent on the leaders to equip themselves with the knowledge, skills and competencies that will help them manage any potential conflict arising from different values and to embrace the possibilities of one generation learning from another, thus harnessing the best from each generation. It is a time when NAPs consider important issues such as building relationships, earning trust among a multi-generational staff, building credibility, managing the school, promoting a positive culture, managing the wellbeing of self and others, leading and managing change, and leading teaching and learning in their schools (Edge, 2014; Nic An Fhailghigh, 2014). Their early experiences as principal teachers will also impact their future career decisions, while their approaches to leadership and their perceptions and expectations may impact on future national policy and practice in leadership induction and preparation (Edge, 2014). It is equally important for principals to be aware that each school has a specific context and culture, thus embracing the concepts of organisational socialisation and situational awareness. It is during the first year that newly-appointed principals learn about themselves and the lacunae for which they require mentoring and support; this concept is widely referred to as 'professional socialisation'.

### **Socialisation**

The sociological concept of socialisation provided a theoretical framework for this study. The process of socialisation prepares a person for his or her role in society as it provides them with the necessary knowledge, habits, beliefs, and values for them to exist in that society (Chinoy, 1961). A feature of the research was the exploration of whether principals in Ireland actually acquire such skills through the process of socialisation. In the area of

educational research, socialisation is mostly viewed through the lens of organisational and professional socialisation (Earley and Weindling, 2004). 'Organisational socialisation' refers to how one learns to function within a particular organisational role, i.e. how one becomes a principal of a particular school community (Van Maanen and Schein, 1977), while 'professional socialisation' refers to how the newly-appointed principals acquire skills needed so that they may function as expected in their new roles, i.e. how one becomes a principal teacher or headteacher (Hart, 1991). To ensure successful socialisation, the concerns and challenges of beginning principalship must be addressed (Lochmiller and Silver, 2010; Daresh, 2010).

### **Concerns and challenges of beginning principalship**

Arising from the research, a specific typology of early leadership styles emerged, two of which were the 'quick hitters' and the 'slow burners' (Nic An Fhailghigh, 2014, p.150). Many newly-appointed principals, the quick hitters, are eager to get on with the leading of their own school as they implement changes quite quickly into post, while others, referred to in the research as the slow burners, prefer to observe for a certain period of time. Slow burners may introduce changes in the future but at a slow pace and in consultation with the whole school community (Nic An Fhailghigh, 2014). It is recognised that, in practice, principals may be an amalgam of both facets or feature along a continuum for quick hitter to slow burner. Sugrue argues that "...there seems to be a lack of appreciation of the complexity of the change process, and lack of commitment to sustainable leadership and sustaining principals" (Sugrue, 2005, p.141). It is important, therefore, that future training courses and programmes take the complexity of change and the potential conflict in values into account. At present, principals are not appointed for a specific duration, and this factor means there "...is probably an expectation that principals have plenty of time to find their feet, to learn leadership on the job..." Sugrue (2005, p.141). It is essential that the experience and training needs of Gen. X and Gen. Y leaders be acknowledged and catered to so that they can be effective leaders. The first year in post is, therefore, a crucial year in the career path of the new principals as many of them have 'traumatic first year experiences' (Crow, 2007, p.51).

As novice leaders begin their posts they encounter challenges, concerns and surprises (Sugrue, 2005, 2015; Earley and Bubb, 2013; Nic An Fhailghigh, 2014). As new leaders may have to lead a multi-generational staff, it is essential that new principals are aware of the differences they may encounter in the expectations, attitude and practices of other generations on the staff and how best to manage these situations. The manner in which these challenges are handled can impact greatly on how the new principal will manage future challenges and on how effective and efficient they will become as leaders. Formal and informal support received during this crucial time may also affect how the principal survives in his or her new role (Sackney and Walker, 2006).

Stevenson (2006) contends that global economic pressure demands that educational institutions face raised expectations about standards. As the leader of teaching and learning in school, principals are expected to raise the standards and the expectations of their schools (Earley and Bubb, 2013). As part of their role, principals are required to

manage different expectations because, in addition to welcoming new cultures, there is a requirement that they will maintain the country's own cultural heritage (Thornton, 2013). Principals also contend with diverse and complicated social and family problems, and once again, the principals may be under further pressure as they are expected to deal with the many social issues involved. Exactly how the newly-appointed principals are coping in post is a very under-researched area in Ireland as elsewhere (Edge, 2017); this is a core issue and a valuable insight which needs to be acknowledged and developed in training programmes for newly-appointed leaders.

Professional isolation and loneliness have been identified as being worrying issues for novice principals in England and Scotland (Hobson et al., 2003). Research suggests that this is also the case among educators in Ireland (Caulfield, 2015). Another issue causing concern, highlighted by Weindling and Dimmock (2006, p.328), is 'the shadows of headteachers past' which has created many challenges for new head teachers and, in particular, when the new leader is of a different generation to the previous leader, each with the traits and characteristics of their own particular generation. The call to foster teacher ownership and teacher leadership in relation to school improvement arguably depends on how school leadership is exercised (King, 2011) and, therefore, professional development for all involved is central for impact on student learning outcomes and school improvement (King, 2014). Many newly-appointed principals may need training in the skills involved in the development of a collaborative style of leadership. It is, therefore, becoming increasingly essential that effective leadership tools and strategies be developed so that new principals do not have to tackle the multifaceted aspects of the post alone.

### **Diversity in leadership**

There is vast diversity in our workforce today, sometimes up to four generations working alongside one another. Each generation has its own characteristics, expectations and attributes born out of the shared experiences of each cohort during their formative years which shaped their personal and professional lives. The stage an individual is at in their career will also influence their approach to life, work and family and this must be understood and taken into consideration by new leaders in our schools and by those who train and prepare new principals. There are significant differences in the attitudes and approaches to work, as each generation is defined and shaped by social, historical, and definitive events which took place during their time growing up.

However, having up to three or four generations within the workforce in any organisation may bring with it many opportunities along with the many challenges if the new generation of leaders are prepared, nurtured and supported in an appropriate manner as they take the helm. The newly-appointed leader will face many challenges as they take up post, one of those challenges being that of how to motivate and be mindful of staff from different generations. Getting to know what makes each generation tick and being self-aware will be of great benefit to the Gen. X principal. All members of staff must be made to feel valued and their generational differences and preferences appreciated, understood, and welcomed. Therefore, in order that the school vision and goals are realised and that the school operates within a positive progressive culture, the Gen. X leaders who are coming

into leadership roles must be prepared in an appropriate manner. Coaching and mentoring are viewed as being essential and effective leadership tools and are deemed to be 'highly significant in empowering leaders to maximise their own performance and that of others' (King and Nihill, 2019 p.67).

### **Coaching and mentoring**

Anecdotal and recorded evidence (*Fitzpatrick Report, 2018*) suggest that the *Misneach* programme (for newly-appointed principals) and the leadership seminars provided by Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), along with the mentoring and coaching programmes being offered by the CSL, are invaluable with a content and delivery style that is relevant and suitable to the learning styles of the new leaders but, unfortunately, these seminars and programmes are not mandatory in Ireland at present.

The acceptance of the value of coaching as part of leadership development is relatively new in the field of education in Ireland but is recently being acknowledged for its many benefits by the CSL and the PDST. The CSL has recently developed a framework for professional learning entitled *Learning to be a School Leader in Ireland* in which the essential features of professional learning are highlighted. In a report commissioned by DES in 2017 to evaluate the impact of CSL leadership programmes, the *Fitzpatrick Report* states that:

...of great significance has been our finding that many school principals and leaders working at the coal-face in Ireland that are aware of the CSL or have engaged with it in any way, are both relieved and excited by its existence... (*Fitzpatrick Report, 2018, p.97*).

The report continued stating that the mentoring and coaching programmes being offered to school leaders at present have been very highly rated by participants. In relation to the coaching:

...Participants also appear to hold coaching support in a different light to other forms of support and development programmes, due to it adding nothing to the knowledge they must have, but much to their strength and personal capacity to perform (*Fitzpatrick Report, 2018, p.99*).

The PDST mentoring programme has "been warmly welcomed and considered highly effective by both mentees and the more experienced principals who have served as mentors" (*Fitzpatrick Report, p.99*). In conclusion, as outlined in the literature, the preparation, support systems, perceptions, expectations and socialisation all impact greatly on the manner in which the new leader manages their first year in post and, indeed, on whether or not they remain in post.

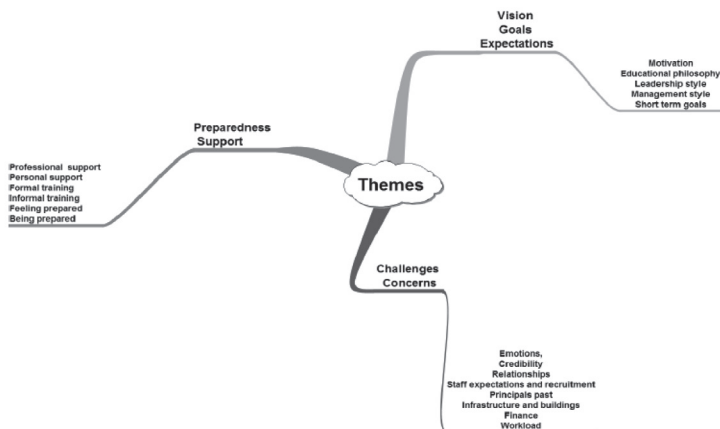
## Findings

I knew it would be busy but didn't expect to have quite so many balls in the air! The multi-faceted nature of the job has me running round, sometimes like a headless chicken! (Principal Ciara).

Findings build on international research and offer recognition of the newly-appointed principal. The three predominant themes emerging from the data in relation to the research questions include vision, goals and expectations, challenges and concerns, and preparedness and support.

The general theme of preparedness and support highlighted sub-themes such as expected sources of professional and personal support, formal and informal training, and feeling prepared versus having actually been prepared, which is the main focus of this paper as outlined in figure 4.1.

Fig 4.1: Themes and sub-themes arising from the data (Source: Nic An Fhailghigh, 2014, p.81)



The focus of this article, in particular, is the theme of preparedness and support and the subthemes of sources of support, training, and feeling prepared. Many of the principals in this study were socialised into their posts in a similar manner to that described in the international literature; they learned how to become professional leaders and they also learned quickly what was needed for them to lead in their own particular schools. All participants agreed that the formal and informal supports received during their first year were crucial factors in determining the success of their socialisation in to their posts as they all agreed that the post can be a very lonely and overwhelming one because, as principal Brian noted: "It's challenging and you need to be strong. It's a lonely road in a school sometimes".

The principals who had formed positive relationships with the various people within the whole school community and had received and accepted support from various people tended to have a much easier passage into principalship than those without support or relationship-building skills. The Gen. X and Gen. Y leaders confirm that they all moved

through specific stages during year one and that they had defining experiences early into post. Some experiences proved, in many cases, to be turning points of some sort, either, in the switching or adaption of their leadership styles, or the rate at which they moved through certain stages, or whether or not they intended to remain in post at all.

Well I hope (to stay) for a few years but I don't know if I'd like to stay in it until retirement because, I can't... I think I'd get old too soon. I've changed, I've changed a lot in where I just cannot keep going because school is so busy and I find I'm much more tired in the evening. I don't know if I would want that quality of life for the next ten years... (Principal Ciara).

The findings also noted that some NAPs struggled to manage the relationship with the board of management (BOM). Sustainability and wellbeing proved to be areas of concern for many NAPs at the end of year one in post. One participant was very eager as she started in to her new post:

I thought I was going to change the world and everything was going to run smoothly and that I'd have everything ship-shape by Christmas... (Principal Áine).

At the end of her first year in post, however, the same principal stated:

Physically and mentally, I'm absolutely exhausted. I found it a very taxing year. I probably tried to do too much and that doesn't augur well for your physical wellbeing... (Principal Áine).

However, as in other countries (Lambert et al., 2016), modern Ireland brings with it the requirement for leaders to have different skills. The findings consequently led to the exploration of the whole notion of how Gen. X and Gen. Y principals may be supported early into tenure. The fact that some of the younger principals in the research viewed the post as being nearly impossible to sustain and, therefore, merely a stepping stone to other careers is very much in keeping with international research around how the attributes of specific generations affect their approach to work (Stone-Johnson, 2016). While some of the Gen. X and Gen. Y participants in the research may appear to be concerned at the outset about their age profile and personality types, they also appear confident in their ability to resolve any issues that may arise as a result:

...what I learned is that I needed to be stronger, have a stronger personality and not be afraid to give direction or to give my opinion. Also learned not to be worrying all the time and maybe there would be less stress. I wasn't achieving as I should have been. I was dealing with people who were older and I didn't want to come across as not having the answer... (Principal Ian).

Principal Ciara initially worried about filling the shoes of the previous principal but was confident in her ability to adapt her style of leadership to manage issues:

The other worry of filling someone else's shoes is important. Your first year is important, that there's a good impression. PR (public relations) are important in primary schools so you have to be careful. I'd be a little bit nervous about that and keeping everyone on side and of mobilising parents. I might be forceful so I have to be careful not to try to do too much... (Principal Ciara).

The principals who participated in the research identified the workload as being overwhelming, which points to a need for relevant training and support in how to manage the workload. One newly-appointed principal found that the duties were endless and that much of her time was taken up with tasks that she hadn't expected to have to deal with:

...the main challenge [is the] lack of sufficient experience in the administrative aspect of the principal's role. While the previous principal has been very supportive and he has written different things down for me during the week, it's all right when you're listening to somebody but when you actually have to do it yourself ... and while the online claims form looks very simple and a lot of forms seem straightforward – until you do them yourself... (Principal Hannah).

