

Irish Teachers' Journal

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Irish Teachers' Journal

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≡ Editorial ≡

The ninth *Irish Teachers' Journal* arrives while we are still in the middle of a global pandemic. COVID-19 is still with us and continues to have a significant impact on all aspects of life including education. The year began with school closures, however, both teachers and pupils were better prepared for remote teaching and learning than they had been in 2020. Schools re-opened in the spring and have remained open since then. Living with COVID-19 creates ongoing challenges in schools where the focus is on keeping pupils, teachers and the school community safe while enabling teaching and learning to continue in an uncertain and unpredictable environment.

The world of teaching and learning as we knew it changed during the pandemic as teachers, parents and school communities reflected on what's valuable, important and relevant in education. There is a better understanding now of the significant role that schools play in children's educational, social and personal development. Through their creative and innovative responses teachers ensured the continuity of pupil learning. Teachers' work is not just about curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. They are committed to social justice, they care about their pupils and believe they can make a real difference in children's lives.

The pandemic also had an impact on education at policy level. The professional development planned for teachers to support the introduction and implementation of the *Primary Language Curriculum* was disrupted. The consultation process on the draft *Primary Curriculum Framework* was paused. The updating of *Aistear* was slowed down. The commencement of the third cycle of School Self-Evaluation was deferred. The schools' inspectorate decided to focus on advice, support and research through incidental visits rather than carrying out whole-school or curriculum evaluations. The Department of Education continued to seek submissions on policy areas being developed or updated such as the *Digital Strategy for Schools*, and *Education for Sustainable Development*. While it is necessary to continue with policy development, the timing of the introduction of any major changes or new initiatives must be negotiated with teachers and their representatives and take cognisance of current challenges and demands in schools.

The pandemic highlighted system weaknesses that led to many supports long demanded by the INTO being introduced. It may have been Churchill who said that a good crisis should never go to waste, or Einstein who said that in the midst of every crisis there is an opportunity! To compensate for the additional workload associated with keeping school communities safe during COVID-19, all teaching principals were granted one administrative day per week. Schools could cluster to appoint a full-time teacher to provide substitute cover for these administrative days. Supply panels to provide substitutes for teacher absences were also expanded during the pandemic. Nearly 700 teachers were appointed on full-time contracts to provide substitute cover in clusters of schools. Certain teacher absences, which were not covered by substitutes prior to the pandemic, became eligible for substitute cover as classes could no longer be divided up. Notwithstanding the current shortage of substitute teachers, supply panels, weekly administrative days for teaching principals and supply cover for all teacher absences must be retained post-pandemic.

We are delighted that Deirdre McGillicuddy accepted our invitation to write the guest article for this edition of the *Irish Teachers' Journal*. Dr McGillicuddy has been part of the national conversation on education throughout the pandemic. She recognises the monumental pivot within education systems across the globe since March 2020 from traditional schooling within physical buildings to learning in a virtual world. In her article she reflects on the challenges and opportunities in education presented by the COVID-19 pandemic and calls for increased agency for teachers, children and school communities as they actively engage in transforming the educational landscape. Dr McGillicuddy acknowledges the inherent creativity of teachers to engage in innovative and contemporary pedagogies. She draws on various research studies outlining children's and teachers' experiences of the pandemic. She addresses the role of digital technologies, the reconnection with outdoor learning, the focus on the wellbeing of both children and teachers, children's rights, funding and partnerships, raising questions about power dynamics and inequalities brought to the fore during the pandemic. She argues that the education system needs to develop agility and flexibility to respond to other crises, such as climate change, and highlights the importance of having a national conversation on the value of education in Irish society. Her article encourages us to reflect on the opportunities the pandemic presents to transform and enhance our education system.

Our next four articles are about leadership. In his article, Denis Moynihan conducts an analysis of contemporary discourse surrounding educational leadership in Irish primary schools. There is no doubt that school leaders have been under pressure and in the public eye more so than usual during the pandemic. Moynihan identifies both influence and vision as key attributes of school leadership and recognises distributed leadership as the preferred model of leadership promoted in the Irish educational system, though not always reflected in practice. He refers to the top-down and bottom-up pressures experienced by principals in a climate of accountability in addition to new pressures arising due to COVID-19 arrangements in schools. He offers an interesting analysis of the discourses pertaining to surviving school closures, handling both media and parental expectations, preparing for re-opening, reacting to the lack of guidance, stress and burnout and argues that due to the pandemic there has been a shift in power relationships between principal teachers and the Department of Education. In a context of ever-increasing workload for school leaders, he proposes the appointment of school managers to deal with management issues to free up school principals to focus on education and to exercise distributed leadership. While Moynihan's suggestion is controversial and has been ruled out by the INTO in the past, there is certainly a need to consider solutions to current teacher and principal workload.

Our second article on leadership considers distributed leadership from teachers' perspectives. The authors, Mairéad Lyons and Jolanta Burke discuss definitions of distributed leadership and its growing popularity in education policy. They also consider critiques of the concept and practice of distributive leadership. Their study explores the factors that prevent and facilitate teachers' involvement in distributed leadership in an Irish post-primary school using appreciative inquiry to collect and analyse data. While the findings are particular to the school involved in the study, similar issues could arise in other post-primary schools or indeed in some primary or special schools. Participating teachers found school culture and climate, attitudes to hierarchy and openness to opportunities

impacted on their understandings and experiences of distributed leadership. It is not surprising that the issue of workload associated with leadership responsibilities also arose. The authors conclude that it is essential to explain distributed leadership to teachers and to clarify its role to enable school communities realise a truly distributed leadership model in Irish schools.

Irene Quinn's article discusses the role of middle leadership and management in the implementation of School Self-Evaluation (SSE) in primary schools. She first discusses the concept of distributed leadership and then describes the research that informs the article. Her research confirms teachers' overall positive response to SSE, seeing its potential, though a lack of time is seen as a major barrier. Her findings also support the view that members of schools' leadership and management teams have a role in leading SSE processes in schools. Further research is required on teachers' experiences of SSE and Quinn's research is an important contribution to our knowledge in this field.

Celia Walsh considers leadership of special education in schools. She traces the development of education for persons with special educational needs (SEN) in Ireland and considers the growth of inclusion in mainstream schools through the lens of leadership and management. She draws on her research carried out in eight mainstream schools to explore both formal and informal coordination of special education in schools, collaborative practice, shared leadership and professional learning needs from the perspectives of special education teachers and principal teachers. Walsh's research illustrates the approaches used by the schools in her study to support children with SEN, the role of SETs in designing support plans and assessment, the limited nature of parental involvement, the lack of time to engage with outside agencies and the informal sharing of expertise and collaboration in the absence of more formal professional learning opportunities in SEN. She identifies the need for professional development for principals and SETs to become more confident in using their autonomy to design and plan special education support policy and in making judgements regarding SEN in their own schools. She recommends the establishment of school-to-school networks to address the concerns of teachers and to facilitate greater success in creating a more equitable and inclusive education for all pupils. Her findings will inform both policy and practice in inclusive education in Ireland.

Our fifth article provides an insight into the policy challenges in Ireland regarding homework, a topic that also garnered attention during the pandemic. Many schools adjusted their homework policies when schools re-opened after a prolonged closure. Helen Fitzmaurice, Marie Flynn and Joan Hanafin have carried out a systematic review of the international literature on homework, exploring the perceptions of parents, teachers and children. The authors capture the tensions around homework, which is often a contentious aspect of schooling, its benefits unclear. They conclude their review by suggesting that there should be a national policy on homework, with guidance to schools to develop policies in collaboration with teachers, parents and pupils. They base their recommendation on their assessment of what the literature says about the benefits, problems, challenges, purposes, motivations and practices regarding homework. The article provides much to reflect on for teachers regarding their practices around homework, which should help in developing homework policies at school level or even to decide whether homework should continue to be part of school life.

Cuireann sé áthas orainn alt i nGaeilge a fhoilsiú san eagrán seo den *Irish Teachers' Journal*. Tugann Sylvaine Ní Aogáin, Caitriona Ní Mhurchú agus T.J. Ó Ceallaigh léargas an-chuimsitheach ar shealbhú teanga i gcomhthéacs na cumarsáide sa suíomh lán-Ghaeilge. Déantar cur síos san alt ar mhúnla an tumoideachais, ar fhás an tumoideachais in Éirinn, agus na buanna agus na dúshláin a bhaineann leis an múnla ó thaobh shealbhú na teanga de. Ceann de na tréithe is suntasaí faoin tumoideachas ná go sealbhaíonn daltaí an sprioctheanga gan dochar ar bith don mháthairtheanga nó d'fhorbairt scileanna acadúla eile. Aithníonn na húdair go mbaineann daltaí tumoideachais amach caighdeán ard sna scileanna gabhchumais ach go mbíonn sé dúshlánach dóibh na scileanna ginchumais nó cruinneas teanga a bhaint amach i suíomhanna tumoideachais. Ag tarraingt ar thaighde amuigh sa ghort molann na húdair cur chuige oideolaíochta a thabharfadh tacaíocht do mhúinteoirí an chothromaíocht cheart a fháil idir múineadh na foirme agus múineadh an bhrí, cur chuige a chuirfeadh feabhas ar chruinneas teanga na ndaltaí tumoideachais. Déantar cur síos ar an gcur chuige seo san alt ach is cinnte, mar a mholann na húdair, go mbeadh forbairt ghairmiúil do mhúinteoirí tumoideachais riachtanach chun deis a thabhairt dóibh na scileanna teagaisc seo a fhorbairt.

In their article, Sylvaine Ní Aogáin, Caitriona Ní Mhurchú and T.J. Ó Ceallaigh describe immersion education, its growth in Ireland and its benefits and challenges. They acknowledge the high levels of attainment of immersion pupils in reading and understanding their target language, at no expense to their mother tongue or to other academic skills. They refer to the challenges associated with developing accuracy in speaking and writing. The authors suggest a specific approach to teaching in immersion contexts that combine meaning with form, aimed at enhancing pupils' fluency, expressive and productive skills. While the article relates to immersion settings, it will be of interest to all language teachers, particularly in the context of increasing linguistic diversity in our schools and classrooms.

The final article, written by Saoirse O'Reilly Cullen, Bronagh Fagan and Paul Downes, focuses on the emotional impact of parental imprisonment on children in primary schools, a topic that rarely gets attention. The authors argue that children who have a parent in prison are often the forgotten victims of crime. Drawing on literature, they consider the topic from the perspective of children's rights and explore how imprisoned parents could continue to be involved in their child's education, which is of benefit to children's emotional development. The authors provide a fascinating insight into the experiences of children who have a parent imprisoned. They identify the lack of support for such children in Ireland and call for emotional counsellors, including play and art therapists, in primary schools to support children experiencing adverse childhoods.

The articles in this edition of the *Irish Teachers' Journal* highlight current issues in Irish education today – the pandemic, leadership, school self-evaluation, special education, homework, immersion education and emotional support for pupils. Challenges for school leadership in the context of the pandemic illustrate the creaking infrastructure in our schools. The policy rhetoric of distributed leadership struggles to become reality in an under-resourced school system suffering due to the moratorium on promotions. Lessons from the pandemic must lead to additional investment in school infrastructure and in the teaching profession if we want to ensure that current and future generations of children can reach their educational potential and be citizens in a fair and just society. The creative

potential of teachers must be nurtured as we re-assess our values in education.

The INTO is proud of its tradition of engaging in discussions and debates on education issues. Over the next few years, we'll see a new Primary Curriculum Framework that will underpin curriculum developments for the next generation of children, a greater focus on inclusive education, the updating of *Aistear* the Early Years' Curriculum Framework, the professionalisation of the early years' sector, a review of the Senior Cycle in post-primary schools, an expansion of DEIS, the reform of school inspection in Northern Ireland and other developments. We will ride the storm of the pandemic to realise our vision for the future of education.

The *Irish Teachers' Journal* offers teachers at all levels, North and South, an opportunity to share with colleagues and the broader education community their research and their opinions on aspects of education policy and practice, both nationally and internationally. We would like to thank all teachers who contributed articles for this edition of the journal. We are particularly grateful to Dr Deirdre McGillicuddy, who wrote the guest article, giving us much to reflect upon in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our reviewers who read the draft articles and provided constructive feedback to the authors also deserve our thanks. Their work contributes significantly to the quality of the journal. I would also like to encourage teachers to continue writing and to submit articles for publication in the *Irish Teachers' Journal*. Fáiltítear roimh ailt i nGaeilge freisin. As I edit the journal for the last time, I wish my successor Máirín Ní Chéileachair well. Cuimhnímís i gcónaí gur uasal ceird an oide.

DEIRBHILE NIC CRAITH, EDITOR

Author Notes

Deirdre McGillicuddy

Dr Deirdre McGillicuddy is assistant professor in UCD School of Education and a primary school teacher with over 20 year experience working across the Irish education system. Deirdre believes in the transformative power of education to empower those marginalised within our society. Deirdre has interest in pedagogy, wellbeing and children's voice/ rights stemming from her time working in a DEIS primary school. She is a UCD Convene Innovation Academy Fellow exploring creativity and innovation in education.

Denis Moynihan

Denis Moynihan is an assistant professor in Education (Digital Learning) in the School of STEM Education, Innovation and Global Studies, Institute of Education, DCU. He has previously worked as a mainstream teacher and as an advisor with the Professional Development Service for Teachers. His research interests include initial teacher education and professional learning, with a focus on digital learning. Denis is currently pursuing a Doctorate of Education at DCU.

Mairéad Lyons and Jolanta Burke

Mairéad Lyons has been a post-primary school teacher for many years. She is currently deputy principal in Meán Scoil Mhuire in Longford, which is a large all-girls school. Mairéad holds a Master's in Education degree from Maynooth University.

Dr Jolanta Burke holds a PhD in Positive Psychology applied in Education. She is a senior lecturer in the Centre for Positive Psychology and Health, RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences, and author of *Positive psychology and school leadership*. For more information, please go to www.jolantaburke.com.

Irene Quinn

Dr Irene Quinn is principal of Scoil Carmel JNS, Firhouse, Dublin 24. She holds a Doctorate in Education from Dublin City University. Her article is based on her research on the role of middle leadership and management (MLM) in the implementation of SSE in primary schools in the ROI. She has completed a Masters in Computer Applications in Education (DCU) and a Masters in Theology (Mater Dei, Dublin).

Celia Walsh

Dr Celia Walsh, a former SET, primary principal and director of Waterford teachers' centre, completed her MSt in SEN in Trinity College, while her doctoral research at Dublin City University examined the leadership and management of SEN provision in mainstream primary schools. She lectures part-time in Special Education at the Centre for Special Educational Needs, Inclusion and Diversity (CSENID) at St Angela's College, Sligo, while also providing online CPD in SEN through the education centre network and to individual schools. Her areas of educational interest include teacher professional networks, promoting inclusion and developing effective school leadership

Helen Fitzmaurice, Joan Hanafin and Marie Flynn

Helen Fitzmaurice is a primary teacher and assistant principal at St Pius X Girls' NS, Terenure, Dublin. She holds a BEd degree from St Patrick's College, Drumcondra and a MEd degree from Dublin City University. She is currently a PhD candidate at Dublin City University's Institute of Education. Helen's doctoral research explores children's perspectives on homework, extending her previous research on parents' and teachers' perceptions of and practices regarding homework. She has been awarded an Irish Research Council Government of Ireland Scholarship, a Teaching Council John Coolahan Research Support Framework Bursary, and a DCU Institute of Education Bursary for this research. She has co-authored a number of research articles on the topic of homework which have been published in international peer-reviewed journals. (<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7764-3392>).

Dr Marie Flynn is a lecturer in sociology in the DCU Institute of Education. She is a member of the School of Human Development, and is involved in a range of programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Marie's teaching responsibilities and research interests are mainly in the areas of families and education, intelligences and inequalities in schooling, children's privacy, Travellers and education, and school placement. (<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6998-9289>).

Dr Joan Hanafin is a sociologist, educator and mediator. She is director of Social Research at the Tobacco Free Research Institute Ireland, TU Dublin and visiting research fellow at Trinity College Dublin where she is a member of the Inclusion in Education and Society Research Group. Currently, she is principal investigator of the YETI Project at TFRI investigating e-cigarette use among young people in Ireland. She has co-authored many books, chapters, and reports and her work on inequalities, gender, social class, families, education and health has been published in journals including *PlosOne*, *BMC Public Health*, *The Lancet*, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, and *Frontiers in Psychology* (<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8016-2266>).

Sylvaine Ní Aogáin, Caitríona Ní Mhurchú agus T.J. Ó Ceallaigh

Is léachtóir í an **Dr Sylvaine Ní Aogáin** sa Roinn um Oideachas Teanga agus Litearthachta, i gColáiste Mhuire gan Smál, Luimneach. Tá spéis mhór aici i gcúrsaí shealbhú agus fhoghlaim an dara teanga, i gcúrsaí tumoideachais, agus i bhforbairt ghairmiúil leanúnach do mhúinteoirí.

Is múinteoir bunscoile í **Caitríona Ní Mhurchú** i nGaelscoil Moshíológ i gContae Loch Garman. Is mac léinn dochtúireachta í san Oideachas i gColáiste Mhuire gan Smál. Tá spéis aici i ngramadach na Gaeilge, in oideolaíochtaí teagaisc a bhaineann go sainiúil leis an suíomh tumoideachais agus i bhforbairt ghairmiúil leanúnach múinteoirí sa chomhthéacs tumoideachais.

Tá an **Dr T.J. Ó Ceallaigh** mar Stiúrthóir na Staidéar Iarchéime san Oideachas i gColáiste Mhuire gan Smál, Luimneach. Mar iar-phríomhoide tumoideachais, tá spéis faoi leith aige i ról an cheannaire theagascaigh, in oideolaíocht a bhaineann le teagasc comhtháite ábhar agus teangacha agus i bhforbairt ghairmiúil leanúnach múinteoirí i gcomhthéacs an tumoideachais, ach go h-áirithe.

Saoirse O'Reilly Cullen, Paul Downes and Bronagh Fagan

Saoirse O'Reilly Cullen graduated as a primary teacher from The Institute of Education, DCU in 2019. Saoirse is currently teaching in the developing Broombridge ETNS in Cabra. Throughout her studies, she specialised in the area of poverty and social inclusion in education and developed a passion for researching how our social structures can impede children's positive educational outcomes in Irish primary schools.

Bronagh Fagan is a primary school teacher. She has a Masters in Criminology and was awarded the Association of Criminal Justice Research and Development Prize for outstanding academic performance in a youth justice related dissertation. She is passionate about social inclusion in education and the role of education in supporting pathways out of crime. Her experiences as a teacher and as a volunteer in prisons in Ireland and abroad have motivated her research interests concerning prisoners' children and the implications of parental incarceration.

Dr Paul Downes is associate professor of Psychology of Education, director, Educational Disadvantage Centre, Institute of Education, Dublin City University, Ireland and affiliate professor University of Malta. With over 110 peer reviewed publications in areas of education, psychology, philosophy, law, anthropology and social policy, he has given keynote lectures and invited presentations in 30 countries, including invited presentations from 16 different countries' official ministries and over 20 invited presentations to the EU Commission's DG Education and Culture.

≡ Reflecting upon primary schooling post-COVID-19 pandemic – A call for increased agency to empower a dynamic and responsive contemporary education system. ≡

≡ DEIRDRE MCGILICUDDY ≡

Abstract

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 there has been a monumental pivot within education systems across the globe, shifting from traditional schooling within a physical building to learning at distance facilitated by a virtual world never before accessed en masse. The pandemic bore witness to teachers and school communities coming together in unity to tackle the challenges of making this pivot with little time, guidance, training, or resources initially available to meet the demands of this unknown virtual frontier. This paper reflects on the challenges and opportunities in education presented by the COVID-19 pandemic and calls for increased agency for teachers, children, and school communities as they actively engage in transforming the educational landscape. It is critical to reflect on the deep learning arising from the pandemic to future-proof the Irish education system with the agility and flexibility to respond to other crises, including climate change.

Keywords: primary education; COVID-19; teacher agency; creativity; teaching.

Introduction

*Ní neart go cur le chéile
There is no strength without unity*

Education communities in Ireland and across the globe have, without a shadow of doubt, demonstrated the power of unity and strength in supporting children and their families throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The past 18 months have borne witness to a monumental pivot within education systems encompassing both challenges and opportunities for how we value, deliver, and engage with education during the pandemic and beyond. Schools and their communities have navigated a year of physical school closures, implemented practices to ensure COVID-19 safe environments upon reopening, negotiated the challenging narratives about education across media in wider society while continuously supporting those at the heart of our system – children and their families. Ireland is now in the midst of a vaccination programme, the linchpin upon which the

uninterrupted reopening of society hangs and yet the emergence of COVID-19 variants brings with them uncertainty. The messaging is slowly changing from 'stay home, stay safe, protect each other' to 'learning to live with covid'. Schools have been at the frontline during the pandemic in relation to opening their physical and virtual doors and welcoming their children to the heart of what they do – teaching, learning and caring. It is within this context that this paper reflects on education in the midst of the pandemic considering the implications for how school communities, teachers and children engage in/through/with primary education into the future.

How do we ensure equitable access to curriculum when using technology and overcome the digital divide?

Technology was critical to supporting learners and facilitating distance learning during physical school closures. However, it quickly became apparent that many assumptions about access to technology, time, space, and digital skills were problematic, restricting access to curricular content and distance learning for some pupils and, as such, compounding inequities already present within the education system. While technology played an invaluable role in keeping us all connected during the pandemic, ensuring that every pupil across the country had access to a device to engage in distance learning was challenging. It emerged that many pupils didn't have access to an appropriate device and were using phones to engage with learning platforms. Not all pupils had access to a stable internet connection, with some relying on private phone data allowances to access curricular content. This is reflected in OECD findings that a lower percentage of Irish children have access to a computer at home for school work than the OECD average, particularly those in the bottom quartile of the socio-economic distribution (OECD, 2020b). In households with multiple children, accessing a device was more challenging, particularly when committing to engage in 'live' interactions at specific times through virtual classrooms. While initiatives at local and national level sought to ensure all pupils had access to a laptop in their home, the challenges around accessing the internet persisted. Distance learning also assumed that children had time, space, and home support to facilitate them in their engagements. While finding a space to learn at home on the face of it sounds straight forward, it became apparent that this could also be challenging for children. Some children did not have access to space to learn, particularly those most vulnerable living in cramped conditions where space is at a premium. Families where parents/guardians were working from home were also competing for appropriate space(s) to engage in professional work while also ensuring children were engaging in school work. In the early stages of the pandemic some families (such as front-line healthcare workers) struggled to find a space and place for their children to be cared for and engage in distance learning while they continued to attend their workplace. Findings from the *Growing Up in Ireland* study also highlight the challenges of learning at distance for children with only half of 12-years olds indicating that it was always true that they had a quiet place to study and the majority indicating a lack of preference for undertaking their school work at home (Murray, McNamara, O'Mahony, Smyth, & Watson, 2021). Most 12-year-olds also indicated they did not have access to online classes with only three-quarters indicating that they always had access to a suitable computer to

engage with their work (Murray et al., 2021). Children from low-income families were less likely to have a quiet space or access to adequate internet connections and resources (Cahoon, McGill, & Simms, 2021; Murray et al., 2021).

Teachers also had to navigate the challenge of finding appropriate space to engage with and prepare curricular content for their pupils. With a national directive to work from home, most notable was the consequential making public of the private space of teachers' homes which now substituted for the more public space of the classroom. Time became a precious and inequitable commodity during the pandemic, particularly during physical school closures. While the lack of commuting and the closure of workplaces provided additional time for some families to be together, other families struggled to find time to manage the demands of remote working/attending the workplace while supporting children to engage in distance learning from home. Indeed, student engagement was found to decline over time with mothers identified as the primary sources of support during the physical school closures (Clark et al., 2021; Flynn et al., 2021).

The Department of Education extended its long arm into the private spaces of home. The boundary between home space and school space was now blurred and while, for some children, the novelty of learning at distance was fun, for others the private family spaces of home became battlegrounds where parents/guardians struggled to engage children in school work. For some children the lack of appropriate space and resources inhibited their ability to engage in any meaningful way. The competing tensions emerging from this battle for space were palpable while the value of school/classroom as an appropriate physical space to ensure equitable access to teaching and learning was increasingly apparent.

Providing children with the resources, time, and space to engage with technology is only one aspect in addressing the digital divide. Most important is ensuring that children and their families have the appropriate digital skills required. The pandemic marked a crude introduction to terms such as virtual learning environment (VLE) and classroom platforms with software such as *Seesaw*, *Aladdin*, *Zoom*, *Teams*, *Kahoot!*, *Google Classroom* and *Padlet* entering the everyday conversations in our homes and schools. The digital skills required to navigate this newly established virtual learning world was challenging even for those with the most developed digital skills, particularly when engaging across platforms and apps. Of particular note was the level of upskilling undertaken by teachers to develop their own digital skills accessed through online courses and resources provided by education centres, the PDST, colleges/departments of education and teacher colleagues. Teachers worked together to share resources online and through social media using a variety of formats which was equally invaluable in supporting preparation for distance learning and overwhelming in the depth, breadth and speed of information being shared in such an intense period of time.

While technology provided a small window to the classroom during periods when schools were physically closed, the inequity of such an approach is evidenced in the emerging research, as 'not all children' had equal access to technology, resources, space, time, and digital skills required to engage in a fair and equitable way. It is evident that bringing children together in community to learn together within the physical classroom is critical to ensuring equitable access to pedagogy and curriculum. However, the value of technology as a pedagogic tool has been especially highlighted during the pandemic with

teachers and children pushing boundaries in terms of possibilities for integrating digital pedagogy into the everyday interactions and engagements in school, while ensuring its use is underpinned by principles of equity and fairness.

Do we (under)value the compassion, care and empathy imbued within the relational aspects of primary schooling?

The physical closure of school buildings during the pandemic highlighted the vital and inherent role that schools play in caring for and nurturing the communities within which they are embedded. Teaching is a deeply relational act, intertwined within the complex dynamics of social interactions and networks within a classroom (McGillicuddy, 2021). Nurturing the deeply relational and emotional aspects of teaching and learning were extremely challenging and frustrating for both teachers and children as they navigated one-dimensional interactions through virtual learning environments. In essence, children and teachers missed the informal chats and stories, the words of encouragement, the high fives, the thumbs up and the everyday physical and verbal cues critical to re/engaging and supporting learning in the classroom. Teachers care deeply about their pupils, and this was especially evident throughout physical school closures where messages of support, encouragement and connection played an integral role in supporting children's wellbeing. Indeed, teachers expressed concern about the interruption of care to their pupils imposed during physical school closures and the challenges in helping children catching up on missed work once schools reopened (Burke & Dempsey, 2020; Primdahl et al., 2021). The importance and strength of strong student-teacher connection was especially important in maintaining student engagement in distance learning (Bray, Banks, Devitt, & Ní Chorcora, 2021).

Schools were at the fulcrum of care for particularly vulnerable families during the COVID-19 pandemic. They actively reached out into their communities to provide support, resources/provisions and food, and by visiting family homes to provide advice and encouragement. Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) coordinators played a key role in maintaining this connection and supporting family wellbeing (Ross, Kennedy, & Devitt, 2021). Although schools increasingly work across/with other care agencies and bodies, emergent from the pandemic was the reliance on schools as the central point for contacting the most vulnerable communities and their children. Irish society has relied heavily on schools to care for our children and yet, until the pandemic, much of this work remained invisible, hidden behind more measurable indicators of numeracy, literacy, and school attendance/retention. The pandemic has highlighted the duality and interdependency between 'edu-cating' and 'edu-caring' at the very core of our education system.

How can we empower teacher agency to continue to promote creativity and innovation within our school communities?

The COVID-19 pandemic showcased the vital role of teacher agency, creativity, and innovation in responding to an increasingly dynamic, complex, and interdependent world. Schools play an important role in imparting to children and young people the skills

and competencies to engage in an increasingly changeable world where technology and artificial intelligence (AI) are forging an unexplored frontier of possibilities beyond those we can even begin to imagine today.

The historic manoeuvre within the education system during the pandemic was all the more remarkable considering teachers felt extremely unprepared to engage with virtual learning environments with many indicating a lack of access to the skills and resources required (Burke & Dempsey, 2020). Apps and technologies previously located in the background of the education system, afforded teachers the opportunity to innovate and be creative using digital pedagogies. As teachers worked tirelessly to prepare, record (and re-record) pedagogical content using video and virtual learning environments, children and their parent(s)/guardian(s) grappled to come to terms with navigating these learning platforms.

Teachers and schools have always been inherently creative, engaging in innovative and contemporary pedagogies to enhance teaching and learning in the classroom. Much of this innovation has remained hidden within the confines of the school building. The pandemic provided a virtual window into the power of teacher agency and freedom to create, innovate and transform the education system in a really condensed period. From daily challenges to virtual Active Schools weeks, interactive presentations to live virtual classrooms, teachers engaged in a creative undertaking never before witnessed across the Irish education system. Although the nature of this creative endeavour varied greatly across the system, it showcased the possibilities and potential for encouraging and foregrounding creative and innovative practices in Irish schools. Risk and vulnerability are at the heart of innovation and creativity, so it is vital to nurture environments where such approaches are valued and supported. Empowering teachers to engage in creativity and innovation has the transformative potential to re/create a dynamic, flexible, and agile education system with the capabilities to respond to our broader societal needs in an increasingly intense and fast paced world. A key aspect to realising such an aspiration is to ensure teachers have the critical time, space and support required in order to exercise professional agency as we slowly return to the new normal in Irish primary education. As Priestley, Philippou, Biesta, and Robinson (2016) argue:

It is problematic for policy to demand that teachers exercise agency in their working practices and then simultaneously deny them the means to do so, effectively disabling them ... they neglect due consideration of (and even actively distort) the cultural and structural conditions that play important roles in enabling teachers to achieve agency in their work (p. 189).

Is re/connecting with outdoor pedagogy a critical aspect to addressing the climate crisis?

The reopening of the physical school building also marked a re/connection with outdoor pedagogy prompting many teachers to re/engage with outdoor teaching and learning. The outdoor physical spaces in/around schools are increasingly used as classrooms, school

gardens, fairy trails, sensory spaces, and places to learn and engage with curriculum. The learning within these spaces is rich and embodied, a resource for children's wellbeing and health (Austin, 2021). While the Irish weather has often been perceived as an obstacle for preventing engagement with outdoor learning, inspiration can be taken from the Norwegian saying "There is no bad weather, only bad clothes". The possibility to nurture a deeply embodied connection between the outdoors/land and the child is particularly pertinent in this period of climate change where our collective role as global citizens requires scrutiny and, most importantly, change to tackle this urgent global crisis. The push into the wild of the outdoors during the pandemic presents us with an opportunity to re/connect with our environments in a meaningful way and to empower children as climate justice warriors with the capacities and skills to shape the future of our world.

How do we continue to nurture children's wellbeing post-pandemic?

More than one-in-five 12-year-olds indicated low mood during the COVID-19 pandemic lock downs with these children more likely to find it difficult settling back to school, to worry about the virus impacting their family and to argue more with parents (Murray et al., 2021). The pandemic particularly highlighted the important role schools play in nurturing and supporting children's wellbeing. Indeed, individual and collective wellbeing has been strongly promoted by global and national educational policy across the OECD (Department of Education and Skills, 2018; OECD, 2018). As it became evident that the initial school closures of two weeks were to be extended well beyond what was initially anticipated, there was growing concern about the impact of school closures on children's wellbeing. For some children being at home was a sanctuary, a welcome refuge from the hustle and bustle of school life, marking an improvement in their wellbeing. The lack of social contact with friends and teachers was difficult for some children, marked by a frustration in their inability to engage through virtual learning environments in a free and dynamic way.

Childhood was abruptly interrupted by the restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is reflected in findings from the *Growing Up in Ireland* study which identified that although children (aged 12) reported spending more time with family, there was a significant increase in informal screen time, and they spent less time exercising and engaging in organised cultural activities (Murray et al., 2021). Children's social worlds were dramatically de-constructed and lock down regulations prohibited them from meeting with their friends/peers resulting in social isolation and the lack of opportunity to play. Children reported spending less time with friends and as such, they reported an increased usage of online platforms/phones to stay connected (Murray et al., 2021). Destabilising children's social worlds by removing the opportunity for them to navigate their relational networks severely restricted their ability to negotiate their identities as social actors within the context of their childhoods. The emotional impact of restricting children's access to the most fundamental aspect to childhood, play, profoundly impacted on their wellbeing and sense of self. Schools are predominant sites for children to negotiate their psychosocial wellbeing with friendships playing a critical role (McGillicuddy, 2021).

The long-term impact of the pandemic and physical school closures on children's wellbeing (both positive and negative) is yet to be fully understood, yet the fundamental role schools play in supporting their wellbeing is profound. This was particularly evident in the emphasis placed on children's wellbeing when they returned to the physical classrooms where school communities were encouraged to 'slow down to catch up' (Department of Education, 2021). There has also been a call to provide training to all teachers in trauma informed practice to safeguard children's wellbeing into the future (Mulholland & O'Toole, 2021). While the long-term trauma impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our children is yet unclear, what is certain is the need for schools to be provided with the supports and training required to safeguard our children's psychosocial wellbeing for the future.

Should we prioritise the wellbeing of our teachers and school community?

The quality and morale of teachers is absolutely central to the wellbeing of students and their learning (Andy Hargreaves)

We cannot nurture our children's wellbeing in the absence of nurturing our teachers' wellbeing. The pace and intensity of changes expected of schools and teachers over the past year and a half have been unprecedented within primary education. The role of the teacher changed from one of pedagogue in the physical classroom to one of educational technologist and digital expert. The lines of communication between home and school expanded from centralised communication to parents from schools to individual contact between teacher and child/parent. What ensued was a constant flow of digital communication and notifications contributing to an epidemic within the pandemic of the inability to switch off. Technology facilitated an ease in communicating between home and school, yet the individuated nature of contact through virtual platforms resulted in teachers receiving a tsunami of pupil work, with high expectations for instantaneous responses in the form of an emoji, voice note or text comment. As a consequence, teachers were under immense pressure not only to prepare engaging and accessible content, but also to provide instant feedback as children completed their tasks. Time in education intensified and quite simply, there were not enough hours in the day. Preparing online resources was particularly time-consuming with teachers putting much time, planning and effort into perfecting the interactive content to upload to online platforms. Teaching as a profession is multidimensional, demanding flexibility and the ability to move in/between different roles. However, the flexibility and ability to innovate demonstrated by teachers during the pandemic has been astounding, above and beyond any job description prior to March 2020.

The intensity of changes within the Irish education system during the past 18 months has, without doubt, taken its toll on teacher and school community wellbeing. Unfortunately, as public frustration with physical school closures increased, the narrative around the teaching profession was less positive across media platforms. The mood changed dramatically from an initial appreciation for teachers and the work they do at the early stages of the pandemic to a divisive and damaging narrative criticising teachers for

not doing enough or doing too much. The impact of such negative narratives on teacher wellbeing cannot be underestimated. An attack on teachers and schools is an attack on education which threatens to undermine the fabric upon which Irish society is built. Teaching is all encompassing as a profession, an intensely embodied process drawing on physical, emotional, and intellectual resources in order to meet and support the needs of all children in the classroom. Failure to nurture teacher wellbeing is a failure to ensure we have a healthy and effective teaching profession.

Should we be more proactive in embedding student voice, participation, and agency in primary education?

Notable throughout the pandemic was the absence of children and young people's voice(s) from the narrative relating to education and schooling. Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) enshrines the importance of affording due consideration to children's voice(s) whereby "parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child". The absence and silencing of children's voice(s) during the pandemic at national level highlight the gap between policy and practice when ensuring their right to active participation in any decision-making processes across government and in education. There is real evidence of practices enabling children's voice(s) at local level where student councils have been established in many primary schools across the country. The pandemic has presented an opportunity to consider how we can enhance the realisation of children's rights not only by listening to them, but also in encouraging them as active participants in decision making processes relating to teaching, learning and their school lives (McGillicuddy & Machowska-Kosciak, 2021). Failure to enact children's rights is a failure to empower our children as active citizens within a more and more complex and globalised world where human rights are increasingly under attack (Lundy, 2019). Schools and educators can continue to lead the way in ensuring children have opportunities to learn about/through child rights to empower their agency as active citizens within our society and beyond (Devine & McGillicuddy, 2016; Mallon & Martinez-Sainz, 2021). Educational policy makers, including the Department of Education, also have a responsibility to ensure that due weight, meaningful consideration, and affirmative action are taken to reflect the views shared by children relating to all matters impacting their school lives.

Has the pandemic highlighted the power of school-parent/guardian partnership and working in community?

Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much (Helen Keller)

School is at the heart of Irish communities, the fulcrum drawing us together on a daily basis. The temporal rhythm and spatial dimensions of the school day punctuate and define how children experience their childhood(s). School defines and connects communities playing a critical role in shaping our social consciousness and defining our identity as citizens

of the world. A thriving school reflects a thriving community with children and their families at the core. The role of parents/guardians is especially important in supporting children as they engage in school (O'Toole, L., Kiely, J., McGillicuddy, D., O'Brien, E.Z. & C, 2019). Nurturing a dynamic and meaningful partnership between home and school can be challenging for schools where time and resources are at a premium. The need for direct communication with children and their families during the pandemic has presented new opportunities and modes to nurture communication between home and school. The use of digital platforms has opened the door of communication and provided both teachers and families with new perspectives and opportunities to nurture mutual understandings of the value and role of education in children's lives. The benefits have been symbiotic, with teachers gaining deeper insight into their pupils' lives and better understanding of who they are as individuals, while greater communication for parents has provided a deeper insight into the elusive world of the classroom. However, it cannot be assumed that parents have equal access or skills to engage through digital modes of communication, particularly for the most vulnerable communities. Nurturing and empowering this relationship between schools and families can only contribute to a deeper strengthening of our communities, with the potential to enhance not only how children engage in school, but more importantly, how they understand their role as change agents within a dynamic and responsive education system. Consequently, the potential for growth and transformation within the Irish education system is profound.

Why is it important to address the underfunding within our education system post COVID-19 pandemic?

Ireland is positioned among countries spending well below the OECD average on primary to tertiary education as measured against the proportion of its wealth (GDP). While the OECD average is 4.9%, Ireland spends 3.4% of its GDP on primary to tertiary education with 1.4% (compared to OECD average of 1.5%) directed to primary education (OECD, 2020a). Annual expenditure per student also sits below the OECD average in Ireland from primary to tertiary education. Irish primary school classrooms are among the largest in the OECD, with an average of 25 children compared to OECD average of 21, and Irish children receive an additional 101 hours instruction (905 hours) compared to the OECD average of 804 hours (OECD, 2020a). The complexities associated with the nuances of the Irish education system were particularly evident as schools and teachers pivoted to meet the demands of distance learning. Almost half of Irish primary schools (44%) have four teachers or less, the highest proportion in Europe. Rural schools play an integral role in Irish society and are key to ensuring regeneration of these most vulnerable communities as our society shifts to a more digitised economy, particularly evident during the pandemic. However, access to fewer resources in smaller schools (such as time, space, learning materials, personnel) results in increased pressure on teachers working across multi-grade classes challenged with meeting a broader spectrum of learner needs, while many also engage in the administrative aspects of managing a school as teaching principals. Larger class sizes in more urban settings also presented a challenge for teachers in terms of planning curricular tasks, engaging with children and providing them with real time feedback, and

supporting those with additional learner needs. The physical limitations of school buildings also emerged as particularly challenging in meeting the requirements to reopen in a safe manner. The cramped conditions of some classrooms resulted in challenges ensuring safe ventilation and social distancing between pods. The physical reopening of schools was a monumental task for school leaders and staff who had to plan for and enact complex and detailed rituals to ensure the safety of the whole school community. Schools rose to the challenge navigating an initial absence of timely directives from the Department of Education while also reassuring and instilling confidence among their families that their children would be safe back in the school building. The chronic underfunding of the Irish education system evident in the challenges presented to schools when seeking to support learners at distance and to reopen their buildings cannot, in good conscience, continue to be ignored. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided a timely opportunity to review the allocation of funding within the education system, to collate an inventory of the challenges and needs identified by schools and to plan for increased investment in our most treasured of assets – our children and young people.

Has the pandemic highlighted the importance and need for a national conversation on the value of education within Irish society?

Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself (John Dewey)

The shifting narrative regarding education across media from one celebrating teachers to one of considerable divisiveness highlights the gap in understanding about the purpose and value of education within Irish society. Primary schooling and education have changed considerably over the past two decades, with active, inquiry-based learning and integrated curriculum at the core of the work within classrooms. Broadcasting lessons through virtual learning platforms opened up a new viewership, one where observations were made based on assumptions rather than on deep pedagogical knowledge. Indeed, such windows to the classroom were tainted by the lens of the pandemic and didn't truly capture the reality of teaching and learning in contemporary Irish primary school classrooms. To replicate such deeply relational work through a virtual platform with young children is an impossible ask. What emerged was a distinct gap in understanding about the deeply complex and dynamic environment within which teaching and learning is undertaken. Closing this gap in understanding between the teaching profession and broader society emerged as a critical issue during the pandemic. Perhaps more powerful is the potential to work together to re/define the value and purpose of Irish primary education. The government's decision to commit to convening a citizens' assembly on the education system proffers a unique and critical opportunity for all stakeholders to have a say on the value and purpose of education within Irish society.

Education is the foundational pillar upon which society is built, shaping our identities as active and empowered citizens of the world. Much of the narrative relating to education within society positions children as 'human becomings' (Qvortrup, 2005) charging education with the purpose of preparing them for a productive life. Perhaps the value of

children as human beings in their own right with an important contribution to make to the education system and beyond would contribute to a re/envisioning of education as 'life itself'. Challenging and reframing this dogma relating to education is critical to ensuring a more informed and nuanced narrative in times of crisis into the future.

Conclusion

Education does not change the world. Education changes people. People change the world (Paulo Freire)

As we face into a new academic year defined by the uncertainty and challenges experienced by school communities over the past 18 months it is vital to pause, take stock and reflect on the opportunity the pandemic has afforded us to transform and enhance our education system. This is not a call to do more. In fact, it is a call to stop and meaningfully re/consider and re/define what we want for our children and young people, for our society, for our teaching profession and for our education system. Slowing down in education has never been more important, while we begin to consider whether we should demand less rather than more from our students (Mahon, 2021) and teachers. The pandemic has presented an opportunity to re/define who we are as a society and how we understand ourselves, our value, and our contribution to the world around us as global citizens. If education is the "practice of freedom" (Freire & Ramos, 1996, p. 16) schools, teachers and children must be entrusted with the transformational agency required to continue to build a dynamic, responsive, and inclusive system post the COVID-19 pandemic.

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will consider the context in question in order to establish an understanding of the forces which act upon and observe school leaders. This is followed by an analysis of the discourse surrounding educational leadership as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, suggestions are made to address both the difficulties faced by school leaders, as well as opportunities created as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Discourse as an analytical lens

In broad terms, discourse refers to “written or spoken communication” (Pitsoe & Letseka, 2013, p. 24). Discourse can be analysed in different ways, but a Foucauldian approach is utilised in this paper as power is at the core of the discourse of educational leadership. Foucault writes that it is through discourse that we demonstrate who we are. He believed discourse to be, “systems of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of action, beliefs, and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak” (Lessa, 2006, p. 285). It is through discourse that school leaders are enabled to construct meaning about who they are in relation to others and how their success is understood (Skerritt, 2019). However, discourse is not just about what is said. Of equal importance is who said it, and what is not said, as well as the identification of who can speak as well as those who cannot (Foucault, 1972). Discourse enables those in power to exercise their authority by deciding what is discussed and can support the oppression and marginalisation of others in society (Pitsoe and Letseka, 2013). Those in power use measures of accountability in order to maintain order and control over those subject to control. Power is maintained through observation, the ever-present gaze of the “panopticon” (Foucault, 1977). Observation in contemporary times is aided by the immanent presence and use of social media and digital recording devices. School leaders have always been vigilant of observation by systemic forces, however, they now find themselves also observed by the media and parents. This expectation of being observed increases the self-imposed pressures upon school leaders, including the modification of their behaviour to match what they believe is expected of them.

In brief, those with power control the narrative through a variety of means. These include expectations set, accountability, and what is said (and not said) in national educational policy, academic research, issued guidance, and traditional news media. As discourse is a means of exercising control and influencing behaviour, this paper focuses upon the subjects of control, school leaders, and those who seek to exercise control, the actors at a systems level. In order to understand fully the contemporary discourse of educational leadership, we must first establish who school leaders are, and how leadership is practised within Irish primary schools.

Educational leadership in Irish primary schools

The importance of school leaders has been well established in the literature (Brown et al., 2019) but leadership in education continues to be a rather nebulous concept with many competing definitions and models proposed (Leithwood & Riehl, 2005). This is in part due to the sheer increase in the volume of research investigating leadership since the year 2000, as well as attempts by researchers to “clarify the definition and practices of

effective leadership from different perspectives” (Gumus et al., 2018, p. 41). Taken more broadly, the practice of leadership in schools has been described as “a process of social influence, which maximizes the efforts of others, towards the achievement of a goal” (Kruse, 2013). Leithwood and Riehl build upon this definition by stating that “at the core of most definitions of leadership are two functions: providing direction and exercising influence” (2003, p. 4). In a later work by the same authors, school leadership is defined as, “the work of mobilizing and influencing others to articulate and achieve the school’s shared intentions and goals” (Leithwood & Riehl, 2005, p. 14). Common across these definitions, and indeed all definitions of leadership, are two key ideas: influence and vision. School leaders influence others. Yet, this is not dependent on an individual being in a formal leadership position (Bush and Glover, 2014). On the contrary, informal school leaders i.e., those with no titles, may exercise greater influence over others than formal school leaders, such as the principal. They may be motivated by a genuinely held purpose and are not corralled by the managerial burdens of a formal leadership position. A second common theme across these definitions is the notion of direction, vision, or goals. Identifying and setting a goal or vision is not an easy task, and can be difficult to maintain (Fullan, 1992). How ideas are realised in Irish primary schools and who is involved in the process varies depending on the model of leadership adopted.

Leadership in schools has been conceptualised in a number of different models; distributed, transformational, transactional, teacher leadership, as well as the ‘great’ (wo) man. The distributed leadership model has become the dominant discourse of leadership in the 21st century (Bush and Glover, 2014), with systemic forces in Ireland reinforcing this model as the normative approach (The Inspectorate, 2016; Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2018b; DES, 2018d). The popularity of the distributed leadership model could be attributed as a reaction to the criticisms aimed at hierarchical leadership models such as the ‘Great Man’ Theory (Gumus et al., 2018; Harris, 2018) and instructional or learning-centred models (Bush and Glover, 2014), as well as the shift toward more democratic collaborative decision-making (Gumus et al., 2018). Furthermore, the distributed leadership model aims to overcome shortcomings in the expertise of school leaders (Cuban, cited in Gumus et al., 2018) by “engaging expertise wherever it exists within the organisation rather than seeking this only through formal position or role” (Harris, 2004, p. 13). In addition, distributed leadership models can harness multiple sources of agency (Leithwood and Mascall, 2008), which can facilitate change initiatives from informal school leaders across the school. Despite its reported benefits, application of distributed leadership is not always straightforward. It requires a “fundamental change” in the ways formal leaders such as principals understand and apply their roles; a move from “exclusive leadership” to “brokering, facilitating and supporting others” (Harris, 2012, p. 8). Within the Irish context, this has not always been successful, with some leaders choosing to simply delegate tasks in “tightly prescribed contexts” to colleagues, a practice termed “licensed leadership” (King & Stevenson, 2017, p. 657). However committed school leaders are to an authentic distribution of leadership, the reality in practice is more complex, with critics claiming distributed leadership to be “chameleon-like” and a “convenient catch all” for any sharing of leadership (Harris, 2012, p. 11).

Educational leadership in Irish primary schools is set out most clearly in *Looking at Our School 2016: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools* (The Inspectorate, 2016). This piece of contemporary discourse identifies school leaders as those in formal leadership roles, while also recognising and valuing the strengths of all teachers as educational leaders regardless of any formal leadership position. Such a categorisation bears an uncanny resemblance to the forms of distributed leadership described by Preedy (2016). Within this policy document distributed leadership models are specifically advocated as an example of the type of highly effective leadership and management which schools should strive to achieve; “He/she **empowers** teachers to take on leadership roles and to lead learning, through the **effective use of distributed leadership models.**” (2016, p. 29, emphasis from original source). *Circular 0070/2018* further demonstrates the importance of distributed leadership and a formal school leadership team. This circular identifies the formal leadership roles in schools, including the designated posts of principal, deputy principal, and assistant principal (I and II), and sets out the distribution of formal leadership posts in Irish schools (Department of Education and Skills, 2018b). Finally, this circular links the criteria for promotion of staff to leadership positions with the aforementioned *Looking at Our School 2016: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools*. In other words, any staff member seeking a promoted post, with the associated increase in pay, must align themselves with the normative approach to school leadership in Ireland – distributed leadership.

The reality of leadership in schools as experienced by the author exposes a far more nuanced situation, where distributed leadership is the espoused approach yet a range of approaches to leadership are employed. This supports claims that leadership models are partial and provide “ideal types” for leaders to “aspire to” (Bush & Glover, 2014, p. 565). There also exists a “slippage between conception and practice” (Macdonald, 2013, p. 141), where the approach advocated in the discourse of educational policy has been transformed at a local level in response to the complex realities of each school. In their role as a member of a national support service for teachers, the author witnessed a range of leadership styles in schools. While each school is governed by the same systemic forces, the leadership approach employed by the school leaders is informed by a range of unique contextual factors. These include the professional skills and experiences of the principal and other leaders, the support provided by the patron body, and the makeup of the school community. Upon reflection, the author agrees with Gumus et al. When they conclude that “there is no best leadership practice” suitable to all contexts and situations; hence, effective leadership practices are highly dependent on the situation in which leaders work” (2018, p. 28).

Educational leadership in Irish primary schools – The reality

While school leaders are being encouraged by policy documents to act in a way that aligns with a distributed model of school leadership, the actions by other actors with ‘power’ over them can often make this difficult to achieve. School leaders in the Irish primary school sector are subject to systemic forces who implement control through the multiple layers of governance and accountability acting upon school leaders. Chief amongst these systemic forces are the patron body and the Department of Education. The Irish primary school

sector is composed of state-funded primary schools who are categorised based upon their patronage, including religious, multi-denominational and non-denominational bodies (DES, 2020e). The management of schools falls under the auspices of the patron body, who appoint a board of management whose duty it is to “manage the school on behalf of the patron” (Government of Ireland, 1998, p. 19). This management is carried out in adherence with the religious ethos of the patron body and includes the recruitment and employment of staff, including the principal of the school (Government of Ireland, 2012). The principal, who is “accountable to the board of the school for that management”, acts as the formal leader of the school and has responsibility for the “day-to-day management of the school”, including the guidance and management of teachers and other school staff (Government of Ireland, 2012, p. 5). This management must fall within the beliefs and expectations of the patron body. While principals are accountable to the board of management, they typically also serve as members of the board. This presents a potentially interesting power dynamic where the principal is both the observer and the observed.

Further accountability and regulation are placed upon school leaders as each school is required to “conduct its activities in compliance with any regulations made from time to time by the Minister” (Government of Ireland, 1998, p. 13). These regulations and guidance take the form of policy documents and circular letters issued by the DES. Observation of the compliance of school leaders is undertaken by the DES’s equivalent of the ‘panopticon’, the Inspectorate. Their role is to evaluate and assess the compliance of school leaders (Government of Ireland, 1998), and they are swiftly becoming the sole arbiters of “good teaching” (Simmie et al., 2019). The globalisation, neoliberal policy borrowing and increasing accountability seen in other districts (Devine, Fahie and McGillicuddy, 2013) are also evident in the context of Irish primary schools. School leaders are being held increasingly accountable under national policies of school improvement. In particular, *Looking at Our School 2016: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools* (The Inspectorate, 2016) sets out the framework for the Irish version of school improvement policy, school self-evaluation (SSE).

In relation to SSE, *Circular 0016/2018* states that “schools should take a whole-school approach to identifying the ... area to prioritise” (DES, 2018a, p. 3). This approach is supported and further developed in other SSE related documents such as the *Digital Learning Planning Guidelines* (DES, 2018c). This document adds that the vision statement prepared by school leaders should be shared with the school community and amended as necessary to meet the needs of the school. Both national policy documents advocate vision statements being guided by the unique needs of the school; however, the reality is that the discourse of school improvement has prescribed objectives. School leaders were strongly advised by *Circular 0039/2016* to use the SSE process to support the investigation and implementation of the new *Primary Language Curriculum* (DES, 2016). Furthermore, the *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018 – 2023* explicitly states that all schools are “required by 2023, to use the SSE process to initiate a wellbeing promotion review and development cycle” (DES, 2018e, p. 5). This contradicts the espoused guidance that school leaders must identify the unique needs of their school when implementing the SSE process and reveals the SSE process as a form of discourse designed to compel school leaders to implement policy goals as set by systemic forces. This demonstrates the power

systemic forces wield over school leaders. It also highlights school leaders as being the 'pinch point' of the system, attempting to address the contextual needs of their schools, while expected to enact all policy directives placed upon them.

Consequently, formal school leaders are striving to enact adopted visions and goals foisted upon them through the discourse of school improvement. This has had mixed results, as some school leaders may be unclear as to the how to achieve the adopted, or artificial, vision in their context. A clear example of this from the author's experience is where school leaders have drawn up a digital learning plan as part of the requirements placed upon them by the *Digital Learning Framework* (DES, 2018d). In some instances, the school leaders are unclear as to their ultimate vision for digital learning in their unique school context and set visions based on their perceptions of what is expected by the instruments of accountability, the Inspectorate. Sadly, this is not unique to the Irish context as school leaders in other jurisdictions are also accountable to external forces and must meet centralised expectations (Hoyle and Wallace, 2018). The key difficulty facing school leaders in Irish primary schools is the inconsistency between the increasing demands placed upon them by systemic factors and the levels of agency and autonomy they are afforded in order to meet these expectations. While it can be argued that the affordance of autonomy and agency at the individual school level is a strength of the Irish context, the difficulty facing school leaders is that as measures of accountability increase, their autonomy and agency decrease and are replaced by licensed leadership (King & Stevenson, 2017, p. 657). Irrespective of the model of leadership in effect in a given Irish primary school, the reality is that school leaders are the pinch point of the system, facing pressures from the top down (systemic forces), as well as the bottom up (relating to their school context).

The ultimate responsibility for the day-to-day running of an Irish primary school falls to the school principal, supported by the school leadership team. These formal school leaders have been shown to be accountable to the Department of Education, patron body, and board of management. This creates an unnecessarily complicated web of governance and accountability which must be navigated on a daily basis. Matters were further complicated during the COVID-19 pandemic as school leaders were forced to ensure that all local arrangements met the guidelines and expectations of their multiple masters, as well as advice from new masters in the form of public health (Health Service Executive (HSE), 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic also served to amplify the power of parents and the media who increased their scrutiny of school leaders as a result of the pandemic (Burke & Dempsey, 2020).

Schooling under a microscope – Leading Irish primary schools during the COVID-19 pandemic

School leaders in the era of COVID-19 find themselves facing a wave of new challenges without any previously identified solutions. As evidence and needs associated with COVID-19 are rapidly changing, schools and school leaders find themselves in an environment where rapid and constant change is to be expected, adding to the complexity and demands of their role (Dunn, 2020). Cognisant of the evolving context of COVID-19

and its impact upon school leaders, this analysis is restricted to events which took place between the months of March and December 2020. In an attempt to curb the spread of COVID-19, education systems around the world were halted abruptly in early 2020 (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2020; Netolicky, 2020; Harris and Jones, 2020). In line with their international counterparts, the DES closed Irish primary schools on 12 March 2020. While school buildings were closed, greater autonomy and power were handed over by the DES to school leaders, to make local arrangements to facilitate learning to continue in an altered way from students' homes (Doyle, 2020; Fahy et al., 2020). Moving education from the classroom to the sitting room is not a change that school leaders, or parents, were prepared for. The following section analyses the contemporary discourse of educational leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. Where-in the additional pressures and increasing perceptions of surveillance experienced by school leaders reportedly pushed them toward burnout (Mangan, 2020; Fahy et al., 2020).

Over the course of the months of March to December 2020, the author contends that previously established power relationships began to shift as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is in part due to previously less prominent actors, including parents and the media, exerting greater power over the discourse of Irish primary education. These shifts in power relationships corresponded to different events during the COVID-19 pandemic and led to certain reactions in school leaders. These can be represented in three key phases; surviving, preparing, and approaching burnout, represented below. Across these three phases the power dynamic in contemporary discourse began to shift as the subjects of control, school leaders, began to gain greater power over the discourse through use of traditional and social media. Correspondingly, systemic forces, particularly the DES, began to lose control over the discourse of educational leadership as they came under increased scrutiny from the media and parents (Burke & Dempsey, 2020).

Key phases of COVID-19 for school leaders in Irish primary schools (March – December 2020)

Phase one: Surviving

During the initial 'survival' phase, the DES and related systemic forces, exercised power over school leaders through their control of the discourse and by maintaining a Foucauldian gaze. This phase was typified by an increased perception of observation of school leaders, by parents in particular, as they initially scrambled to "continue to plan lessons and, where possible, provide online resources for students or online lessons" as tasked by guidance documents (DES, 2020c). Arrangements for continuing educational provision during school closures were put in place by school leaders. However, the initial absence of clear direction from systemic forces resulted in a variability of approaches to distance learning across schools (McBride & O'Brien, 2020). This in turn led to school leaders and teachers fearing comparison of teachers and schools by parents (Burke and Dempsey, 2020). Despite vast numbers of requests by school leaders for clear guidance (Burke and Dempsey, 2020), successive documents issued by systemic forces failed to provide any firm direction to school leaders (DES, 2020a). Rather, principals were advised

to use their “professional expertise to decide upon appropriate online resources that match the intended learning”. This constituted a further example of licensed leadership and this resulted in a fragmentation of approaches to remote learning provision across the sector, with two negative outcomes. Firstly, the potential widening of inequalities in education and skills between students. Variability in a school’s capacity and approach to providing distance learning opportunities could compound pre-existing socio-economic differences in educational attainment (Doyle, 2020, p. 2). Secondly, variability of approach across schools came under the lens in the discourse from parents and the media, with the work of school leaders scrutinised and even demeaned by some media outlets (O’Connell, 2020). The increased pressure caused by the ‘panopticon’ was further substantiated when school leaders identified “action to reduce the fear of competition and comparison between schools and teachers” amongst the key supports required during COVID-19 (Burke & Dempsey, 2020, p. 18). The scrutinous Foucauldian gaze has only added to the pressures facing school leaders who judge their own successes (or failures) and identity based upon popular discourse.

The additional pressures placed upon school leaders have had a negative impact on their well-being. School leaders are the ‘pinch point’ of the primary education system. If their well-being is not considered and protected it could result in the loss of such leaders, which would ultimately cause even greater difficulties for the education system. During the initial ‘survival’ phase McCoy and Carroll reported that many school leaders felt the support provided to them by systemic forces did not match the support they were providing to their school communities (2020). Measures need to be put in place for any future school closures which account for the additional workload and support provided by school leaders, including supporting and motivating staff and students, communicating with the school community as well as reacting to unforeseen challenges.

Phase two: Preparing

The second phase proposed by the author, ‘preparing,’ was chiefly characterised by preparations to re-open schools for the new academic year and the loss of trust between school leaders and the systemic forces acting upon them (Fahy et al., 2020; Golden, 2020). For school leaders preparing to re-open schools during these demanding and chaotic circumstances, the pressure is relentless, the options are limited, the sleepless nights are frequent (Harris and Jones, 2020). In addition to the normal preparations for a new term, school leaders were attempting simultaneously to find solutions to new challenges including social distancing, additional cleaning procedures, as well as how to cater for staff and students who are immunocompromised. The well-being of school leaders was again flagged during this phase with school leaders reporting “severely impacted” work-life balances (Carroll & McCoy, 2020). Well-being of school leaders was further eroded during this phase in tandem with a loss of trust in systemic forces. Trust is an important component of leadership (Daly, 2009), with trustworthiness considered essential when leading within a crisis (Netolicky, 2020). However, during this phase trust in systemic forces began to waver, both from school leaders and in the wider national discourse. This was attributed to a perceived a lack of support and guidance from the DES (Fahy et al., 2020;

Burke and Dempsey, 2020; Casey and McConnell, 2020), and further compounded by the issuance of communications to school leaders at times that did not facilitate the seeking of clarifications. These include school holidays or at the close of business on a Friday (Fahy et al., 2020; Department of Education and Skills, 2020b; Department of Education and Skills, 2020d). Due to the timings, rate and variety of discourse issued by systemic forces, confusion arose amongst school leaders. Successive guidance and document updates were published in part due to the evolving understanding of COVID-19 but can also be attributed to omissions or errors within documents (Moore, 2020). An attempt to allay this confusion was made by the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) (2020) through the creation of a COVID-19 Support Hub; an action which correspondingly enabled the INTO to exercise some control over contemporary discourse. While the INTO is not a new actor in the discourse of educational leadership in Irish primary schools, this action further demonstrates how school leaders and the forces supporting them began to exert power over the popular discourse during this phase of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Phase three: Approaching burnout

The third phase is associated with a shift in the power dynamic, whereby the power held over school leaders by systemic forces was lessened and school leaders began to use contemporary discourse to exercise power over systemic forces through the 'panopticon'. This phase is labelled to reflect the discourse of school leaders at the time, who were reportedly pushed toward burnout (Mangan, 2020; Fahy et al., 2020). At this stage of the pandemic, in part due to the experience of remote learning, parents and the media had come to acknowledge the true workload of teachers and school leaders (Gottlieb and Schneider, 2020). This resulted in an increase in observation and expectation of systemic forces, particularly the DES, to provide guidance and support to school leaders as the new term began. The DES came under scrutiny within contemporary discourse in relation to perceived failures in supporting school leaders, most notably "#fakesanitiser" (Lydon, 2020). An incident involving a hand sanitiser widely used in schools due to its inclusion on the DES procurement framework was being recalled due to safety concerns (McNulty, 2020). Resultingly, school leaders were placed under additional pressures to remove and replace these defective products at short notice, which proved an unnecessary addition to the workload of school leaders. Some school leaders reported feeling increasingly over-worked during this phase, in part due to a lack of time off as a result of the COVID-19 crisis (Fahy et al., 2020). Despite summer preparations, school leaders faced novel organisational challenges in the new term relating to social distancing of staff and intensified cleaning. An unexpected challenge reported by school leaders was the emotional burden relating to COVID-19 contact tracing (Fleming et al., 2020) and the reported inefficiencies of this system in relation to schools (O'Kelly, 2020). The dissatisfaction of school leaders during this phase was best captured in a statement from the President of the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) where he severely criticised the lack of support and guidance from systemic forces (White, 2020). This criticism of systemic forces extended beyond school leaders and their supporters, with elected representatives stating that, "school leaders are keeping schools open in spite of the DES" (Ó Ríordáin, 2020). Power relationships within

contemporary discourse have shifted so that school leaders are no longer subjects of control, instead they have begun to wield power of their own. A question that needs to be asked, however, is whether this shift in power relationships will continue to progress as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to evolve?

Conclusion

This paper has analysed contemporary discourse of educational leadership in the Irish primary school sector through a Foucauldian lens. It has explored school leadership practices and the forces which acted upon the work of school leaders prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. With this contextual understanding, the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic between March – December 2020 were then interrogated, with a focus on the power dynamic within contemporary discourse. This, however, is not a time to be disheartened. The pandemic has shown the complexities of vision and action undertaken by school leaders within their unique contexts in order to overcome the most pressing challenges and keep schools operating. Following this time of change, it is this author's view that we disrupt the status quo (Facer, 2020) and provide a system of governance whereby professional school managers take the administrative burdens of management from school leaders so that they may focus their full attention on learning, teaching and assessment within their schools. It is anticipated that such a reform would help to alleviate the conflicting demands placed upon school leaders by their multiple masters at a systemic level as the professional school manager would serve as a form of filter or conduit, where school leaders are presented only with communications and initiatives relevant to their role as leaders of education within their schools. Such a reform would have to be financed correctly at a systemic level to ensure a uniformity of approach across schools and avoid a fractured system where school managers function differently based upon the beliefs of the patron body. While school leaders will ultimately always be accountable to systemic forces, perhaps the COVID-19 pandemic provides an opportunity for distributed leadership to be truly enacted across the primary education system. This would facilitate school leaders to "respond to rapidly changing circumstances" by enabling policies and practices to move quickly from "high-level rhetoric to implementation down through the organisation" (Brown et al., 2019, p. 470). Furthermore, the DES could also strive to provide clear guidance, along with the requisite supports as mandated by school leaders (Burke and Dempsey, 2020). Alongside the appointment of professional school managers, these proposed changes could benefit the well-being of school leaders and lead to an improved system of primary education in Ireland. A system where schools are understood as more complex and valuable to students than "getting them into seats and raising their scores" (Gottlieb and Schneider, 2020, p. 25).