Supporting our new leaders in a manner that is effective and relevant should also take some of the fear and loneliness out of the post and hopefully encourage retention. Several principals pointed to the loneliness of the post, for example, principal Emma stated, "I'd have to say it's a lonely job. At the end of the day the buck stops at me. At the end of the day I just feel it's lonely".

The need for peer support along with relevant training in relation to the management of an inter-generational workforce is again highlighted by principal Hannah, who encountered a difficulty with a Gen. Y member of staff:

...I won't say there's a divide, but you are principal. So I found the perception change to be there. My first staff meeting, while most people were very supportive, there was a younger member who was somewhat aggressive...

The findings are supportive of the *Misneach* and leadership seminar programmes being provided by PDST and the mentoring and coaching programmes being provided by CSL and recommend that these programmes become mandatory for newly-appointed principals. In keeping with the *Fitzpatrick Report* (2018), feedback from *Misneach* was very positive with principal Brian, for example, saying, "I completed *Misneach* (induction programme) last week. It was great ...". Similarly, principal Áine found the initial two days of *Misneach* to be of great value to her, stating, "I also found the *Misneach* training excellent ...very supportive..." The findings support the great need for relevant support and training and professional development for Gen. X and Gen. Y leaders in education.



## Discussion and conclusion

If the problems of recruitment and retention in leadership roles are to be resolved, it is crucial that the voice of the new generation of school leaders be heard. Careful consideration will have to be given by the providers of professional learning, training, and support to aspiring and newly-appointed principals. Induction programme designers may need to reflect on and review the traditional methods of preparation and practices, for instance, as the use of technology will probably become the norm in the daily running of schools, it would seem obvious that technology and all it has to offer is integrated into preparation programmes. Giving participants a voice when designing the content of a programme usually ensures the success of the programme and the feedback taken from participants in PDST and CSL programmes impacts and influences the content and delivery of future professional learning, which is a very positive move towards future success. If we are to avoid the possibility of an exodus from leadership roles after very few years in post, we need to understand the new generation of leaders and to embrace and welcome what they have to offer leadership. The findings of this study may have an impact on policy, practice and research as we seek to look to the future confident in the fact that the needs of our Gen. X and Gen. Y leaders are being met and that, in turn, they themselves have been well prepared and are supported continuously in a manner that allows them to take up their leadership roles in a confident and capable manner. Combining the energy and new learning of the Gen. X and Gen. Y leaders with the wisdom and experiences of the mature principals should continue to inform future mentoring preparation programmes.

Effective leadership preparation is essential so that leaders are aware of and are prepared for the many aspects involved in all leadership roles. Acquar (2019) suggests that there are many challenges associated with the development of programmes 'to best prepare them for 21st century schools'. Relevant and effective leadership programmes and continuous professional development seminars during year one in post are essential if new generational leaders are to understand and meet the challenges and complexities within a school community. It is imperative that such programmes not only meet the needs of the new principals but that they become compulsory for new principals to engage fully with leadership induction programmes and ongoing professional learning.

This study acknowledged the importance of the planned programmes of the PDST and CSL, which recommend mentoring and coaching as being highly effective during the induction stages of new principals. The PDST *Misneach* programme is designed specifically for NAPs and, since August 2016, the initial two-day residential programme has been delivered in late August, which is just before the new leader takes up post. This is a move in the right direction by the PDST for the preparation of newly-appointed leaders, as it ensures some training and knowledge before they begin post. It also equips the NAPs with invaluable networking opportunities which may help combat the loneliness and isolation of the post (Nic an Fhailigh, 2014). Coaching as a leadership development tool should be an integral and mandatory aspect of principal induction and should be viewed in a positive manner: "coaching is a perk, not a punishment" (Reiss, 2015, p.24). Despite the fact that the value of coaching is appreciated globally in the world of industry, it is relatively new to the Irish educational system. It is, therefore, imperative that it is viewed positively and as

a gift which unleashes the potential and capabilities of our future school leaders. "School systems that embrace coaching can experience stronger, more confident leadership" (Reiss, 2015, p.252).

While much has been written about Gen. X and Gen. Y in general terms, there is a dearth of research in relation to the experience of these people in education (Edge et al, 2017) and further research in relation to how newly-appointed principals are meeting the challenges of their post in modern Ireland is necessary and recommended. This new generation of leaders will impact and influence future global leadership developments, yet they are very much under-represented in research (Nic An Fhailghigh, 2014; Edge, 2017).

While much research has been carried out outlining the impact of policy on leadership, a further recommendation for research could focus on how the practice strategies and characteristics of Gen. X and Gen. Y generations may impact strongly and shape future policy and practice and so that our leaders may lead with confidence, thus encouraging them to remain in post. It is imperative that mandatory principal preparation and induction programmes acknowledge and manage potential conflicts in values, and ensure the retention of school principals in their post and build leadership capacity. In addition, it is imperative that the designers of all preparation courses embrace and understand the values, work style, lifestyle and perspectives of the incoming generation of leaders, thus ensuring a successful and effective transition into leadership.

## Bibliography

- Acquaro, D. (2019). Preparing the next Generation of Educational Leaders: Initiating a Leadership Discourse in Initial Teacher Education. *ISEA*, Volume 47, Number 2, 2019.
- Burkhauser, S., Gates, S., Hamilton, L., and Schuyler Ikemoto, G. (2012). *First-Year Principals in Urban School Districts, Technical Report for Rand Education*.
- Caulfield, A. (2015). *The contribution of the practice of mindfulness to stress reduction among school teachers: a qualitative study of Irish primary teachers*. Unpublished thesis: University of Lincoln, England.
- Chavez, Mark, J.A. (2015). Generational Diversity in the Academia: Ramifications and Challenges for Educational Leaders. *Journal of International Education and Leadership*, Volume 5, Issue 1, Spring 2015. ISSN: 2161-7252.
- Chinoy, E. (1961). *Society: An Introduction to Sociology*. New York: Random House.
- Crow, G. (2007). The Professional and Organizational Socialization of New English Headteachers in School Reform Contexts. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, 35(1), 51-71.
- Crow, G., and Weindling, D. (2010). Learning to be Political: New English Headteachers' Roles. *Educational Policy*, 24(1), 137-158.
- Dareh, J. (2010). From Mentoring to Coaching: Finding the Path to Support for Beginning Principals. In: A.R. Shoho, B.G. Barnett, and A.K. Tooms (Eds.) *The Challenges for New Principals in the Twenty-First Century: Developing Leadership Capabilities Through Professional Support*. Charlotte: Information Age Publishing Inc. 121-145.

- Day, C., and Bakioglu, A. (1996). Development and disenchantment in the professional lives of headteachers. In: I. Goodson and A. Hargreaves (Eds.) *Teachers' Professional Lives*, 123-139. London: Falmer Press.
- Day, C., Leithwood, K., and Sammons, P. (2008). What Have We Learned, What We Need to Know More About. *School Leadership and Management*, 28(1), 83-96.
- Department of Education and Skills (DES). (2011). *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life*. Dublin: DES.
- Department of Education and Skills (DES). (2019). *Empowering through Learning, Action Plan for Education*. Dublin: DES
- Department of Education and Skills (DES). (2017). *Circular 0063/2017: Leadership and Management in Primary Schools*. Dublin: DES
- Department of Education and Skills (DES). (2016). *Looking at our school. A Quality Framework for Primary Schools*. Dublin: DES.
- Department of Education and Skills (DES). (2018). *Fitzpatrick Report on CSL*. Available at: [www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/school-leadership-in-ireland-and-the-centre-for-school-leadership-research-and-evaluation.pdf](http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/school-leadership-in-ireland-and-the-centre-for-school-leadership-research-and-evaluation.pdf). (Accessed: 30 March 2019).
- Donnelly, K. (2017). Power of positive leadership. *Irish Independent*, 16 February 2017. Available at: [www.independent.ie/irish-news/education/going-to-college/power-of-positive-leadership-on-schools-35451279.html](http://www.independent.ie/irish-news/education/going-to-college/power-of-positive-leadership-on-schools-35451279.html).
- Earley, P., and Bubb, S. (2013). A Day in the Life of New Headteachers: Learning from Observation. *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership*, 41, 782-799.
- Earley, P., and Weindling, D. (2004). *Understanding School Leadership*. London: Sage.
- Edge, K., and Armstrong, P. (2014). Advisory Groups and Multi-national , Multi-layered Research Design: Strategies for Studying Generation X School Leaders in London, New York City and Toronto. *Canadian and International Education*, Vol. 43, Issue 1.
- Edge K., Galdames, S., and Horton, J. (2017). Diversity: new leaders and new leadership. In: P. Earley and T. Greany (Eds.) *School Leadership and Education System Reform*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Edge, K., Descours, K., and Frayman, K. (2016). *Generation X School Leaders as Agents of Care: Leader and Teacher Perspectives from Toronto, New York City and London*. UCL Institute of Education, 20 Bedford Way, London WC1H 0AL, UK.
- Economics and Social Research Council (ESRC). (2010). *Framework for Research Ethics* (Online). Available at: [www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/\\_images/Framework for Research Ethics tcm8-4586.pdf](http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/_images/Framework%20for%20Research%20Ethics%20tcm8-4586.pdf). (Accessed: 19 May 2012).
- Fuller, E., and Young, M. (2009). *Tenure and Retention of Newly Hired Principals in Texas*. Department of Educational Administration, University of Texas at Austin. University Council for Educational Administration.
- Government of Ireland. (2016). *A Programme for a Partnership Government*. Available at: [www.taoiseach.gov.ie](http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie).
- Hall, G., and Mani, M. (1992). Entry strategies: Where do I begin? In: F.W. Parkey and G.E. Hall (Eds.) *Becoming a Principal*, 48-69. Boston, Mass.: Allyn and Bacon.
- Hall, V., and Southworth, G. (1997). Headship. *School Leadership and Management*, 17(2),151-170.
- Hart, A. (1991). Leader Succession and Socialization: A Synthesis. *Review of Educational Research*. Sage.

- Hobson, A., Brown, E., Ashby, P., Keys, W., Sharp, C., and Benefield, P. (2003). *Issues for Early Headship - Problems and Support Strategies. Summary Report*. Nottingham: National College for School Leadership.
- Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN). (2005). *New Horizons for Smaller Schools and Teaching Principals in Ireland*. Cork: Author
- Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN). (2010). *Leadership Crisis In Education*, Press Release 22 July, 2010. (Accessed on: 25 August 2011).
- Kelly, G. (2012). From The Editor – Despondent leaders plan their exit strategies. *TES Magazine*, 23 March 2012. TSL Education Ltd.
- King, F. (2011). The role of leadership in developing and sustaining teachers' professional learning. *Management in Education*, 25(4), 149-155.
- King, F. (2014). Evaluating the impact of teacher professional development: An evidence-based framework. *Professional Development in Education*, 40(1), 89-111.
- King, F., and Nihill, M. (2019). The impact of policy on leadership practice in the Irish educational context; implications for research. *Irish Teachers Journal*, Vol 7, No 1, November 2019. Dublin: Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO).
- Lambert, P., Warren, M., Elliott, V., and Johnston-Anderson, N. (2016). Generational change in Australian school leadership. *Journal of Educational Administration*, Vol. 54 Issue 2, pp.114-134.
- Lochmiller, C.R., and Silver, M. (2010). Accelerating New Principal Development Through Leadership Coaching. In: A.R. Shoho, B.G. Barnett and A.K. Tooms (Eds.) *The Challenges for New Principals in the Twenty-First Century: Developing Leadership Capabilities Through Professional Support*, 101-120. Charlotte, North Carolina. Information Age Publishing.
- Murray, A. (2011). Mind the gap: technology, millennial leadership and the cross-generational workforce. *The Australian Library Journal*, 60:1, 54-65, DOI:10.1080/00049670.2011.10722556
- Nic An Fhailghigh, M. (2014). *Beginning Principals: Exploring the Perspectives of Newly Appointed Principals in Rural Ireland*. Unpublished EdD. Thesis, University of Lincoln.
- O'Bannon, G. (2001). Managing Our Future: The Generation X Factor. *Public Personnel Management*, 30(1), 95-110.
- Parkay, F.W., and Hall, G.E. (1992). *Becoming a Principal*. Boston, Mass.: Allyn and Bacon.
- Pascal, C., and Ribbins, P. (1998). *Understanding Primary Headteachers*. London: Cassell.
- Reeves, J., Moos, L., and Forrest, J. (1998). Making sense of school leadership in the 1990s: being and becoming. *Professional Development in Education*, 24(2), 329-345.
- Reiss, K. (2015). *Leadership Coaching for Educators, Bringing Out the Best in School Administrators*. Sage: A Thousand Oaks, C.A.
- Ryan, J. (2003). *Handing Back the Keys : why some primary principals are stepping down*. Unpublished MEd. Thesis. St Patrick's College, Dublin City University.
- Sackney, L., and Walker, K. (2006). Canadian perspectives on beginning principals: their role in building capacity for learning communities. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 44 (4), 341-358.
- Sharp, K. (2009). Gen. X at work. What do they want? *Suite 101*, 18 June 2009. Retrieved from: <http://kelly-sharp.suite101.com/Gen.-x-who-are-they-and-what-do-they-want-a125461>.
- Srinivasan, V. (2012). Multi generations in the workforce: Building collaboration. *IIMB Management Review* 24, 48-66. [www.sciencedirect.com](http://www.sciencedirect.com).