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Distributed leadership

There is no clear, universally accepted definition of DL (Bennet et al., 2003; Harris, 2004; Hartley, 2007; MacBeath, 2009; Tian, Risku & Collin, 2016; Diamond & Spillane, 2016). As the international literature on DL accumulated, the “conceptual elasticity” (Hartley, 2007, 2010) and broad nature of the concept has been highlighted. Different terms have been used interchangeably with it, including; shared, team, democratic, participative and teacher leadership (Spillane, 2005; Harris, 2008a, 2013; Leithwood, Mascall & Strauss, 2009; Sun & Xia, 2018). This has resulted in confusion (Harris & Spillane, 2008) with loose definitions, and fuzzy diagnostic work making true consensus between researchers and practitioners difficult (Spillane, 2005).

There is agreement however, that the DL approach is a dramatic move away from the “command and control” (Harris, 2004, p. 15) leadership regimes of the past towards the shared collective leadership prescribed for the 21st century (Bush, 2013). Gronn (2000, p. 334) one of the original proponents of DL in education, described it in action as “a widening of the net of intelligence and resourcefulness”. Directly relating DL to schools, Spillane et al. (2004, p. 16) defined DL as a form of collective agency “incorporating the activities of many individuals in a school who work at mobilizing and guiding other teachers in the process of instructional change”. Hence, the leadership function is stretched over several individuals (Diamond & Spillane, 2016), implying an inter-dependency rather than dependency. Despite the absence of a clear definition of DL, researchers provide an array of DL benefits and suggest guidelines for implementation.

They suggest the need to consider patterns of DL and their potential impact on desired change at a local level. Unquestionably, purposeful or planned leadership distribution can impact on school performance (Harris, 2013; Leithwood, Mascall & Strauss, 2009). Many authors attest to the positive effects of DL on school improvement and student learning (Harris & Spillane, 2008; Leithwood, Mascall & Strauss, 2009; Hairon, Goh & Chua, 2015; Lárusdóttir & O’Connor, 2017; Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2020). A significant study conducted by Leithwood et al. (2008) found evidence to support the claim that school leadership has a greater influence on schools and students when it is widely distributed. That claim is even more convincing and consolidated in their recent article *Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited* (Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2020), which reviews up-to-date research evidence on the matter. Harnessing expertise from across the organisation facilitates the emergence of innovative solutions to challenges that are less likely to emerge from individual sources (Harris, 2008a).

Many studies cite the positive effects of developing DL practice on teachers’ self-efficacy, levels of morale and organisational commitment (MacBeath, 1998; Harris, 2008b; Hulpia & Devos, 2010). This evidence supports the notion that DL is compatible with caring, responsible, authentic, and respectful action on the part of leaders towards their followers, supporting the development of creativity, knowledge and skill, on their journey towards self-fulfilment (Ivtzan et al., 2013). According to Harris (2004) DL equates with magnifying human capacity. She specifies the role of formal leaders in holding all aspects of the organisation together through positive productive relationships and the creation of a common culture of expectation, collaboration and engagement. In addition,

developing constructive DL practice in schools is recognised as a sustainable leadership approach to addressing the dearth of interest in principal positions (Flood, 2011; Ritchie, 2020). It develops instead of depleting leadership potential in schools by replenishing and supporting the leadership capacity pool on a continual basis (Fink, 2011). Taking these claims on board, there is no doubt DL can prove itself to be a strategic lever in change management at all levels in education (Harris, 2013).

Nevertheless, as literature in the field of DL has grown, it has not been without its critics. Several authors have questioned the motives behind DL in practice (Fitzgerald & Gunter, 2008; Hargreaves & Fink, 2008; Hartley, 2007, 2010; Lumby, 2013). Despite seeming to espouse a caring nurturing vision of leadership, the reality can hide a dark side (Harris & DeFlaminis, 2017; Harris & Jones, 2018) of misuse or abuse of power, influence and authority (Harris, 2013). Hargreaves and Fink, (2008, p. 230) contend DL can be manipulated “as a motivational device to re-energise a dispirited profession into producing more effective and enthusiastic delivery of imposed government targets”. Many scholars support this view (Hood & Peters, 2004; Hall, 2013; King & Stevenson, 2017). Additionally, Hartley (2007) highlights the political licensing of DL in official policy narratives. Such a reality creates tensions and contradictions regarding the purpose of education and the role of relational beings within the process (Lynch, Grummell & Devine, 2012). Thus, formal leaders need to consider whether the leadership practices in operation in each context are truly lateral and distributed or whether they are merely tokenistic. Further, the practice of DL needs to be made visible and explicit (O’Donovan, 2015) in each context, to avoid suspicion, scepticism and resistance.

According to Tehart (2013) school reform cannot be accomplished against the will of the teachers. Bringing people with you rather than imposing change is the essence of effective leadership (Ruth, 2006). Hence, leadership of school reform requires formal leaders to take people through a process of adaptation, conserving what is best from history and innovating for the future, creating “next practices” by merging inputs in a solution that responds to the context (Linsky & Lawrence, 2011). O’Donovan (2015) acknowledges leadership in Irish schools is challenging, characterised by an ever expanding role-description and workload. In a climate of accountability, there is pressure on leaders “to manage yet lead, compete yet innovate” (King & Stevenson, 2017, p. 658). To compound the challenge, Lárusdóttir and O’Connor (2017, p. 423), in a study conducted in Ireland and Iceland, noted the reluctance of principals to relinquish authority, resulting in the existence of DL “strictly at the gift of the principal”. This is understandable in the Irish education system where, traditionally, very clear lines of command existed in schools (Ibid.). Flood (2011, p. 53) corroborates this view stating, “the model of leadership in most Irish schools remains largely hierarchical and atomised, with a focus on the distribution of tasks rather than responsibility”. Hall, Gunter and Bragg (2012, p. 187) contend that this type of functional task completion amounts to little more than “a contemporary delusional twist of delegation”. Delegation is not distribution (Harris, 2004, 2013), it is a form of “licensed leadership” where teachers are encouraged to exercise limited agency with little meaningful autonomy (King & Stevenson, 2017). Fink (2011, p. 679) describes DL in such circumstances as “a shiny new package” of the “same old top-down leadership model”. Such applications of DL would fall far short of the capacity building approaches to leadership advocated today (Bragg, 2012).

Historically, middle management systems were weak and teacher agency was limited in religious run voluntary secondary schools in Ireland (O'Donovan, 2015). The motivation for and view of leadership in this setting was reduced to a staging post towards senior leadership or as a channel to enact externally mandated policy (Fitzgerald & Gunter, 2008; Lárusdóttir & O'Connor, 2017; Forde et al., 2019). Hence, there remains in many situations a clear disconnect between the theory of DL in the literature and practice on the ground (Lárusdóttir & O'Connor, 2017). Mediating the strong 'volunteer' dimension of informal leadership in these settings, with the aspirations of DL and the complication of limited availability of formal positions, has received little attention in DL literature (O'Donovan, 2015). The challenge of how to implement DL remains, exacerbated by the scarcity of research in the Irish context to inform the process in said jurisdiction.

In retrospect, there is strong evidence to suggest that there is something compelling and important about DL, not least that it can be a positive channel for change releasing human potential (Graetz, 2000). Simultaneously it can bring out the best in people and in the organisation. When implemented perceptively and inclusively, with a focus on practice rather than role, DL can become a diagnostic and design instrument that enlightens, reconfigures and transforms leadership in schools (Harris & Spillane, 2008). However, despite 20 years of research in the field, there is no blueprint on how to effectively establish DL (Harris & DeFlaminis, 2017). How leadership is distributed and the difference it makes (Harris & Spillane, 2008; Harris, 2014; Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2020), remain pertinent questions and challenges in each individual situation. Day, Gronn and Salas (2006) argue that DL must be studied in its natural settings. Harris (2005) corroborates that view calling for more case-study exemplars to inform knowledge and practice, with Preedy (2016) noting the absence of research detailing the practitioner's perspectives. This study aims to contribute in a positive way to addressing that gap in practitioner knowledge, while also seeking to explore ways to improve DL practice.

Distributed leadership in the Irish school context

Distributed Leadership in the Irish school context presents many challenges. School leadership has a linear property (Flood, 2011; O'Donovan, 2015; Lárusdóttir & O'Connor, 2017) with clear demarcation of roles, responsibilities and pay scale in evidence (Harris, 2003; Lárusdóttir & O'Connor, 2017). In the words of West Burnham (2011, p. 164), schools remain "islands of hierarchy and bureaucracy", thriving on routine and the status quo (Goleman, Boyatis & McKee, 2002). Several studies question the viability of DL within the hierarchical structure of schools (Harris, 2003; Fitzgerald & Gunter, 2008), which are in existence in Ireland. Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that change is happening and we are moving inexorably towards a more distributed model of leadership in the Irish education sphere (Curtis, 2018). The development of a distributive leadership model of practice is evident and prescribed in key recent policy documentation.

As an example of such policy, *Looking at Our Schools 2016: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools* (DES, 2016), underpins the strive for excellence in all areas of school life. Under this framework those in senior leadership positions are expected to empower teachers to take on leadership roles through the effective use of a DL model (DES, 2016).

The document proposed itself as an enabler of self-reflection and improvement and not as an inflexible checklist (DES, 2016), or a 'tick-box' performance exercise as specified by Forrester (2011). A circular, *Leadership and Management in Post-Primary Schools* (DES, 2018) also stipulates that leadership be distributed throughout the school and it recognises the leadership role of every teacher within the school community. In an atmosphere of accountability, the policy documents referred to above clearly mandate action on the part of the senior management team to distribute leadership. This cannot happen on an ad hoc basis if it is to prove successful. According to Ruth (2006), the role of leadership is fundamentally about liberating people and assisting them to claim their full leadership ability, in other words bringing out the best in them.

The primacy of caring relationships with students and colleagues holds little value in the "hard world of performativity" (Smyth et al., 2000, p. 140), increasingly evident in Ireland (Ball, 2016). Bell & Stevenson (2006, p. 56) argue that education is more than the production of human capital, it is "about values, beliefs, ethics, social justice and the very nature of society now and in the future". Hargreaves and Fink (2006) remind us that moral and democratic questions about DL are the hardest ones to answer. When there is a mismatch between individual needs and the needs of the school or state, difficulties arise (King & Stevenson, 2017). To avoid such difficulties, it is time for all schools to reflect on and evaluate practice, and ask hard questions as to how leadership is nurtured, developed and deployed in each school context. Otherwise, DL has the potential to become nothing more than a delivery tool for standardized packages of government reforms and performance (Gronn, 2003; Hargreaves & Fink, 2008). In so doing it will alienate people and be perceived as little more than a "palatable way of encouraging gullible teachers to do more work" (Lárusdóttir & O'Connor, 2017, p. 427). There is no doubt that organisations benefit and thrive on the labour and commitment of their employees. However, leadership viewed from this angle alone supports a mercenary notion of practice, where people become mere pawns in meeting the workload of bureaucracy, performativity and accountability (Ball, 2003).

Undoubtedly, each school context is unique and at various points on the journey of developing leadership capacity. One size does not fit all (Spillane, 2006; Dimmock, 2012). DL demands a "reconfiguration of leadership as practice rather than role" (Harris & Spillane, 2008, 32). Harris (2013) advises the success of DL is dependent on the intentions behind it and how leadership is distributed in each situation. The aim of this study is, therefore, to explore the factors that prevent and facilitate teachers' involvement in DL.

Methodology

Participants

A total of 16 teachers participated in the current study, 11 females and five males. They were equally distributed across two age groups with eight teachers aged 20-39 and a further eight aged 40+. All participants had more than one year of service completed in their respective schools. More specifically, four participants had less than five years, three had 5-10 years, five had 11-20 years, two had 21-30 years and two had 31-40 years of service

completed at the time of the study. All participants worked in the same secondary school located in midlands. Convenience sampling was used to source them.

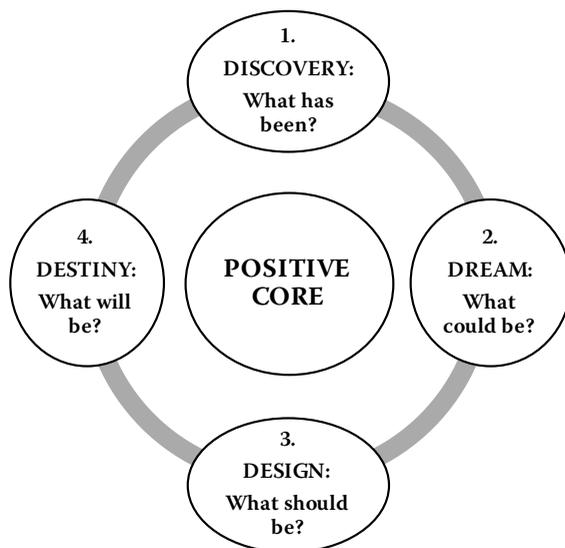
Data collection and analysis

The study followed the ethical guidelines of and was approved by the Faculty of Social Science at Maynooth University. Three focus groups were created of the teachers who had agreed to participate in the study. Each focus group was made up of five to six participants. The focus group interviews took place in the school in a quiet, welcoming and hospitable meeting room environment. The interviews were audio-recorded and each was approximately one hour and 50 minutes in duration.

Appreciative inquiry (AI) was used to collect data. AI is an inclusive methodology and philosophy, with a constructive, positive, life-affirming approach to change that "liberates the power of inquiry, builds relationships and unleashes learning" (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, p. 37). The 'appreciating' component of an AI approach helps to create a positive mind-set, valuing, affirming and building on strengths, while the "inquiring" component involves asking questions with a positive core to explore, study, discover and build on new possibilities (Collington & Fook, 2016). In so doing, AI facilitates an effective way of exploring a positive school leadership approach to change that has transformational potential (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Hart, Conklin & Allen, 2008). It is a qualitative method that aims to generate new knowledge by identifying the best of 'what is' and helping to ignite the collective imagination as to 'what might be' (Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2003).

Each application of AI is different as it is designed to recognise where an organisation is at with a particular challenge and guide it through the 4-D (discover, dream, design, destiny) cycle of inquiry as illustrated in Figure 1. An affirmative topic choice is crucially important to the process as it dictates the direction of the interview and change process that follows (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). The discovery phase is guided by a purposefully affirmative topic and the conversations that it inspires. Participants are encouraged to share narratives and personal experiences (Fifolt & Stowe, 2011) that confirm, appreciate and acknowledge the positives in the past and present situation (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). The dream phase that follows is both practical and generative, amplifying the positives and collectively creating images of what organisational life at its best could look like (Ibid.). The design phase invites people to challenge the status quo and to "craft possibility propositions" that would make the realisation of the dream a reality (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, p. 29). The destiny phase focuses attention on action and the formulation of definite pathways forward at a personal and organisational level (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). The researcher facilitated the enactment of each of these phases during the focus groups sessions.

Figure 1: Appreciative Inquiry 4-D Cycle (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005).

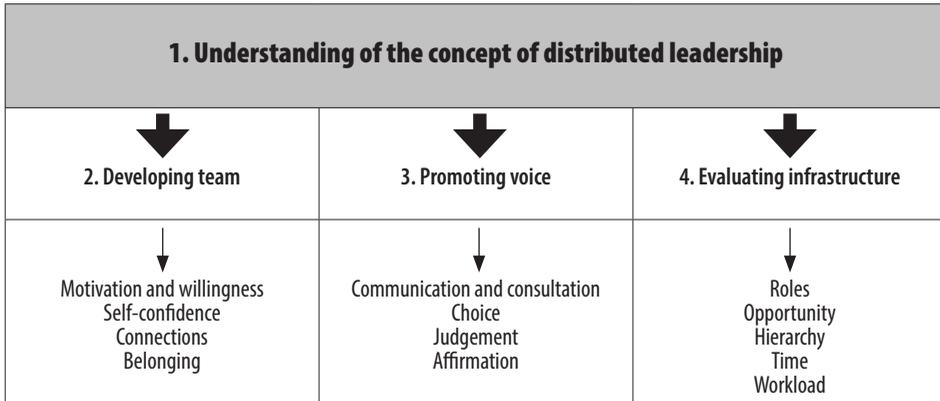


Braun and Clarke’s (2006) reflexive six phase process of thematic analysis was chosen to analyse and interpret patterns of meaning within the qualitative data collected through the aforementioned focus group approach. This method was flexible enough to facilitate the analysis of the qualitative data collected across the three focus group sessions. It allowed for coding of the full data set to precede theme development, thereby giving “priority to the participants’ lived experience, views and perspectives” (Braun & Clarke, 2017, p. 297). In so doing it helped reduce researcher subjectivity and was in keeping with the aims of the research. The identification of themes was not a passive process, it actively engaged the researcher in coding the data, collating and connecting ideas, reflecting and making judgements on what themes were identified. The importance of a theme is dependent on whether it captures something significant in relation to the overall research question(s), rather than on prevalence or quantifiable measures (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In reporting the findings, final themes require clear definition accompanied by “vivid examples” from the data that provide a strong link to the research question(s) (Ibid., p. 93). This study took an inductive or ‘bottom up’ approach to coding and analysing the raw data. Therefore, the semantic (surface meaning) codes identified were strongly linked to the data itself and were not made to fit into any pre-existing coding frame (Patton, 1990). The findings were used to inform future DL practice development in the school.

Results

Four main themes emerged from the analysis: (1) understanding the concept of DL; (2) developing team; (3) promoting voice; and (4) evaluating infrastructure (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Final thematic map



Understandings of the concept of distributed leadership

There was a lack of understanding of the concept of DL amongst participants, which was found to prevent them from engaging with it. Understanding of the concept of DL was viewed through the traditional hierarchical lens and was negative in focus.

The challenge with DL in terms of the dream is cracking the mindset of DL as a way of distributing leadership from the leaders who are being paid to lead and getting people who are not being paid to do their job for them (Interview 3, P13).

This misinterpretation of DL as the abdication of responsibility by people in formal roles was echoed by other respondents throughout the focus group sessions. Participants indicated this view was widespread within the school community. The lack of understanding of DL and the exasperation at the pace of change was expressed by another participant in the following way: I've only really learned what exactly DL is by having this discussion ... and I think that the general view for a lot of people is that it's only more bloody things to do now (Interview 3, P16). Thus, there was a sense that DL was looked on by the teachers as additional work outside the classroom being foisted on teachers.

Developing team

Participants identified the need for team development in order to best prepare them for implementing DL in their schools. The motivating factors divulged for taking on leadership positions included “making a positive difference”, “being part of a successful operation”, the “betterment of the school”, the “creation of wonderful memories”, and the desire “to see change happen”. While money, accolade and promotion were identified by participants too, education was identified as a field that had many more intrinsic rewards than private sector work. This can be appreciated from the foregoing extracts in which the main motivating factor for volunteering for leadership activity was for the students. The benefits of collaborative aspects of DL were also highlighted in terms of reducing stress

for teachers and enhancing motivation as exemplified by the statements: “You can remove stress big time if there’s much more of a willingness to collaborate and be helpful towards each other and share the resources.” (Interview 3, P16), and “When everyone is rowing the boat together, it definitely motivates people more” (Interview 3, P15). Therefore, helping teams understand benefits that can accrue from participating in DL may help them engage more effectively in it in their schools.

Lack of confidence and negative self-talk were identified across all interviews as factors holding people back from collaborative endeavours of all kinds. The following quote captures these concerns most vividly:

I do feel that there’s that level of not feeling good enough. Everybody has wonderful strengths in so many areas, but it is a confidence thing. That’s a big part in collaboration, is the fear. People do fear that they have imposter syndrome that they’re not really good at what they’re doing and they don’t feel comfortable (Interview 3, P12).

Several suggestions were made as to how this issue could be addressed: Starting from a strengths base was seen as a way of providing ‘building blocks’ that could be extended through experience and further training as confidence grew. The role of supportive, encouraging and empathic colleagues was cited as central to that growth.

Promoting voice

Empowering people to find their voice at every level of the school community was a theme that percolated throughout each focus group interview as a component for encouraging teachers’ involvement in DL. The diversity of voice within the school community was recognised and the need to explore avenues to support the release of the quiet as well as the strong voice. In this context, the willingness to communicate and consult in every direction, upwards, downwards and laterally, within the organisation was recognised by participants as inherent in adapting to the changes required to accommodate DL practice in the school. The extract that follows expresses this point: “Time to talk to the whole staff about decision making, I think is huge. If we’re looking to change something or do something, it’s important that everyone feels involved and is feeding into that decision” (Interview 1, P5).

An identified concern that permeated all interview discussions was the worry about other peoples’ reactions to individual actions. The fear of peer judgement stunted potential for engagement in leadership. For example, one teacher described the following situation: “Just being in the door, let’s just say if a post came up and no one else was going for it, I still wouldn’t go for it” (Interview 1, P3). Therefore, a teacher feels uncomfortable to engage in DL despite an opportunity arising. Another articulated the desired future as follows: “I think the dream would be having an environment that is conducive to everyone working at whatever level above the requirement at which they wish to work and feeling supported not blocked or [having] motives questioned” (Interview 3, P14). A further clearly articulated aspect of developing voice was the voice of affirmation and appreciation. People need their

work and effort to be noticed, affirmed and encouraged. As one participant explained: "There's nothing that undermines the leadership like not being appreciated or you know, not being acknowledged for what you're doing" (Interview 1, P1). Thus, there was consensus that when people feel valued they give their best, their confidence grows and they are more likely to repeat the effort. Praise, affirmation and encouragement were seen as antidotes to negativity within the organisation. Therefore, taking the time to notice and acknowledge the work and effort of colleagues was identified as a key ingredient in cultivating leadership capacity and DL.

Evaluating organisational infrastructure

According to the participants, for teachers to be more involved in DL, the organisational infrastructure would need to be developed. Traditionally leadership in the voluntary second level school was associated with the post of responsibility and senior management structures alone. Teacher leadership outside these parameters was not recognised or remunerated. The austerity measures, cutbacks and moratorium on posts of responsibility over the past decade occurred simultaneously with massive curricular changes with additional time demands being foisted on teachers. The concept of DL presumes equality and fairness for all concerned, yet involvement in this arena raised concerns in practice. For example, these included:

"There are so few posts that there are not enough for all of us" (Interview 1, P2), and "There should be more posts or maybe roles that could be rotated so that everyone would get one at some stage if they want one. At the moment once a post is gone, it's out of your reach, then you lose interest" (Interview 1, P3).

These comments indicate the lack of movement and opportunity felt by many teachers within the traditional hierarchical structures evident in schools and their voiced need to look at alternative ways to engage and energise their leadership capabilities with appropriate remuneration.

Central also to the concept of developing DL practice in the school was the conscious effort to flatten hierarchical structures to the greatest extent possible. The middle and senior leadership and management structures were recognised as obvious manifestations of these structures but outside participants' control to change. However, hierarchy evident in attitude and behaviour was recognised as problematic. This is illustrated by one teacher who stated, "When I first came, I felt muzzled. I was told that junior teachers or trainee teachers don't go into the staff room" (Interview 3, G5) and another whom in the context of enhancing DL commented, "There needs to be a conscious removal of almost subliminal hierarchical structures" (Interview 3, G4).

These examples show how participants experienced hierarchy in subtle ways, where people were initiated into patterns of behaviour, a 'pecking order' that perpetuated itself and became part of the status quo. Participants identified these unquestioned routines and patterns of behaviour as being in direct conflict with any potential for the development of DL capacity.

Directly connected to the issue of time was that of workload. Participants spoke of feeling swamped and panicky with the pace of change including coping with the demands of the new Junior Cycle curriculum. The question, one that could be considered rhetorical, was asked: “Who is going to jump into a distributed leadership model if they think it is going to exacerbate their workload?” (Interview 2, P11).

Discussion

The current study explored the perceptions of teachers in Ireland in relation to what is preventing them from engaging in a DL process and what changes can be made to facilitate their involvement in same to a greater extent. One of the main factors that prevented participants from engaging in DL was their difficulty in understanding the concept of DL, which can be explained by the hierarchical nature of leadership in Irish schools (O'Donovan, 2015; West-Burnham, 2011) that equates leadership with role, status and paid position. This may lead to the negative perception of DL when teachers view it as abdication of leaders' responsibilities. The findings indicate that the meaning of DL must be negotiated internally in this school context, making the concept of DL more “visible and explicit” (O'Donovan, 2015, p. 263) if it is to take hold. In order to engage with change, teachers need to understand the need for it (Harris, 2013; King & Stevenson, 2017; Sugrue, 2011). Otherwise efforts to progress DL will meet with suspicion, scepticism and resistance, thereby preventing the potential for constructive, creative and life-giving changes to leadership configurations in schools (O'Donovan, 2015).

The current study also showed the urgent need for school leaders to encourage the development of positive interpersonal relationships, communication, consultation, partnership, transparency and respect, and to cultivate a sense of worth as integral to the development of teacher leadership of any sort (Grant, 2006). Positive informal interrelationships and interconnections between people can cut across formal structures creating web-like communities (Capra, 2002) of flourishing people that are highly involved and absorbed in their work (Gaffney, 2011; Gray, Garvey & Lane, 2016). Everything and everyone in a web is connected in some way and what happens in one part affects all the other parts (Hargreaves & Fink, 2008). Working together to enhance what goes on in schools through authentic DL practice presupposes the development of a learning community that strives to maximise the achievement capacity of every member of the organisation (Gronn, 2000).

The findings of this study raised the issue of peer judgement as a significant factor in inhibiting the development of leadership potential. This was felt quite intensely by some respondents. The experience and fear of being ostracised by teaching colleagues was evident (Grenda & Hackman, 2014). Developing a school culture that is safe and forgiving (Dimmock, 2012), which publicly asserts the importance of treating everyone with respect (Ruth, 2006), giving each person the benefit of the doubt (Gaffney, 2011), allowing for risk taking and acknowledging that it is not possible to lead without mistakes (Ruth, 2006) is critical to building DL capacity.

The crucial role senior management play in recognising, affirming, supporting and encouraging the efforts of teachers was emphatically expressed by participants. Ruth (2006) posits that praise needs to be thoughtful if it is to be effective, catching people doing things right and acknowledging it. Expressing confidence in people's ability to lead, actively modelling good leadership, sharing information on how to lead, creating conditions for people to experiment and learn, and lavishing praise and appreciation of effort (Ibid.) are recommended actions for developing leadership capability and capacity in this context.

There was unanimity among participants in the call for time to meet, plan and develop DL capacity. Wenner and Campbell's (2017) review of the research highlights the pressures on teachers to balance teacher leadership roles with classroom teaching. This challenge was clearly echoed in the data collected. Finding time is not an issue unique to the setting in question. It is a persistent challenge in the overburdened school environment visible today (Sugrue, 2011). Strong and effective infrastructures are required for school improvement (McKinsey, 2007) and they do not materialise without appropriate allocation of the resource of time.

In summary, the current study provides a theoretically informed perspective based on empirical evidence that sheds light on key factors that help and hinder the introduction of DL into schools in Ireland. It highlights the need for leaders to clarify the role that DL plays in schools and take a more systematic approach to implementing it. Further research is required to generalise the findings and expand on the implications highlighted, including training for schools in regard to actualising DL, especially given it is such a fundamental part of the prominent *Looking at Our Schools* (DES, 2016) policy document in Ireland.

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- Semi-structured interviews with a retired DE inspector, principals, deputy and assistant principals and teachers.

The online questionnaire was designed by the researcher for the purpose of this research only. A link to the online questionnaire was sent to 60 schools in May 2019. Principals were asked to complete the questionnaire and to distribute it to the rest of the staff. A total of 100 responses to the questionnaire was received from 53 of these schools.

The subjects for the interviews were a retired inspector and 18 primary school teachers. The 18 teachers consisted of six senior management, six MLM and six non-post holders. The interviews were conducted from January to March 2020. Pragmatism is the philosophical worldview proposed in this mixed-method research.

Background to the study

The DE has moved strongly in recent years to redefine MLM from being management only to being leaders also and expecting such staff to become part of a distributed leadership structure. The subject of this research is the distributed leadership role defined for MLM with reference to School Self-Evaluation (SSE).

Leadership in education

The *Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) 2013*, documents policy recommendations to improve school leadership. The research indicates room for improvement in areas such as teacher collaboration and instructional and distributed leadership. Similarly, *TALIS (2018)* provides policy recommendations to help strengthen the professionalisation of teaching careers regarding collaborative teamwork, autonomous decision making and leadership practices.

'Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn in school' (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 5). Bolden (2011) tells us there seems to be a steady increase in the popularity of distributed leadership among policy makers and practitioners. The importance of 'multiple actors' in leadership has been acknowledged by Spillane (2005). Distributed leadership is as Spillane and Diamond (2007, p. 7) describe about 'the many rather than the few'. Another advocate Harris (2004) acknowledges that it is no longer possible for heads to lead all aspects of their schools. Harris (2013, p. 54) points out that distributed leadership embodies both formal and informal leadership which she says are not separate or opposite. In writing about leadership during the recent pandemic, Azorín, Harris and Jones (2020) tell us how "distributed leadership has become the default leadership response in this current crisis." Hargreaves, Boyle, and Harris (2014) suggest, as regarding leading from the middle, that leadership depends on us all being leaders in some way or another.

A study by Lárusdóttir and O'Connor (2017) found a disconnect between distributed leadership theory as outlined in the literature and MLM practice as currently experienced in Ireland and Iceland. Although they found a form of distributed leadership existing in both contexts, it was strictly at the gift of the principal. De Nobile (2018) maintains while there has been considerable research activity in the area of middle management or leadership since the late 1990s, the concept remains under-theorised, and ambiguities persist in relation to who middle managers or middle leaders are and what they do.

Research in two Australian schools by Lipscomb, Tindall-Ford and Grootenboer (2019) tell us that middle leaders find themselves in the unique but complex position where they have an influence on both executive leadership and teachers within the school organisation. Their research showed that if middle leaders were to make a difference in influencing change at local level, they needed the support of executive leadership. Rönnerman, Grootenboer and Groves (2017) argue that it is 'middle leaders' who are the critical professionals for developing quality in education.

The inspectorate of the DE adopts a dual system of both external and internal evaluations. The role of inspection is concerned with the quality of education and standards. The role of self-evaluation is concerned with school improvement. They are 'complementary' processes. The two main methods of inspection and evaluation in Ireland in primary schools are (a) external inspection (whole school evaluation) and (b) internal evaluation (SSE).

School Self-Evaluation (SSE)

The DE defines SSE as:

... a collaborative, inclusive, reflective process of internal school review. During school self-evaluation the principal, deputy principal and teachers, under the direction of the board of management and the patron and in consultation with parents and pupils, engage in reflective enquiry on the work of the school. It is an evidence-based approach which involves gathering evidence from a range of sources and making judgements with a view to bringing about improvements in pupils' learning (DE, 2016, p. 10).

Improvement is central to SSE which MacBeath (2008, p. 398) defines as follows:

Improvement takes place when learning is centre stage, when there is a learning culture in a school and when heads and senior leadership team are lead learners. It is in the process of building such a learning culture that self-evaluation takes root and external review, or inspection, plays a valuable supportive and challenging role.

According to the DE, SSE '... gives teachers and schools the opportunity to tell their own story' (2012, p. 8). SSE was introduced into Ireland in 2004, though in reality, it is only since 2011 that it is operating in any significant way in schools. SSE was a natural progression from school development planning which was introduced by the Department in 1999.

Methodology

This mixed-method research with its pluralistic strategies based on real-world practice, situates me within the pragmatist philosophical worldview. The research design is an exploratory sequential mixed method.

Table 1a: Exploratory sequential method used for this research

	Part 1	Part 2	Part 3
Overall project Objective The role and impact of MLM on the implementation of SSE in primary schools in the ROI	MM QUAL DA of three key policy documents Stand-alone results + Informs →	MM QUAN Online questionnaire Stand-alone results + Informs →	MM QUAL Semi-structured Interviews Stand alone results

The three methods used in the research are:

1. Documentary analysis of the three key DE policy documents
2. Online questionnaire
3. Semi-structured interviews

This method also involved triangulation, i.e., the use of more than one source of data so that a finding may be cross-checked and thus increased the validity of the results.

Documentary coding, selection, and analysis

The two types of qualitative data in this study are the three policy documents and the interviews. A documentary analysis was manually carried out of the documents using Bowe, Ball and Gold’s (1992) policy analysis framework. The stages of their policy cycle are The Context of Influence, The Context of Text Production and The Context of Practice. Ball (1994) later added The Context of Outcomes and The Context of Political Strategies.

Questionnaire development, distribution and analysis

The quantitative method used in the research was a survey. Creswell (2013, p.155) informs us that ‘a survey design provides a quantitative or numeric description of trends or opinions of a population by studying a sample of that population.’ A stratified convenience sample was selected for this research. The actual survey instrument used was the online questionnaire. A user-friendly questionnaire was designed using Google Forms. Follow-up semi-structured interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis either face-to-face or by telephone. Eighteen teachers and a retired inspector were interviewed. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2013) assert that researchers can ‘hand pick’ cases for the sample on the basis of their judgement, typicality or possession of the particular characteristics being sought. A purposive sampling strategy was used whereby the researcher identified suitable people for interview. The interviewees were selected based on the profiles required and having completed the questionnaires. It was decided to interview a sample of teachers from large, medium-sized, and small schools.

In total, 19 individuals were interviewed: six in senior leadership and management, six in middle leadership and management, six other teachers and one inspector. The schools from which the interviewees were drawn were evenly divided between six large schools, six medium schools and six small schools. For the purposes of this research, a large school was considered to be a school that had over 18 teachers, a medium school had

between nine and 17 teachers and a small school had between two and eight teachers. The researcher asserts that 19 was a sufficient number of interviewees to select due to the time constraints and to what Creswell (2013) and Gentles *et al.* (2015) refer to as ‘saturation’. After a number of interviews the same information is repeated and any new knowledge is exhausted. Creswell (2103) says about the need to ‘winnow’ the data which means focusing on some areas to elicit the data that is required.

Documentary analysis

In this research, the inception to implementation of three key policy documents *LAOS 2016*, *SSE 2016* and *Circular 0063/2017* is examined through the lens of Bowe, Ball and Gold’s (1992) policy cycle. These documents are the seminal policy statements issued by the DE concerning the inspection and evaluation rubric of the inspectorate (*LAOS 2016*), the process of self-evaluation to be conducted by schools (*SSE 2016*) and the role to be played in both by school senior and middle leadership and management (*Circular 0063/2017*). The relationship between *LAOS 2016* and *SSE 2016* is important to note. The former is a complete statement of school evaluation policy and practice including inspection and *SSE* while the latter is a detailed template for the conduct of self-evaluation by schools. In that sense the latter might be perceived as a subset of the former.

The context of influence

According to the OECD (2007, p. 9) ‘effective school leadership is essential to improve the efficiency and equity of schooling’. Academics such as McNamara and O’Hara (2004) and Sugrue (2006) have traced the evolution of performativity and accountability policy and practice in Ireland. The three documents are influenced by both academic research and the economic climate at the time. I will look at the context of text production for each of the documents.

The context of text production

Looking At Our Schools: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools 2016 (LAOS 2016) is a 30-page document consisting of two dimensions – teaching and learning and leadership and management, the latter being the focus of this research. Each dimension has four domains with each domain having four standards. *LAOS 2016* is addressed to the managerial bodies. Its language is plain, concise and clear. The four domains are outlined as follows:

Diagram 1.1 (DES 2016)

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT	Leading learning and teaching	<p>School leaders: promote a culture of improvement, collaboration, innovation and creativity in learning, teaching and assessment</p> <p>foster a commitment to inclusion, equality of opportunity and the holistic development of each pupil</p> <p>manage the planning and implementation of the curriculum</p> <p>foster teacher professional development that enriches teachers' and pupils' learning</p>
	Managing the organisation	<p>School leaders: establish an orderly, secure and healthy learning environment, and maintain it through effective communication</p> <p>manage the school's human, physical and financial resources so as to create and maintain a learning organisation</p> <p>manage challenging and complex situations in a manner that demonstrates equality, fairness and justice</p> <p>develop and implement a system to promote professional responsibility and accountability</p>
	Leading school development	<p>School leaders: communicate the guiding vision for the school and lead its realisation</p> <p>lead the school's engagement in a continuous process of self-evaluation</p> <p>build and maintain relationships with parents, with other schools, and with the wider community</p> <p>manage, lead and mediate change to respond to the evolving needs of the school and to change in education</p>
	Developing leadership capacity	<p>School leaders: Critique their practice as leaders and develop their understanding of effective and sustainable leadership</p> <p>Empower staff to take on and carry out leadership roles</p> <p>Promote and facilitate the development of pupil voice, pupil participation, and pupil leadership</p> <p>build professional networks with other school leaders</p>

In looking at the statements for the effective and the highly effective practice we can see how they differ in their terminology. For ease of reading and emphasis the differences have been emboldened by the inspectorate in the statements of practice for the highly effective practice. The language used for the statements of practice for the highly effective schools is more descriptive and powerful, based more on practice rather than aspiration. They are concerned about evidence rather than theory. The statements of practice for the effective practice acknowledges how the school leaders are, for example “aware” (p. 25), “recognise” and “ensure” (p. 26) whereas in highly effective practice terminology such as “inspire” (p. 27), “identify” and “empower” is used (p. 29).

School Self-Evaluation Guidelines 2016 (SSE 2016)

The context of text production

SSE (DE, p. 6) “empowers a school community to identify and affirm good practice, and to identify and take action on areas that merit improvement. School self-evaluation is primarily about schools taking ownership of their own development and improvement.” In *SSE 2016* schools are being asked to continue to implement the SSE process (p. 6). *Circular 0039/2012* required all schools to engage in the SSE process and set out its purpose and rationale. Terminology such as (p. 6) “reflective enquiry”, “action planning”, “informed by evidence” and “unique context” are used.

Circular Letter 0063/2017 Leadership and Management in Primary Schools (Circular 0063/2017)

The context of text production

New terminology is introduced in *Circular 0063/2017* such as assistant principals replacing special duties teachers. The assistant principal must now play a bigger role in the leadership aspect of school work. *Circular 0063/2017* is a 32-page letter addressed to all managerial authorities and teaching staff in recognised primary schools. The circular has a clinical, technical, legal style of language.

The context of practice

Producing these three key documents is one thing but having them read and ‘enacted’ by their prospective ‘actors’ is another. Although *SSE 2016* as a policy document refers to the four-year period of 2016-2020, it was only really implemented in schools between March 2018 and March 2020, as the schools closed on 13 March 2020 due to the Coronavirus. On 17 June 2020 the DE published *Circular 0040/2020* in relation to SSE for 2020/21. The circular provided that there would be no new or additional SSE requirements on schools in the 2020/21 school year. SSE could be used to ensure the safe return to school and to complete evaluations from the previous year.

With the introduction of *Circular 0063/2017* we can see that assistant principals have a role to play in leading SSE. *Circular 0063/2017* introduces a distributed view of leadership into what would have been previously a hierarchical view. Cutbacks to posts of responsibility have impacted on the work in schools. The context of practice with regard to *Circular 0063/2017* is hugely affected by these measures.

Online questionnaires

A link to an online questionnaire was sent to 60 schools. A total of 100 responses was received from 53 of these schools. A sample is any subsection of the population of individuals on whom information is obtained. Snowballing is a non-probability sample in which the researcher makes initial contact with a small group of people who are relevant to the research topic and then uses these to establish contact with others. For the

purpose of this study a stratified snowballing convenience sample was obtained. Schools were classified again as large, medium, and small, and for the purposes of the online questionnaire, 60 schools were contacted: 10 large, 10 medium and 40 small schools. The table below summarises the number of MLM posts of responsibility in a typical school:

Table 1b: Number of MLM posts of responsibility in a typical school

	Administrative principal	Teaching principal	Deputy principal	Assistant principal I	Assistant principal II	Non post holders
Large school	1	-	1	2	3	11+
Medium school	1	-	1	1	2	4-12
Small school	-	1	1	-	1	0-6

The sample chosen endeavoured to reflect the make-up of the primary schools, in terms of size and therefore in the number of teachers holding different levels of responsibility. However, while there was a good level of response from the different ranks of teachers, it does not reflect fully the national percentages in each category. A pilot questionnaire was conducted with a sample of 10 primary school teachers.

Table 1c: The percentage of responses from each of the categories

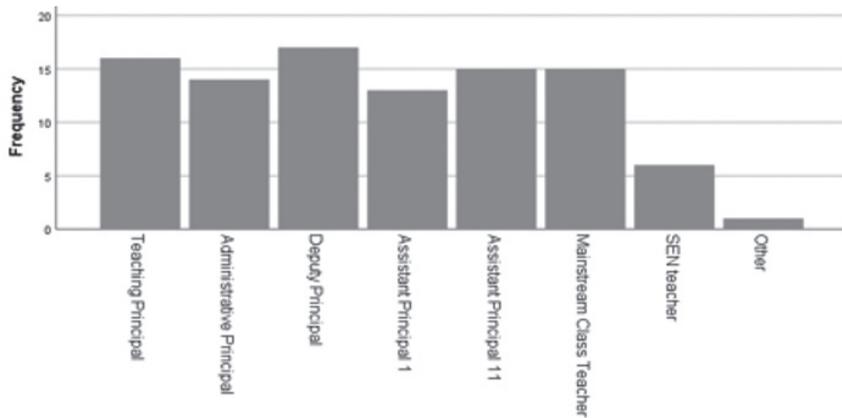
Status	% of total of responses
Administrative principal	14%
Teaching principal	16%
Deputy principal	19%
Assistant principal I	14%
Assistant principal II	15%
Non-post holder	22%

Results of the online questionnaire

Background information

There was an even spread of respondents from the various backgrounds. This representation is not indicative of the profile representation nationwide as two-thirds of principals are teaching principals and only 25% of teachers hold a post of responsibility.

Diagram 1.2: What is your role in the primary school?

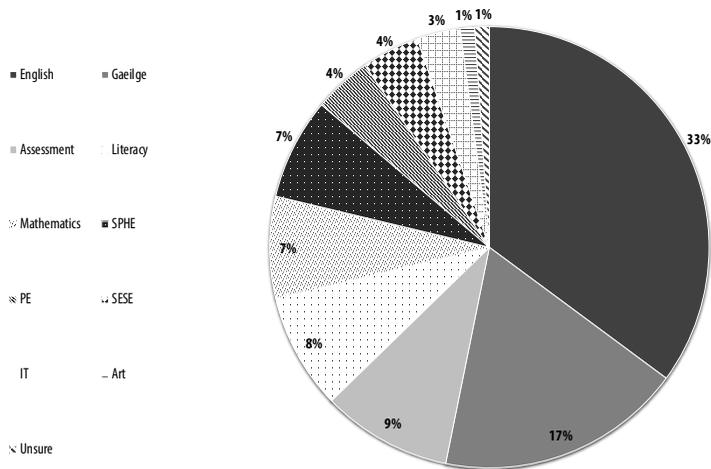


SSE in practice

In total, 93% of the 100 respondents reported their schools were engaging with SSE.

There was a surprisingly variation in the areas being evaluated, as outlined in diagram 1.3 below:

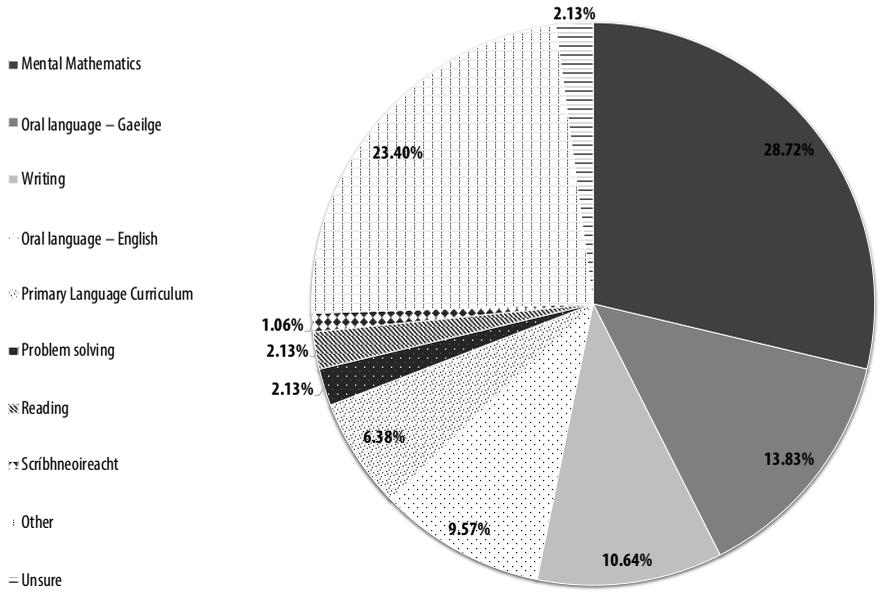
Diagram 1.3: If your school is engaging with SSE this year please state which area you are looking at.



The results showed that 33% of respondents chose English, 17% Gaeilge and 8% the new Primary Language Curriculum which means that 58% chose literacy. In addition, 7% chose maths meaning a total of 65% chose literacy or numeracy as recommended by the DE. This was supplemented by 9% who chose assessment which links into literacy and numeracy, bringing the total to 74%. Examples of non-curricular aspects are collaboration and teacher planning and preparation.

Diagram 1.4 illustrates the aspects of subjects chosen for evaluation, according to 77 respondents:

Diagram 1.4: *If you have chosen a curricular area for evaluation please state which aspect of it you are examining*



When asked how the curricular area for evaluation was chosen, 93 respondents gave a variety of reasons, with “at a staff meeting” being the most popular at almost 50%. An example of the involvement of MLM in the SSE process is:

Subject post holders and SSE team met to list many suggestions, all teachers were invited to make suggestions to the post holders prior to this initial meeting. The list of suggestions was presented to the post holders at a staff meeting, was discussed and debated and two from each area were selected by vote (Online Questionnaire Respondent).

For 94 respondents the area or aspect for evaluation was decided by the staff (39%) or the principal, (35%). It is interesting to note the number of committees involved, either led by a post holder or another teacher, or the establishment of a specific SSE team for example ‘staff and active schools committee’ and ‘all teaching staff led by post holders.’

According to 92 respondents, a variety of data, both of a qualitative and quantitative nature, was collected using numerous instruments such as questionnaires and teacher observation. Others acknowledged the time involved in collecting data such as “Lots and lots of surveys that took up class teaching time and personal time from teachers who had to correct them and file them”. The most common methods used to collect the data according to 91 respondents were: staff meeting (45%) or the principal (35%).

SSE data

Almost two-thirds considered the data collected useful or very useful to the SSE process giving a strong endorsement from the schools of the value of the SSE process. A variety of data was collected by teachers in the SSE process with questionnaires being the most popular method of data collection, at almost 60%.

SSE teacher involvement

A majority of 82% agreed that SSE was part of a teacher's responsibility. There was also strong agreement that SSE was a very time-consuming process, with almost 70% of 97 respondents considering it time-consuming or very time-consuming. Almost half of 93 respondents said they got time to engage with SSE during 'Croke Park' time, with over a quarter saying that they engaged with it during personal time. Staff meetings accounted for 12.2% of the time, 4.88% reported in-class time and 2.44% was in-school management meetings and 4.88% was other.

Reporting SSE

Over a third of the 98 respondents said they had reported the SSE findings to parents and the wider school community with another third saying they hadn't done so yet but would do. The online questionnaire was conducted in the last three months of the school year.

Supports for SSE

Less than a half of the 97 respondents thought the *SSE 2016* document was useful or very useful to implementing SSE and less than half of the 97 respondents also thought the *LAOS 2016* document was useful or very useful. In relation to employing the services of an outside agency such as the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), just over half of the 97 respondents noted that their school did not employ the services of an outside agency, while almost half of the 88 respondents said the use of an outside agency in supporting their engagement with SSE was beneficial or very beneficial. The main role played by an outside agency in supporting the implementation of SSE was, according to almost 30% of the respondents, "advisory". Similarly, the main role an outside agency should play, according to 71 respondents, was mostly advisory and the sharing of expertise.

Over half of 89 respondents thought their schools should engage the use of an outside agency, and over half of the 86 respondents would recommend the use of an outside agency to another school. Over a quarter of the 75 respondents would like to avail of the services of an outside agency once a year.

Table 1d: Examples of some of the 62 responses are indicated in the following table

Advisory	"Advisory – shared ideas regarding good practice and resources," "PDST helped us to interpret the task in hand more clearly and how to best proceed," "Bring ideas" and "They answer questions and help with planning and structure".
Guidance	"Support sought from the inspectorate and the PDST, which gave valuable and manageable guidance," "Enable us to focus and proceed with confidence" and "Probably give guidance on how to approach the implementation".
Support	"PDST gave us good support" and "We had support in the area of the new English Curriculum and felt more confused at the end than beforehand."
Expertise	"Demonstrating gymnastics lesson to teachers", "Informed us of ways to improve this subject area", "Sharing expertise but limited help due to our choice of area for development" and "I imagine an outside agency would be a super help in this area. They have the knowledge and skills we certainly don't have in this area."
Paperwork	"They will provide templates but don't assist in school's own paperwork".
Other	"Involved all staff in a collaborative way managed workload very efficiently while recognising the burden of work required", "They helped shape our actions." and "None. They inspected us only."

SSE and accountability

The main reason offered by over two-thirds of the 92 respondents for engagement with SSE, was compliance. Almost a quarter reported it was to do with reasons associated with collective responsibility. A variety of reasons was put forward regarding the school's engagement with SSE by 92 respondents some of which were for "accountability" reasons only, some saw it as part of their "collective responsibility" and others saw it as "mixture" of the two. Some felt "unsure as was not involved in decision making". Examples of reasons of compliance were "obligatory, DE requirement, external recommendation, it's part of our job, told to!" An example of a reason of collective responsibility was "to see what we do well and what we need to do better, desire to improve accuracy in oral Irish, a way of progressing".

Half of the the 98 respondents reported that they thought their school engaged with SSE for accountability reasons only. Almost one-third didn't think so and almost one-fifth were unsure.

Accountability in this question referred to compliance as a separate question related to the school taking ownership of SSE. Over half of the 98 respondents reported their schools took ownership of SSE to a large or very large extent.

The impact of SSE in schools

Almost half of the 98 respondents thought SSE was beneficial in bringing about a positive change in their schools. This was achieved, according to 58 respondents, by improved focus, with over one-third saying, "it forced us to focus on areas that we feel need improvement." One-fifth reported collaboration as bringing about a positive change saying it "promoted staff reflection and discussion, helped us to identify strengths and weaknesses". Others said there was an improvement in teaching and learning such as "the time spent on SSE

is beneficial to the teaching and learning in our school". A variety of responses showed different opinions such as "reflection is always beneficial, as it leads to improvement". There was a relatively small number of sceptical responses such as "no, it's cosmetic":

I think there is a small number of staff who work on the SSE paperwork, and it is discussed with the whole school at brief meetings, however I think SSE is only beneficial when a whole school is fully committed to engaging in making changes across the board (Online Questionnaire respondent).

Over three-quarters of the 98 respondents reported that their engagement with SSE enabled their school to identify its 'strengths' in learning and teaching. Over three-quarters of the 97 respondents reported that their engagement with SSE enabled their school to identify its 'weaknesses' in learning and teaching.

Over half of the 98 respondents reported that the process of SSE helped their school regarding external school inspection. This was elaborated on as 58 respondents pointed to evidence and improvement as the two primary ways in which SSE helped with external school inspection. Almost a quarter rated evidence, and one-fifth rated improvement, while other reasons given were ownership, collaboration, focus, paperwork, and transparency.

One response regarding evidence was "data and evidence collection benefits the inspector by providing more than the one-day snap-shot of school life". Another regarding improvement was "the school is working together as a whole to improve an identified area of need within the school". A combination of evidence and improvement was acknowledged too: "we feel that this will inform our whole school planning and our school improvement plan which we expect the inspectorate to look for when they visit."

A sense of ownership was also acknowledged, "SSE made staff more aware of what our aims are in teaching and learning; it also instilled a sense of ownership and confidence amongst staff for the work that we do." An example regarding compliance is "inspectors are keen on SSE so are happy that we are doing it!"

SSE – possible improvements

Respondents were asked to consider what might improve the SSE process. The main feedback from the 90 respondents focussed on more time (11%) and less paperwork (9%). More support for professional development was recommended also. Over half of 95 respondents considered the purpose of SSE to be improving teaching and learning. The DE, as mentioned earlier, states that it does not wish the SSE process to be paper driven. A two or three-page report is considered ample. The feedback from the teachers indicate there is a lot of paperwork involved. Time is a factor too. 'Croke Park' hours are the main time used for teachers for conducting SSE, followed by teachers' own personal time but 'Croke Park' time can't be used exclusively for SSE. Some teachers expressed a need for "more release time from class to plan". Some of the reasons offered as to how SSE could be improved are, according to 100 responses, time, data, paperwork and dialogue. These concerns are all interrelated. The paperwork and data collection for example become more of an issue due to the lack of time. Another example of a response is "let teachers teach.

The concept of SSE is flawed. Teachers are professional. Trust us. Our instincts to teach our students to the best of our ability is true. The strict SSE process is a box ticking exercise and restricts us.”

The role of MLM with regard to SSE

In total, 76% considered the principal to have the overall responsibility for the implementation of SSE in their schools. In relation to the role of MLM in the implementation of SSE, almost half of the responses considered that MLM teachers had a role in assisting with the implementation of the process, with only one-tenth referring to MLM teachers as leading the implementation of SSE.

Table 1e: Examples of some responses.

Assisting	“Assisting the principal in implementing change” and “Assist the principal in SSE planning and implementation”.
Leading	“We should be involved in leading SSE, perhaps meeting with different levels to facilitate discussion”, “Leading focus group/suggesting ways to gather evidence etc./devising same”, “Having direction from the principal, I think the middle management should run the SSE”, “I think they should be leaders in this area”, “Organise, lead, oversee implementation and report on engagement with SSE”, “Leading the focus and purpose”, “steering only” and “lead research and then lead implementation of strategies or changes”.
Informing	“Ensure staff know what is expected of them”, “Ensuring it is explained, understood and implemented to a level that is of benefit in a school.” and “Dissemination of information”.
Other	“Support and promote the implementation”, “to encourage all staff to engage”, “Co-ordinate, and implement, engage other teachers”, “Facilitation guidance and direction”, “Liaison with staff and see needs of the school in order to progress and adapt”, “Identify needs, distribution of leadership” and “Overseeing implementation enabling discussions regarding benefits of SSE and problems that arise, paperwork”.

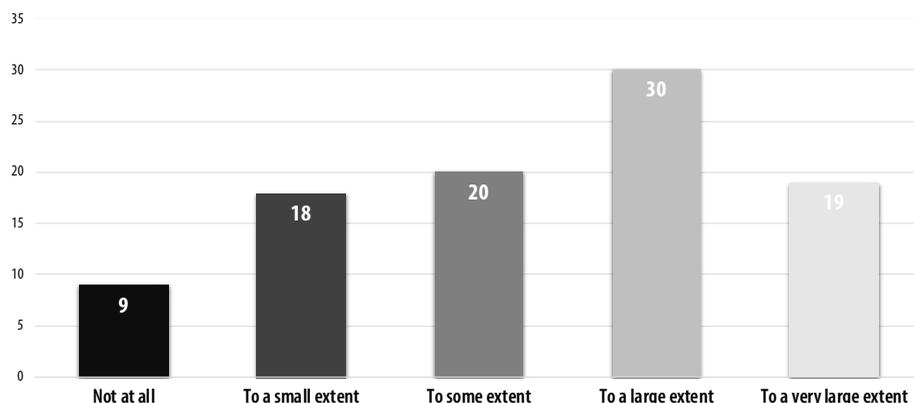
Almost one quarter of the responses described the style of the MLM team as collaborative, with 4% describing it as distributive.

Table 1f: Examples of some responses.

Collaborative (22.22%)	“Collaborative – total of three teachers, one of whom is shared SET based here”, “Collaborative/ teamwork”.
Supportive (13.33%)	“Positive and supportive”, “Open and willing to listen supportive approach. We could do better at ensuring implementation however.”
Distributive (4.44%)	“Distributed” and “distributive and transformational”.
Other (60%)	“It varies”, “Very strong and professional”, “Facilitators”, “Inclusive”, “Very collegiate and democratic”, “As a principal – some better than others”, “Poor”, “Very stressed staff in general with an over-loaded curriculum, killing ourselves working. Leading by example yet we feel distributive leadership is not working as people that don’t have posts feel they shouldn’t have to do all this extra work”.

Almost half of the 99 respondents thought the MLM lead SSE and school improvement to a large or a very large extent.

Diagram 1.5: To what extent do you think does middle leadership and management lead SSE and school improvement in your school?



MLM and LAOS 2016

Clear expectations are outlined in *LAOS 2016* by the inspectorate regarding the role of MLM in SSE. A series of questions was designed to test MLM respondents' views on the extent to which they perceive themselves to be equipped to implement these roles. The results are given in Table 1g below: Confidence levels with regard to standards (the 'no opinion' (neutral) column is not included).

Table 1g: Confidence levels with regard to standards.

Standard	Percentage reporting confident or very confident	Percentage reporting little or no confidence
Promote a culture of improvement, collaboration, innovation and creativity in learning, teaching and assessment.	66.6	3.7
Foster a culture of inclusion, equality of each pupil and the holistic development of each pupil.	74	3.7
Manage the planning and implementation of the curriculum.	59.2	7.4
Foster teacher professional development that improves teachers' and pupils' learning.	59.2	3.7
Establish an orderly and secure learning environment and maintain it through healthy communication.	70.3	3.7
Manage the school's human, physical and financial resources so as to create and maintain a learning environment.	44.4	7.4
Manage challenging and complex situations in a manner that demonstrates equality, fairness and justice.	62.9	7.4
Develop and implement a system to promote professional responsibility and accountability.	44.4	14.8

Communicate the guiding vision of the school and leads its realisation.	59.2	14.8
Lead the school in a continuous process of SSE	59.2	11.1
Build and maintain relationships with parents, with other schools and with the wider community.	66.6	11.1
Manage, lead and mediate change to respond to the evolving needs of the school and to changes in education.	57.69	6.41
Critique their practice as leaders and develop an understanding of effective and sustainable leadership.	37	25.9
Empower staff to take on leadership roles.	44.4	22.2
Promote and facilitate the development of pupil voice, pupil participation and pupil leadership.	60.4	14.8
Build professional networks with other school leaders.	51.8	22.2

Additional comments

Examples of some of the comments offered by the 30 respondents are indicated in Table 1h below.

Table 1h

Positive	"I think SSE gives the whole school community a focus for planning, for CPD and resourcing materials."
Negative	"The idea behind the process is excellent. However, the amount of investigation, assessment and reporting which needs to be written and provided to inspectorate is onerous" and "I find it's hard to get the buy-in from staff at times and they see it as a box-ticking exercise."
Mixed	"Very worthwhile but very time consuming, sometimes I feel we have to do too much paperwork which is just for show/to prove we have engaged in SSE and this may not be the most beneficial use of our time – the process should be simple and not cumbersome." and "we can see the benefit of SSE but it is a bit daunting."

Table 1h taken together with those immediately before it indicates that SSE policy envisages a significant role for MLM staff in the process and that the majority of respondents both have confidence that they have the skills to undertake this work and are in fact doing so in practice. In schools that have MLM, and in particular the largest schools, the role of MLM in the context of SSE is highly regarded.

Interviews

A series of 19 interviews was completed with primary school teachers and principals and a retired assistant chief inspector. This inspector had responsibility for developing and introducing SSE as a mandatory requirement in schools. The interviews were conducted one-to-one, either face-to-face or on the phone during the period from January to March 2020. Each interview lasted an average of 45 minutes. They were recorded to aid analysis. A copy of the transcripts was given to the interviewees to ensure accuracy of interpretation.

The interviewees were furnished with the interview schedule in advance of the interview. The questions used in the interviews were modified slightly to be more relevant to the inspector. The questions form the basis of this analysis. The interviewees were selected based on their school size and their role within the school. A total of 18 teachers was interviewed from 18 different schools. The following section illustrates some of the feedback received.

The Success of SSE

The inspector described the engagement as being “on a continuum”. This continuum was reflected in the responses of the teachers. Most teachers reported SSE as being “successful” in their schools.

The strengths and weaknesses of SSE

Teachers outlined a variety of strengths such as “schools are taking responsibility for improvement and monitoring the improvement over time” and “schools are actually taking ownership of the SSE process” The inspector tells me “I think the main strengths where it is effectively happening is collaboration between teachers”. Examples of weaknesses mentioned by teachers are “the monitoring of the implementation of the focus area of the school can be difficult”, “the lack of resources, lack of equipment or money needed to help school improvement in particular areas” and “difficulty in ensuring that teachers continue to work on the previous focused areas in SSE once the school moves on to a new focus area of SSE”.

The inspector referred to the weaknesses as arising from custom and practice in a school, i.e., “teachers working in isolation and that’s what Lortie in the 1970s talked about ‘the egg crate mentality’ and that ‘egg crate mentality’ is still there so the weakness is getting teachers to be confident enough and willing to share practice.”

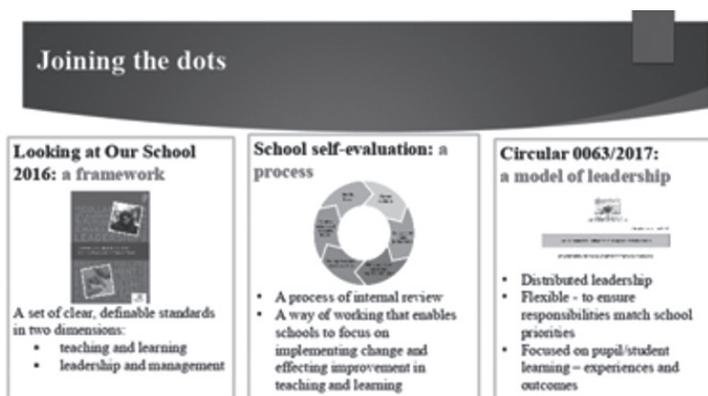
It was very clear in these interviews that the central importance of the role of MLM in implementing SSE is understood and equally clear that there would be very little progress without the active involvement of MLM.

The main barriers perceived by the interviewees are time, training, and paperwork. The responses here strongly support the questionnaire outcomes that training in data collection and analysis, enough time, and realistic levels of paperwork are central to making SSE work well, particularly for MLM who have full class teaching responsibility.

School taking ownership of the SSE process

It emerges from these responses that leading the school in the direction of taking ownership of the SSE process is a key matter for all those in leadership roles but MLM by being so close to the teachers without special duties posts are in a particularly good position to achieve this.

Diagram 1.6 (Department of Education and Skills, 2018)



The three interconnecting documents in Diagram 1.6 above, describing the framework, process and roles related to SSE in our primary schools were analysed in depth. Since SSE became a compulsory process in 2012, the interviews confirm that it has progressed steadily to be now perceived as an invaluable methodology for improving schools. These interviews, despite concerns over resource issues, are overwhelmingly positive in tone, emphasising, that although it has been very gradual, schools and teachers are increasingly willing and able to use SSE as a tool of school governance and development.

Analysis, discussion and conclusion

This research involved a documentary analysis of the three key policy documents from the DE concerning SSE and leadership and management, a 'snap-shot' online questionnaire administered to primary school teachers and principals and a series of semi-structured one-to-one interviews with teachers, principals, and a retired inspector.