- Stevenson, H. (2006). Moving towards, into and through principalship: developing a framework for researching the career trajectories of school leaders. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 44(4), 408-420.
- Stone-Johnson, C. (2016). *Generational Identity, Educational Change and School Leadership*. New York: Routledge.
- Sugrue, C. (Ed.) (2005). *Passionate Principalship: Learning from the Life Histories of School Leaders*. London: Routledge.
- Sugrue, C. (2009). From heroes and heroines to hermaphrodites: emasculation or emancipation of school leaders and leadership? *School Leadership and Management*, 29 (4), 353-371
- Sugrue, C. (2015). *Unmasking School Leadership: A Longitudinal Life History of School Leaders*. Springer Dordrecht Heidelberg New York London.
- Thornton, M. (2013). *States of Mind: The role of Irish traditional music in creating Irish identity in the primary school*. Unpublished EdD. Thesis, University of Lincoln, England.
- Tolbize, A. (2008). *Generational Differences in the Workplace*. University of Minnesota, Research and Training Center on Community Living. Manuscript. Contract: TLG — 05-034-2967.06.
- Van Maanen, J., and Schein, E. (1977). *Toward a Theory of Organizational Socialization*. MIT Alfred P Sloan School of Management. Available at: <http://dspace.mit.edu/bitstream/handle/1721.1/1934/SWP-0960-03581864.pdf>. (Accessed on: 14 July 2013).
- Warner, J., and Sandberg, A. (n.d.). *Generational leadership. Ready to Manage*. Retrieved from: [www.kiwata.com/pdf/Gen.erationa-Leadership.pdf](http://www.kiwata.com/pdf/Gen.erationa-Leadership.pdf). (Accessed on: 28 October 2011).
- Weindling, D., and Dimmock, C. (2006). Sitting in the 'hot seat': new headteachers in the UK. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 44 (4), 326-340.



of instilling entrepreneurial skills amongst the population, and promoting increased engagement with entrepreneurial ventures (Johansen, 2014; Fenton and Barry, 2011; Henry et al., 2005; Backström-Widjeskog, 2010; Piperopoulos and Dimov, 2015). EE is a relatively new concept within the Irish education system and is yet to develop a significant research base, particularly with regards to the perception of EE amongst primary school teachers who have experience of implementing EE initiatives. This article begins by examining the emergence of EE internationally, then the conflicting 'internal' and 'external' ideological perspectives on EE are introduced, an overview of the pedagogical approach to EE is subsequently provided, followed by an overview of the steps the Irish Government has taken towards developing a policy statement on EE and, finally, the findings from a series of semi-structured interviews with Irish primary school teachers who have implemented EE programmes are discussed.

### The emergence of entrepreneurship education

The publication of *Towards an 'Enterprising' Culture: A Challenge for Education and Training* by the OECD in 1989 provided an impetus for the development of entrepreneurship education (Ball, 1989). In the following decade, a focus on entrepreneurship at primary and second level began to develop as a broad trend in international education policy (Henry et al., 2005). The European Commission is now at the forefront of engendering political commitment to EE, exemplified by an official policy position advocating the implementation of EE across all levels of education (Eurydice, 2012). Although most entrepreneurship programmes are offered at third level, more and more initiatives are emerging at primary and second level (Fayolle, 2013). In Ireland, several EE initiatives operated by private organisations have emerged to facilitate engagement with EE at primary and second level (Birdthistle et al., 2006). An overview of the main EE initiatives operating at primary level in Ireland is provided in figure 1.

Fig 1: Overview of the main entrepreneurship education initiatives at primary level

	Bí Gnóthach (BG) (Curriculum Development Unit, n.d.)	Junior Achievement Ireland (JAI) (Junior Achievement Ireland, n.d.)	Bizworld Ireland (BI) (Biz World Ireland, n.d.)	Junior Entrepreneur Programme (JEP) (Junior Entrepreneur Programme, n.d.)
Year established	2005	1996	2011	2011
Duration of programme	One school term	Five weeks	Two days	12 to 16 weeks
Target age group	Ten to twelve years	All ages at primary (and second) level	Fifth class pupils	10 to 12 years
Type of initiative	Educational programme/competition	Educational programme	Educational programme/competition	Educational programme
Organising body	Local Enterprise Board	Junior Achievement Ireland	Bizworld Ireland	Tweak.com, in association with a 'County Partner'
Pedagogic approach	Teacher-led, with resource pack containing teachers' notes, videos and activity sheets provided	External volunteers deliver the programme	External tutor delivers the programme	Teacher-led, with 'Teacher's guide' provided and support provided by a dedicated 'entrepreneur project manager'

The fragmented nature of these initiatives and unstructured approach towards implementation are amongst the key criticisms of the Irish approach to EE (Ireland, 2015). To begin with, the current approach lacks guidelines that establish clear objectives for EE that are congruent with the aims, principles, and objectives of the primary school curriculum (Ireland, 1999). Secondly, school engagement with the aforementioned EE initiatives is discretionary and, therefore, many pupils may complete their primary education without having had an opportunity to engage with EE. Thirdly, the limited nature of these programmes raises reasonable concerns regarding the long-lasting effectiveness of the interventions, as many only provide for older pupils and the duration of each programme is less than one school term. The development of a policy statement on EE would be a first step towards addressing these challenges and ensuring a coherency and consistency to pupils' experience of EE. This approach is supported by the experience of policy-driven engagement with EE in the Nordic countries (Korhonen et al., 2012; Somy and Johansen, 2017). The Irish Government has committed to developing an EE policy statement to inform the development of EE guidelines for schools (Ireland, 2016), and the process preceding this milestone is discussed later in this article.

Core to the development of effective guidelines for EE in the Irish context is a clear vision for the goals of EE within the Irish education system. Reflecting upon the Nordic experience, in which Government policy impelled the introduction of EE across all levels of education (Räty et al., 2016; Komulainen et al., 2014; Dahlstedt and Andreas Fejes, 2017; Korhonen et al., 2012; Johansen and Schanke, 2013), could provide a benchmark for developing a form of EE that is aligned at curricular level with the Irish education system. The Nordic research base also provides an insight into the perceptions of EE amongst teachers who have delivered EE initiatives, research that is particularly beneficial due to the limited nature of such research in the Irish context.

### **The 'internal' and 'external' perspectives**

At present, EE lacks a consensual theoretical and conceptual foundation (Pittaway and Cope, 2007; Solomon, 2007; Dal et al., 2016; Holmgren and From, 2005; Fayolle, 2013). This has resulted in the emergence of two opposing ideological perspectives on EE, referred to as the 'internal' and 'external' perspectives. Examining these perspectives is a good starting point towards a better understanding of the potential ideological orientation that EE could embrace in Ireland.

Under the 'internal' perspective, EE assumes a broad focus on personal skill and competency development, promoting initiative, persistence, and creativity; skills which can be applied in a range of situations and contexts (Dal et al., 2016; Seikkula-Leino, 2010). Conversely, the 'external' perspective focuses on developing skills and functional competencies required for setting up and running a business (Dal et al., 2016). Thus, the focus of the 'internal' perspective is the development of transferable skills that may bolster learning across the curriculum, while within the 'external' perspective the development of such skills that could be applied to non-business applications is incidental.

Assessment of effective EE from the 'internal' perspective tends to focus on pupil



outcomes and the effect of engagement with the programme on the development of particular cognitive and non-cognitive entrepreneurial skills. These cognitive skills have been identified as creativity, willingness to take risks (Johansen, 2014), decision-making (Dahlstedt and Hertzberg, 2012), imagining, speculating about innovative hypotheses, discovering, and inventing (Urban, 2006). Non-cognitive entrepreneurial skills include flexibility (Dahlstedt and Hertzberg, 2012), self-confidence, willingness to take initiative, ability to collaborate, and social skills (Johansen, 2014.). Huber et al., (2014) claim a positive correlation between pupils' engagement with the EE initiative provided by BizWorld, an international organisation that provides enterprise workshops for senior end primary school pupils that are delivered by specially-trained tutors, and improved cognitive and non-cognitive entrepreneurial skills, as indicated by self-reported scores on self-efficacy, need for achievement, risk taking, persistence, analysing, pro-activity and creativity. However, the cross-curricular transferability of these skills remains a point of contention. Johansen (2014) examined the link between engagement with EE and academic performance and found no evidence of performance differentials. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that there is evidence of a positive relationship between engagement with EE and the development of certain cognitive and non-cognitive skills. Indeed, such skill development is suggested as a key objective for each of the EE initiatives offering such programmes in Ireland as identified in figure 1. These skills include creativity (JAI, BI, JEP), problem-solving (JEP) and inter-personal skills (BG, JEP) (Curriculum Development Unit, n.d.; Junior Achievement Ireland, n.d.; Biz World Ireland, n.d.; Junior Entrepreneur Programme, n.d.). However, the limited nature of research on this topic in Ireland dictates that additional research is required in order to assess satisfactorily the true effectiveness of each of these initiatives in fostering such skills.

In the 'external' paradigm, the effectiveness of EE is often assessed with reference to the effect of the intervention on the participants' 'entrepreneurial intentions', or ambition to run their own businesses (Bae et al., 2014). There is significant reference in the literature to a positive correlation between engagement with EE and increased entrepreneurial intentions (Peterman and Kennedy, 2003; Wilson et al., 2007; Bae et al., 2014), but the methodological rigour of many studies in this field has been challenged (Oosterbeek et al., 2010; Fayolle, 2013). Martin et al. (2013) acknowledge that some less rigorous studies in the field tend to overstate this relationship, but corroborated a positive correlation between engagement with EE and increased entrepreneurial intentions following a meta-analysis of 42 independent samples that were assessed as methodologically satisfactory. Piperopoulos and Dimov (2015) and Oosterbeek et al. (2010) contend that any increase in entrepreneurial intentions following engagement with EE is dependent on educators providing pupils with a realistic frame of reference for attainable outcomes within their entrepreneurial endeavour; otherwise pupil self-efficacy for entrepreneurship could be affected negatively by a failure to attain unrealistic objectives. Kolvereid and Amo (2007) eschew entrepreneurial intentions and propose assessing business start-up rates as a more appropriate metric to measure outcomes. In an Irish context, further research is required to determine if there is a link between engagement with EE at primary level and increased entrepreneurial intentions and, ultimately, business start-up rates. Evidence

of a positive correlation could be perceived as a boon for support of EE among business groups and economic policymakers. It is apparent from the Nordic literature that the primary focus of an effective EE programme from the 'external' perspective is generating outcomes that benefit the economy, yet fulfilling the goals of the 'external' perspective is not at the forefront of teachers' ambitions for EE, and most teachers' perceptions of EE are aligned with the 'internal' perspective (Korhonen et al., 2012; Antikainen, 2006), with these teachers rejecting the contention that primary education has a role to play in promoting the objectives of the 'external' perspective (Komulainen, 2014; Seikkula-Leino, 2010; Lourenço and Jayawarna, 2011).

### **Pedagogical approach**

Active learning is positioned as the most effective pedagogical approach for teaching and learning within EE (Verzat et al., 2009; Gibb, 2005; Paço and Palinhas, 2011; Neck and Greene, 2011). This approach facilitates pupil engagement with authentic, problem-based projects, which require pupil investigation, experimentation, and research in order to construct an understanding of entrepreneurship (Dal et al., 2016; Huq and Gilber, 2017). The rationale underlying this approach is that effective learning in EE occurs when pupils are given opportunities to engage with entrepreneurial processes, reflecting the way entrepreneurs acquire these skills (Birdthistle et al., 2007; Cooper et al., 2004; Fiet, 2001; Richardson and Hynes, 2008). This could involve utilising the classroom as an incubation space for a business, with pupils assuming responsibility for various business operations including product design, production, finance, and sales and marketing. The group members within each division would then work together to carry out their respective business function, as well as managing the logistics of intergroup collaboration to ensure that each process is completed on schedule. In this way, the entrepreneurial experience is pupil-led, with teacher as facilitator. Backström-Widjeskog (2010) contends that teacher content knowledge of EE is crucial to their effectiveness in scaffolding the entrepreneurial project and producing the desired skill and competency development. Teachers with high levels of EE content knowledge tend to facilitate an approach to EE that focuses on developing individual and social entrepreneurship competences, self-confidence, self-reliance and independence. Conversely, limited EE content knowledge is associated with a more circumscriptive focus on developing functional entrepreneurial competences. The former approach indicates an understanding of the objectives of EE aligned with the 'internal' perspective, whereas the latter approach bears the hallmarks of the 'external' perspective. The pupil competencies identified above appear consistent with a whole-child development educational philosophy, and this indicates that it is possible to implement EE in a manner congruent with aims, principles, and objectives of the Irish curriculum. However, this is contingent upon high levels of teacher content knowledge of EE. Therefore, providing opportunities for teachers to enrich their content knowledge of EE, such as during initial teacher education and as continuing professional development, would help ensure teachers are empowered to facilitate an approach to EE that results in the development of competencies allied with a whole-child educational philosophy.

## **Towards a policy statement on entrepreneurship education for Ireland**

The convening of the first Forum on Entrepreneurship in Schools (Forum I) in 2014 marked the initial phase towards the development of a policy statement on EE by the Irish Government. Forum I provided entrepreneurs with an opportunity to voice their perspectives on EE and reached a consensus regarding the importance of promoting entrepreneurship at all levels of the Irish education system (Ireland, 2015). Significantly, Forum I also affirmed a utilitarian vision for EE aligned with the 'external' perspective, asserting that the purpose of EE was to enable "young people to think innovatively and creatively – so they can add value in commercial or social enterprises" (Ireland, 2015, p.2). The subsequent *National Policy Statement on Entrepreneurship in Ireland* (Ireland, 2014) included an affirmation of support for the development of EE at all levels of the education system. A second forum on entrepreneurship in schools (Forum II) was organised in 2015, with a focus on empowering school representatives to share their views (Ireland, 2015). Forum II sought to yield recommendations from participants regarding the proposed aim of EE, prospective pedagogical models, challenges in developing relevant transversal skills and means of supporting the implementation of EE. These recommendations have not been made public and, despite a request, were not made available to this research. Nevertheless, the Government has committed to developing an EE policy statement to inform the development of EE guidelines for schools (Ireland, 2016), albeit without stating if their vision for EE aligns with the 'internal' or 'external' perspective. Engaging with the literature enabled the researcher to identify a research gap and consequent lack of clarity regarding the perceptions of EE amongst Irish primary school teachers, and this led to the development of the following research questions:

1. What is Irish primary school teachers' understanding of the term 'entrepreneurship education'? Is this understanding aligned with the 'internal' or 'external' perspective?
2. What outcomes for teaching and learning do Irish primary school teachers associate with entrepreneurship education?
3. What are the skills or competencies that Irish primary school teachers perceive pupils acquire from engaging in entrepreneurship education?

## **Methodology**

The semi-structured interview was selected as the primary research instrument, as it provides opportunities for the researcher to use probing questions to elicit additional information or clarify responses, adding significance and depth to the data collected (Saunders et al., 2007; Harrell et al., 2009; Whiting, 2008). The selection of this methodology was influenced by the work of Backström-Widjeskog (2010) and Korhonen et al. (2012), which utilised interviews to gain an insight into Finnish teachers' perceptions of EE.

## **Research design**

In order to collect the data, five primary school teachers with experience of implementing EE initiatives in Irish primary schools took part in a semi-structured interview. EE does not form part of the core curriculum in Irish primary schools. Consequently, school

participation in entrepreneurial initiatives is entirely discretionary. This necessitated the use of criterion sampling to identify research participants. Criterion sampling involves identifying a sample with characteristics relevant to the research question (Teddle and Yu, 2007). The relevant criterion for participation in this study was evidence of engagement with an EE initiative. The process involved scrutinising media reports to identify articles about school engagement with either of the two main, teacher-implemented entrepreneurship initiatives: Bí Gnóthach and the Junior Entrepreneur Programme. The participants were employed in permanent positions at five different primary schools located in Dublin and the West of Ireland.

*Fig 2: Profile of participants*

Participant	Participant profile	Programme implemented
P1	Primary School Teacher – Large DEIS Urban band 1 Primary School	Bí Gnóthach
P2	Primary School Teacher – Large DEIS Urban band 1 Primary School	Junior Entrepreneur Programme
P3	Primary School Teacher – Medium Rural Primary School	Junior Entrepreneur Programme
P4	Primary School Principal – Small Rural Primary School	Junior Entrepreneur Programme
P5	Primary School Deputy Principal – Large Urban Primary School	Bí Gnóthach

### **Data analysis**

Data consisted of five interview transcripts that were transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms were used to conceal participants' names and the names of the schools. Subsequently, the interviews were transcribed and coded. The following interconnected themes emerged from analysis of the transcribed data:

1. Ideological perspectives on entrepreneurship.
2. An impetus for constructivist pedagogy.
3. Cross-curricular integration within entrepreneurship education.
4. The place of entrepreneurship education in the primary school curriculum.

### **Theme 1: Ideological perspectives on entrepreneurship**

Most of the participants voiced an understanding of the term 'entrepreneur' aligned with the 'internal' perspective, acknowledging the traditional business-centric definition but also demonstrating an awareness of a potentially broader application:

It's about building on what's innate in the children, their talents and skills... It shows children how to engineer and make a business or anything like that (P2).

(Entrepreneurship education is) a programme that would provide children with skills that would allow them to use their own initiative to better themselves in life, perhaps make a living out of it (P3).

Now I don't know if the technical definition of Entrepreneur solely applies to business, but I would see it as an idea that children would make into a financially successful operation, that would be an entrepreneur (P5).

Two of the five participants indicated an understanding of entrepreneurship more closely aligned with the external perspective, suggesting that the primary purpose of EE is for pupils to develop an understanding of business operations:

I suppose, the children are aware of how to set up their own business, in context I suppose, in terms of their everyday life (P1).

It gives the children an introduction to what it takes to become an entrepreneur. When we do it, a business visitor comes and gives a talk to the class, explaining how they got to where they are and the level of work that's involved in that (P4).

Nevertheless, all participants associated the goals of EE with those of the 'internal' perspective, which focus on pupil development of certain cognitive and non-cognitive skills. These skills are summarised in figure 3.

*Fig 3: Summary of skills promoted by entrepreneurship education identified by participants*

Cognitive	Non-cognitive
Budgeting (P2, P3)	Collaborative skills (P1, P3, P4, P5)
Creativity (P3, P5)	Self-confidence (P1, P2, P3, P4)
Critical thinking (P2, P3)	Speaking skills (P2, P3, P4)
Numeracy (P2, P3)	Carrying a plan through (P3, P5)
Literacy (P2, P3)	Self-esteem (P2, P3)
Collating and organising (P1)	Inclusion (P4)
Decision-making (P2)	Time management (P1)
Evaluating (P2)	
ICT (P3)	
Marketing (P2)	
Planning (P5)	

As previously noted, most of the participants signalled an understanding of the term 'entrepreneurship' aligned with the 'internal' perspective, although two of the five participants voiced an understanding more closely aligned with the external perspective. However, all participants expressed an understanding of effective outcomes associated with the child-centric 'internal' perspective.

### **Theme 2: An impetus for constructivist pedagogy**

The findings indicate that participants perceived implementing an EE initiative as an opportunity to facilitate pupil engagement with constructivist learning methodologies:

...sometimes it's very hard to find the time to just teach those... basic life skills, and I suppose I would see the entrepreneur programme as maybe giving them a certain bit of practical learning (P3).

The whole thing of working collaboratively, that was a big thing for me; it opened my eyes to that (P4).

I would have seen it as a fantastic opportunity to...engage in project work and group work (P5).

This constructivist pedagogical approach was informed by the programmes and guided by the teacher manuals provided to teachers:

It was a very well-designed folder in terms of before you ever got to the business there was an awful lot of learning in it. For instance, you spent a lot of time talking with the children about the project, doing the market research, how to go planning the whole project and then actually working through the production, marketing, and sales (P5).

Clearly, participants implemented EE using a constructivist pedagogical approach, with some explicitly citing engagement with the process as an opportunity to engage with constructivist methodologies that might otherwise be absent in the classroom.

### **Theme 3: Cross-curricular integration within entrepreneurship education**

Three of the five participants described using a cross-curricular approach to implement EE:

It all links into the curriculum, and that's important because it's very difficult to set time aside (P2).

Say when we're doing the market research like, we would do Data in Maths and then they're going around collecting up all the data, drawing up the graphs and charts...Then other advertising posters are done with Art, and in English as well we tie in, we do exposition and persuasive writing when we're doing it so they have to write persuasive letters to sponsors (P1).

It takes up so much time it had to be cross-curricular. There are elements of numeracy, literacy, visual arts coming in there, even some of the other SESE (social, environmental and scientific education) subjects (history, geography and science). There are links to all of them... I don't think teachers would be too interested taking it on-board as a standalone programme, because we're talking about something that takes twelve/sixteen weeks and a lot of work in that time (P3).

Two of the five participants did not adopt a planned approach to integration and described the presence of cross-curricular elements as 'incidental' to the overall process:

The way it works, it's informal integration, incidental with other subjects (P4).

I wouldn't say I integrated it as such... but I would have said 'look, this is the practical use of Maths now'... there would be elements of writing there and I'd always say 'this is real practical use of your literacy skills'... I'd kind of be more incidental... If I went back to do it again – could I take a thematic approach? I probably could (P5).

Whilst all participants acknowledged the potential for EE to facilitate cross-curricular integration, not all participants have implemented EE using a planned integrative approach.

#### **Theme 4: The place of entrepreneurship education in the primary school curriculum**

Most participants favoured the introduction of EE as part of the primary school curriculum, although different opinions were expressed regarding the most suitable space for EE.

Well the most obvious subject area is SPHE, Social Personal and Health Education. There would be a link there as a lot of the skills are transferable and that's where I would see it, but you'd have to increase the allocated time to that subject area and it would need to be a block as well (P3).

The teachers would be saying 'don't give us anything more!', but does it (entrepreneurship education) have a place? Absolutely.... you can tie it in with SPHE as well, but I would certainly think of Entrepreneurship Education in relation to that whole Geography curriculum (P5).

It should be a module in some part of the SESE, and not only in book form, but to allow the children to experience it; active learning (P4).

There's a lot of talk now about changing hours and looking at introducing flexible time in addition to discretionary time... maybe at senior level it could be built in at core (curriculum). I don't know if that's achievable. If there's flexible time then it definitely is, it would definitely be something to look at (P2).

However, support for the inclusion of EE as part of the core curriculum was not unanimous:

I think it should be voluntary as well. It's not going to suit everyone and there's so many time constraints, so much going on, that like if it was something that was going to be rolled out, as you know compulsory, then something else would need to be taken out of your day (P1).

The same participant argued that there was already scope within the existing geography curriculum to achieve the learning objectives associated with EE, if teachers opted to engage with the practice:

That's the thing, the curriculum is very adaptive... so a geography strand would be 'Local Areas' and you would target like business and you would do a little bit of what a business is made up of... I suppose it doesn't specifically have its own title as in 'this is business' and 'we're doing business now'...but (entrepreneurship education) is definitely there (P1).

While most participants voiced support for the inclusion of EE within the curriculum, there was significant divergence regarding the ideal form this should take. A common recommendation was the inclusion of EE within the SESE subjects, although whether it was necessary to amend the existing curricular structure to do so was a matter of debate.

## **Discussion**

### **Theme 1: Ideological perspectives on entrepreneurship education**

Most participants indicated an understanding of the term 'entrepreneurship' aligned with the broader conceptualisation of the 'internal' perspective. This focus on EE as a means of promoting whole-child development implicit in the present findings is unsurprising when we consider that this study was conducted with Irish primary school teachers who deliver a child-centred curriculum.

The findings also show that a minority of participants held an understanding of entrepreneurship aligned with the more limited, business-centric view of entrepreneurship associated with the external perspective. However, these findings indicate that a self-identified ideological perspective, indicating alignment with either the 'internal' or 'external' perspective, is not necessarily indicative of one's understanding of effective outcomes; all participants expressed an understanding of effective outcomes associated with pupil development of certain cognitive and non-cognitive skills. Some of the skills identified correspond with those previously identified in the research, including the cognitive skills of creativity (P3, P5) and decision-making (P2) (Huber et al., 2014; Dal et al., 2016; Seikkula-Leino, 2010) and the non-cognitive skills of self-confidence (P1, P2, P3, P4), collaborative (P1, P3, P4, P5), and speaking skills (P2, P3, P4) (Johansen, 2014; Backström-Widjeskog, 2010). None of the participants referred to the standard 'external' metrics of entrepreneurial intentions or business start-up rates when describing pupil outcomes. The findings indicate that the participants' ideological perspectives on EE broadly conform with the 'internal' perspective, and this is consistent with the prior research from the Nordic countries. Furthermore, regardless of ideological perspective, all teachers voiced an understanding of effective outcomes associated with the 'internal' perspective.

### **Theme 2: An impetus for constructivist pedagogy**

All participants indicated that they used constructivist pedagogy to implement EE. This approach conforms with the best practice recommendations of the literature, which contend that EE is most effective when pupils have opportunities to engage with real-life entrepreneurial processes and can acquire entrepreneurial skills in a manner analogous to real-life entrepreneurs (Birdthistle et al., 2007; Cooper et al., 2004; Fiet, 2001; Richardson



and Hynes, 2008). It was evident from the interviews that participants perceive that *Bí Gnóthach* and the *Junior Entrepreneur Programme* provide a real-life context to engage with entrepreneurial learning, as they felt both initiatives require pupils to engage with real business processes in order to start a functioning business.

The findings suggest that active learning and co-operative learning are the main constructivist methodologies utilised for implementing EE, consistent with best practice for effective teaching and learning in this area (Verzat et al., 2009, Gibb, 2005; do Paço and Palinhas, 2011; Neck and Greene, 2011). Participants advised that their engagement with these methodologies was informed by the teacher manuals provided by the programmes. The provision of this instructional scaffolding is significant, as some participants reported low self-efficacy implementing constructivist pedagogy. The findings indicated that when teachers are provided with a framework that informs the implementation of constructivist methodologies, they will feel more comfortable engaging with this approach.

### **Theme 3: Cross-curricular integration within entrepreneurship education**

The findings suggest awareness amongst participants of the potential to implement EE using a cross-curricular approach. This suggests that *Bí Gnóthach* and the *Junior Entrepreneur Programme* avoid a failing ascribed to many EE initiatives by Hytti and O'Gorman (2004), that of being narrowly focusing on the development of a particular set of vocational skills required for running a business, instead of integrating the learning across the pupils' general educational experience. These findings also suggest that EE is conducive to the integrated learning approach advocated by the *Primary School Curriculum* (Ireland, 1999). Three of the five participants outlined using a planned cross-curricular approach, stressing that the time demands, and level of work associated with implementing the initiative, provided a strong impetus for doing so. This approach is consistent with the best practice recommendations of the literature for effective EE outcomes (Hytti and O'Gorman, 2004; Seikkula-Leino et al., 2010; Backström-Widjeskog, 2010). However, in contrast with the literature, it is apparent from the above responses that a planned, integrated approach here was precipitated by the demands of teaching life, rather than an ideological belief in the enhanced effectiveness of EE outcomes when using a cross-curricular approach. Two of the five participants advised that they did not plan for integration while implementing EE and referred to the cross-curricular elements encountered as 'incidental' to the overall process.