The documentary analysis of the policy documents highlighted the recent changes in education policy. A clear emphasis is placed on leadership roles in education particularly with regard to the new role of an assistant principal. The theory of distributed leadership is very much evident in these documents. Other terminology such as collaboration and professional review are central. Although *LAOS 2016* sets out clear descriptions of school effectiveness criteria, for some this may be perceived as being too prescriptive. The DE acknowledges that it is not a 'one-size fits all' system and it will vary in accordance with school context.

It is clear from the results of the online questionnaire that primary school teachers consider the SSE process to be a very worthwhile exercise. The results show that schools are engaging with the SSE process and that it is having a positive impact on teaching and learning. Teachers in MLM were seen to play a pivotal role in leading SSE. The role of MLM in leading SSE was described in ways such as collaborative, collegial, democratic, distributed, and supportive. MLM reported its confidence levels in each of the domains. The most problematic and challenging domains as reported by MLM such as empowering and critiquing leadership were explored further in the interviews. The key negative outcomes

as highlighted by the online questionnaire are the huge demands placed on teachers. Issues such as time, data-gathering and paperwork were the major obstacles to implementing SSE successfully in schools. The lack of personnel such as an SSE coordinator is also highlighted as a hindrance.

It is significant to note that the key findings from the online questionnaire were evident in the interviews also. The responses of the interviewees illustrated a very good appreciation of SSE in schools and the role of MLM in leading SSE. Teachers valued the SSE process and have experienced good results from engaging with the process. Teachers in MLM, where such exist, were acknowledged as playing a key role. The main negative outcomes that emerged from the interviews were the lack of resources such as time and personnel. Paperwork was perceived as being unnecessarily demanding.

Key findings

The following are the key themes that emerged from this research

School size

The findings from this research highlight the fact that the role of MLM in overseeing the implementation of SSE in primary schools depends on the school profile. Schools vary significantly in size with over two-thirds of schools being classified as small schools. Many of these schools have only one MLM member. Bigger schools have more MLM members. Very often these MLM members have responsibility for specific curricular areas. These curricular areas tend to be identified as the area of focus for SSE. The MLM in these schools take the leading role in overseeing the implementation of SSE in their schools. They tend to operate by forming committees ensuring that all teachers have a say in the implementation of SSE.

Distributed leadership

The framework is very much based on distributed leadership. Schools have been dependent on the goodwill of the teaching profession for years. Teachers by their nature in primary schools are very generous with their time, energy, and skills. With the changing of the roles of post holders to assistant principals there is an implicit expectation in the domains, which form the job description for this new position, that leadership will be distributed. However, it must be noted as mentioned in the documentary analysis, that distributed leadership doesn't form part of the statements of practice for MLM.

Professional development

Upskilling is a key theme that emerged from the MLM members themselves regarding their role. Some expressed the fact that they felt they didn't have the necessary skills to fulfil their role and responsibilities properly particularly with the change in 2017 from post holder to assistant principal. The lack of upskilling was particularly evident with regard to the leadership part of their role. The DE has begun a pilot programme of professional development for MLM; Comhar through its agency the PDST which could be extended.

Training could also be provided by the INTO which currently provides support to principals. Professional development is also provided for teachers by the Teaching Council. Teachers engage in a variety of CPD through local education centres and colleges. It behoves the DE to support MLM in their new roles particularly with the recent changes. It should be mandatory for all assistant principals assuming these roles.

MLM structure

Another theme that emerged from the research was the lack of a proper MLM structure in place in schools. MLM is under more pressure now with their increasing workloads. As a result of the cutbacks, younger teachers are not now being afforded the opportunities to aspire to these roles in their schools. On the one hand senior and middle management are expected to “empower other teachers to carry out leadership roles” (DE, 2016, p. 6) in their schools but this experience, however invaluable may never translate into actual leadership roles in a formal capacity.

Time

Time is a huge factor according to MLM members and other teachers. MLM need more time to lead the implementation of SSE more fully in their schools.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this research the following four recommendations are proposed.

1. There is an urgent need to reinstate posts that were lost as a result of the moratorium in 2009. Primary schools cannot operate efficiently without an adequate MLM structure being in place in schools. Every school in the country would benefit from the allocation of an extra MLM post. This post could be designated as a position of SSE coordinator who would oversee the implementation of SSE in the school. The coordinator could assist other MLM in setting up the SSE process in their curricular areas. The role of SSE coordinator could be rotated among school leaders to ensure a new and fresh approach every few years.
2. Professional development needs to be mandatory and provided by the DE to all MLM teachers in primary schools, particularly on appointment to these posts. Upskilling is needed particularly with regard to the leadership skills required. In-service training should be provided on a regular basis, at least once a year, for MLM in a similar way to that available to senior leadership and management.
3. Time should be made available to MLM to support them in their role. While it is acknowledged that, as assistant principals, MLM teachers are paid an allowance to perform their duties and carry out their role, this research has shown that many MLM are spending an increasing amount of personal time in carrying out their role and responsibilities. MLM should be afforded some time in school to attend to their duties such as, for example, visiting other classrooms.
4. Due to the recent changes to the appointment procedure for assistant principals with *Circular 0063/2017*, it would be interesting to carry out follow-up research regarding the confidence levels of MLM in their role. As increasing emphasis is placed on a

teacher's experience and expertise in the appointment of posts, the confidence levels of assistant principals may increase in the areas that were highlighted in this research as being challenging for MLM, such as empowering others and critiquing their own leadership. Similarly, the confidence levels of existing post holders may increase with experience as they evolve into the new role.

Conclusion

The online questionnaire and interview data revealed insights into some of the challenges facing MLM in leading SSE in their schools. The overwhelming response towards SSE among all school leaders and teachers is positive. Almost all teachers and leaders reported valuing SSE and saw it as a worthwhile process. However, there are significant challenges for MLM as reported in the analysis. Time and paperwork are major obstacles. The lack of a sufficient MLM structure in schools in the first place was evident.

If the DE is to take SSE seriously and ensure it is adequately established in schools, it needs to provide the essential resources such as personnel and time. There is no doubt that SSE was interrupted due to the recent pandemic. I believe with a commitment from the DE towards the proper provision of resources that SSE will become embedded in schools going forward. The positive attitude of teachers and leaders is a strong indication of the future success of SSE in schools.

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Significant growth in the number of pupils with SEN attending mainstream primary schools in recent years is indicated by an increase in those who accessed additional supports from resource teachers. This figure grew from 20,138 in 2011 to 31,536 in 2017, an increase of 63.8%, while during the same period the number of pupils attending special schools grew from 7,665 to 8,225, representing only a 6.7% increase.

Research context

In Ireland, as in most educational systems, the role of special education teachers (SETs), previously known as 'remedial teachers', was until recently quite narrow, attempting to 'remediate' the specific difficulties of children with SEN by withdrawing them from the mainstream classroom and teaching them in small groups or individually (Griffin and Shevlin, 2007). International moves towards more inclusive school practice have brought changes in many education systems in the provision of support to pupils with SEN, particularly in the role, professional qualifications, and responsibilities of support teachers. These new responsibilities include the provision of professional guidance to general educators and support staff on the implementation of effective inclusion programmes, and the coordination, at school level, of educational provision for pupils with SEN by undertaking a more proactive role in curriculum development and programme modification (Agaliotis & Kalyva, 2011).

In Irish primary schools there is no specific designated post for the coordination of special needs. This results in difficulties for SEN teams in coordinating provision and working collaboratively in the school setting and also with the various educational stakeholders and sectors, with particular challenges in coordination between the areas of health, welfare, and education (Drudy & Kinsella, 2009). In some schools, special needs resource teachers (RT) or learning support teachers (LST), both now renamed as special education teachers (SETs), have taken on a coordinator's role either in a voluntary capacity or as part of the duties attached to a post of responsibility for which an additional allowance is paid. The main role of these teachers, however, is 'the provision of supplementary teaching to pupils either in the pupils' own classroom or in a learning support room' (DES, 2000). While some Irish schools have opted to appoint a teacher as a special educational needs coordinator (SENCo), this practice is not formalised and tends to vary in different school contexts (O'Gorman and Drudy, 2010).

This paper reports on a study which focussed on the contribution to leadership made by SETs whose role includes the overall coordination of SEN provision, and also those who support school principals by informally contributing to the coordination of this essential aspect of school life. The study was carried out at a time of significant transition in special education in Ireland, during 2017, when the revised model of resource allocation was about to be implemented. Given the unique context in Irish primary education, where schools are not required to have a formal role of SEN coordinator but where many have created such positions through the middle management system (Travers, 2017) or through teacher volunteerism, this study examined the tasks for which these teachers are responsible, the duties they undertake in their schools, and the impact of their role in the coordination of SEN provision at school level. The study also investigated how models of

SEN provision in the Irish context compare with successful models of provision in other systems, documenting the challenges and barriers that inhibit successful SEN coordination, and identifying the structures and strategies that facilitate the effective management of inclusion, while alleviating some of the challenges experienced by principals and teachers in this area (Kugelmass & Ainscow, 2004).

The research further explored how school context impacts on these coordinators' ability to carry out their assigned tasks and responsibilities successfully; to this end, school settings of wide variation were selected as cases for the study. In addition, as there is no mandatory professional learning for teachers in these roles, the impact of this feature is also investigated.

Historical context

In Ireland, prior to the 1990s, some pupils with disabilities had been denied an education, while others were segregated from mainstream education in special schools and special classes (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007). Change began with the *Special Education Review Committee Report* (1993) signalling a new direction in policy and recommending as much integration as possible, followed by the *Commission Report on the Status of People with Disabilities* (1996), which was pivotal in promoting an awareness of inclusion, while highlighting the lack of support services and resources for pupils with SEN. Successful litigation by parents which challenged inadequate educational provision for their children with SEN also had an impact by promoting change in SEN policy and practice (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007).

Changes in legislation, principally the Education Act 1998, provided for the legal right of all children to education, ensuring the right of parents to choose the appropriate school setting for their child. This was followed by the Equal Status Act 2000, outlawing discrimination in the provision of goods and services on nine grounds, including special needs and the most significant legislation, the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004, which established the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), a centralised organisation to administer provision for SEN and also created local support structures, such as regional SEN organisers, to deliver special educational provision. These legislative changes represented a significant alteration in government policy towards the creation of more inclusive educational environments (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007), converging to provide a commitment to ensuring that children with disabilities now have access to an appropriate inclusive educational setting.

From 2005, provision for pupils with SEN was organised under the general allocation model (GAM), designed to provide truly inclusive schools (DES, 2005), with resources determined by such factors as gender (more weighting for boys), socio-economic disadvantage and school size. However, the model was based on categories of disability rather than assessed needs and it required unnecessary labelling (Logan, 2017). The allocation of SEN resources was divided between children deemed to have 'low-incidence' disabilities, for example sensory impairments, autism, and assessed syndromes, who were assigned to resource teachers (RTs); and children with 'high-incidence' disabilities, such as specific learning difficulties and borderline or mild general learning disability, who were catered for by learning support teachers (LSTs), appointed on the basis of school enrolment levels (Shevlin & Griffin, 2017).

Some challenges emerged in the implementation of the GAM model of provision. The level of student need for support varied greatly from school to school, and the existing allocation system could not reflect this variation. In addition, a formal diagnosis of disability was required in order to access resources under the 'low-incidence' category. Many pupils were on long waiting lists for a professional diagnosis, during which time resource teaching support could not be provided, although some parents could afford to access private assessments, which reinforced the disadvantage experienced by less well-off families. Finally, while pupils with the same category of disability received the same level of resource teaching support, their needs could vary significantly, indicating that allocation should be based on assessed needs rather than disability category (Byrne, 2017). Clearly, while the aim of implementing the GAM model was to promote inclusion, dependency on assessment procedures and the overemphasis on deficit labels was actually creating a system that was discriminatory (Rose, 2017) and inequitable, and potentially confirming social disadvantage while reinforcing social advantage (Byrne, 2017).

Following extensive consultation, a revised model of allocating additional teaching supports for pupils with SEN in Irish schools was launched and implemented in 2017 by the Department of Education and Skills (DES). This new system reflects a shift from the previously dominant medical model, based on categories of deficit labels, to a more social model based on the needs of pupils. The need for formal assessments as part of the application process for additional resources was removed (Walshe, 2017), allowing the professional assessment to focus on the identification of learning needs rather than on diagnosis for the purpose of resource allocation (Byrne, 2017). Resources are allocated to schools based on the profiled needs of each school rather than individual needs. The criteria used to indicate a school's need for additional resources include the number of enrolled students with very complex special educational needs, the overall level of academic achievement, and the school's socio-economic context (Byrne, 2017). Principals and SEN teams are afforded more autonomy to make professional judgements regarding SET deployment (Rose, 2017).

This new reality requires more creative approaches to ensure that resources are distributed effectively when supporting learning needs (Rix, Sheehy, Fletcher-Campbell, Crisp, & Harper, 2013), while more than half of the schools involved in the pilot of the new model identified the need for greater coordination of SEN going forward (Byrne, 2017) – a challenge for schools which is investigated in this study. Under this revised model, the roles of RT and LST were combined into one role, special education teacher (SET), in 2017, while this study was proceeding, allowing for more flexibility in SEN team deployment at school level.

Developments in coordinating special education needs provision at school level

While most education systems have been influenced by the worldwide move towards inclusive education, demonstrated by the introduction of legislation and structures to support its implementation in schools, in practice it appears that in several countries including Spain, Sweden, Finland, the Netherlands and Greece, (Agalotis & Kalyva, 2011; Arnaiz & Castejón 2001; Lindqvist, 2013; Takala, Pirttimaa & Törmänen, 2009; Van

Leeuwen, Thijs, & Zandbergen, 2013), pupils with SEN attending regular schools continue to be segregated. This is due to the prevalence of models of provision dominated by the withdrawal from regular classrooms of individuals or small groups for specialised teaching by SETs, practices that do not constitute inclusion, according to MacGiolla Phádraig (2007), highlighting the necessity of continuing efforts to create effective models of in-class support based on increased teacher collaboration and whole-school approaches in our own system.

In addition, the role of SENCOs and support teachers in most systems appears to be dominated by teaching duties, with much less allocated time for teachers to engage in planning, consultation, and collaboration (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) as envisaged in their role descriptor such as that of SENCOs in Sweden, Greece, the Netherlands, and the UK and the support teachers in Australia, Finland, and Spain. The introduction of instructional coaches (IC) teams in the US appears to be an exception to this trend, with a reduction in referral of students to special education settings (Gravois & Rosenfield, 2006) and the emergence of the role of the special educator as a consultant or co-teacher in general education settings (Vaughn, Wanzek & Denton, 2014). A similar policy of implementing adaptive instruction in ordinary primary schools in the Netherlands has not been so successful, due to limited collegial consultation and the lack of teacher professional development (Imants, Van der Aasvoort, De Brabander & Ruijsenaars, 2001), highlighting the importance of a collaborative approach and upskilling of teachers if such a policy were to be introduced in Ireland.

In Australia, the role of the support teacher (learning difficulties) (ST(LD)) provided by Forlin (2001) demonstrates a potential template for the development of a similar role in Ireland, although the designation of specific time for teachers to engage in collaborative planning should be prioritised. The challenge presented by the lack of scheduled time for the coordination and planning of SEN provision is indicated in all systems reviewed and is presented as a barrier to the development of more inclusive practice, such as co-teaching in Finland (Takala et al., 2001), illustrating the necessity of prescribing for this essential element of inclusive practice when developing policy in our own system. Furthermore, the SENCOs' lack of impact on school policy and decision-making due to not holding a formal leadership role, as evidenced in the UK and Sweden (Lindqvist & Nilholm, 2011; Szwed, 2007), indicates the need for a formal position in the school management team if such a role were created in our schools.

In a number of systems, the responsibility for coordinating SEN provision has been devolved to the SENCO, a role that has been firmly established in Britain for two decades and for a shorter time in Greece, the Netherlands, and Sweden. In other systems, such as Australia, Finland, Spain, the US, and here in Ireland, members of the SEN team or SETs have assumed responsibility for organising aspects of SEN provision and organisation informally in their school creating a pivotal role in facilitating change towards more inclusive practices.

In Ireland, despite the absence of a requirement on the part of schools to designate a teacher to undertake this role formally, there is strong evidence of SETs undertaking duties related to the coordination of their schools' SEN provision (Kinsella, Murtagh, & Senior, 2014). In schools where boards of management have designated a teacher as SENCO, there

are wide variations in the responsibilities and tasks attached to these positions, since both depend on the particular school context, with no national standards or guidelines against which to measure the effectiveness or efficiency of the role. If the role of SENCo were to be formally established in all schools, then it seems prudent that an effective system of monitoring the implementation of national guidelines and appraisal of the role should be initiated simultaneously, to avoid the situation described by Szwed (2007) and Pearson and Ralph (2007), where a large amount of 'local interpretation' exists at school level.

Examination of aspects of the SENCo role, such as qualifications, support of other staff and policy formation innovation has found evidence of positive impact and good practice in schools. Travers, Balfe, Butler, Day, Dupont, McDaid, O'Donnell & Prunty (2010, p. 180) described coordinators as highly confident, with "high levels of specialist knowledge and skills", "willing to lead and mentor staff, support new practices, and lead reflections on initiatives". Examples of good practice included undertaking needs analysis of the school in relation to inclusion, tailoring professional development for staff, and establishing sophisticated systems for record-keeping, monitoring progress, and documenting support time. Coordinators, facilitated by support from principals and a system of distributed leadership in schools, were also found to play a key role in policy development, planning, and supporting inclusive practice. The evidence also supports the view that teachers assuming the role of coordinator of SEN provision will be more successful if they have engaged in professional learning (Travers et al., 2010).

Significant changes introduced and implemented in 2017 in the system of resources provision for special educational needs are being supported by the establishment of the NCSE support service, providing advice and support to schools. This service will include professional development for teachers (INTO, 2014), since the proposed changes will result in increased autonomy being assigned to school principals in the allocation of resources to students. In order for any new system to be implemented successfully, it is essential for teachers to have access to support from school governing bodies, school management and colleagues (Pijl & Frisson, 2009). Collaboration and consultation are vital aspects of the organisation of SEN provision under this model and could provide support for SETs and all staff concerned with implementing the revised model. In practice, this would involve commitment to a shared vision of pupil learning and development, engagement in collaborative inquiry and problem-solving, analysis of evidence, and engagement in mutual dialogue (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2014).

The findings presented here regarding the benefits and effectiveness of systems of SEN provision, including the role of those SETs who coordinate special education at school level, provide additional data to assist policy-makers in determining whether to establish a SENCo-style role in every school, or a more collaborative team approach with all SETs taking active responsibility for the provision of SEN. Decisions regarding the establishment of guidelines, procedures, and practices to be followed by those appointed may also be informed by this research. The appointment of SENCos to a senior leadership role in the school, facilitating their inclusion in strategic decision-making, along with the provision of mandatory professional development have emerged from the literature review as important recommendations in ensuring adherence to procedures and successful implementation of effective programmes and strategies.

Research approach

A qualitative approach was employed to investigate the leadership and management provided by SETs in the provision of special education in eight mainstream primary schools. It focussed on contextually based approaches to shared leadership, collaborative practices, and professional learning from the perspective of SETs and their principals.

Following a substantive literature review, the data collection, data analysis, and findings of this study were considered within the theoretical framework provided by Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018) in their case studies of five worldwide sites of school collaboration. Their research acknowledges the benefits of collaborative professionalism in facilitating people to “work as a profession in a more collaborative way” and to create “stronger and better professional practice together” (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018, p. 4). An inclusive school environment can only be created ‘through the collaborative actions of every individual within the organisation’ (O’Riordan, 2017, p. 52), in this case SETs and principals. Consequently, the 10 tenets of collaborative professionalism, which include collective autonomy, efficiency, responsibility and initiative, while also incorporating collaborative approaches such as mutual dialogue, joint work, collaboration with pupils, big picture thinking and common meaning and purpose (Hargreaves and O’Connor, 2018) are relevant to this study and provide a helpful typology in facilitating the researcher to identify the collaborative approaches and strategies that enable SETs to undertake their role in leading and managing SEN provision.

The research comprised a multiple case study approach which allowed a phenomenon to be explored in its context, using qualitative methods and a variety of data sources (Baxter & Jack, 2008), including focus group interviews, one-to-one interviews, and participant reflexive diaries. The sample in this research is non-probability and purposive, whereby participants were hand-picked by the researcher (Cohen et al., 2011) since they have in-depth knowledge about the particular issues of interest. The participants included the principals and one SET from each of eight primary schools, collectively comprising a multiple case study which aims to generate a broader appreciation of a particular issue, so that the context is different in each of the cases. This was achieved by selecting diverse schools as case study sites of varying sizes, circumstances, and settings (Crowe et al., 2011), as outlined in Table 1, enabling the researcher to explore differences within and between cases.

Table 1

No.	Enrolment	School Context	SEN Coordinator Y/N	No of SETs	No of SNAs
1	232	Rural Mixed with 2 ASD classes	Y Post holder	5	6.66
2	174	Rural Mixed	Y Voluntary	3	2.75
3	411	Urban Boys DEIS Band 1	Y Post holder	7	5.5
4	222	Urban Girls	Y Principal	3	1.75
5	425	Urban Girls DEIS Band 1	Y Post Holder	6	6
6	111	Rural Boys	Y Post Holder	2	1
7	76	Urban Mixed	Y Principal	1	0.75
8	24	Rural Mixed	Y Principal	1	2

The goal was to replicate findings across cases (Crowe et al., 2011). Analysis of the data provided by the interviews and reflexive diaries comprised a six-step flexible approach to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Findings

When analysing the findings through the lens of the theoretical framework of collaborative professionalism (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018), three significant themes emerged: shared leadership, professional learning, and school autonomy.

Shared leadership

This study provides evidence of varying levels of shared leadership for inclusion, including distributed leadership and decision-making (Kugelmass & Ainscow, 2004) involving principals and SETs, aligning with the view of “leadership as practice” (MacBeath, Dempster, Frost, Johnson & Swaffield, 2018, p. 88), which advocates for collaborative dialogue in the planning and provision of SEN.

Role of the SET in coordinating special education needs provision

While the centrality and commitment of the principals are evident in facilitating the creation of a school culture that is collaborative, flexible, supportive, and most importantly inclusive (Kugelmass & Ainscow, 2004), many activities related to the planning and provision of SEN are initiated and led by SETs. These include organising planning meetings, setting agenda, communicating decisions made, and reviewing the implementation of practices and strategies. However, a significant finding indicates that those SETs who hold a management role in their schools, or who hold a formal SEN qualification, engage at a deeper level of leading the organisations' SEN provision and have a stronger impact and influence on the planning of provision (MacKenzie, 2007; Szwed, 2007) than those who do not hold formal posts or are shared with other schools.

This evidence strengthens the argument that national policy should dictate the appointment of a coordinator of SEN provision in every school who is also a member of the school senior management team (Tissot, 2013; Travers et al., 2010). This policy should also apply to smaller schools, since evidence from this study indicates that teaching principals, who already carry a significant combined teaching and administrative workload, shoulder most of the managerial burden related to SEN provision. This is mainly due to the limited time spent in each school by SETs whose allocated time is generally shared among schools. The role could be allocated on a shared basis to a SET who coordinates SEN in a number of schools. In addition, CPD specific to the leadership and management of SEN provision would be essential for those assuming coordinator roles (Crockett, 2000; Travers et al., 2010).

Leading school collaboration in special education needs

An important aspect of leadership for inclusion identified by Kugelmass and Ainscow (2004) is the nurturing by leaders of collaboration between staff with different specialisations

willing and able to work together as cooperative teams, thereby creating a community where all individual expertise and experience are valued. The majority of schools in this study provide evidence of such collaborative inquiry (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018).

Collective engagement is evident in the identification of pupils' needs, assessment, the drafting of support plans, and the selection of models of provision, particularly in the larger schools, as indicated by SET5:

We are all there. If a child comes to our attention, there's less chance of them falling through the cracks. It allows for deciding on things like Literacy Lift Off, allows for drawing up of timetables, and there's a nice sense of collaboration.

Since schools now enjoy enhanced autonomy on SEN provision, these in-school collaborative structures have potential to promote enhanced professional practice, shared learning, and deeper engagement in collaborative decision-making, if nurtured and supported in a combined approach by the SEN coordinator and principal, through mutual support, trust, and joint action.

Structures for regular liaison with parents were found to be in place in all schools, facilitated by school-based policies and practices. Nonetheless, in regard to the formulation of support plans in particular, deeper collaboration through more extensive information-sharing, participative decision-making, and shared commitment to implementing strategies to achieve pupil learning targets (Kugelmass & Ainscow, 2004), led by the SEN coordinator, would facilitate a greater contribution from these educational partners. Principal 6 (P 6) indicates that "We formulate the IEP, and the parents are brought in at the end of that to input into the document" indicating that parental engagement is somewhat limited.

Models of support

Schools are attempting to embrace more inclusive approaches through a combination of in-class and withdrawal models of provision (Casserly & Padden, 2018), with a predominance of team – teaching approaches indicated – a positive development, as indicated by P1:

I think it's very beneficial. Everyone knows the children better; you have a better idea of their levels. They're getting more attention, opportunities to speak more. You've got a bit of brainstorming going on between teachers about how to approach problems that come up. ... There has to be a lot of planning, and that benefits everybody. (P1)

However, evidence of over-reliance on one approach, station teaching, indicates a need for CPD regarding alternate models of provision for both class teachers and SETs. Furthermore, the implementation of a variety of approaches is more likely to meet the wide diversity of individual needs in classes (NCSE, 2011) and to facilitate improved social engagement while learning.

Participants justified withdrawal approaches when supporting pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties or those learning English for the first time, "It really depends on the child and their needs. You might have a child who needs less distraction and a smaller environment on their own". (P5)

Nonetheless, there are concerns that this approach impedes inclusion (Rose & Shevlin, 2019) through lessening the need for class teachers to acquire expertise in differentiation strategies, increases the possibility of pupil isolation and their inability to access a full curriculum (Rose & Shevlin, 2019). Support in terms of relevant CPD, the provision of SNAs, and the expansion of the recently established school inclusion model of support – which includes in-school provision of behavioural practitioners, psychologists, and regional support teams – would greatly assist schools in ensuring that all pupils do not experience isolation and have access to the full curriculum, regardless of their specific needs.

Assessment and support plan formulation

The leadership provided by SETs in the areas of assessment and support plan design is evident in this study, with collaborative approaches to the fore in drafting targets and strategies to meet pupils' needs. Nonetheless, deeper parental engagement (King et al., 2018) and the introduction of student voice to support plan drafting (Flynn, 2017), would greatly enhance the process and enable the constructing of change together (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). Regarding assessment, while significant effort is invested by SETs in collating and analysing standardised test results, these are not utilised to the greatest extent possible by class teachers to inform decisions on the selection of strategies and resources (O'Leary, Lysaght, Nic Craith & Scully, 2019). Again, this finding indicates that specific CPD is required on the potential of these results to inform decision-making about teaching and learning (O'Leary et al, 2019). The development and implementation of innovative strategies to support pupils at transition stages are welcome, adding to our knowledge of the various methods used by SETs to access relevant information in order to facilitate smoother transitions. However, a more formal process of information-sharing between pre-schools and primary schools is urgently needed, with P1 advocating for "a more formal sharing of information" and P5 a "more detailed ... form filled in by the pre-school" (P5) to facilitate the transition of pupils from pre-school to primary.

Liaising with outside agencies is challenging for principals and SETs, mainly due to time constraints, although school cluster group meetings facilitated by NEPS psychologists to provide information are welcomed, as is the provision of templates to support school planning and record-keeping. Participants indicate that parental expectations regarding the implementation of programmes designed for pupils by SLTs are unrealistic, given the lack of expertise among teachers in this regard. Establishing collaborative inter-professional groups to share expertise, experience, information, and resources may improve professional practice, while in turn developing common meaning and purpose (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018).

Shared leadership is demonstrated by principals and SETs in the induction and mentoring of SNAs, although no formal programme of CPD for SNAs has been provided at policy level, despite wide variation in their levels of qualifications (Logan, 2006; Rose & O'Neill, 2009). Although an SNAs' official remit is confined to the care needs of pupils, in reality this focus is too narrow, since SNAs support pupils in accessing the curriculum, for example during station teaching. A broader view at policy level may be more realistic, while the recently announced development of a national policy on CPD for SNAs will greatly benefit all pupils accessing this support.

Professional learning

There is no mandatory requirement for teachers in Irish schools, appointed to a position involving special education, to hold an SEN qualification, although a necessity exists for in-career professional development commensurate with their additional responsibilities (O'Gorman & Drudy, 2010).

Wide variations in the level of professional qualifications and expertise in SEN exist across the participating schools. Accredited, face-to-face CPD opportunities in SEN are rare in the area where this study took place – a reason proffered by participants for the low number of SETs with professional SEN qualifications.

This study's identification of existing structures and processes to facilitate professional learning related to SEN – including the sharing of experience, knowledge, and expertise in schools – is important, given the identified gaps in access to meaningful professional learning on inclusion and SEN (Crockett, 2000; O'Gorman & Drudy, 2010; Travers et al., 2010; Ware et al., 2010), the absence of mandatory professional learning for existing teachers, and the importance of collaborative practice for addressing the needs of students with SEN (Hargreaves, 2010; Kugelmass & Ainscow, 2004). Evidence emerges of creative CPD initiatives (O'Gorman & Drudy, 2010) including mentoring and induction (Uí Chonduibh, 2017) and collaborative approaches such as coaching (Walsh, 2012), networking, and collegial discussion (O'Gorman & Drudy, 2010). Sharing professional expertise and experience (Travers et al., 2010) available within staffs is also demonstrated. This adds to our knowledge of how SETs support their less-experienced colleagues by sharing knowledge.

Sharing of professional expertise and experience

Schools are potential communities of practice for teachers, where opportunities exist for collaboration with colleagues, particularly those who hold professional capital because of their experience, expertise, and qualifications (Hargreaves, 2019) and where interpreting information and making meaning can result in the mediation of new knowledge in the community (Fraser et al., 2007). Engagement with new learning may be prompted by a CPD intervention, or by organisational restructuring – as is inevitable for the participating schools in implementing the revised model of provision (DES, 2017). The presence of leaders, as evidenced in this study, who are committed to inclusive values, as indicated by P1 facilitates collective problem-solving, and encourages a high level of staff collaboration (Ainscow, 2014) which is essential for new ideas and practices to take root:

It's a bit about levelling the playing pitch, some children need more support than others in order to have the same experience.

Findings indicate that collaborative approaches adopted during team teaching provide an opportunity for mentoring of more inexperienced colleagues (Uí Chonduibh, 2017). Improving their knowledge and understanding of effective SEN strategies occur through the collaborative planning and joint work (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) involved when engaging in planning, teaching, and review of co-teaching lessons as suggested by P4:

With the support teacher going into the classroom, there's a huge amount of modelling informally and sharing information ... That's one of the advantages of an in-class model. (P4)

Evidence of engagement by the participating SETs in cluster group meetings organised and facilitated by NEPS psychologists support the CPD of SEN teams, showing collaborative inquiry (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). This example of school-to-school collaboration, while limited, strengthens teachers' capacity to address challenging circumstances (Ainscow, Muijs & West, 2018) to improve areas such as pupil attainment, teacher motivation, and leadership capacity (Muijs, 2018) and has strong potential to increase teachers' confidence when making judgements about the allocation of additional resources under the revised model of provision to facilitate learning (Rix et al., 2013). This form of collaboration helps improve outcomes for schools when experiencing specific challenges, as evidenced by P6:

It's nearly like teachers helping themselves in a group. I think it's a good model to put five or six schools in a cluster group together, because if you have a child that's causing a concern to you, you can bring it to the group. (P6)

Factors identified as essential for successful school-to-school collaboration include engagement in critical dialogue, positive attitudes and relationships and an understanding that trust and openness already exist in each school – qualities that are then taken into partnerships created with other schools. It is essential to establish appropriate organisational arrangements and agreed principles, including structures and roles to facilitate accountability and effective communication, in order to learn from difference, to use evidence to promote change, and to identify areas that require review (Ainscow et al., 2004). These local clusters of SETs, if supported by the nationwide education centre network, have the potential, if developed, to provide a regular forum for collaborative inquiry, mutual dialogue (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018), and most importantly, professional learning to improve practice.