### **Theme 4: Place of entrepreneurship education in the primary school curriculum**

The research findings indicate unanimous support amongst participants for engagement with EE at primary level, although divergent opinions were expressed regarding the ideal space for this practice. Four of the five participants advocated the inclusion of EE within the existing framework of the curriculum. Three participants identified SESE as the most appropriate area, with P1 stating that there was scope within the existing structure of the geography curriculum to achieve the learning objectives associated with EE, if teachers opted to engage with the practice. In contrast, P4 and P5 argued that the learning objectives of EE would best be achieved by the creation of a compulsory new strand for EE within the

geography curriculum. Only one participant identified SPHE as the most appropriate area. This was surprising as, along with maths and English, SPHE is a curricular area from which the promotional materials for these initiatives drew particularly strong links (Curriculum Development Unit, 2016; Junior Entrepreneur Programme, n.d.). Nevertheless, the findings show that, amongst those participants who advocate the inclusion of EE within the curriculum, geography is recognised as the most appropriate location. Despite this support for the inclusion of EE within the curriculum, most participants referred to the curriculum as 'overloaded' and asserted that support for the introduction of EE amongst teachers may be subdued for this reason.

### **Recommendations**

- Participants associated positive outcomes from EE with pupil development of particular cognitive and non-cognitive skills. A larger and more comprehensive study engaging a representative sample of teachers would help determine the validity of these claims. Furthermore, a multi-faceted analysis, exploring perceptions of cross-curricular skill development amongst teachers, pupils, and parents, would offer a valuable perspective on the process.
- Participants perceive the existing curriculum as being 'overloaded'. An apprehension of EE as yet another curricular requirement is likely to exacerbate this and hinder meaningful engagement with the practice. The EE guidelines to be brought forward by the DES could address this by affirming a cross-curricular vision for EE and stressing that teachers can integrate curricular content into the EE initiative. This could be achieved by linking each component of the EE initiative to a specific content objective across the various subject headings. This would also help to highlight opportunities for integration as a means of addressing a perceived increase in curricular content arising from the addition of EE.
- Provide teachers with reference materials setting out the constructivist learning methodologies to be used during each phase of the EE project and provide training during initial teacher education and continuing professional development to ensure teacher self-efficacy in utilising these methodologies.
- This study focused on collecting the views of teachers who have implemented the teacher-led *Junior Entrepreneur Programme* and *Bí Gnóthach* initiatives. Further research examining the perceptions of teachers who have engaged with other initiatives, and those who have not engaged with EE at all, would provide a more representative sample for analysis.

### **Conclusion**

This small-scale study was novel in an Irish context and the findings cannot be generalised as representative of the views of all Irish primary school teachers who have implemented an EE programme. The results indicate that participants perceive EE as compatible with the goals of a child-centred curriculum, facilitating an integrated approach to teaching and

learning involving pupil engagement with task-centred group work in a manner consistent with the constructivist paradigm. The experience of EE in the Irish primary school has predominately been characterised by extra-curricular engagement with programmes designed, and often implemented, by external agencies. Consequently, these initiatives may not necessarily be consistent with the aims, principles, and objectives of the curriculum. In recent years, Irish policymakers have taken an increased interest in promoting EE and have committed to the development of a policy statement to guide the implementation of a form of EE which is consistent with the *Primary School Curriculum*. The forthcoming DES guidelines will inform the future development of EE in Ireland and clarify if education policy will adhere to the 'internal' or 'external' perspective. If these guidelines adhere to the vision set out by Forum I, then it is likely that a utilitarian vision for EE aligned with the 'external' perspective will be endorsed. However, the present findings indicate that teacher buy-in with the practice would best be supported by the introduction of guidelines advocating an approach to EE aligned with the 'internal' perspective, with EE serving to fulfil the curricular cornerstone of whole-child development.

## References

- Antikainen, A. (2006). In search of the Nordic model in education. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 50(3), pp.229-243.
- Backström-Widjeskog, B. (2010). Teachers' thoughts on entrepreneurship education. In: K. Skogen, and J. Sjøvoll (Eds.) *Creativity and Innovation: Preconditions for Entrepreneurial Action*. Trondheim: Tapir Academic Press.
- Bae, T.J., Qian, S., Miao, C., and Fiet, J.O. (2014). The relationship between entrepreneurship education and entrepreneurial intentions: A meta-analytic review. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 38(2), pp.217-254.
- Ball, C. (1989). *Towards an "enterprising" culture: a challenge for education and training*, No. 4. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.
- Birdthistle, N., Hynes, B., and Fleming, P. (2007). Enterprise education programmes in secondary schools in Ireland: A multi-stakeholder perspective. *Education + Training*, 49(4), pp.265-276.
- Bizworld. (n.d.). About. Available at: <http://bizworldireland.org/about/> (Accessed 19 July 2020).
- Cooper, S., Bottomley, C., and Gordon, J. (2004). Stepping out of the classroom and up the ladder of learning: An experiential learning approach to entrepreneurship education. *Industry and Higher Education*, 18(1), pp.11-22.
- Curriculum Development Unit (2016). *Bí Gnóthach Teacher's Manual*. Available at: [www.localenterprise.ie/SouthDublin/Student-Enterprise/Primary-Schools-Enterprise-Programme/](http://www.localenterprise.ie/SouthDublin/Student-Enterprise/Primary-Schools-Enterprise-Programme/) (Accessed 19 July 2020).
- Curriculum Development Unit (n.d.). About Bí Gnothach. Available at: [www.curriculumdevelopmentunit.com/biacute-gnoacutethach.html](http://www.curriculumdevelopmentunit.com/biacute-gnoacutethach.html) (Accessed 19 July 2020)
- Dahlstedt, M., and Fejes, A. (2019). Shaping entrepreneurial citizens: A genealogy of entrepreneurship education in Sweden. *Critical Studies in Education*, 60(4), 462-476.

- Dahlstedt, M., and Hertzberg, F. (2012). Schooling entrepreneurs: Entrepreneurship, governmentality and education policy in Sweden at the turn of the millennium. *Journal of Pedagogy/Pedagogický Casopis*, 3(2), pp.242-262.
- Dal, M., Elo, J., Leffler, E., Svedberg, G., and Westerberg, M. (2016). Research on pedagogical entrepreneurship – a literature review based on studies from Finland, Iceland and Sweden. *Education Inquiry*, 7(2), p.30036.
- European Commission Thematic Working Group on Entrepreneurship Education (2014). *Final Report of the European Commission Thematic Working Group on Entrepreneurship Education*. Available at: [www.tesguide.eu/policy-strategy/itemid/40911/](http://www.tesguide.eu/policy-strategy/itemid/40911/) (Accessed: 19 July 2020).
- Eurydice, E.A.C.E.A. (2012). *Entrepreneurship, Education at School in Europe. National strategies, curricula and learning outcomes*. Available at: [eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/thematic\\_reports/135EN.pdf](http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/thematic_reports/135EN.pdf) (Accessed 30 March 2020).
- Fayolle, A. (2013). Personal views on the future of entrepreneurship education. *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development*, 25(7-8), pp.692-701.
- Fayolle, A., Gailly, B., and Lassas-Clerc, N. (2006). Assessing the impact of entrepreneurship education programmes: a new methodology. *Journal of European Industrial Training*, 30(9), pp.701-720.
- Fenton, M., and Barry, A. (2011). The efficacy of entrepreneurship education: perspectives of Irish graduate entrepreneurs. *Industry and Higher Education*, 25(6), pp.1-10.
- FFE-YE. (2012). Impact of Entrepreneurship Education in Denmark – 2011. In: L. Vestergaard, K. Moberg, and C. Jørgensen (Eds.) *Odense. The Danish Foundation for Entrepreneurship – Young Enterprise*.
- Fiet, J.O. (2001). The pedagogical side of entrepreneurship theory. *Journal of Business Venturing*, 16(2), pp. 101-117.
- Gibb, A.A. (2005). The future of Entrepreneurship Education. Determining the basis for coherent policy and practice, Chapter 2 in Kyro, P., and Carrier, C. *The Dynamics of Learning Entrepreneurship in a Cross-Cultural University Context*, pp.44-68. University of Tampere Research Centre for Vocational and Professional Education.
- Government of Ireland (2016). *National Skills Strategy*. Available at: [www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/pub\\_national\\_skills\\_strategy\\_2025.pdf](http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/pub_national_skills_strategy_2025.pdf) (Accessed: 19 July 2020).
- Harrell, M.C., and Bradley, M.A. (2009). *Data Collection Methods: Semi-structured Interviews and Focus Groups*. Available at: [www.dtic.mil/docs/citations/ADA512853](http://www.dtic.mil/docs/citations/ADA512853) (Accessed: 19 July 2020).
- Henry, C., Hill, F., and Leitch, C. (2005). Entrepreneurship education and training: can entrepreneurship be taught? Part I. *Education + Training*, 47(2), pp.98-111.
- Holmgren, C., and From, J. (2005). Taylorism of the mind: entrepreneurship education from a perspective of educational research. *European Educational Research Journal*, 4(4), pp.382-390.
- Hoppe, M. (2016). Policy and entrepreneurship education. *Small Business Economics*, 46(1), pp.13-29.
- Huber, L.R., Sloof, R., and Van Praag, M. (2014). The effect of early entrepreneurship education: evidence from a field experiment. *European Economic Review*, 72, pp.76-97.
- Huq, A., and Gilbert, D. (2017). All the world's a stage: transforming entrepreneurship education through design thinking. *Education + Training*, 59(2), pp.155-170.

- Hytti, U., and O'Gorman, C. (2004). What is "enterprise education"? An analysis of the objectives and methods of enterprise education programmes in four European countries. *Education + Training*, 46(1), pp.11-23.
- Ireland, Government of (2015). *Forum on Entrepreneurship in Schools*. Available at: [www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Events/Enterprise-in-Education/Entrepreneurship-Education-Gary-O-Donnchadha.pdf](http://www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Events/Enterprise-in-Education/Entrepreneurship-Education-Gary-O-Donnchadha.pdf) (Accessed: 19 July 2020).
- Ireland, Government of (2014). *National Policy Statement on Entrepreneurship in Ireland 2014*. Available at: [www.djei.ie/en/Publications/National-Policy-Statement-on-Entrepreneurship-in-Ireland-2014.html](http://www.djei.ie/en/Publications/National-Policy-Statement-on-Entrepreneurship-in-Ireland-2014.html) (Accessed: 19 July 2020).
- Ireland, Government of (1999). *Introduction to Primary Curriculum*. Available at: [www.curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/c4a88a62-7818-4bb2-bb18-4c4ad37bc255/PSEC\\_Introduction-to-Primary-Curriculum\\_Eng.pdf](http://www.curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/c4a88a62-7818-4bb2-bb18-4c4ad37bc255/PSEC_Introduction-to-Primary-Curriculum_Eng.pdf) (Accessed: 19 July 2020).
- Johansen, V. (2014). Entrepreneurship education and academic performance. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 58(3), pp.300-314.
- Johansen, V., and Schanke, T. (2013). Entrepreneurship education in secondary education and training. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 57(4), pp.357-368.
- Junior Achievement Ireland (n.d.). About Junior Achievement Ireland. Available at: <http://jai.ie/about-ja/about-junior-achievement.html> (Accessed 19 July 2020).
- Junior Entrepreneur Programme (n.d.). How it works. Available at: [www.juniorentrepreneur.ie/howitworks/](http://www.juniorentrepreneur.ie/howitworks/) (Accessed: 19 July 2020).
- Kolvereid, L., and Åmo, B.W. (2007). Entrepreneurship among graduates from business schools: a Norwegian case. *Handbook of Research in Entrepreneurship Education*, Volume 2, p.207.
- Komulainen, K., Naskali, P., Korhonen, M., and Keskitalo-Foley, S. (2014). Internal Entrepreneurship – a Trojan horse of the neoliberal governance of education? Finnish pre-and in-service teachers' implementation of and resistance towards entrepreneurship education. *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, 9(1).
- Korhonen, M., Komulainen, K., and Rätty, H. (2012). "Not everyone is cut out to be the entrepreneur type": How Finnish school teachers construct the meaning of entrepreneurship education and the related abilities of the pupils. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 56(1), pp.1-19.
- Lourenço, F., and Jayawarna, D. (2011). Enterprise education: the effect of creativity on training outcomes. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior and Research*, 17(3), pp. 224-244.
- Martin, B.C., McNally, J.J., and Kay, M.J. (2013). Examining the formation of human capital in entrepreneurship: A meta-analysis of entrepreneurship education outcomes. *Journal of Business Venturing*, 28(2), pp.211-224.
- Neck, H.M., and Greene, P.G. (2011). Entrepreneurship education: known worlds and new frontiers. *Journal of Small Business Management*, 49(1), pp.55-70.
- O'Connor, J., Fenton, M., and Barry, A. (2012). Entrepreneurship Education: Irelands Solution to Economic Regeneration? *Industry and Higher Education*, 26(3), pp.241-249.
- Oosterbeek, H., Van Praag, M., and Ijsselstein, A. (2010). The impact of entrepreneurship education on entrepreneurship skills and motivation. *European Economic Review*, 54(3), pp.442-454.