Evidence of the development of relationships between schools and health professionals such as NEPS psychologists, occupational therapists, and SLTs is positive; nonetheless, it is clear that minimal collaborative practice (Glover, McCormack & Smith – Tamaray, 2015) is occurring, as indicated by SET5: “they are the ones who diagnosed, so they are the ones who should be guiding us ... they're the ones with the training” (SET5). Inter-professional

groups (Glover et al., 2015) facilitating collaborative inquiry (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) would be beneficial and allow mutual professional learning to occur.

These models of CPD, as examples of collaborative professionalism, foster teacher self-efficacy through critical collaboration (Fraser et al., 2007), while supporting teachers in reconstructing their own knowledge and therefore are more likely than transmissive approaches to lead to transformative change (Fraser et al., 2007).

Teacher autonomy

The increased individual and collective teacher autonomy given to schools in conjunction with the implementation of the new model of SEN provision, carries obligations regarding the organisation of school schedules to facilitate planning, consultation, and decision-making opportunities for all concerned with SEN matters. It also requires principals and SETs to lead the process of developing school policies that acknowledge and support all aspects of SEN provision given the particular context of the school (Hudson), while having the opportunity to work collaboratively in decision-making on curriculum, instruction, and scheduling (Willner, 1990).

All schools investigated have policies on SEN provision, relating to testing, SEN team allocation, timetabling, resource management, and the organisation of staged provision. The data indicate that school context influences the level of autonomy that SETs retain in the drafting, implementation, and review of these policies. Those in the larger schools have significantly more responsibility, undertaking this task in collaboration with the other post-holders, as described by SET5:

We generally present a document and ... let them know what's changed. The staff responds then, or alternatively it can be circulated via *Aladdin* [education software] before the meeting for people to read. (SET5)

Those in smaller schools and in shared SET roles have less autonomy, since the principal retains responsibility for policy review and updating. However, all staff are engaged in discussions on this process, demonstrating some opportunities for the enactment of collective teacher autonomy.

This study provides important insights into the lack of confidence experienced by principals and SETs in embracing the autonomy afforded to them when making meaning of SEN policy and practice. While participants welcome this increased autonomy, findings indicate that the additional responsibility will require specific CPD opportunities for principals and SEN teams (O'Gorman & Drudy, 2010), since the building of professional capacity in schools (Byrne, 2010) has the potential to boost teacher confidence and ensure that principals and SEN teams are well placed to make judgements on resource allocation that will adequately respond to pupils' needs (Rose, 2017).

A collaborative process demonstrating collective initiative, involving principals, SETs, and class teachers, is evident in the procedures and structures existing in schools for the identification and selection of pupils for support. The recent significant developments in SEN provision have been introduced through top-down policy changes, with schools

required to reflect these changes in their SEN policies, planning, and practice, thereby facilitating teachers' professional judgement to be taken into account in the deployment of resources (Byrne, 2017). Principals and SETs are presented with an opportunity to embrace collective autonomy and to make judgements confidently regarding resource provision (Rix et al., 2013), through a process of collective responsibility, collaborative inquiry and common purpose (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018).

Conclusion

In summary, findings indicate that school context is fundamental to the SET's capacity to lead and influence SEN provision, with those in larger schools having enhanced opportunities in this regard. Shared leadership is evident, with collaborative professionalism and collective initiative existing in all schools, particularly in the implementation of co-teaching approaches. Both formal and informal planning structures are evident, facilitating school-based collaboration and dialogue, principally led by the SET. There is a lack of opportunities to acquire formal qualifications in SEN in the region where the study took place. However, a proposal for the development of in-school communities of practice could create a sustainable model of enhanced professional learning. Increased individual and collective teacher autonomy (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) in SEN provision has recently proved challenging for schools. The findings indicate a lack of confidence in relation to the additional responsibility of principals and SEN teams in the allocation of SEN resources as prescribed in the revised allocation model (DES, 2017). A proposal to establish school-to-school networks focussed on SEN matters may contribute to the alleviation of teacher concerns and provide support and opportunities for mutual dialogue and collective initiatives, hallmarks of collaborative professionalism (Hargreaves & O'Connor 2018). Adoption of these recommendations at both policy and school level may facilitate greater success in implementing the revised model of SEN provision and create a more equitable and inclusive education for all pupils.

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≡ A systematic review of literature on homework: Challenges and proposals for educational policy makers in Ireland ≡

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Abstract

No government policy on homework exists in Ireland, despite being a topical issue. This paper focuses on homework from the perspectives of parents, teachers, and children. It provides a synthesis of recent international research about homework and suggests proposals for Irish educational policy makers. From a systematic literature review of scholarly/peer-reviewed journal articles and books published between 2000 and 2019 (articles n=89, books n=8), we recommend the development of an organic national policy on homework, for both primary and post-primary schooling sectors, based on principles of partnership/recognition, communication, and guidance. It would include clarification of the roles of teachers, parents, and children in homework, thus aligning rationale, expectations, and practices; ensuring careful consideration to homework design and implementation, with the aim of creating homework that is meaningful, purposeful, creative, and meets the unique needs of all children, systematic provision of initial and continuing teacher education, and appropriate parent education and guidance.

Keywords: homework; parents; teachers; children; primary education.

Introduction

Few issues related to teaching and learning affect children, parents, and teachers as directly as homework does. In Ireland, there is currently no government policy on homework despite it being a topical issue, featuring prominently in the media in recent times due to its coming before the Oireachtas (McMahon, 2018) and, subsequently, with the spotlight falling on a school that made a unilateral decision to trial a no-homework policy (Hogan, 2019). This literature review explores the perceptions of homework held by parents, teachers, and children, thus providing an insight into how it impinges on their lives, an issue often taken for granted and about which assumptions abound. There is a need for evidence-based decision-making about homework policy. Gaining an insight into the perceptions and practices of the main stakeholders should serve to inform best practice and influence policy, both at school and system level, to encompass a shared vision of homework as an educational strategy. Thus, the aim of this article is to provide a synthesis of recent research evidence about homework that identifies issues and challenges, and to suggest proposals for Irish educational policy makers.

Methodology

The literature search was conducted using Dublin City University Library's A-Z of electronic databases. Education databases amongst these include: Academic Search Complete; British Education Index; Education Research Complete; ERIC International; JSTOR; SAGE Journals online; Taylor and Francis online; Scopus. The searches were performed using the following keywords connected to the keyword 'homework' using the Boolean operator AND: 'parents'; 'teachers'; 'pupils'; 'primary school'; 'children'; 'perceptions'. The Google Scholar database was also searched to source articles, using the same keywords. In total, 89 scholarly and peer-reviewed journal articles published in English between 2000 and 2019 were identified, across a range of disciplines, primarily sociology and psychology. Eight books were also identified as relevant to the review (see supplemental materials). As relatively little Irish research has been carried out on homework (Fitzmaurice, Flynn, & Hanafin, 2019; Jackson & Harbison, 2014; Kiely, O'Toole, Haals Brosnan, O'Brien, O'Keeffe, & Dunne, 2019), this review draws on a synthesis of findings from these international sources, identifies key issues that may be of relevance to policy makers, and proposes recommendations for educational policy-making about homework in Ireland.

Homework: An overview

Homework is defined as "tasks assigned to students by school teachers that are meant to be carried out during non-school hours" (Cooper, 1989, p. 7). Homework connects home and school (Warton, 2001), and is, in fact, one of the most common school activities involving teachers, children, and parents (Rosário, Núñez, Vallejo, Cunha, Nunes, Mourão, & Pinto, 2015). Homework is a significant issue for each of these groups as it impinges directly upon their daily lives (Rudman, 2014; Trautwein, 2007). It forms a central part of children's learning experiences in education systems across the world (Cooper, Robinson, & Patall, 2006; Dettmers, Trautwein, & Lüdtke, 2009; Tam & Chan, 2009; Xu, 2005). It is a pervasive practice in schools today, and, although not mandatory, nowhere more so than within the Irish education system (Jackson & Harbison, 2014). There is tentative evidence that teachers and parents in Ireland are positively disposed towards homework (Fitzmaurice et al., 2019) but it remains a somewhat neglected topic in Ireland and internationally.

Homework is a complex process (Coutts, 2004; Xu & Corno, 2003), influenced by more variables than any other instructional strategy (Cooper, 2001b). It involves three protagonists, teachers, children, and parents, whose goals and behaviours are often misaligned and conflicting (Cooper et al., 2006). Teachers can structure the homework in a multitude of ways with variation in the amount, type, and difficulty. Children influence whether, when, and how it is completed. Parents influence the process by their degree of involvement and by providing a home environment that either promotes or inhibits learning. Cooper (2001b) has gone so far as to describe the homework process as a battlefield for teachers, children, and parents. It is a multifaceted process that involves a complex interplay of factors in the two contexts of home and school (Warton, 2001).

Homework is a controversial and contentious aspect of schooling (Bempechat, 2004; Scott & Glaze, 2017), with a lack of consensus regarding its strengths and weaknesses (Doctoroff & Arnold, 2017; Madjar, Shklar, & Moshe, 2016; Ndebele, 2018). There is limited evidence of its utility and effectiveness (Jackson & Harbison, 2014). The relationship between homework and academic achievement remains unclear (Dettmers et al., 2009; Pfeiffer, 20018), with studies producing mixed results (Cooper et al., 2006). While homework is generally positively associated with academic achievement (Cooper & Valentine, 2001), the relationship is stronger for older students and negligible for elementary- or primary-school pupils, with negative correlations found (Cooper et al., 2006). Therefore, the younger the child the less benefit accrued from doing homework (Cooper & Valentine, 2001). Consequently, Kohn (2006) argues that there is no reason not to reduce or abolish it for primary-school children.

Proponents of homework, however, have suggested that completing it enhances children's attitudes and learning styles, helping them to acquire better study and self-regulatory skills and to develop as independent learners (Buyukalan & Altinay, 2018; Williams, Swift, Williams, & Van Daal, 2017). Critics have refuted this, claiming that it may be counterproductive as children tend to develop avoidance strategies, lose interest in learning, and experience physical and mental fatigue (Kohn, 2006; Pfeiffer, 2018). Homework is also considered to reduce the quality of childhood (Holte, 2016), to impact negatively on family life (Dudley-Marling, 2003), to detract from children's leisure time, and to amplify inequalities (Rønning, 2011).

Parents' perceptions of homework

Parents tend to take homework for granted (Forsberg, 2007), viewing it as a normal part of their children's lives (Tam & Chan, 2010). While some parents question teachers' overuse of homework (Van Voorhis, 2011a), most are accepting of their right to assign it (Forsberg, 2007). Parents view homework positively, with most considering it necessary (Kukk, Rajalaane, Rei, & Piht, 2015). Many are enthusiastic about their involvement (Tam & Chan, 2009), although negative perceptions have been observed (Van Voorhis, 2011a), with homework involvement reported by some as their least enjoyed activity with their children (Solomon, Warin, & Lewis, 2002). Parents' perceptions of homework are often at odds with those of children and teachers (Harris & Goodall, 2008; Xu, 2005).

Parents hold relatively consistent views regarding the value and purpose of homework, with the majority believing that it is important for learning and academic achievement (Cooper et al., 2006; Van Voorhis, 2004). Parents tend to believe that homework contributes to learning more than children do (Turanli, 2009) as they hold longer-term views of its benefits (Coutts, 2004). Parents also perceive many non-learning functions of homework including the development of skills such as responsibility, learning autonomy, time management, and other motivational and self-regulatory attributes (Cunha, Rosário, Macedo, Nunes, Fuentes, Pinto, & Suárez, 2015). They also consider it useful as an indicator of children's performance (Corno & Xu, 2004).

Many parents, however, consider that homework causes friction and conflict, putting a strain on family life (Hoover-Dempsey, Battiato, Walker, Reed, DeJong, & Jones, 2001; Trautwein, 2007). Homework is regarded by parents as a source of stress (Katz, Kaplan, & Buzukashvily, 2011; Van Voorhis, 2011b). Many feel that they are too busy and resent giving of their time to become involved (Van Voorhis, 2011a; Xu & Yuan, 2003). They also feel that it denies them the opportunity to pursue other family activities and that it interferes with children's play and leisure activities (Kidwell, 2004; Kukk et al., 2015) to the point that homework and formal education can dominate home and family life (Kiely et al., 2019). Parents differ in their views of the quality and quantity of homework tasks (Cooper et al., 2006; Kralovec & Buell, 2000). Some may be concerned that children are required to spend too much time completing tedious assignments that have little impact on academic achievement (Simplicio, 2005; Van Voorhis, 2011), while others consider the amount reasonable (Jackson & Harbison, 2014) and the difficulty level acceptable (Kukk et al., 2015). Middle-class parents are more sceptical in their views of homework, often considering it a waste of time (Hutchison, 2011).

Parents' perceptions of homework are significant as they affect the level and quality of their involvement. Moreover, parental attitudes towards homework are directly related to children's attitudes in its regard (Katz et al., 2011). Most parents are involved in their children's homework (Kukk et al., 2015). This involvement varies considerably, with a wide range of strategies employed by them (Tam & Chan, 2009; Wingard & Forsberg, 2009). This diversity of strategies is due to variations in parent and family situations and to parents' assumptions regarding the purpose and value of homework (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). Parents tend to provide practical, educational, and emotional support to their children during the homework process.

Some parents often see homework as the only way to be involved in their children's schooling (Rudman, 2014) but many feel unprepared and incapable of supporting their children (Davidovitch & Yavich, 2017; Jackson & Harbison, 2014) and consider more teacher direction necessary (Warton, 2001). They are also dubious about being assigned a teaching role (Hutchison, 2012). Parents' skills and education level, however, appear to be unrelated to parental homework involvement (Xu, 2007). In fact, higher-educated parents tend to engage less in homework than their lower-educated counterparts (Silinskas, Niemi, Lerkkanen, & Nurmi, 2012). Despite this, higher-educated parents structure homework involvement better (Englund, Luckner, Whaley, & Egeland, 2004). Gender also influences parental homework involvement, with mothers tending to be more involved than fathers (Bhanot & Jovanovic, 2005; Hutchison, 2012; Rønning, 2011).

Parents' life context is also a strong determinant of involvement (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007). Time available to parents can be curtailed by demands of domestic and work commitments (Matei & Ciascai, 2015; Ndebele, 2018). These demands may deplete mothers' energy reserves, in particular, as parental involvement falls disproportionately on women (Reay, 2005). The burden on one parent in single-parent families can also create pressure (Hutchison, 2012). The number of children in the home vying for the same parental resources could potentially decrease the quality and level of involvement for each child (Cooper, Lindsay, & Nye, 2000; Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008). Findings are inconclusive regarding the influence of socio-economic status on

homework involvement (Dumont, Trautwein, Nagy, & Nagengast, 2014; Tam & Chan, 2009). Several studies have shown the type and quality of involvement to be unrelated to parents' socio-economic status (Dumont, Trautwein, Lüdtke, Neumann, Niggli, & Schnyder, 2012; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001; Tam & Chan, 2009). Overall, there appears at best to be a moderate association between socio-economic status and parental homework involvement (Dumont et al., 2012). Parental homework involvement is influenced by parents' perceptions of invitations to involvement from teachers. Such invitations indicate to parents that homework is important and that teachers value their involvement, encouraging them to become involved (Green et al., 2007).

Parents expect homework to be assigned (Matei & Ciascai, 2015; Ndebele, 2018), as do children (Corno, 2000) and other major stakeholders (Tam & Chan, 2016). Teachers, therefore, assign homework in order to meet parental expectations and system requirements (Snead & Burris, 2016). Parents view teachers' homework practices as a critical indicator of teacher quality (Jackson, 2007). Those who assign regular homework are deemed better teachers (Hong, Wan, & Peng, 2011; Matei & Ciascai, 2015). Parents believe that assigning homework consistently indicates effort and concern on the teacher's part (Xu & Yuan, 2003). This accountability, and fear of being judged harshly, strongly influences teachers' homework practices (Coutts, 2004).

Teachers' perceptions of homework

Assigning homework is an accepted and unquestioned practice amongst teachers (Hong & Milgram, 2000; Snead & Burris, 2016), who generally view homework positively (Buyukalan & Altinay, 2018), more positively, in fact, than either children or parents (Davidovitch & Yavich, 2017; Xu, 2005). Teachers, however, have also been found to perceive homework negatively (Coutts, 2004; Van Voorhis, 2011a), considering it a source of difficulty for them (Warton, 2001). Furthermore, it is experienced teachers who hold particularly negative attitudes towards homework (Davidovitch & Yavich, 2017). Teachers' homework-related attitudes are crucial as they may have a significant impact on homework quality and on students' effort and motivation (Trautwein, 2007).

Teachers commonly perceive homework as very important and essential for learning and achievement (Snead & Burris, 2016; Tam & Chan, 2016). The majority believe in its necessity (Matei & Ciascai, 2015) and consider it a valuable educational tool (Ndebele, 2018). It is frequently recognised as an effective supplement to in-school learning (Cooper & Valentine, 2001), and thought to strengthen home-school relationships (Bempechat, 2004; Hutchison, 2011). The opposite may be true, however, of situations where children and parents feel stressed or overburdened by homework (Kiely et al., 2019). Teachers appear to value the outcomes of homework more than the process itself (Corno & Xu, 2004). Moreover, they tend to recognise its benefits and ignore the associated costs (Matei & Ciascai, 2015), believing that homework should take priority over leisure activities (Holte, 2016). While teachers and parents share similar views regarding homework (Cooper et al., 2000; Xu & Yuan, 2003), teachers perceive it from a professional viewpoint (Davidovitch & Yavich, 2017). Teachers' perceptions of homework are central to the homework process (Turanli, 2009) and impact greatly on their homework practices (Kukk et al., 2015; Tam & Chan, 2016).

Teachers consider that homework serves both academic and non-academic functions (Davidovitch & Yavich, 2017; Tam & Chan, 2016). In terms of academic purposes, homework provides opportunities for practice and reinforcement of classroom instruction (Medwell & Wray, 2019; Ndebele, 2018), which serves to consolidate children's learning (Pfeiffer, 2018) and improve retention and understanding (Cooper, 2001a). Homework is also assigned to extend learning, provide enrichment for learners (Ndebele, 2018; Tam & Chan, 2016), improve their interest (Kukk et al., 2015), and increase their knowledge (Painter, 2003). It allows children to learn according to their individual ability and learning style (Kidwell, 2004), while encouraging them to use resources such as the library and internet (Ndebele, 2018). Teachers also perceive homework as a useful means of assessment (Snead & Burris, 2016; Tam & Chan, 2016), viewing it as a significant indicator of children's achievement (Xu & Yuan, 2003). The main non-academic function of homework is facilitating personal development (Tam & Chan, 2016). Teachers believe that homework cultivates a good work ethic (Holte, 2016) and improves children's motivation and self-regulation (Trautwein, Niggli, Schnyder, & Lüdtke, 2009), the main reason, in fact, that many teachers assign homework (Warton, 2001). Homework fosters the development of autonomous study habits which increase self-discipline, time management, responsibility, and accountability (Scott & Glaze, 2017). It is thought to improve children's attitude towards school (Bempechat, 2004) and dispositions towards learning (Cooper, 2007). Homework is also used as punishment which reinforces the view that it is to be endured rather than valued (Rosário et al., 2015). Homework enhances parent-child and home-school communication and cooperation (Medwell & Wray, 2019) and serves as a means of informing parents of children's capabilities (Holte, 2016), although we note that Kiely et al. (2019), in the Irish context, found that parents' involvement in their children's homework may not be beneficial in situations where homework is considered a source of stress.

Teachers play the predominant role in the design and implementation of homework (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001; Tam & Chan, 2016). Their homework practices and perceptions influence children's motivation, effort, behaviour, and achievement (Trautwein et al., 2009), therefore, warranting the same attention as other pedagogical practices, considering the potential positive and negative consequences (McReynolds, 2005). Homework must have a clear purpose (McGlynn & Kelly, 2019; Vatterott, 2011) and be designed such that its intended goals are achieved (Buyukalan & Altinay, 2018). Homework designed for specific purposes increases children's engagement and achievement (Rosário, Núñez, Vallejo, Nunes, Cunha, Fuentes, & Valle, 2018). Moreover, research evidence recommends that these purposes be clearly communicated to children (McGlynn & Kelly, 2019) and that the task assigned be compatible with the planned purpose of the homework (Coutts, 2004).

Well-designed homework assignments are meaningful (Tam & Chan, 2016), purposeful (Ndebele, 2018), relevant (Flunger, Trautwein, Nagengast, Lüdtke, Niggli, & Schnyder, 2017) and engaging (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001). Homework requires careful planning in order to meet children's specific needs (Turanli, 2009) and must be differentiated in order to ensure success (McGlynn & Kelly, 2019). Teachers, however, typically assign the same homework to all children (Holte, 2016; Trautwein & Lüdtke, 2009). Pupil choice and ownership promote intrinsic motivation and autonomy (Kiely et al., 2019; Kohn, 2006;

Vatterott, 2010). Children's age and ability are considerations in deciding the amount of homework to assign (Ndebele, 2018; Ramdass & Zimmerman, 2011), while ensuring that tasks are developmentally appropriate and of a reasonable difficulty level (Pfeiffer, 2018; Walk & Lassak, 2017). A degree of challenge is necessary but too much causes frustration (Corno, 2000).

The most important consideration is the type of homework assigned (Coutts, 2004), ensuring that it is enjoyable, experiential, and inspires creativity (Bembenuddy, 2011). Conceptual, long-range assignments, such as projects, are preferable to tedious drill and practice (Buyukalan & Altinay, 2018). Children are more motivated by these innovative tasks (Rosário et al., 2018) and they also promote collaboration (Corno, 2000). Most teachers, however, assign practice rather than project work (Costa, Cardoso, Lacerda, Lopes, & Gomes, 2016). Experienced teachers tend to favour assignments that encourage thinking and creativity over traditional drill and practice (Tam & Chan, 2016). Although teachers recognise the benefits of extension-type assignments they cite limited time, large class sizes, and children's ability as reasons for not assigning them (Rosário et al., 2015). Teachers tend to prioritise core subjects when assigning homework (Costa et al., 2016; Medwell & Wray, 2019). Activities ought to lend themselves to completion at home (Kohn, 2006). The nature and characteristics of assignments significantly influence motivation, effort, and achievement (Trautwein, Lüdtke, Kastens, & Köller, 2006). Negative attitudes may be due more to the type of assignment than resistance to homework itself (Warton, 2001). Children who perceive homework as being of high quality invest greater effort and are more motivated to complete it (Ramdass & Zimmerman, 2011; Rosário et al., 2018).

It is necessary for teachers to monitor homework completion (Bembenuddy, 2011) and provide feedback (Rosário et al., 2018; Xu, 2013). The way in which teachers structure and monitor homework affects children's motivation and behaviour (Trautwein, Lüdtke, Schnyder, & Niggli, 2006). Strict homework control by teachers can have negative consequences on motivation, effort, and emotions, as do external rewards (Trautwein & Lüdtke, 2009). Providing constructive and informative feedback increases children's understanding (Corno, 2000), as well as improving motivation, interest, effort, emotions, and completion rates (Xu, 2011). Teachers do not provide enough feedback (Hallam, 2004).

Children's perceptions of homework

Children have mixed views about homework and experience a wide range of emotions when completing it (Warton, 2001). For some, it is regarded as one of the most negative aspects of schooling (Cooper, 2001b; Van Voorhis, 2011a) and viewed less favourably than all other activities (Xu & Yuan, 2003). Children who view homework negatively are more likely to have a negative attitude to school in general (Warton, 2001). Some children, however, display a positive attitude towards homework, finding it enjoyable (Costa et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2017). These children tend to be more successful at school (Kukk et al., 2015). Children's attitude to homework determines how much they complete (Xu, 2005) but is unrelated to ability and home background (Cooper et al., 2001). Girls generally have a more positive attitude towards homework than boys do (Cooper et al., 2006; Xu, 2006). Older children tend to be less enthusiastic than their younger counterparts (Hong,

Peng, & Rowell, 2009; Trautwein et al., 2006). According to Xu (2005), children have a more negative attitude towards homework than either parents or teachers, whereas Davidovitch and Yavich (2017) argue that children's attitudes are less positive than teachers' but more so than parents' attitudes.

Children tend to view homework in terms of proximal costs and rewards rather than long-term utility and importance. The meaning they attach to it is very different to that of adults (Coutts, 2004; Tam, 2009). They resent its curtailment of other more enjoyable activities (Cooper et al., 2006; Warton, 2001), considering it time-consuming (Letterman, 2013), stressful (Coutts, 2004), and boring (Madjar et al., 2016). Although children complain about homework, they perceive it as necessary (Costa et al., 2016; Xu, 2005). They often complete it for extrinsic reasons such as securing approval from parents and teachers (Hutchison, 2011) and avoiding punishment (Corno, 2000). Homework tasks are often perceived by children as routine and mundane (Scott & Glaze, 2017; Turanli, 2009), to which they ascribe little interest (Warton, 2001) or commitment (Smith, 2000). Children, however, are generally accepting of homework and take it for granted as part of their daily lives (Farrell & Danby, 2015; Wingard & Forsberg, 2009).

Conclusion

Homework provides an important link between home and school, playing a significant role in home-school relations (Gonida & Cortina, 2014; Holte, 2016). It is a practice prescribed by the school and enforced in the home (Farrell & Danby, 2015), resulting in a complex, multi-dimensional relationship influenced by parents, teachers, and children (Forsberg, 2007). Not only does it involve parents' regulation of children but also the school's regulation of family life (Kiely et al., 2019; Wingard & Forsberg, 2009). Teachers control the homework process as it is assigned by them and completed in accordance with their requirements (Farrell & Danby, 2015; Trautwein & Lüdtke, 2009). Homework can be viewed as an assignment to parents as they are expected to ensure its completion (Forsberg, 2007; Smith, 2000). Many feel pressurised by school to fulfil the task (Solomon et al., 2002). Homework, however, can foster positive communication if teachers, parents, and children understand their roles (Van Voorhis, 2011a; Williams et al., 2017).

Homework is a three-phase process which is initiated and evaluated at school but performed at home without direct teacher supervision or support (Holte, 2016; Trautwein & Köller, 2003). Children are responsible for regulating their own learning, sometimes with parental support (Katz, Kaplan, & Gueta, 2010; Ramdass & Zimmerman, 2011). In some cases, discontinuities exist between home and school, while, in others, home and school practices are congruent (Corno, 2000). Teachers regulate homework indirectly. While there is no immediate teacher control in the home setting, the teacher, although not physically present, remains influential (Farrell & Danby, 2015). Conversely, parents assume an active role (Trautwein et al., 2006). Therefore, homework involves joint supervision by parent and teacher with the child acting as the link between both (Forsberg, 2007). Finally, homework curtails children's leisure time (Katz et al., 2010) and demands a willingness on their part to learn outside of school hours. In contrast to adults, who either set the tasks or supervise their completion, children are required to do the actual work (Warton, 2001).

Policy recommendations

In terms of government policy, we recommend that a national policy or set of guidelines be developed for both primary and post-primary school sectors, in an effort to standardise homework practices. Despite evolutions in policy, practices may change very slowly, if at all (Boyle, Flynn, & Hanafin, 2018). The influence of policy paradigms is greater when there is “coherent interpretive force” (O’Sullivan, 2005, p. 89) and we suggest, therefore, an organic development of national policy, i.e., one that would draw on the perceptions and practices of those most involved in the homework process. Such a policy would ideally be formed, therefore, in consultation with schools, teachers, parents, and children. We turn to the specifics of those now.

Regarding school policy, we align ourselves with others (e.g., Jackson & Harbison, 2014; Kiely et al., 2019; Ndebele, 2018; Pfeiffer, 2018) in recommending that a school’s homework policy be developed in partnership with all stakeholders – teachers, parents, and children. It should provide a clearly defined rationale for homework, making explicit its functions and purposes. We emphasise the importance of setting out the roles of teachers, parents, and children in order to align the expectations and behaviours of all. We suggest that a school’s homework policy promotes the strengthening of home-school communication to facilitate parental homework involvement, to enhance parents’ commitment to becoming involved, and to empower them by conveying to them the importance of their participation. We suggest that it also reinforces the need for teachers to communicate regularly to children and parents their goals for assigning homework so that they recognise its significance. Equally important is the obligation on teachers to be receptive to the views and concerns of parents and children regarding homework. The necessity for the home-school relationship to be one of partnership and reciprocity cannot be overemphasised. We recommend that the policy covers the provision of guidance to parents on providing practical, educational, and emotional homework support for their children, whereby they are given advice regarding the structuring and monitoring of homework and offered clear strategies to encourage more constructive involvement. The development of a national homework policy should also incorporate the implementation of initiatives, such as training programmes addressing core aspects of parental homework involvement, to empower parents and to support them in their involvement.

In devising a school’s homework policy, we recommend that careful consideration be given to homework design and implementation, with the aim of ensuring that teachers design homework that is meaningful, purposeful, and interesting, that which reinforces learning without being overly repetitive. Teachers need also to be mindful that the amount is appropriate and that the difficulty level is such that it is easy enough for children to complete independently but challenging enough to be stimulating. Differentiation of homework to meet the unique needs and circumstances of children is recommended, as is continuity between classwork and homework. We also advocate regular correction of homework and the provision of timely feedback. Children are motivated by innovative tasks and more creative approaches to homework. Given the negative views that many children hold about homework and that pupil choice and ownership promote autonomy and intrinsic motivation, we recommend that children have some say in the assignment of homework to them.

In implementing homework policy, we suggest that schools encourage teachers to reflect on their homework practices and to critically evaluate the homework they assign, as well as providing time for them to explore collaboratively homework-related issues. It is important that teachers have a shared vision and collaborate on strategies to enhance homework practices. Consistent transparency is recommended in how a school's homework policy is disseminated amongst all stakeholders and implemented. Finally, we propose that initial teacher education programmes consider a coherent input on homework research and practice, and that continuing professional development on all aspects of homework be provided for practising teachers.

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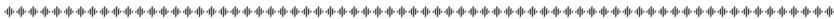
⇒ I dtreo an tsealbhaithe ar bhealach iomlánaíoch: Forbairt na foirme i gcomhthéacs na cumarsáide sa suíomh lán-Ghaeilge ⇒

⇒ SYLVAINÉ NÍ AOGÁIN, CAITRÍONA NÍ MHURCHÚ AGUS
T.J. Ó CEALLAIGH ⇒

Coimriú

Tugtar le fios go comhsheasmhach sa taighde go bhfuil go leor buanna ag baint leis an gcóras tumoideachais amhail, scileanna cognaíocha, gnóthachtáil acadúil mar aon le forbairt teanga agus litearthachta. É sin ráite, aithnítear i roinnt staidéar go mbíonn dúshláin ag baint le cur i bhfeidhm éifeachtach an chórais tumoideachais, go háirithe ó thaobh shealbhú na teanga de. Maítear go mbíonn deacrachtaí ag daltaí tumoideachais cruinneas sa dara teanga (T2) a fhorbairt agus go dtarlaíonn sé seo go páirteach toisc nach mbíonn cuir chuige teagaisc chórasacha ag múinteoirí tumoideachais chun fócas ar theanga a chomhtháthú trasna an churaclaim thumoideachais i mbealaí atá córasach agus comhthéacsúil. Tá sé tugtha le fios sa litríocht le fada an lá gur chóir go mbeadh cothromaíocht idir múineadh na foirme agus múineadh an bhrí sa chomhthéacs tumoideachais ar mhaithe le hardchaighdeán scileanna gabhchumais agus ginchumais a chothú i measc daltaí tumoideachais. Ag eascairt as taighde sa ghort, díreoidh an t-alt seo ar chur chuige oideolaíochta amháin a thacódh le múinteoirí an cur chuige frithchothromaithe seo a chur i bhfeidhm go rathúil sa chomhthéacs tumoideachais.