- Paço, A.D., and Palinhas, M.J. (2011). Teaching entrepreneurship to children: a case study. *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 63(4), pp.593-608.
- Peterman, N.E., and Kennedy, J. (2003). Enterprise education: Influencing students' perceptions of entrepreneurship. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 28(2), pp.129-144.
- Piperopoulos, P., and Dimov, D. (2015). Burst bubbles or build steam? Entrepreneurship education, entrepreneurial self-efficacy, and entrepreneurial intentions. *Journal of Small Business Management*, 53(4), pp.970-985.
- Pittaway, L. and Cope, J. (2007). Entrepreneurship education: a systematic review of the evidence. *International Small Business Journal*, 25(5), pp.479-510.
- Raposo, M., and Paco, A.D. (2011). Entrepreneurship education: Relationship between education and entrepreneurial activity. *Psicothema*, 23(3), pp.453-457.
- Rasmussen, E.S., Knudsen, M.H., Lydixsen, R., and Servais, P. (2011). Sub-suppliers in the life science industry: the case of two Danish university spin-offs. In: *International Entrepreneurship in the Life Sciences*, pp.159-174. Edward Elgar Publishing, Incorporated.
- Räty, H., Korhonen, M., Kasanen, K., Komulainen, K., Rautiainen, R., and Siivonen, P. (2016). Finnish parents' attitudes toward entrepreneurship education. *Social Psychology of Education*, 19(2), pp.385-401.
- Richardson, I., and Hynes, B. (2008). Entrepreneurship education: towards an industry sector approach. *Education + Training*, 50(3), pp.188-198.
- Saunders, M., Lewis, P., and Thornhill, A. (2007). Formulating the research design. *Research Methods for Business Students*, pp.130-161.
- Seikkula-Leino, J., Ruskovaara, E., Ikavalko, M., Mattila, J., and Rytkola, T. (2010). Promoting entrepreneurship education: the role of the teacher? *Education + training*, 52(2), pp.117-127.
- Solomon, G. (2007). An examination of entrepreneurship education in the United States. *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*, 14(2), pp.168-182.
- Somby, H.M., and Johansen, V. (2017). Entrepreneurship education: motivation and effort for pupils with special needs in Norwegian compulsory school. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 32(2), pp. 238-251.
- Teddle, C., and Yu, F. (2007). Mixed methods sampling: A typology with examples. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 1(1), pp.77-100.
- Urban, B. (2006). Entrepreneurship education and entrepreneurial intentions: A prospect for higher education? *Education as Change*, 10(1), pp.85-103.
- Verzat, C., Byrne, J., and Fayolle, A. (2009). Tangling with spaghetti: Pedagogical lessons from games. *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, 8(3), pp.356-369.
- Whiting, L.S. (2008). Semi-structured interviews: guidance for novice researchers. *Nursing Standard*, 22(23), pp.35-40.
- Wilson, F., Kickul, J., and Marlino, D. (2007). Gender, entrepreneurial self-efficacy, and entrepreneurial career intentions: implications for entrepreneurship education. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 31(3), pp.387-406

# ≡ Primary science in Ireland – 17 years on ≡

≡ CLIONA MURPHY, NICOLA BRODERICK, BEN MALLON ≡

## **Abstract**

With the imminent publication of a revised Irish *Primary Curriculum Framework* in 2021 and the subsequent revision of the *Primary Science Curriculum*, this paper explores the teaching and learning of primary science in Ireland since the formal implementation of the 1999 *Primary Science Curriculum* in 2003. This paper highlights some of the successes in and challenges facing primary science education that have emerged from science educational research, national reviews of the primary science curriculum and reports on Ireland's participation in large-scale studies of achievement. Recommendations are proposed to support effective teaching and learning in primary science that would support our young people in developing their scientific knowledge and skills, resulting in them developing positive attitudes and values towards science.

**Keywords:** primary science; science curricula; teaching and learning; pedagogical content knowledge; professional development.



## **Introduction**

Our world today faces numerous challenges. The STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) disciplines are embedded in these and it is essential that STEM subjects at all school levels address the application of STEM subjects in real contexts, rather than solely focusing on the concepts within these disciplines (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2016; Murphy, Smith, and Broderick, 2019). With regard to science as one of the STEM disciplines, science plays a central role in our understanding of and responses to the most significant global challenges faced by humanity. It provides fundamental knowledge about the world in which we live and, as a discipline, enables citizens to observe, investigate, measure, analyse, design and advance our physical environment (DES, 2016) to take action to prevent the breakdown of our climate, to tackle the causes of poverty, to address the need for good sanitation and clean water, and to produce clean energy. Furthermore, it is imperative that students leave school as scientifically-literate citizens. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2015 *Assessment and Analytical Framework* defines scientific literacy as:

The ability to engage with science-related issues, and with the ideas of science as a reflective citizen... is willing to engage in reasoned discourse about science and technology which requires competencies to: explain phenomena scientifically; evaluate and design scientific enquiry; and interpret data and evidence scientifically. (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2017, p.7).

Over the past 30 years, science education has moved from an emphasis on teaching and assessing scientific content towards the development of students' scientific literacy. This development is reflected in science curricula, that emphasise the importance of scientific knowledge that is relevant to students (Murphy et al., 2011; European Commission, 2015).

The current Irish *Primary Science Curriculum* (PSC) was developed in 1999 and formally implemented in all Irish primary schools in 2003. Seventeen years after the PSC's implementation, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is developing a new *Primary Curriculum Framework*, for publication early in 2021. With the imminent publication and roll-out of this new curriculum framework, it is timely to examine the teaching and learning of primary science in Ireland since the inception of the 1999 PSC. In this article, we examine the research literature on primary science across this period and consider the successes and challenges apparent within the teaching and learning of primary science in Ireland. The paper considers possible future developments for science education, as a discrete discipline within STEM education and, given the necessity of all citizens to be scientifically literate, considers how the re-envisioning of the primary curriculum presents huge opportunities to advance scientific literacy for all students in Ireland.

### **Primary science curriculum development (1971-1999)**

Prior to 1971, the Irish education system was perceived as insular, with national needs dominating curriculum texts and teachers' practice (Walsh, 2016). Science education did not feature in Irish classrooms. Elsewhere, international influence in the form of the 'Sputnik effect' of the 1960s, which saw the United States of America (USA) fall behind the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in the 'space race', spurred policy-makers to invest in science education and the development of national science curricula in the USA and across Europe. At a national level, economic prosperity provided the impetus for the 1971 curriculum and science became part of social environmental and scientific education (SESE) (Walsh, 2007; 2016). Analysts acknowledge that curriculum for school science in the 1960s and 1970s were designed, in response to dominant demand, for the preparation of future scientists and engineers (Fensham, 2004; National Science Foundation, 1983; Bodmer, 1985; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), 1983). The 1971 curriculum was poorly implemented, with little effect on students' learning of science (Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), 1992; NCCA, 1990). This combined with poor international comparative results in tests such as PISA and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), followed by a decline in the number of students pursuing science beyond the compulsory years, sparked government concerns (Beaton,



Mullis, Gonzalez, Smith, and Kelly, 1997). In pursuit of strategic improvements, several expert groups set about transforming the state of the Irish economy with a focus on science education. The Irish Council for Science and Technology Innovation (ICSTI) called for the introduction of a new primary science curriculum, claiming that the "availability of more people with science training was a prerequisite for the development of an economy capable of maintaining its citizens into the 21st century" (ICSTI, 1998, p.1). Forfás (1999) concurred, highlighting the importance of knowledge and skills for future competitive advantage. An economic-educational discourse was constructed and science was introduced as a subject in its own right in 1999.

The revised PSC is a considerable improvement on its precursor, *Curaclam na Bunscoile* (1971), and aims at developing students' scientific content knowledge and skills in working scientifically, from infants to sixth class. The overall aim of the PSC is to support children in learning about the physical and biological aspects of the world, through applying and developing their 'working scientifically' and 'designing and making' skills (DES, 1999b).

Social constructivist approaches underpin the PSC and a strong emphasis is placed on supporting children to develop scientific approaches to problem solving. While science is not a core subject in the Irish primary curriculum, it is compulsory, and it is recommended that science is allocated 50 minutes per week from infants to second class, and one hour per week from third to sixth class. This equates to approximately 4% of the overall instruction time allocated to science. Reviews of implementation of the PSC were conducted in 2008 (NCCA, 2008; Varley et al., 2008) and again in 2012 by the Department of Education and Skills (DES, 2012). The findings from these national reviews, results from international large-scale studies of achievement, combined with national research in science education, provide some evidence of the status of teaching and learning of primary science in Ireland to date.

### **The good news**

Research on the teaching and learning of primary science in Ireland presents mixed results. On a positive note, there is evidence that student and practising primary school teachers hold positive attitudes towards teaching science (Murphy et al., 2015; Smith, 2014; Waldron et al., 2007), and that student primary school teachers are more confident about teaching science after engaging with their initial teacher education science methodology courses (Murphy and Smith, 2012; Waldron et al., 2007). There is also evidence that primary school teachers are affording students with opportunities to engage in hands-on science and that they are integrating digital technologies in their science classes to some extent (DES, 2012; Murphy and Smith, 2012; Murphy et al., 2012; Smith, 2014). It is also worth noting that a higher proportion of the fourth class children in Ireland who participated in TIMSS (2015), were taught by newly qualified teachers than in previous TIMSS cycles. These newly qualified teachers reported adopting more inquiry-based methodologies for teaching science with more evidence of inquiry-based science education (IBSE) methodologies being used in primary schools than being used in previous years (Clerkin et al., 2017).

Irish primary school children hold positive attitudes towards learning science, appear

to have some experience of engaging with hands-on science in schools, are being provided with opportunities to work collaboratively in school science and are performing above average on international assessments (Clerkin et al., 2016; Eivers, 2013; Murphy et al., 2011; Murphy, 2013; Murphy et al., 2019; Smith, 2014; Varley et al., 2008). Extremely high percentages of fourth class children in Ireland who participated in TIMSS 2015 were positive about their instruction in science class (95%), reported engaging teaching in science (94%), were confident about science (82%), and liked learning science in school (89%) (Mullis et al., 2016).

There is no national assessment of science in Ireland, however, TIMSS 2015 reveals positive findings regarding Irish primary students' attainment. In the most recent TIMSS cycle (2015), fourth class students in Ireland performed significantly above the TIMSS centre points for both mathematics and science and outperformed students in 37 and 15 TIMSS countries respectively (Clerkin et al., 2016). Fourth class students' performance in mathematics and science in Ireland was significantly higher than in 2011 or 1995, however, it is worth noting that there were bigger improvements in mathematics than in science (Clerkin et al., 2016). Interestingly, since 1995 there has been a considerable improvement in the performance of the lower-achieving fourth class students from the Irish cohort in science but a slight dis-improvement amongst higher-achieving students in science (Clerkin et al., 2016). While fourth class students' performance in TIMSS 2015 in both science and mathematics has improved significantly since 2011, it could be, as Clerkin et al. (2016) suggest, that this is as a result of improved literacy levels amongst students in Ireland which made it easier for them to engage in the standardised science and mathematics tests.

### **The not so good news**

On a not so positive note, it is apparent from research that many Irish teachers lack confidence when teaching primary science (Clerkin et al., 2016; Murphy et al., 2015; NCCA, 2008; Smith, 2014). In the most recent TIMSS cycle (2015), Irish teachers reported much lower levels of confidence in teaching science content than they reported for mathematics. They were also found to be less confident about teaching science than teachers in many other participating countries (Clerkin et al., 2016). A further concern was that over half of the fourth class students in Ireland were taught by teachers who reported medium or low confidence in improving lower-performing students' understanding of science and/or providing challenging tasks for higher-performing students in science (Clerkin et al., 2016). Inadequate scientific content knowledge, particularly in the physical sciences, is a factor frequently cited by Irish primary school teachers for their lack of confidence in teaching science (DES, 2012; Clerkin, 2013; Eivers and Clerkin, 2013; Murphy et al., 2015; NCCA, 2008; Smith, 2014).

Concerns about scientific content knowledge are also highlighted amongst Irish pre-service teachers (Waldron et al., 2007; Murphy and Smith, 2012). Murphy and Smith's 2012 study, for example, explored the impact an undergraduate curriculum science methodology course had on student primary teachers' conceptual knowledge of science

and on their attitudes towards teaching science. A considerably higher percentage of these student teachers had studied biology (68%) to Leaving Certificate level than either chemistry (17%) or physics (8%). The findings revealed that, while there was an increase in students' scientific content knowledge at the end of the module, high percentages of these students still held inaccurate conceptions in physics, chemistry and biology. This was the only compulsory science education module within an initial teacher education degree. A concern was therefore raised as to whether these student teachers would have the requisite conceptual knowledge to implement the science curriculum effectively.

Research indicates that teachers tend to shy away from teaching content about which they do not feel confident and often cope with this lack of specific content knowledge by teaching "the minimum required... only doing very simple practical work" (Jarvis and Pell, 2004, p.189). Indeed the recent review of the World Around Us (WAU)<sup>1</sup> curriculum in Northern Ireland revealed that, while the vast majority of the responding schools reported that their staff had the requisite skills and knowledge to teach history (94%), and geography (94%), only 67% indicated that they had the requisite knowledge and skills to teach the science and technology strand effectively (Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), 2014). This review also revealed that only 46% of web-survey schools agreed that their current WAU programme ensures sufficient emphasis is placed on science and technology learning and teaching and only 52% agreed that they have included the progression of the relevant practical and experiential (science and technology) skills within their WAU planning. It could be the case that, when science education is bound to other curricular areas (such as history and geography), the relative lack of science-related pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) places science education in a subordinate position within the grouping, and increases the possibility that the frequency and time allocation of science education may fall. However, further research would be required to explore this.

Research in the Republic of Ireland indicates that primary children appear to be engaging with basic concepts relating to floating and sinking and the properties of magnets considerably more frequently than content from the other strand units within the energy and forces strand (DES, 2012; Murphy et al., 2012; NCCA 2008). It could be the case that teachers are avoiding teaching the other strand units because they have insufficient subject knowledge to support children's learning. A DES inspectorate report (DES, 2012) recommended that additional professional learning to support teachers in teaching content from the energy and forces strand was required (DES, 2012). However, no formal national professional development (PD) was made available to address this recommendation.

In terms of teaching methodologies, there is strong evidence that teachers in Ireland are still adopting more traditional approaches to teaching science where lessons tend to be more teacher-directed than child-led (DES, 2016; Murphy et al., 2015; Smith, 2014; Varley et al., 2008). Irish children are engaging in hands-on science that tends to involve them

---

1 The WAU curriculum (CCEA, 2007) adopts an integrated approach to teaching history, geography and science. In Key Stages 1 and 2, the curriculum supports learning across the strands of interdependence, place, movement and energy, and change over time.

carrying out experiments that are more prescriptive, following step-by-step instructions given to them by their teachers. This is in contrast to inquiry-based approaches that employ a more child-led approach to scientific inquiry where students are required to apply and develop a range of scientific and problem-solving skills. This tendency to adopt more teacher-directed approaches to science could be related to teachers' lack of confidence in teaching science. It is apparent from the research that, if teachers have good scientific knowledge, they are more likely to adopt more inquiry-based approaches to science and are more likely to afford students with opportunities for discussion and reflection in science (DES, 2016; Jarvis and Pell, 2004; Murphy et al., 2007; Murphy et al., 2011; Murphy et al., 2015).

While Irish students are being provided with opportunities to engage with hands-on science, the frequency and nature of this hands-on work is of concern (Varley et al., 2008). It is apparent that while hands-on science is occurring in some classes, for some children these experiences are infrequent and, in many classes throughout Ireland, children are experiencing virtually no hands-on science (Murphy et al., 2015; Smith, 2014; Varley et al., 2008). Further concerns relate to the extent to which Irish primary school children are developing their scientific skills and that older primary school children appear to be operating at skill levels similar to those more in line with younger classes (Murphy et al., 2011; Varley et al., 2008; Smith, 2014). It is also apparent that the scientific content with which children engage is not particularly relevant to the children (DES, 2016; Murphy et al., 2011; Murphy et al., 2012; Varley et al., 2008).

Internationally, Irish fourth class students are performing above the TIMSS' centre points in both science and mathematics, and we can see that mathematical performance amongst lower and higher-achieving students in Ireland has improved since 2011. However, while there has been an improvement in the performance of lower-achieving students in science since 1995, the performance of higher-achieving students in science in Ireland has not changed since 1995 and is still very low (7%). So, while it is evident that more fourth class students have attained basic levels of scientific understanding than in previous cycles, there has been little change in the percentage of higher performers (Clerkin et al., 2016).

A further challenge regarding primary science in Ireland relates to the time being allocated to the teaching of science (Clerkin et al., 2016; Eivers, 2013; Murphy, 2013; Murphy et al., 2015; Smith, 2014). International research indicates that Irish primary teachers are spending less time teaching science than all OECD countries. The most recent TIMSS cycle revealed that teachers of fourth class pupils in Ireland reported spending less time teaching science than any other of the 57 countries that participated in TIMSS 2015 (32 hours per year in comparison to the TIMSS mean of 76 hours). Even more worryingly, the time allocated to science in Irish fourth classes in 2015 has halved from 2011 where the average time teachers reported allocating to teaching science was 63 hours per year (Clerkin et al., 2016).

## What can be done?

The *Primary Curriculum Framework* is due to be published in 2021. It is apparent from the research literature and recent TIMSS cycle reports that primary science in Ireland faces challenges; primary school teachers often lack the content and pedagogical knowledge to teach primary science confidently; primary school children are being afforded infrequent opportunities to engage in inquiry-based approaches to science; there appears to be a lack of progression in the development of students' scientific skills as they progress from the junior to senior classes; there is a deficit in the time spent teaching science and engagement with PD in comparison with our OECD counterparts. However, teachers and students are interested in science and hold positive attitudes towards it. Furthermore, Irish primary students are performing above average in international large-scale studies of achievement (TIMSS). On the threshold of a new era for primary education in Ireland, it is the ideal time to address these challenges and to work towards progressing the teaching and learning of primary science throughout Ireland to ensure that our young people experience a rich science education that supports them in developing their scientific understanding and skills, and in developing positive attitudes and values towards science. The next section provides an overview of recent educational policy that will influence future developments in primary science education in Ireland.

The *Irish STEM Education Policy Statement 2017-2026* (DES, 2017) was developed with the aim of improving STEM education in the different Irish education sectors. This policy statement outlines a vision for STEM education in Ireland to ensure high-quality STEM education resulting in young people developing the necessary knowledge, skills and dispositions to ensure Ireland has "an engaged society and a highly-skilled workforce in place" (DES, 2017, p.5). The policy statement acknowledges that systematic support from the department and other stakeholders in STEM education is vital to generate a STEM-literate society. It highlights the importance of a STEM ecosystem whereby all stakeholders are working collaboratively to promote STEM education and enable and encourage learners to become active and responsible citizens (DES, 2017). In order to achieve the vision of the STEM education policy statement, an *Implementation Plan 2017-2019* was published. It consists of a number of high-level actions and sub-actions highlighting key areas of development and targets to ensure the ambitions of the STEM policy are met. With specific reference to primary science education, the plan (DES, 2017) proposes a number of objectives to support its future development; it recognises the necessity to provide high-quality STEM related opportunities for teachers to support their own professional learning (Objective 2.3). The policy supports evidence-based research to inform STEM education provision, curriculum, pedagogy, professional learning, and future policy developments (Objective 1). It also recommends that programmes of PD and high quality curricular materials be developed and delivered to support primary curricular change in STEM areas (Objective 1.2). Thus it would seem that the STEM policy and implementation plan could provide a framework for a coherent development of science education in relation to both teacher education and classroom practice. Also, of significance to the future development of primary science education is the *Cosán* policy for teacher professional learning published in May 2016 (Teaching Council of Ireland (TCI), 2016). Despite being in its

pilot phase, this policy represents a landmark development in Irish education whereby, in the future, teacher professional learning will be regulated by the TCI and a legislative requirement for all teachers. *Cosán* is considered a flexible framework which recognises teachers as autonomous professionals responsible for identifying and pursuing relevant learning opportunities. It acknowledges the broad range of learning processes that teachers engage in, with reflection and teacher collaboration at its core (TCI, 2016). *Cosán* presents a significant opportunity for professional learning in STEM education when the policy is implemented nationally in the near future (Broderick, 2019).

With regard to the STEM implementation policy (DES, 2017) and the *Cosán* framework for teacher professional learning (TCI, 2016), and in advance of the new *Primary Curriculum Framework*, it is crucial that a number of measures are taken to ensure effective teaching and learning in primary science throughout Ireland. Based on the review of literature documenting the current position of primary science education in Ireland, three broad areas are identified: professional development; initial teacher education; greater allocation of time for science.

### **Professional development**

Several studies highlight the positive impact of effective PD on primary teachers' confidence and competence in teaching science (DES, 2016; Guskey 2002; Murphy et al., 2008; Murphy et al., 2015; Smith, 2014; Wellcome Trust, 2014). Research indicates that 'effective' PD addresses subject content knowledge and pedagogies through active engagement over a sustained period of time. Effective PD is hugely successful in developing teachers' confidence and competence in teaching science and has a positive effect on students' experiences of and learning in science (Murphy et al., 2015; Smith, 2014; Wellcome Trust, 2014). However, PD programmes in primary science in Ireland are often short-term 'one-off' courses that ignore individual teacher's PD needs. The literature is highly critical of such approaches as they tend not to lead to significant positive changes in teaching methodologies (DES, 2016; Desimone, 2009; Hamilton, 2018; Smith, 2014).

Prior to the roll-out of the revised PSC in 2003, all primary teachers participated in a two-day in-service programme facilitated by the then Department of Education and Science. This PD focused on the implementation of the revised PSC, rather than addressing the needs of individual teachers. Follow up support for teaching science was available (when requested) from the Primary Curriculum Support Project (PCSP) and Primary Professional Development Support (PPDS) and, currently, through the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST). However, since the initial two-day in-service, no government-led national PD in primary science has been made available for primary teachers. Data gathered from teachers in the latest two TIMSS cycles (2011 and 2015) reveal that the percentage of students in fourth class in Ireland who were taught by teachers that had recently participated in science education PD was considerably lower than the TIMSS centre points (Clerkin et al., 2017; Murphy, 2013). It is apparent that Irish primary school teachers require further support in developing their competence and confidence in teaching science.

The research literature strongly highlights the instrumental role PD can play in

improving teachers' confidence and classroom practice (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone, 2009; Smith, 2014). Revision of the PSC necessitates effective PD in science for primary teachers to ensure that teachers have the requisite confidence and competence to teach science effectively. It is essential, however, that this PD avoids a 'one type fits all' model and adopts a longer, more sustained approach that ensures continuity; that tasks are clearly defined; collective professional development; a focus on content that is relevant to the teachers; and engagement with active learning methodologies (Coe et al., 2014; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Desimone, 2009; Roesken, 2011; Smith, 2014; Whitehouse, 2011). It is also essential to consider how future PD programmes for primary teachers in science will focus on science as a discipline in itself as well as, separately or otherwise, focusing on science as a discipline in STEM. Recent research from Northern Ireland is informative in this regard. Greenwood (2013), exploring teachers' perceptions of the World Around Us curriculum, found that, whilst the majority of teachers in this study supported an area of learning featuring science, history and geography, teachers also cited concerns about the loss of science skills and the demotion of science education. Greenwood (2013) identified the need for extensive in-service teacher education to support the development of knowledge, skills and confidence in the delivery of the WAU through cross-curricular planning and teaching. Furthermore, one of the key recommendations of the WAU review (ETI, 2014) identified the need for more detailed guidance on the development of the discrete concepts, skills and knowledge in the history, geography and science and technology strands to enable schools to plan and evaluate more effectively for continuity and progression in children's learning (ETI, 2014, p.5). The challenge of ensuring effective PD for discrete science education, as well as consolidated approaches to wider curriculum areas, must be considered in light of the new primary curriculum framework and revised science curriculum.

PCK represents the intersections between subject knowledge and pedagogical knowledge and was first identified by Shulman in 1986 as a key aspect of teacher knowledge and is now widely accepted. While there are general pedagogical ideas, constructs and practices that are similar across all STEM disciplines, each of these disciplines contains its own specific concepts, processes and epistemologies. If primary teachers are to plan for and effectively integrate science, mathematics and technology in their teaching it is vital that, in the first instance, they develop robust PCK of the discrete subjects. Research on effective teaching highlights the importance of the domain specificity of PCK (Grossman, Schoenfeld and Lee, 2005). It would, therefore, seem sensible that future PD in science for primary teachers in Ireland should initially focus on developing teachers' PCK in science to ensure they have the requisite knowledge and skillset to teach science effectively. This could then be followed by PD that would support teachers to integrate the science, technology and mathematics disciplines effectively through STEM education.

There is a plethora of science education research highlighting the importance of IBSE pedagogies in developing students' scientific literacy. It is apparent from the literature that engagement with IBSE methodologies during science class promotes the development of scientific content knowledge and skills, the development of scientific critical thinking and problem-solving skills, collaboration in science, and more positive attitudes towards and a

greater interest in science (Artique et al., 2012; Harlen, 2012; Murphy et al., 2019; Rocard et al., 2007; Smith, 2015). IBSE is a child-centred methodology that provides "experiences that enable students to develop an understanding about the scientific aspects of the world around them through the development and use of inquiry skills" (Harlen and Allende, 2009, p.11). Harlen (2010) outlines a number of key aspects of inquiry that include making observations, asking questions, planning and carrying out investigations, and interpreting and reporting data. Teachers have a critical role in engaging students in scientific inquiry. However, if teachers are to develop their PCK in inquiry-based science pedagogies it is essential that they are provided with opportunities to experience, understand and value inquiry-based learning. Harlen and Allende (2009) claim "confidence and understanding play a large part in determining whether teachers provide students with experiences that enable them to develop an understanding of the world around them through inquiry" (p.17). Future PD should therefore afford teachers with opportunities to engage with, reflect on and implement a range of IBSE teaching methodologies. These might include, for example, teacher-directed and student-led scientific investigations, use of digital technologies for collecting and analysing scientific data, design and technology pedagogy, and scientific inquiries to support children's scientific problem solving and critical reflection skills.

### **Initial teacher education**

In initial teacher education (ITE) programmes in Ireland, students are obliged to take courses in STEM education pedagogy. These modules vary from degree to degree but essentially, they provide student teachers with opportunities to develop their PCK in STEM. In Ireland, the amount of time and credit allocated to compulsory science education pedagogy modules varies from degree to degree, ranging from 2.5 credits to 7 credits of the overall Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) degree programme, which is approximately 250 credits. While some of the B.Ed. degree programmes offer elective science education specialism modules, these are only offered to less than 10% of the overall cohorts (approximately 25-30 students per year).

There are no compulsory modules on any B.Ed. degree programme in Ireland that are aimed explicitly at developing student teachers' conceptual knowledge in science. This is worrying considering the low percentage of students taking physics and chemistry to Leaving Certificate levels. In 2017, of all the students in Ireland who sat the Leaving Certificate, only 14% and 17% respectively sat physics and chemistry and, while these figures show a small increase in uptake since 2012, the numbers are still relatively small. The percentages of B.Ed. students who tend to sit science subjects to Leaving Certificate level are more or less in line with the national averages. In contrast, the percentage of B.Ed. students who took higher-level mathematics amongst the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 cohorts were on average 45% and 51% respectively. These percentages were slightly higher than the national average (33.6% in 2017 and 34.9% in 2018).

With such low percentages of primary school teachers taking physics or chemistry to Leaving Certificate levels and no compulsory science content modules offered on ITE programmes, one could question whether primary school teachers have the requisite subject knowledge to implement the PSC effectively. If STEM education is now seen



as a national priority (DES, 2017), it would seem that additional compulsory science content modules should be developed and included on all ITE programmes to support teachers in developing their scientific content knowledge. And what of the content of this provision? In terms of science pedagogy within ITE programmes and taking cognisance of the research that highlights the importance of the domain specificity of PCK (Grossman, Schoenfeld and Lee, 2005), it is essential that students in the early years of their ITE programmes would engage with science as a discipline, laying further foundations for their PCK in science. This provision should focus on developing students' understanding of the epistemology/nature of science as well as on different pedagogical approaches to teaching science. Then in the later part of their ITE programmes, having developed PCK in science, students could then engage with modules that would support them in planning for and teaching science effectively as part of STEM. Mirroring this approach, students should be required to teach science as a discipline in itself during early school placement experiences before being afforded opportunities to plan and teach science as part of STEM towards the later part of their programme.