Eochairfhocail: **Sealbhú an dara teanga, tumoideachas, scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge, luath-thumadh iomlán, teagasc foirm-dhírithe.**



Réamhrá

Tá rath agus bláth ar an gcóras tumoideachais anseo in Éirinn agus ar fud na cruinne le trí scór bliain anuas. Is iomaí staidéar atá curtha i gcrích le fada an lá a cheiliúran tairbhe agus buanna an chórais tumoideachais go hidirnáisiúnta. Ach i dtaobh shealbhú an dara teanga, cé go léirítear go seasmhach sa taighde go n-éiríonn le daltaí tumoideachais ardchaighdeán a bhaint amach sna scileanna gabhchumais (éisteacht agus léitheoireacht) sa dara teanga (T2), ní mór suntas a thabhairt go ndealraítear go dteipeann orthu, uaireanta, an t-ardchaighdeán ceanna a bhaint amach sna scileanna ginchumais (labhairt agus scríbhneoireacht). Is é sin le rá go dtugtar le fios go gcruthaíonn úsáid chruinn an T2 fadhbanna casta do dhaltaí tumoideachais. Dá réir sin, is é príomhaidhm an pháipéir seo breathnú go criticiúil ar fhéidearthachtaí oideolaíochta d'fhonn na dúshláin chruinnis i suíomh an tumoideachais in Éirinn a leigheas.

Ar mhaithe le haidhm an pháipéir a fhiosrú, féachfar, ar an gcéad dul síos, ar an bhfás agus ar an bhforbairt atá tagtha ar an múnla tumoideachais in Éirinn le blianta beaga anuas, le béim shonrach ar an múnla luath-thumtha iomláin. Ina dhiaidh sin, cuirfear sintéisiú taighde os comhair an léitheora ar na buanna agus ar na dúshláin a bhaineann leis an múnla, ó thaobh shealbhú na teanga de ach go háirithe. Ansin, féachfar ar theagasc foirm-dhírthe mar réiteach féidearthachta ar na dúshláin oideolaíochta agus foghlama seo. Ar deireadh, cuirfear cur chuige oideolaíochta amháin in iúl chun cur i bhfeidhm na hoibre seo a threorú go praiticiúil sa chomhthéacs tumoideachais. Táthar ag súil go dtacóidh an páipéar seo le múinteoirí tumoideachais caighdeán T2 daltaí tumoideachais a fhorbairt, a threisiú agus a neartú.

Múnla an tumoideachais

Is gné amháin den chontanam oideachais dhátheangaigh é an tumoideachas ina dtumar an dalta sa sprioctheanga, teanga atá difriúil ó mháthairtheanga an dalta (Ó hAiniféin, 2007). Sainnithníonn Lyster (2007) an tumoideachas mar fhoirm den oideachas dátheangach a bhfuil sé mar aidhm aige dátheangachas suimitheach a sholáthar. Tarlaíonn dátheangachas suimitheach nuair a chuirtear an sprioctheanga (T2) leis an máthairtheanga (T1) gan an T1 a chailleadh (Baker & Wright, 2017).

Léirítear sa taighde gurb iad na haidhmeanna a bhaineann le cláir thumoideachais ná dátheangachas suimitheach agus délitearthacht (litearthacht sa T1 agus sa T2) a bhaint amach, mar aon le gnóthachtáil acadúil agus tuiscint idirchultúrtha (Cammarata & Tedick, 2012). Ag teacht go cruinn leis an gcur síos seo, tugtar cuntas sa litríocht (Swain & Johnson, 1997; Swain & Lapkin, 2005) de thréithe sainaitheanta a bhaineann leis an tumoideachas ar bhonn idirnáisiúnta.

1. Is í an tumtheanga meán an teagaisc.
2. Is ionann an curaclam tumoideachais agus an curaclam áitiúil don mháthairtheanga (T1).
3. Cuirtear tacaíocht fhollasach ar fáil do na teangacha baile go léir.
4. Tá sé mar aidhm ag an gclár go mbainfidh na daltaí dátheangachas suimitheach amach.
5. Den chuid is mó, baineann an teagmháil leis an dara teanga leis an seomra ranga amháin.
6. Bíonn an leibhéal céanna cumais teanga (leibhéal a bhíonn teoranta go leor) ag na daltaí nuair a thosaíonn siad amach ar an gcóras.
7. Bíonn na múinteoirí dátheangach.
8. Ní mór do chultúr an tseomra ranga aitheantas a thabhairt do na cultúir éagsúla a bhaineann leis na pobail inimirceacha go léir as a dtagann na daltaí.

Tuigtear cé go mbíonn tromlach na dtréithe seo a leanas le sonrú i bhformhór na gclár tumoideachais ar fud na cruinne, go bhféadfaí mion-éagsúlachtaí teacht chun solais eatarthu ag brath ar riachtanais na ndaltaí a bhfreastalaíonn ar an gclár.

An tumoideachas go hidirnáisiúnta

Tá cláir thumoideachais ar an bhfód le breis agus trí scór bliain anuas. Tháinig múnla an tumoideachais chun cinn den chéad uair in St. Lambert, bruachbhaile de chuid Montréal i gCeanada sna 1960í (Lambert & Tucker, 1972) nuair a d'iarr grúpa tuismitheoirí ar oifigigh riaracháin naíonra tumoideachais trí mheán na Fraincise (ón gcéad lá scoile) a bhunú (Johnson & Swain, 1997). Ba iad aidhmeanna na naíonraí sin ná go mbeadh na daltaí cumasach sa Fhraincise; go mbainfidís gnáthspriocanna acadúla an churaclaim amach ach gan dochar ar bith a dhéanamh d'fhoghlaim an Bhéarla (an mháthairtheanga); go gcothóidís meas ar chultúr lucht labhartha na Fraincise i gCeanada mar aon le cultúr lucht labhartha an Bhéarla (Baker & Wright, 2017). Baineadh na haidhmeanna oideachasúla seo amach (Lambert & Tucker, 1972) agus mar thoradh rath an chláir, scaipeadh an múnla tumoideachais seo go háiteanna eile i gCeanada go tapa. Ó shin i leith, tá an tumoideachas tar éis leathnú timpeall Cheanada, chomh fada le Meiriceá agus roinnt ceantar eile san Eoraip, Éire ina measc.

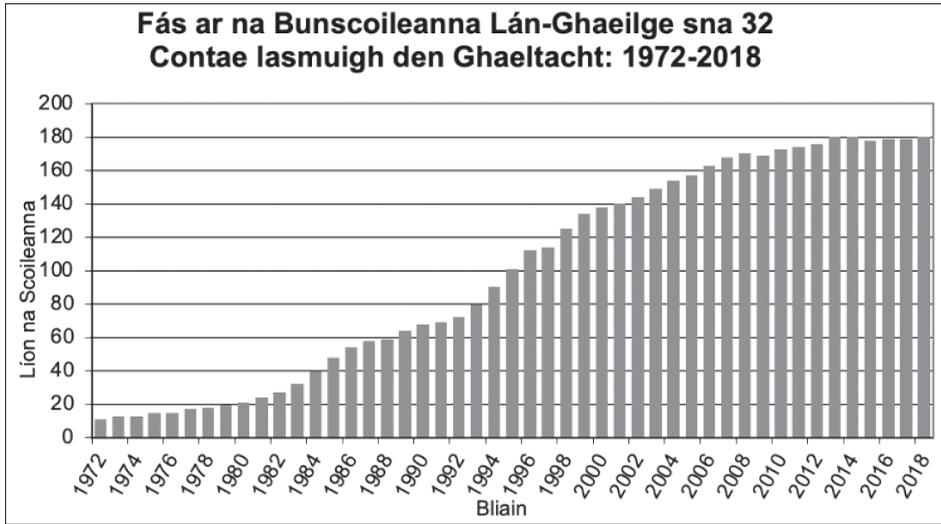
An tumoideachas in Éirinn

Is díol spéise é go raibh an luath-thumadh iomlán i bhfeidhm in Éirinn i ranganna na Naíonán ó bunaíodh an Stát in 1922. Tháinig meath ar an tiomantas seo don Ghaeilge sna 1960í agus de réir a chéile, cuireadh níos lú ama ar fáil sna scoileanna chun Gaeilge a mhúineadh agus chun múineadh trí mheán na Gaeilge (Ó Duibhir, 2018).

Le linn na 1970í, bhí tuismitheoirí in Éirinn a raibh lagmhisneach orthu de bharr an laghdaithe seo ar mhúineadh na Gaeilge sna scoileanna náisiúnta agus ar chaighdeán na Gaeilge a bhí á bhaint amach ag a bpáistí dá bharr. Is ar an gcúis seo a spreagadh feachtas i measc na dtuismitheoirí seo chun naíonraí lán-Ghaeilge agus chun scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge a bhunú. Ba thuismitheoirí a chuir an ghluaiseacht seo ar bun, ón ithir aníos (Ó Laoire in Ó hAiniféin, 2008, lch. 11).

Sa lá atá inniu ann, is díol suntais é go bhfuil an-rath agus éileamh ar na bunscoileanna lán-Ghaeilge in Éirinn agus go bhfuil síormhéadú tagtha ar líon na mbunscoileanna lán-Ghaeilge in Éirinn le blianta beaga anuas, mar atá léirithe i bhFigiúr 1. Ar mhaithe le comhthéacs an fháis a chur in iúl go soiléir, ní mór a lua nach raibh ach 10 mbunscoil lán-Ghaeilge lasmuigh den Ghaeltacht in 1972 agus anois, tuairiscítear go bhfuil 149 mbunscoil lán-Ghaeilge lonnaithe lasmuigh den Ghaeltacht. Lena chois sin, tugtar le fios go raibh bunscoil lán-Ghaeilge i ngach uile chontae in Éirinn den chéad uair i rith na scoilbhliana 2005-2006 (Ó Muircheartaigh & Hickey, 2008) agus go bhfuil 37,721 dalta ag freastal ar bhunscoil lán-Ghaeilge lasmuigh den Ghaeltacht in 2020/21 (Rannóg Staitisticí na Roinne Oideachais, 2021).

Figiúr 1. Fás na Gaelscolaíochta in Éirinn ó 1972 go 2018



(www.gaeoideachas.ie) (Faighite 4 Márta, 2019)

Scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge lasmuigh den Ghaeltact

Feidhmíonn an bhunscoil lán-Ghaeilge faoi ghnáthrialacha na Roinne Oideachais (Ní Mhaoláin, 1998). I gcomhthéacs na mbunscoileanna lán-Ghaeilge lasmuigh den Ghaeltact, ar a bhfuil an t-alt seo dírithe, tumtar daltaí ó chúlra na mórtheanga tromlaigh (an Béarla den chuid is mó) sa mhionteanga (an Ghaeilge) ón gcéad lá ar scoil ar aghaidh (Ó Duibhir, Ní Chuaig, Ní Thuairisg & Ó Brolcháin, 2015). Ina theannta sin, bíonn sé de rogha ag na bunscoileanna lán-Ghaeilge tréimhse tumoideachais iomláin a fheidhmiú go dtí deireadh rang na naíonán sinsearach (CNCM, 2019). Is é an luath-thumadh iomlán a bhíonn ar siúl i bhformhór na mbunscoileanna lán-Ghaeilge. Is é sin le rá go mbíonn an dalta tumtha sa sprioctheanga (T₁) agus go gcuirtear siar teagasc na mórtheanga (T₂) go dtí an tríú nó an ceathrú bliain sa bhunscoil.

Le linn na mblianta tosaigh seo, forbraíonn próiseas sealbhaithe an T₂ i measc na ndaltaí tumoideachais. Dar le Ó Duibhir agus Cummins (2012), foghlaimíonn daltaí an T₂ sa bhealach céanna is a fhoghlaimíonn siad a T₁; trí idirghníomhú le daoine eile ina dtimpeallacht chun riachtanas cumarsáide a shásamh. Tugtar le fios sa litríocht nach mbíonn cur chuige teagaisc foirmiúil oiriúnach do dhaltaí óga agus iad ag foghlaim agus go bhfoghlaimíonn siad níos fearr nuair a bhíonn siad gníomhach le linn foghlama (Bennett, 2005). Thairis sin, creideann Uí Chonghaile (2012) gur chóir do chláir luath-thumtha iomláin a bheith páiste-lárnach, iomlánaíoch, bunaithe ar spraoi, idirghníomhach agus dírithe ar an teanga. Ar an ábhar sin, is creatchuraclam luath-óige é *Aistear* do pháistí ó bhreith go sé bliana d'aois a chuir an Chomhairle Náisiúnta Curaclaim agus Measúnachta (CNCM) ar fáil d'earnáil na luath-óige in Éirinn (CNCM, 2009). Sa chláir seo, leagtar béim mhór ar an spraoi faoi threoir. Tugtar deiseanna do dhaltaí, tríd an gclár *Aistear*, scileanna

labhartha a fhorbairt agus a chleachtadh i gcomhthéacs atá nádúrtha dóibh (CNCM, 2009). I suíomh an tumoideachais in Éirinn, cé go dtugann an creachturclam *Aistear* deis do dhaltáí naíonáin a scileanna T2 a fhorbairt agus a shealbhú i gcomhthéacs spraoibh-unaithe, creideann múinteoirí tumoideachais go bhfuil ról an mhúinteora sa phróiseas *Aistear* ríthábhachtach do shealbhú scileanna na tumtheanga (Ní Fhéinne, 2019). Is díol suntais é, áfach, gur tháinig sé chun solais i dtaighde Uí Fhéinne (2019) nach mbíonn múinteoirí tumoideachais soiléir faoi ról an mhúinteora le linn *Aistear* de bharr easpa forbartha gairmiúla maidir le *Aistear* a chur i bhfeidhm sa seomra ranga tumoideachais.

Maidir le cathain ar chóir tús a chur le múineadh an Bhéarla sna bunscoileanna lán-Ghaeilge, is í seo an treoir a thugtar i gCuraclam Teanga na Bunscoile (2019): “Cuirfear siar baint amach na dTorthaí Foghlama do T2 na scoile (Béarla) go dtí tar éis na tréimhse tumtha nuair a chabhrófar le páistí na scileanna atá sealbhaithe acu sa Ghaeilge a aistriú go dtí an Béarla” (CNCM, 2019, lch. 21). É sin ráite, tugann Ó Duibhir et al. (2015) le fios go gcuirtear tús le múineadh an Bhéarla ar feadh 30 nóiméad in aghaidh an lae in thart ar 10% de na bunscoileanna lán-Ghaeilge. Ach ar an iomlán, nuair a thosaítear ar an mBéarla a mhúineadh sna scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge, comhlíonann sé thart ar 14% den lá scoile agus leantar leis an gcéatadán sin go seasmhach go dtí deireadh na tréimhse bunscolaíochta (Ó Duibhir, 2018). Is trí Ghaeilge a mhúinteoir gach ábhar scoile suas go Rang 6, ach amháin an Béarla sna scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge seo. Is í an Ghaeilge teanga chumarsáide na scoile agus teanga spraoi an chlóis.

Suílící an tumoideachais

Faoi mar a luadh, tá an-rath ar an gcóras tumoideachais in Éirinn agus ar fud na cruinne. Tá raidhse staidéar curtha i gcrích a léiríonn gurb iomaí buntáiste a bhaineann leis an gcóras tumoideachais, an múnla luath-thumtha iomláin ach go háirithe. Léiríonn tromlach na staidéar seo go mbaianeann daltaí tumoideachais leas amach i dtaobh na forbartha cognaíocha, féinmheasa agus feasachta maidir le teangacha agus cultúir eile (Baker & Wright, 2017; Ó Ceallaigh, 2013). Dealraítear gur ceann de na tréithe is suntasaí de chláir thumoideachais is ea go gcuirtear an fhoghlaim agus an dátheangachas suimitheach chun cinn (Fortune & Tedick, 2008; Ó Ceallaigh, 2016; Tedick & Lyster, 2020) de bharr go sealbhaíonn daltaí tumoideachais an T2 gan dochar ar bith do chur chun cinn na T1 nó forbairt na scileanna acadúla eile. Mar atá curtha in iúl níos túisce, ar mhaithe le cleachtas an luath-thumtha iomláin a chur i bhfeidhm go tairbheach i gcomhthéacs na hÉireann, go hiondúil, cuirtear siar múineadh na T1 (an Béarla) go dtí deireadh na tréimhse lántumtha (CNCM, 2019). Cé go n-aithníonn an taighde idirnáisiúnta go mbíonn moill ar fhorbairt scileanna T1 (léamh, scríobh, litriú) an dalta tumoideachais ar feadh seal ag an tús dá bharr (Baker & Wright, 2017), is mór an t-ábhar misnigh é go dtugtar le fios go n-éiríonn le daltaí tumoideachais comhchaighdeán nó caighdeán níos airde a bhaint amach sna scileanna T1 ná daltaí ar comhaois leo in oideachas príomhshrutha eile faoi dheireadh na bunscolaíochta (Baker & Wright, 2017; Gilleece, Shiel, Clerkin & Millar, 2011). Anuas air sin, aithnítear go sroicheann daltaí tumoideachais caighdeán ardlíofachta sa sprioctheanga agus maítear go mbíonn a scileanna gabhchumais (éisteacht agus léitheoireacht) ar aon chéim, nó geal le, scileanna an chainteora dúchais (Ní Dhiorbháin, 2016). Is díol suntais é seo, i gcomhthéacs na hÉireann ach go háirithe, mar is líon fíorbheag daltaí tumoideachais, taobh amuigh de cheantair Ghaeltachta, a bhfuil Gaeilge acu mar theanga bhaile.

Duáilcís an tumoideachais

In ainneoin na dtorthaí dearfacha seo, ní córas gan cháim é an córas tumoideachais in Éirinn ná go hidirnáisiúnta agus tá sé tugtha le tuiscint le fada an lá sa taighde go bhfuil dúshláin ar leith fós le sárú sna córais tumoideachais ar mhaithe leis an leas is fearr a bhaint astu ó thaobh na foghlama agus na forbartha de (Ó Ceallaigh & Ní Shéaghdha, 2017; Cammarata & Ó Ceallaigh, 2020). Tá mórán taighde curtha i gcrích le breis agus scór bliain anuas a léiríonn go mbaineann daltaí tumoideachais úsáid as stór focal teoranta mar aon le gramadach shimplithe a bhíonn go mór faoi shrian theanga na scoile (Ó Ceallaigh & Ní Shéaghdha, 2017). Lena chois sin, tá fianaise ann a léiríonn nach n-éiríonn le dalta tumoideachais gnéithe nádúrtha den teanga a shealbhú ná a úsáid ar bhonn cumarsáideach go mion minic (Ó Ceallaigh & Ní Shéaghdha, 2017). Ach bíodh sin mar atá, ag eascairt as taighde an ghoirt, d'fheadfaí a mhaíomh gurb í forbairt na scileanna ginchumais i measc daltaí tumoideachais ceann de na gnéithe is dúshlánaí ar fad atá le sárú i gcomhthéacs an tumoideachais. Cé go bhfuil sé tugtha le fios go mbaineann daltaí caighdeán líofachta an-ard sa T₂ amach sna córais tumoideachais, deirtear go mbíonn dúshláin agus deacrachtaí acu i leith shealbhú an chruinnis (Ó Duibhir, 2018). Go hachomair, is gnách gur fearr na scileanna gabhchumais teanga ná na scileanna ginchumais teanga a bhíonn ag daltaí tumoideachais. Agus, is é an rud is iontaí fós go ndeirtear go labhraítear 'idirtheanga' (Selinker, 1972) i measc daltaí tumoideachais. Is éard is brí léi ná teanga a bhfuil líofacht teanga go mór le sonrú inti ach easpa cruinnis agus bíonn sí go mór faoi thionchar mháthairtheanga an dalta (Ní Dhiorbháin & Ó Duibhir, 2017; Ní Dhiorbháin, 2016). Déanann Genesee (1994, lch.5) scéal an T₂ i measc daltaí tumoideachais a mheas mar "... linguistically truncated, albeit functionally effective.' Dar le taighdeoirí agus le hoideachasóirí in Éirinn, is cúis imní é caighdeán shealbhú na scileanna ginchumais nó an chruinnis i measc daltaí tumoideachais (Ó Duibhir, 2018; Walsh, 2007) agus ní foláir cruacheisteanna a iniúchadh ar mhaithe leis an dúshlán a leigheas.

Dúshláin an tsealbhairthe teanga

Is de bhuíochas taighdeoirí agus oideachasóirí a bhfuil claochlú tagtha ar ár gcuid tuisceana i leith an tsealbhairthe teanga sa suíomh tumoideachais le dornán blianta anuas. Ar an gcéad dul síos, tuigtear go mbíonn brú ar dhaltaí cumarsáid a dhéanamh ar an toirt trí mheán na sprioctheanga sa chóras tumoideachais. Is le linn na cumarsáide seo a bhféadfadh iallach a bheith ar dhaltaí foirmeacha, struchtúir nó foclóir den T₂ a úsáid nach bhfuil sealbhaithe acu go cruinn fós (Ó Duibhir, 2018). Mar sin de, d'fhéadfadh daltaí filleadh ar ghnéithe atá sealbhaithe acu sa mháthairtheanga chun tacú leo cumarsáid a dhéanamh sa sprioctheanga. Le linn na gcásanna seo, thiocfadh úsáid na n-idirtheangacha go mór chun solais i gcaint an dalta tumoideachais. Anuas air sin, de bharr na hinniúlachta próiseála agus na n-acmhainní cognaíocha teoranta a bhíonn ag daltaí tumoideachais agus an T₂ á shealbhú, uaireanta ní bhíonn an t-am nó an spás acu an t-ionchur teanga a phróiseáil ar mhaithe le foirm agus le brí. Ní nach ionadh, mar sin de, go dtugtar tús áite do phróiseáil na brí agus fágtar sin, go hiondúil, nach ndéantar próiseáil ar fhoirm na teanga (Van Patten, 1996; Sharwood Smith, 1993). Lena chois sin, léirítear go mbíonn easpa spreagtha sóisialta ag daltaí tumoideachais barr feabhais a chur ar a gcuid scileanna ginchumais (a gcuid cruinnis) a

túisce is a n-éiríonn leo scileanna cumarsáide leordhóthanaí a shealbhú sa sprioctheanga (Ó Duibhir, 2018; Ní Dhíorbháin & Ó Duibhir, 2017). Mar bharr ar an donas, áirítear, go mion minic, go labhraítear idirtheangacha lochtacha i measc daltaí tumoideachais agus iad ag idirghníomhú lena chéile sa chomhthéacs scoile (Ó Duibhir, 2018). Treisíonn na hidirghníomhartha idirtheangacha seo foirmeacha míchruinne na ndaltaí tumoideachais. Is fiú a lua má leantar leis na foirmeacha míchruinne seo ar feadh seal i T2 an dalta, déantar iad a uathobriú agus bíonn sé rídheacair ar dhaltaí agus ar mhúinteoirí athrú a nochtadh orthu ina dhiaidh sin. Is ag an staid seo i bpróiseas sealbhaithe T2 an dalta a ndeirtear go n-iontaisíonn na foirmeacha lochtacha den T2 sa chuimhne fhadtéarmach.

Os a choinne sin, ní mór a lua go dtugtar le fios nach gcuireann múinteoirí tumoideachais brú leordhóthanach ar dhaltaí tumoideachais cumarsáid chruinn a chur chun cinn sa seomra ranga (Ó Ceallaigh, Ó Laoire & Uí Chonghaile, 2019; Ó Duibhir, 2018). Uaireanta, bíonn drogall ar mhúinteoirí briseadh isteach ar líofacht chainte nó cumarsáid na ndaltaí chun earráidí gramadaí a cheartú (Lyster, 2007). Mar sin de, go mion minic, tugtar neamhaird d'earráidí gramadaí na ndaltaí ar mhaithe le líofacht teanga na ndaltaí a threisiú agus a neartú. Is ceist íogair í ó thaobh shealbhú an T2 de mar ní féidir líofacht nó cruinneas na teanga a idirscaradh óna chéile. Tá nasc dofhuascaillte eatarthu de bharr go dteastaíonn ardchaighdeán líofachta agus cruinnis ó dhaltaí le bheith ina n-úsáideoirí inniúla teanga. Ina theannta sin, cuirtear in iúl uaireanta, go mbíonn easpa muiníne ag múinteoirí ina gcuid inniúlachta gramadaí féin agus go gcuireann sé sin bac orthu earráidí gramadaí na ndaltaí a cheartú go minic (Ó Ceallaigh et al., 2019).

Mar sin de, leis an taighde seo ar fad san áireamh, an cheist rithábhachtach a thagann chun solais, dar ndóigh, ná conas is féidir foirm na teanga a fhorbairt go héifeachtach i seomraí ranga tumoideachais ar bhealaí nach gcuireann isteach ar an gcleachtas seomra ranga atá idirghníomhach agus dírithe ar an mbrí?

An teagasc foirm-dhírthe: Féidearthachtaí oideolaíochta

Ag eascirt as an taighde, d'fhéadfaí a mhaíomh gurbh as léirithe níos follasaí ar eolas a shealbháítear go hintuigthe nach ndéantar anailís air a d'eascródh an fhoghlaim sa tumoideachas seachas as léirithe follasacha ar eolas faisnéiseach. Mar shampla, i samhail an luath-thumtha iomláin den oideachas, mar a bhíonn in úsáid i bPoblacht na hÉireann, spreagtar na daltaí an Ghaeilge a úsáid ar bhealach gnásúil roimh dóibh eolas faisnéiseach a shealbhú. Ar an ábhar sin, ní mór don mhúinteoir tumoideachais, i rang na naíonán mar shampla, cabhrú le hanailís agus machnamh a dhéanamh ar an eolas gnásúil sin agus eolas faisnéiseach a fhorbairt agus, le linn dó é sin a dhéanamh, a spreagadh chun léirithe nua atá cosúil leis an sprioctheanga a fhorbairt a rachaidh san iomaíocht le foirmeacha idirtheanga a bhfuil rochtain níos éasca orthu ar fáil (Ranta & Lyster, 2007).

Lena chois sin, cé go sealbháítear foirmeacha faoi leith den T2 go hintuigthe agus go nádúrtha sa suíomh tumoideachais de bhuíochas an ionchuir teanga saibhre a bhíonn ar fáil do dhaltaí (Ranta & Lyster, 2018), tá sé tugtha le fios ag taighdeoirí nach leor ionchur teanga sothuigthe (Krashen, 1985) ar mhaithe le hardchaighdeán scileanna gabhchumais agus ginchumais sa T2 a chur chun cinn sa suíomh tumoideachais (Ó Duibhir, 2018; Tedick & Lyster, 2020). Tá sé curtha in iúl go sonrach ag Lightbown (2014, lch. 222) "... Language

acquisition does not take care of itself". Tá foirmeacha faoi leith den T2 agus dealraítear go dteastaíonn ionchur foirm-dhírithé uathu ar mhaithe leo a shealbhú go cruinn. Mar shampla, is ionann foirmeacha atá éagsúil ó fhoirmeacha T1 an dalta, foirmeacha nach gcuireann go mór isteach ar chumarsáid ná tuiscint an dalta, foirmeacha neamhrialta agus foirmeacha an T2 a mbíonn idirghabháil oideolaíochta éigin de dhíth orthu d'fhonn iad a shealbhú go cruinn (Ranta & Lyster, 2018).

Is ar na cúiseanna seo a mholtar an cur chuige cumarsáideach, a bhíonn go mór le sonrú sna córais tumoideachais, a nascadh le cuir chuige anailíseacha chun deis a thabhairt do dhaltá aird a dhíriú ar bhrí agus ar fhoirm an T2 i gcomhthráth le linn an lae tumoideachais (Stern, 1990). Mar sin de, chun an fhoghlaim teanga is fearr a bhaint amach sa chóras tumoideachais, maíonn líon mór taighdeoirí gur gá aird chúramach a thabhairt ar fhoirm na teanga laistigh de chomhthéacs teagaisc sainábhair atá dírithe ar an mbrí (Cammarata & Tedick, 2012; Lyster, 2007; Ó Duibhir, 2018). Moltar gur féidir cur chuige an tumoideachais a fheabhsú ach daltaí a nochtadh a thuilleadh do theanga atá deartha go speisialta chun a n-aird a dhíriú ar fhoirmeacha gramadaí a mbíonn deacrachtaí leo (mar shampla, béim sa tuin chainte agus gothaí in ionchur cainte dírithe) agus, ag an am céanna, níos mó deiseanna a chur ar fáil do dhaltá na foirmeacha ábhartha a úsáid ar bhealach fóna (mar shampla, gníomhaíochtaí arna n-ionramháil ag an múinteoir ina meallfar foirmeacha ábhartha go nádúrtha in aschur táirgiúil na ndaltaí). Dá réir sin, ba cheart a mheas gur deis é gach ceacht, beag beann ar ábhar an cheachta nó rang leibhéal na ndaltaí, chun aird na ndaltaí a tharraingt ar fhoirm na teanga laistigh de chomhthéacs teagaisc sainábhair atá dírithe ar an mbrí.

Is fiú a lua, áfach, go bhfoilsítear i mórán taighde gur annamh a dhíríonn múinteoirí tumoideachais aird na ndaltaí ar fhoirm na teanga le linn an lae tumoideachais nó le linn ceachtanna ábhar-bunaithe (Allen, Swain, Harley & Cummins, 1990; Ó Ceallaigh et al., 2019; Tedick & Zilmer, 2020). Ar an dul céanna, léiríonn Tedick & Zilmer (2020, lch. 120), "... that immersion teachers' lack of attention to language in their content instruction is, in part, related to the shortcomings that have been observed in immersion student language acquisition". Tuairiscítear go gcothaíonn an chothromaíocht nó comhtháthú idir múineadh na foirme nó na teanga laistigh de chomhthéacs teagaisc sainábhair dúshlán mhóra do mhúinteoirí tumoideachais (Ó Ceallaigh 2013; Ó Ceallaigh agus Ní Shéaghdha 2017; Ó Ceallaigh et al., 2019) agus nach mór tuilleadh oiliúna a chur ar fáil do mhúinteoirí tumoideachais d'fhonn an cur chuige frithchothromaithe (Ranta & Lyster, 2020) a chur i bhfeidhm go rathúil sa seomra ranga tumoideachais.

Mar thacaíocht do mhúinteoirí tumoideachais a leithéid de theagasc agus d'fhoghlaim a nochtadh agus a fhorbairt sa seomra ranga, tugann Tedick agus Lyster (2020) achoimre ar shraith theagaisc atá dírithe ar bhéim a chur ar an teanga sa chomhthéacs a chomhtháthú ar fud an churaclaim. Ceithre chéim atá sa tsraith theagaisc – cur i gcomhthéacs; feasacht; cleachtadh; agus neamhspleáchas. Pléifear gach ceann de na céimeanna sin go mion anois

Cur i gcomhthéacs

Leagtar amach comhthéacs bríoch a bhaineann leis an ábhar sa chéim seo. Déantar é sin, go hiondúil, le téacs atá curtha in oiriúint le go mbeidh gnéithe áirithe den sprioctheanga níos feiceálaí agus le go mbeidh níos mó samplaí díobh ann. Ní mór do mhúinteoirí tosú amach trí théacsanna a roghnú a bhfuil gnéithe áirithe den teanga iontu. Beifear ag súil leis go mbeidh sé ar chumas na ndaltaí na gnéithe sin a úsáid sa chéim neamhspleáchais ag deireadh an phróisis. B'fhéidir gur ghá do mhúinteoirí an téacs a chur in oiriúint le go mbeadh na gnéithe den sprioctheanga le feiceáil minic go leor ann go dtabharfaí faoi deara iad. Féadtar an breisiú clóghrafach a úsáid chun an ghné den sprioctheanga ar a bhfuiltear ag díriú a chomhlánú agus a chruthú agus í a dhéanamh níos suntasaí san ionchur scríofa, mar shampla códú dathanna, cló iodálach, cló trom. Úsáidtear aiceann sa tuin chainte agus gothaí nó comharthaí i gcás an ionchuir ó bhéal. Is féidir neart samplaí a thabhairt in ionchur na teanga chun minicíocht na gné den sprioctheanga ar a bhfuiltear ag díriú a mhéadú gan aon uirlis ar leith a úsáid chun aird a tharraingt ar an ngné sin. Ní mór do na daltaí aird a dhíriú ar an ábhar sa chéim thosaigh seo, mar saorfar a n-acmhainní cognaíocha sna chéad chéimeanna eile agus iad ag féachaint go mion ar ghnéithe sonracha den teanga sa téacs, má bhíonn tuiscint mhaith acu ar an ábhar. Ní mór d'fhoghlaimoirí déileáil le comhthéacs bríoch atá leagtha amach le hionchur atá saibhir ó thaobh na teanga de (spreagthaigh i scríbhinn nó ó bhéal, nó spreagthaigh chlosamhairc).