### **More time for science**

The time allocated for science in the Irish curriculum (at 4% of overall instructional time) is one of the lowest primary curriculum allocations of science worldwide. Recent data gathered from TIMSS (2015) reveal that, in practice, Irish teachers are only teaching 32 hours of science per year, less than half the time reported by Irish teachers in 2011 and the lowest teaching hours of all participating countries. If STEM education is to be seen as a national priority, it is essential that the NCCA and the TCI introduce measures to increase the allocation for science on the primary curriculum significantly and, at the very least, to reverse the diminished allocation and preferably to bring Ireland in line with other TIMSS participants. Without this time-window, the potential of IBSE cannot be realised and the opportunity to provide all children with the opportunity to extend their scientific literacy will not be met.

### **Conclusion**

Over the last 30 years, we have seen a movement towards science education rooted in student-relevant real-world issues and prioritising the development of critical scientific skills and competencies which underpin the process of scientific inquiry. National curricula have somewhat mirrored these transformations, with science education moving from exclusion pre-1971, marginalised in the PSC of 1971, before inclusion within the PSC of 1999 as a subject in its own right (albeit on the basis of an economic-educational paradigm), underpinned by social constructivist principles and problem-solving approaches. As we sit at the cusp of curricular reform within the Irish context, it is imperative that the development of a new PSC builds on the successful developments in science education over the past 30 years, whilst also addressing the significant challenges that have been encountered over this time.

Firstly, the successes. Research highlights the success of progressive approaches to

science education, including the practice of inquiry-based approaches (particularly from early-career teachers) in classrooms across Ireland. Children in Ireland hold positive attitudes towards science and science education, with some positive developments in attainment recognised in global assessments. This positive evidence provides examples of how progressive science education can work and guide curricular reform. Furthermore, the *Irish Primary Curriculum* (DES, 1999a) provided fertile ground for the development of social constructivist approaches to science education, progressive principles which are recognised in the wider literature.

And the challenges. Any new curriculum must continue to promote the transition from traditional science education approaches towards child-led approaches. Whether science education stands alone or sits within a wider grouping of subjects, there is a clear need to ensure opportunities for the development of initial and in-service teachers' scientific PCK as one means of improving teacher confidence to teach science to children of all abilities in primary classrooms. This is all the more important considering the gaps in attainment recognised amongst particular groups of children. Whilst this scientific knowledge and science education confidence is being developed, there is a need to ensure that the time allocated for primary science education is extended, at least in line with international norms. Whatever form the curriculum takes, policy makers, researchers and educators must continue to monitor the progression of science education as framed within the curriculum, supported through initial and in-service teacher education, practised in Irish primary classrooms and as experienced by students. The authors hope that any development of educational curricula continues to provide students with the opportunities, through science education, to develop their scientific literacy, engage with real-world issues, and have the opportunity to contribute towards the significant global challenges with which we are faced.

## References

- Artique, M., Harlen, W., Lena, P., Baptist, P., Dillon, J., and Jasmin, D. (2012). *The Legacy of the Fibonacci Project to Science and Mathematics Education*. Retrieved from: [www.fondation-lamap.org/sites/default/files/upload/media/Fibonacci\\_Book.pdf](http://www.fondation-lamap.org/sites/default/files/upload/media/Fibonacci_Book.pdf).
- Beaton, A.E., Martin, M.O., Mullis, I.V.S., Gonzalez, E.J., Smith, T.A., and Kelly, D.A. (1996). *Science Achievement in the Middle School Years: IEA's Third International Mathematics and Science Study*. Chestnut Hill, MA: TIMSS International Study Centre, Boston College.
- Bodmer, W. (1985). *The Public Understanding of Science*. London: Royal Society.
- Broderick, N. (2019). From Our Own Correspondent: Teachers' professional learning in the Republic of Ireland context. *PRACTICE*. DOI: 10.1080/25783858.2019.1591773
- Clerkin, A. (2013). Teachers and teaching practices. In: E. Eivers and A. Clerkin. (Eds). *National Schools, International Contexts: Beyond the PIRLS and TIMSS test results*, 77-104. Dublin: Educational Research Centre. Available at: [www.erc.ie/documents/pt2011\\_ch5.pdf](http://www.erc.ie/documents/pt2011_ch5.pdf).
- Clerkin, A., Perkins, R., and Chubb, E. (2017). *Inside the primary classroom: What happens in fourth class?* Dublin: Educational Research Centre.

- Clerkin, A., Perkins, R., and Cunningham, R. (2016). *TIMSS 2015 in Ireland: Mathematics and Science in Primary and Post-Primary Schools*. Dublin: Educational Research Centre.
- Coe, R., Aloisi, S., Higgins, C., and Major, L. (2014). *What makes great teaching? Review of the underpinning research*. Sutton Trust.
- Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). (2007). *The Northern Ireland Curriculum: Primary*. Belfast: CCEA.
- Darling-Hammond, L., Wei, R.C., Andree, A., Richardson, N., and Orphanos, S. (2009). State of the profession: Study measures status of professional development. *Journal of Staff Development*, 30 (2), 42-50. Retrieved from: <https://learningforward.org/docs/pdf/nsdcstudytechnicalreport2009.pdf?sfvrsn=0>.
- Department of Education and Science (DES). (1999a). *Primary School Curriculum*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.
- Department of Education and Science (DES). (1999b). *Primary School Curriculum: Science*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.
- Department of Education and Skills (DES). (2012). *Science in the Primary School 2008: Inspectorate Evaluation Studies*. Dublin: Government Publications.
- Department of Education and Skills (DES). (2016). *STEM Education in the Irish School System: A Report on Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) Education*. Dublin: Government Publications.
- Department of Education and Skills (DES). (2017). *STEM Education Implementation Plan: 2017-2019*. Dublin: Government Publications.
- Desimone, L.M. (2009). Improving impact studies of teachers' professional development: Toward better conceptualizations and measures. *Educational Researcher*, 38 (3), 181-199. Retrieved from: <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.3102/0013189X08331140>.
- Education and Training Inspectorate. (2014). *An evaluation of the implementation of the World Around Us in primary schools*. ETI.
- Eivers, E. (2013). Results from PIRLS. *Reading News (Spring)*, 12-14.
- Eivers, E., and Clerkin, A. (2013). Programme in International Reading Literacy Strategy (PIRLS) and TIMSS 2011: Overview. *National Schools, International Contexts: Beyond the PIRLS and TIMSS Test Results*. Educational Research Centre.
- European Commission. (2015). *Science Education for Responsible Citizenship: Report to the European Commission of the Expert Group on Science Education*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. DOI:10.2777/13004
- Fensham, P. (2004). Increasing the relevance of science and technology education for all students in the 21st century. *Science Educational International*, 15 (1), 7-26.
- Forfás. (1999). *The First Report of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs*. Dublin: Forfás.
- Greenwood, R. (2013). Subject-based and cross-curricular approaches within the revised primary curriculum in Northern Ireland: teachers' concerns and preferred approaches. *Education*, 3-13, 41 (4) 443-458.
- Grossman, P., Schoenfeld, A., and Lee, C. (2005). Teaching Subject Matter. In: L. Darling-Hammond and J. Bransford (Eds.) *Preparing Teachers for a Changing World: What Teachers Should Learn and Be Able To Do*, pp.201-231. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

- Guskey, T.R. (2002). Professional development and teacher change. *Teachers and Teaching*, 8(3), 381-391.
- Harlen, W. (2012). *Assessment of Skills and Competences in Science*. Retrieved from: [www.sqa.org.uk/files\\_ccc/Wynne\\_Harlen\\_Presentation.pptx](http://www.sqa.org.uk/files_ccc/Wynne_Harlen_Presentation.pptx).
- Harlen, W., and Allende, J. (2009.) *IAP report of the working group on the international collaboration in the evaluation of IBSE programs*. Fundación para Estudios Biomédicos Avanzados. Chile.
- Hamilton, M. (2018). Pedagogical transitions among science teachers: How does context intersect with teacher beliefs? *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 24 (2), 151-165.
- ICSTI. (1999). *Benchmarking school science, technology and mathematics education in Ireland against international good practice*. Dublin: Forfás.
- Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO). (1992). *Primary Science Education in Ireland*. Dublin: INTO.
- Jarvis, T., and Pell, A. (2004). Primary teachers' changing attitudes and cognition during a two-year science in-service programme and their effect on pupils. *International Journal of Science Education*, 26(14), 1787-1811.
- Mullis, I.V.S., Martin, M.O., and Foy, P. (2016). *TIMSS 2015 International Results in Science*. Chestnut Hill, MA: TIMSS and PIRLS International Study Centre, Boston College.
- Murphy, C. (2013). Science Items: Context and curriculum. In: E. Eivers and A. Clerkin (Eds). *National Schools, International Contexts: Beyond the PIRLS and TIMSS Test Results*. Dublin: Education Research Centre.
- Murphy, C., Kilfeather, P., and Murphy, C. (2007). An exploration of issues surrounding teaching the nature of science to pre-service primary school teachers. *Irish Educational Studies*, 26 (1), 27-38. DOI: 10.1080/03323310601125120.
- Murphy, C., Murphy C., and Kilfeather, K. (2011). Children making sense of science. *Research in Science Education*, 41 (2), 283-298.
- Murphy, C., and Smith, G. (2012). The impact of a curriculum course on pre-service primary teachers' science content knowledge and attitudes towards teaching science. *Irish Educational Studies*, 31(1), 77-95.
- Murphy, C., Smith, G., and Broderick N. (2019). A Starting Point: Provide Children Opportunities to Engage with Scientific Inquiry and Nature of Science. *Research in Science Education*, 1-35.
- Murphy, C., Smith, G., Varley, J., and Razi, Ö. (2015). Changing practice: An evaluation of the impact of a nature of science inquiry-based professional development programme on primary teachers. *Cogent Education*, 2(1), 1077692.
- Murphy, C., Varley, J., and Veale, O. (2012). I'd rather they did experiments with us... than just Talking: Irish children's views of primary school science. *Research in Science Education*, 42 (3), 415-438.
- National Science Foundation. (1983). *Educating Americans for the Twenty First Century: Report of the National Science Board Commission on pre-college education in mathematics, science and technology*. Washington, DC: National Science Foundation
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). (1990). *Report of the Review Body on the Primary Curriculum*. Dublin: NCCA.

- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). (2008). *Primary Curriculum Review: Final Report with Recommendations*. Dublin: NCCA.
- OECD. (2017). *PISA 2015 Assessment and Analytical Framework: Science, Reading, Mathematic, Financial Literacy and Collaborative Problem Solving*. Paris: OECD Publishing. DOI: 10.1787/9789264281820-en
- Rocard, M., Csermely, P., Jorde, D., Lenzen, D., Walberg-Henriksson, H., and Hemmo, V. (2007). *Science Education Now: A Renewed Pedagogy for the Future of Europe*. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Commission. Retrieved from: [http://ec.europa.eu/research/science-society/document\\_library/pdf\\_o6/report-rocard-on-science-education\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/research/science-society/document_library/pdf_o6/report-rocard-on-science-education_en.pdf).
- Roesken, B. (2011). *Hidden Dimensions in the Professional Development of Mathematics Teachers – In-Service Education for and with Teachers*. Citeseer. DOI:10.1007/s13398-014-0173-7.2.
- Shulman, L.S. (1986). Those who understand: Knowledge growth in teaching. *Educational Researcher*, 15(2), 4-14.
- Smith, G. (2014). An innovative model of professional development to enhance the teaching and learning of primary science in Irish schools. *Professional Development in Education*, 40 (3), 467-487. DOI: 10.1080/19415257.2013.830274.
- Smith, G. (2015). The impact of a professional development programme on primary teachers' classroom practice and pupils' attitudes to science. *Research in Science Education*, 45 (2), 215-239. DOI: 10.1007/s11165-014-9420-3
- Teaching Council of Ireland. (2016). *Cosán: Framework for Teachers' Learning*. Dublin: TCI. Retrieved from: [www.teachingcouncil.ie/en/Publications/Teacher-Education/Cosan-Framework-for-Teachers-Learning.pdf](http://www.teachingcouncil.ie/en/Publications/Teacher-Education/Cosan-Framework-for-Teachers-Learning.pdf).
- UNESCO. (1983). *Science for All*. Bangkok: UNESCO Office for Education in Asia and the Pacific.
- Varley, J., Murphy, C., and Veale Ó. (2008). *Science in Primary Schools: Phase 1 Final Report*. Dublin: NCCA. Retrieved from: [www.ncca.ie/uploadedfiles/primary/Binder1.pdf](http://www.ncca.ie/uploadedfiles/primary/Binder1.pdf).
- Waldron, F., Pike, S., Varley, J., Murphy, C., and Greenwood, R. (2007). Student teachers' prior experiences of history, geography and science: initial findings of an all-Ireland survey. *Irish Educational Studies*, 26 (2), 177-194. DOI: 10.1080/03323310701296086.
- Walsh, T. (2007). The revised programme of instruction, 1900-1922. *Irish Educational Studies*, 26 (2), 127-143. DOI:10.1080/03323310701295831
- Walsh, T. (2016). 100 years of primary curriculum development and implementation in Ireland: a tale of a swinging pendulum. *Irish Educational Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/03323315.2016.1147975.
- Wellcome Trust. (2014). *Primary Science: Is it Missing Out? Recommendations for reviving primary science*. London: Wellcome Trust.
- Whitehouse, C. (2011). *Effective Continuing Professional Development for Teachers*. Centre for Education Research and Policy. London. AQA.