Feasacht

Sa chéim seo, spreagtar na daltaí chun na gnéithe den sprioctheanga a thabhairt faoi deara agus machnamh a dhéanamh orthu ar bhealach a chabhróidh leo teacht ar na patrúin lena rialaítear úsáid na ngnéithe sin sa téacs. De thairbhe dhá theanga a fhoghlaim, tá feasacht mheititheangeolaíoch á forbairt cheana féin ag daltaí tumoideachais agus is féidir le múinteoirí leas a bhaint as an bhfeasacht sin. Mar atá curtha in iúl sa pháipéar seo, is gá do dhaltaí níos mó a dhéanamh ná díreach foirmeacha san ionchur a thabhairt faoi deara; is gá dóibh gabháil do mhionléiriú, d'anailís nó do mhachnamh ar an teanga go pointe áirithe. I dtascanna ionduchtacha, nochtar na daltaí ar ghnéithe den úsáid teanga agus glacann na daltaí ról gníomhach sa tástáil hipitéise agus tagann siad féin suas leis an bpatrún bunúsach atá ann. Ní mór do mhúinteoirí, mar sin, aird na ndaltaí a tharraingt ar ghnéithe den sprioctheanga a mbíonn deacracht leo agus atá curtha in oiriúint le go mbeidh siad le feiceáil níos minice san ionchur. Ní mór d'fhoghlaimoirí tabhairt faoi anailís nó machnamh trí thascanna aimsithe rialacha, ceachtanna meititheangeolaíocha, nó deiseanna chun patrúin teanga a chur i gcomparáid nó i gcodarsnacht lena chéile.

Cleachtadh

D'fhonn cuir chuige teagaisc atá bunaithe ar ionchur a chomhlánú, ní mór do mhúinteoirí tumoideachais a chinntiú freisin go ndéantar méadú leanúnach ó thaobh cáilíochta agus cainníochta de ar na deiseanna a bhíonn ag daltaí an tumtheanga a úsáid (Lyster, 2007; Swain, 1993). Soláthraítear deiseanna do dhaltaí sa chéim seo chun na gnéithe den sprioctheanga a úsáid i gcomhthéacs atá idir bhríoch agus rialaithe, agus aiseolas ceartaitheach a fháil. Ní mór do mhúinteoirí feasacht mheititheangeolaíoch na ndaltaí a mhealladh chun eolas

meititheangeolaíoch a ghlacadh chucu féin trí phróiseáil na tuisceana agus na giniúna. Ní mór do mhúinteoirí deiseanna a chur ar fáil d'fhoghlaimoirí chun na gnéithe den sprioctheanga a úsáid ar bhealaí bríocha ach i gcomhthéacsanna atá struchtúrtha go leor le gur féidir le múinteoirí aiseolas ceartaitheach a thabhairt. Ní mór do mhúinteoirí tascanna a dhearadh ina gcuirtear brú ar fhoghlaimoirí dul níos faide ná a ngnáthghiniúint idirtheanga. Ba cheart go mbeadh ar dhaltaí an struchtúr teanga meallta a úsáid chun an tasc a chur i gcrích go rathúil. Ní mór go mbeadh próiseáil teanga chun críocha cumarsáide i gceist leis na tascanna sin freisin, agus ní mór go mbeadh na tascanna fréamhaithe i réimse an ábhair. Tá ról an mhúinteora tumoideachais ríthábhachtach maidir le gníomhaíochtaí cleachtaidh rialaithe agus chumarsáidigh araon a dhearadh agus a éascú. Tá sé tábhachtach a thabhairt faoi deara go dtugtar le tuiscint i hipitéis an aschuir de chuid Swain (1993) nach gcabhróidh an ghiniúint leis an sealbhú ach amháin i gcás ina spreagtar an dalta. Dá bhrí sin, tá ról an mhúinteora tumoideachais sa phróiseas scaflála seo an-tábhachtach ar fad. D'fhéadfaí go mbeadh tionchar ar na roghanna dearaidh tosaigh ag nádúr na ngaol idir an fhoirm agus an bhrí (Ó Ceallaigh, 2013). Tá sé riachtanach, ar an ábhar sin, go mbeadh inniúlacht riailbhunaithe ag an mhúinteoir tumoideachais ina gcuimsítear eolas ar rialacha gramadaí sainiúla agus lena bhfreastalaítear ar inniúlacht agus ar chastacht na Gaeilge féin (Ó Ceallaigh, 2020; Ó Ceallaigh & Ní Chathasaigh, 2021). Cúram mór don mhúinteoir tumoideachais, dá bhrí sin, is ea gníomhaíochtaí cleachtaidh a dhearadh a bhfuil feidhm rialaithe agus feidhm chumarsáideach araon ag baint leo. Tá feiniméan coiteann ag baint le gníomhaíochtaí cleachtaidh chumarsáidigh agus rialaithe: ní mór go gcuimsítear iontu próiseáil na foirme teangeolaíche chun críocha cumarsáideacha.

Neamhspleáchas

Sa chéim seo, cuirtear ar chumas na ndaltaí na gnéithe a úsáid ar bhealach níos oscailte agus níos neamhspleáiche chun líofacht, spreagadh agus muinín a fhorbairt maidir leis an sprioctheanga a úsáid. Ní mór do mhúinteoirí cur ar chumas na ndaltaí na gnéithe den sprioctheanga a úsáid i gcomhthéacs bríoch a bhaineann go sainiúil le disciplín ar leith gan an méid céanna scaflála ón mhúinteoir. Ní mór do mhúinteoirí gníomhaíochtaí oiriúnacha ó churaclam ábhair na ndaltaí a chur in oiriúint chun úsáid na ngnéithe teanga ar a ndírítear sna céimeanna feasachta agus cleachtaidh a mhealladh. Dá bhrí sin, tá aistriú diaidh ar ndiaidh i gceist le foghlaim na tumtheanga ó úsáid chomhfhiosach i dtreo úsáid níos uathoibríche den tumtheanga de bharr cleachtaidh agus aiseolais. Tagraíonn coincheap an uathoibríochais don fheidhmíocht atá níos tapa, níos iontaofa agus níos nádúrtha mar thoradh ar chleachtadh fairsing (Ranta & Lyster, 2007; Segalowitz, 1997, 2000, 2003). Bíonn deiseanna idirghníomhaithe gan teorainn ag teastáil ó dhaltaí teanga sa chóras tumoideachais le cur ar a gcumas an teanga a úsáid ar bhealach cruinn, cuí agus inniúil i raon comhthéacsanna neamhiata inar gá léiriú neamhsrianta gan choinne. Trí idirghníomhaíocht, is féidir le foghlaimoirí a n-úsáid teanga a bheachtú, a dhaingniú agus a fhairsingiú agus eolas breise a fhoghlaim ar an gcaoi a n-oibríonn an teanga.

Conclúid

Is léir ón taighde a pléadh sa pháipéar seo go mbaineann idir bhuanna agus dhúshláin leis an gcóras tumoideachais go hidirnáisiúnta agus anseo in Éirinn. Tugann an páipéar seo blaiseadh de na buntáistí a bhaineann le cláir thumoideachais agus rinneadh tuairisciú ar na dúshláin atá le sárú sa chóras fós, go háirithe ó thaobh phróiseas an tsealbhaithe teanga de. Léirítear go mbíonn deacrachtaí ag daltaí tumoideachais ardchaighdeán scileanna ginchumais a bhaint amach agus is follas ón taighde go n-éilíonn cur chuige teagaisc faoi leith a chothaíonn cothromaíocht idir múineadh na teanga agus na n-ábhar i gcomhthráth i rith an lae tumoideachais chun ardchaighdeán cruinnis a chur chun cinn i measc daltaí tumoideachais. Is ag eascairt as an bhfadhb seo a bhfuil aitheanta ag taighdeoirí agus oideachasóirí tumoideachais araon go gcuirtear cur chuige oideolaíochta amháin in iúl sa pháipéar seo chun tacú le próiseas sealbhaithe níos cruinne i measc daltaí tumoideachais. Táthar go súil gur tacaíocht a bheas sa tsraith de cheithre chéim atá curtha in iúl anseo do mhúinteoirí agus d'oideachasóirí tumoideachais chun an chothromaíocht idir múineadh na teanga agus an ábhair a chur chun cinn d'fhonn caighdeán T2 an dalta tumoideachais a threisiú, ó ranganna na Naíonán go Rang a Sé. Eascraítear ón bpáipéar seo, nach mór do mhúinteoirí naisc thrasc-churaclaim agus naisc eis-churaclaim a chruthú ar mhaithe le teanga a mhúineadh go seasmhach i rith an lae sa chomhthéacs tumoideachais. Is fiú do mhúinteoirí dul i mbun pleanála ar mhaithe le deiseanna a thapú fud fad an churaclaim chun na naisc seo a chruthú agus a chothú. Anuas air sin, moltar, bunaithe ar litríocht an ghoirt, cur chuige uile-scoile a dhearadh agus a chur i bhfeidhm ó na Naíonáin go Rang a Sé d'fhonn cur chuige frithchomthromaithe idir múineadh na teanga agus na n-ábhar uile a chur chun cinn ag leibhéal uile-scoile. Thar aon ní eile, is fiú go mór suntas a thabhairt go dteastaíonn forbairt ghairmiúil leanúnach ó mhúinteoirí tumoideachais ar mhaithe leis an gcur chuige teagaisc a moladh sa pháipéar seo a chur i bhfeidhm go rathúil.

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≡ The emotional impact of parental imprisonment on children in primary schools: Developing an agenda for reform ≡

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Abstract

The holistic educational and wider support needs of children of parents in prison is a highly neglected issue in key Irish national policy documents and EU documents, such as the *DEIS 2017 Action Plan*, its *DEIS 2005* antecedent, the *National Children's Policy Framework, Better Outcomes Brighter Futures* and the EU Council Recommendation 2011 on early school leaving. Building on a rights based approach, this article argues that a charter needs to be drawn up in the Irish context, in conjunction with children, support services and relevant organisations, including teachers' unions, which would then act as a supportive framework and guarantee the rights of children are respected and their holistic needs are addressed. The issue of separation anxiety in the distinctively ambiguous loss of a parent through imprisonment requires more fundamental recognition in Irish national policy including with supports such as emotional counselling/therapy in and around schools.

Keywords: parental imprisonment; children's rights; separation anxiety; attachment; trauma; adverse childhood experiences.



Introduction

There are several invisible groups in key national and EU policy documents about the impact of poverty and socio-economic exclusion in education. Pivotal national policy documents such as the *DEIS 2017 Action Plan*, its *DEIS 2005* antecedent, the *National Children's Policy Framework 2014-2020, Better Outcomes Brighter Futures* and the EU Council Recommendation 2011 on early school leaving, all either totally overlook or neglect a focus on vulnerable groups such as children in care, children experiencing homelessness or living in temporary accommodation and children experiencing domestic violence. Another such invisible group in Irish policy, and until recently in EU level policy, is children who have a parent in prison. This article focuses on the holistic, educational needs of children who have a parent in prison. A holistic approach recognises social, emotional, and physical needs and not simply academic, cognitive needs of both children/young people and their parents (Downes, Nairz-Wirth & Rusinaite, 2017). For the purposes of this article, no distinction is made between maternal or paternal imprisonment, or its impact on their sons or daughters, though this does not mean that distinctive gender needs and issues in this area do not require further consideration.

Employing documentary analysis, the purpose of this article is to highlight a range of issues and needs for Irish policy makers in education and related areas to address pertaining to the emotional and holistic educational needs of children who have a parent in prison. In doing so, the policy neglect of this area in Irish national policy is being foregrounded. The article will suggest solutions that combine theory and practice in this area from both an international and an Irish perspective.

The recent evaluation of the implementation of the 2011 EU Council Recommendation across EU Member States and candidate countries (Donlevy, Day & Downes, 2019) is the first EU policy document in education to recognise explicitly the needs of children whose parents are in prison:

Based on evidence from targeted research, policies should be developed to address the specific needs of particular groups, such as newly arrived migrants (of all ages), learners of different age-groups, young men, those living in rural or deprived areas and those with mental health issues, including trauma. There also needs to be a stronger focus on those with complex needs (e.g. children with mental health issues, children in care, children with a parent in prison, victims of domestic violence) (2019, p. 124).

While prisoners have tended to be treated in peripheral fashion with regard to lifelong learning in EU policy documents (Downes, 2014), nevertheless it is to be noted that an encouraging and significant step forward has taken place in the Council Resolution on a renewed European agenda for adult learning (2011) document. Under the Promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship through adult learning heading, in its Annex, there is the invitation for member states to focus on “Addressing the learning needs of ... people in specific situations of exclusion from learning, such as those in ... prisons, and providing them with adequate guidance support”. This is the first EU Council Resolution in lifelong learning to embrace prisoners explicitly within its scope of relevant target groups, via a social cohesion and active citizenship lens.

Whilst not all prisoners or prisons are the same in their conditions, practices, rehabilitation programmes or opportunities, being human is one of the fundamental commonalities which connects all prisoners with each other. Many of these prisoners are also parents. Whilst one cannot assume the impact, often it is negative not only for the offender but for their children and families. Children are described as being forced to engage in a “collective suffering” when their parents are imprisoned as they carry around this emotional burden (Arditti, 2012, p. 2). These same children come in and out of our primary school classrooms every day.

Picking Up the Pieces, a 2012 report published by the Irish Penal Reform Trust (IPRT), examines how children are the “hidden” or “invisible” victims of the crime and penal system. Despite having not committed a crime, children often endure a worse sentence when a parent is imprisoned. They encounter disruptions to their child-care arrangement, relationship breakdowns, financial loss and stigmatisation (IPRT, 2012). International research shows children of prisoners are considerably more likely to end up in prison than their peers (Murray and Farrington 2008). This highlights the need for services that

not only support those in prison, but also their families. A report commissioned by the Childhood Development Initiative (CDI), also recognised the harmful impact of parental imprisonment on children and illustrated evidence of a reduction of negative implications when positive engagements with prisoners' families occur (O'Dwyer, Kelliher and Bowes, 2019). Sources referred to in the report identified needs for the provision of improved family visits, family programmes and services.

Within the European Union, roughly 800,000 children are affected by parental imprisonment on any given day (Scharff-Smith & Gampell, 2011). While research in this area in an Irish context is extremely lacking, the Irish Prison Service has noted 80,000 child visits occur every year within prisons (Donson, 2014). This figure does not account for children who do not visit their parent in prison for a variety of reasons. However, what this figure does highlight, is the need for further research in this area. These figures also raise questions regarding how a child is impacted by parental imprisonment, what this impact is and how it could be alleviated or reduced through supports based in schools.

Organisation

Despite the complexity of the topic, when analysing the literature, four recurrent themes emerge. These themes will be discussed in this literature review beginning with a human rights perspective to parental imprisonment, then focusing on parental involvement in the primary school, to emotional development and concluding with system quality features in dealing with such a sensitive issue.

Theme 1: Human rights perspective

Much of the research carried out on a European level, identifies parental imprisonment as a human rights issue. For example, Lynn (2017), the assistant director for Children of Prisoners, Europe, suggests the impact of parental imprisonment as being deeply rooted in children's human rights, with a particular emphasis on "protection from discrimination" (p. 4). She emphasises the school's role in safeguarding these rights and explores the school as a place that provides a "web of caring" for all children (Lynn, 2017, p. 4). At a European level, the school's role in providing supports for children of imprisoned parents has been recognised, yet no such evidence of these supports exists in Ireland at a systemic or school level. According to Kilkelly (2007), who takes a children's rights approach to her work on youth justice, for the effective realisation of children's rights, efforts must be made to establish common approaches, perspectives, and shared understandings, particularly in areas of poverty and social exclusion, child protection and health care.

The concept of children's rights is similarly explored in research carried out by the Irish Penal Reform Trust, with a particular emphasis on children's right to voice. Despite the *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making (2015-2020)*, there is no evidence of consultation with the children of imprisoned parents in Ireland. In the USA, in an effort to uphold this right, a Charter was drawn up of Rights for Children with a Parent(s) in Prison in San Francisco. One right outlined in the Charter was the right to "speak with, see and touch my parent" (2015, p. 11). However, research carried out by Martyn (2012) highlights how these rights are being denied to children in

many prison settings. One such mother recalled the emotional impact the visit had on her child, as she was unable to touch or hug her father behind the glass panel (Martyr, 2012).

The effects of parental imprisonment extend beyond the individual. Penal policy must reflect this and take into account the implications for children, families, and wider society. Those reasons are deeply rooted in the rights of the child and the family. The Irish State has committed to the European Convention on Human Rights 1950 and has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989. It is therefore legally obliged to acknowledge and safeguard the rights of children and families.

The link between family and child visits with successful resettlement or reintegration has been widely acknowledged in international policy documents. For example, Rule 24.4 of the European Prison Rules 2006, states: "The arrangements for visits shall be such as to allow prisoners to maintain and develop family relationships in as normal a manner as possible" (2006, p. 12). In addition, Rule 37 of the 1977 UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners affirms: "Prisoners shall be allowed under the necessary supervision to communicate with their family and reputable friends at regular intervals, both by correspondence and by receiving visits" (1977, p. 6).

Article 9 of the UN CRC specifies that children who have a parent in prison have the right to keep in contact with their parent. However, research carried out by the IPRT shows that in many prisons throughout the country, this right in addition to the European Prison Rules is not being upheld. Issues were raised regarding procedures prior to the visit, child-centred facilities and visits, lack of flexibility in visiting hours, shortage of visitor centres and in some instances, prisoners were only permitted to make one phone call for fifteen minutes, three times weekly. If the Irish state is to be truly committed to upholding these rights, then the issues outlined must be addressed.

Rule 15 of the European Prison Rules, revised recommendations 2018, outlines the following for imprisoned parents who have children: "At admission the following details shall be recorded immediately concerning each prisoner: ... names of children, their ages, location and custody or guardianship status."

Without routine compilation of this information and an actual figure for the volume of children affected by this issue, it will be difficult to put progressive measures in place. Until this step is taken by the Irish Prison Service, the extent of this problem cannot be accurately acknowledged or changed. Only with data on the above details, can child centred, age-appropriate supports and services, easy to access in terms of location and accessible to all those who work and care for children be designed. Rule 17.1 of the European Prison Rules states that "Prisoners should be allocated in as far as possible, in prisons close to their homes" (2006, p. 9). Much of the research carried out by the IPRT (2012) highlights how this is not always the case. Many respondents to this research reported having to travel for hours to get to the prison. Some followed on to say they were disallowed their visit, for varying reasons, despite the distance they had travelled. The location of prisoners near their families would facilitate child-parent contact, build positive relations, and ensure regular visits. In placing prisoners far away from their families and children, the undue hardship that families already face in accessing their loved ones is reinforced (IPRT 2012).

In the Irish context, at least, the rights of children with a parent in prison are a matter which has been ill-considered by policy and law makers to date (Parkes and Donson, 2018). A charter needs to be drawn up in the Irish context, in conjunction with children, support services and relevant organisations, including teachers' unions, which would then act as a supportive framework and guarantee the rights of children are respected. Until then, the lack of voice, continual discrimination and disrespect for children's rights will inevitably contribute to the stigma which prevails around parental imprisonment and will reinforce the idea that children are the "invisible victims" of crime and the penal system (Martyn, 2012).

Theme 2: Parental involvement in their children's education

One of the key ways outlined in the *DEIS Action Plan 2017* and the School Support Programme to tackle and address socio-economic exclusion in education and improve academic achievement, is through the involvement of and partnership with parents. However, figures from the Irish Penal Reform Trust (2012) have estimated that upwards of six thousand children in Ireland have a parent who is imprisoned. This reveals that the omission of children of parents in prison from the *DEIS Action Plan 2017* overlooks a sizeable cohort of vulnerable children. Parents impacted by incarceration face significant barriers to parental involvement in education and lack basic supports. For example, at present, social work support for families of prisoners in Ireland often only occurs if there are child protection or mental health concerns. This raises the question: "Is risk only being addressed at crisis stage?" (Sheehy, 2010, p. 141).

Schools can help children to maintain a relationship with an imprisoned parent by enabling parental involvement. Extensive international research indicates that parental involvement in children's education is good practice (Desforges and Aboucaar, 2003; Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). The National Parents Council in Ireland advocates that all parents should be encouraged and supported to be involved in their children's education, while "Initiatives designed to increase parental involvement with children's education ... must engage with the lived experience of individual family lives, however these are constituted" (Cullen et al., 2011, p. 488). Parc Prison in Wales hosts parent-teacher evenings whereby incarcerated fathers sit with their child's teacher to discuss schoolwork six times each year. They also offer a homework club for children to complete homework with their parent in prison. Sending newsletters, school reports, school photographs and samples of the child's work to the incarcerated parent can also help them to connect meaningfully with their child's life at school (Roberts, 2012). "It is crucial that incarcerated parents, like all other parents, be involved in the pupil's schoolwork and be aware of the various goals and hurdles associated with their child's education" (Carpentier-Tuboeuf in Lynn, 2017, p. 19).

A study carried out in an American context found that, despite the desire of many parents to play a meaningful role in the lives of their children, being in prison makes this duty difficult, if not impossible (Arditti, 2012). In this research, Arditti (2012) further suggests that risk factors co-occur with protective factors. In this context, if there is a strong link between parental imprisonment and academic failure, how might the school enhance academic structures to prevent this from happening? If international research

is highlighting the positive outcomes and benefits of parental involvement, this raises a problematic question for schools in how they may involve a parent who is in prison or prevent the imprisonment of parents from having a negative impact on children in schools.

To combat the negative impact of parental imprisonment on children's academic achievement, the Read to Your Child/Grandchild programme was established in Pennsylvania. Research was then carried out and published in the *Journal of Prison Education and Re-entry*, to assess the experiences of incarcerated fathers with this programme (Prins, Stickel and Kaiper-Marquez, 2020). Many of the fathers had pre-existing relationships with their children that involved regular support with reading and writing, help and assistance with schoolwork, attendance at parent-teacher conferences and often read stories to their children. The aim of the programme was to enhance and develop this pre-existing relationship between incarcerated fathers and their children to ensure that upon release this bond would be maintained. Fathers pre-recorded videos of themselves reading books to their children and a personal message attached. Fathers who engaged with the programme reported that it allowed them to preserve the involvement they had in their children's literacy developments, whilst being in prison. It also gave them a vehicle to communicate and emphasise the value of education to their children. A similar programme could be adapted in an Irish context to provide more opportunities for parental involvement in children's schooling and break the cycle of educational disadvantage amongst children of imprisoned parents.

Initiatives could also be designed to support parental involvement in education with regard to the co-parent of the child who is not in prison. Foundations for this could be set in the form of school-based support groups. Bradshaw and Muldoon (2019) explored the identity dynamics associated with participation in group-based support for partners of incarcerated men and found that support groups may provide a shared sense of experience, social connections, and support even in stigmatised contexts. Perhaps if such groups were facilitated in schools, it would reduce the likelihood of parents withdrawing from opportunities for interactions with the school or wider education system where they may feel their stigmatised identity is emphasised.

The only reference made to parental imprisonment and its impact on children in Irish Policy, is in the National Policy document *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*. This requires the Department of Justice to "ensure adequate access by children to an imprisoned parent, in a child-friendly setting" (2014, p. 82). Whilst inclusion of this issue in policy is a step in the right direction, the commitment to this issue is too narrow. The focus, as outlined in this policy is only on one of the many aspects of parental imprisonment and children. This does not in any way address the need for school supports for children directly impacted by such an issue or the complexity of this issue. Instead, it reduces parental imprisonment to one aspect and one department, which will not make any lasting impact. A more multi-disciplinary, cross-departmental approach is greatly needed in this area.

Theme 3: Emotional development

Research carried out by Murray and Farrington (2008) suggests the impact of parental imprisonment as being “distinct and more developmentally prohibitive” than any other type of loss such as through death or separation. Similarly, the effects of parental incarceration are long lasting (Johnson, 2009). This view is reiterated in reports made in many contexts such as Family Lives, Children of Prisoners, Barnardos, The Irish Prison Service and reports by Bedford Row. In research here, the most distinguishing factor that differentiates parental imprisonment from any other type of loss, is its ‘ambiguous’ nature. This directly relates to Bowlby’s theory of Attachment Loss (Bowlby, 1998). As children find it difficult to cope in situations characterized by ambiguity and uncertainty, children who are impacted by parental imprisonment are at high risk of emotion dysregulation (Myers, 2013). Research by COPING, an EU project developed in Romania, Sweden, Germany, and the UK, discovered that children who have a parent in prison are twice as likely to suffer from mental health problems than their peers. Parental imprisonment greatly affects a child’s sense of stability and can lead to severe separation anxiety (Jones et al. 2013, p. 484).

In prisons, opportunities to reduce recidivism and limit negative implications of parental imprisonment on children are emerging internationally, such as programmes aimed at building positive family ties and child-friendly visiting arrangements. For example, a comparative study of the experiences of children with imprisoned parents in Denmark, Italy, Poland, and Northern Ireland identified prisoners’ children as being at risk of developing emotional difficulties which impact on their development and their future (Martynowicz, 2011). Among the report’s recommendations to the EU was “Regular arrangements for parent/child activities for children of prisoners and their parents should be offered in prisons, for example, at least once during every school holiday period” (Martynowicz, 2011 p. 236). A summer camp has been successfully organized in prisons in America by non-profit organisation Hope House whereby children spend time with their parent in prison doing activities such as crafts, games, and creative writing (Muth, 2016). Training materials for this project have been used by other groups to replicate the programme across four states and in the Netherlands.

Bowlby’s attachment theory highlights the types of behaviour and the problems that can arise from the traumatic experience of prolonged separation from the caregiver. The loss of a ‘secure base’ is a common feature in the lives of children who have lost a parent to imprisonment (Benamer & White, 2008, p. 5). This theory and its implications provide a rationale for the compelling need to appoint emotional counsellors in primary schools. There is scope for valuable initiatives mentioned and other international projects to be implemented in Irish prisons. However, it would need to be underpinned at a system level and programmes inside prisons alone cannot fully address the holistic needs of children on the outside.

Implications of Bowlby's attachment theory on children in primary schools

Bowlby's research highlights how the primary bond between the care giver and the care-seeker has a hugely influential impact on subsequent relationships. Healthy emotional bonds are required, from an early age, to ensure successful development of oneself and one's relationships with others. The experiences that a child has with their caregiver from an early age have the capacity to distort considerably the lens through which a child views themselves and the world around them (Bowlby, 1998).

The most fundamental idea which underpins Bowlby's theory is the view that all humans, have an innate need to maintain and promote proximity to care-givers (Crain, 2005). This innate need amongst babies can be seen through what Bowlby described as attachment behaviours, i.e., when a baby cries, laughs, smiles or babbles (Bowlby, 1998). Through each of these behaviours a child seeks the response of the caregiver. Children who experience a secure attachment have a solid relationship with their caregiver and as a result will rely on their emotions and thoughts to enable them to process a situation and how they may react. If the 'secure' child is unable to cope with a given situation, they will seek help from people or the environment surrounding them.

When a parent is imprisoned, a child risks the trauma of separation anxiety. The prolonged separation between the child and the caregiver causes a fracture to this relationship and essential bond. This trauma takes place at a time that is crucial to the child's emotional development and thus has severe emotional consequences for that child in their future relationships and behavioural patterns. Exposure to such overwhelming emotions of abandonment, helplessness, and anxiety not only impact on a child's emotional and bodily states but is arguably capable of rupturing whole communities (Benamer & White, 2008). Among the 10 types of trauma included in the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) framework, it is significant that the imprisonment of a family member is mentioned specifically (Dong et al. 2005). In other words, parental imprisonment is directly recognised in international research as an adverse childhood experience for a child.

Unlike the loss of a parent through death, separation, or divorce, losing a parent to imprisonment is considerably different. The ambiguous nature of this loss is reflected in the research conducted in Ireland whereby 61.5% of parents in prison stated their child was unaware of their parent's imprisonment (King, 2002. p. 30). Many children are unaware of the reason their parent is in prison, may not be even aware that that is where their parent has gone and are unsure of whether their parent will ever return. This fracture in the most fundamental relationship between a child and their major and perhaps primary caregiver, whether it be their mother or father, can lead to immense feelings of grief and loss followed by a sense of mourning. For the child, throughout their "disenfranchised grief", an incarcerated relative is first and foremost their relative – a mother, father, brother, or sister – not a prisoner or offender (Haines in Lynn, 2017).

Kaiser Permanente and the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention carried out a survey which elicited responses from adults who experienced some form of childhood abuse, neglect or dysfunction (Felitti et al., 1998). These adults were considered to have had ACEs and amongst the 17,337 surveyed, high numbers of the respondents reported to have had depression, suicidal thoughts, alcoholism, drug addictions or experiences of domestic

violence. A child who has suffered either a physical or emotional loss of a parent through imprisonment or otherwise, having experienced such ACEs, are also likely to endure such consequences. This highlights the relationship between early trauma and mental health issues. This relationship could be alleviated or even prevented with the help of sustained one-to-one support such as through an emotional counsellor, in primary school (McElvaney et al. 2017; Educational Disadvantage Centre Joint Oireachtas Education Committee Submission 2020).

There are three stages which a person may go through having suffered a separation from their primary caregiver (Bowlby, 1982). At first a child may 'protest'. This phase can last differing lengths of times for any child. The child will scream, cry, and externalise their behaviour. In a school setting, the child may express anger or aggression which may be considered disruptive behaviour (Golding et al., 2013). Then the child will go through a period of 'despair', where they may reverse their behaviours and begin to internalise their emotions. They might appear quiet, withdrawn or detached. At this stage, the child endures a deep state of mourning (Golding et al., 2013). Finally, a state of 'detachment' sets in. During this period, a child may appear as though they have overcome the impact of the trauma. Fortunately, most children upon reuniting with their caregiver re-establish their initial relationship. However, this is not always the case. For some children, the prolonged separation provokes a lack of trust in adults. Even those who are reliable, may be treated with caution as a result of the betrayal of caregivers who they have depended upon in the past. The greatest cause for concern at this stage is the 'affectionless character' which may result (Bowlby, 1982).

In Benamer and White, 2008, the memory of losing both parents when entering the care system is recalled by one interviewee, who recalled his mastering the skill of 'ignoring affect'. Ignoring emotions and feelings is a common feature of Bowlby's 'avoidant attachment' and is used as a coping mechanism by people who have experienced disruption to their attachment bonds. What is most striking about his narrative, is the confusion he felt and how he thought "there was no one to talk to about it" (Benamer & White, 2008, p. 31).

Experiencing such extreme states of emotion and expressing what may be viewed as challenging behaviour by a school, can seriously impinge on a child's educational opportunities. Children may hold defensive attitudes towards teachers and school staff which in turn will impede their ability to have relationships built upon mutual trust. Such traumatic experiences can disrupt a child's ability to relate to all those around them, including classmates and peers. In a classroom setting, this can lead to a cry out for attention through poor behaviour and has the potential to seriously reduce the child's instructional time because of detention, suspension or early school leaving. These children, without the support of emotional counsellors, may have poor educational outcomes and therefore the cycle of educational disengagement continues (see Esch et al., 2014, for example, on the link between mental health difficulties and early school leaving). Emotional counselling and support are provided in a range of countries, including the Czech Republic, Belgium and Germany, in order to help those suffering from serious emotional distress, (Donlevy et.al., 2019). In France, all pupils have access to the Psychologist of Education for psychological support and career guidance. Emotional counselling is also available in Sweden and Slovenia, where all students have access to a school doctor, school nurse, psychologist,

and school welfare officer at no cost. In some countries, emotional counselling is expressly backed by legislation. In Poland, legislation mandates for the existence of a system of support to students who are having significant difficulties at school, in the form of one-to-one academic tutoring and psychological support where required (Donlevy et.al., 2019— see pp. 63-65 and p. 51 for a comparative table on the availability of these emotional counselling supports in schools in Europe).

In some US contexts, school-based programmes provide support groups for children affected by parental imprisonment, for example the Youth Advocacy Board for Children Left Behind in Arkansas. Prisoners' children meet with foster children and children of undocumented immigrants (all of whom are coping with parental loss) to share experiences. A leadership and advisory board on restorative justice has also been at times established (Krupat, Gaynes and Lincroft, 2011) as part of fostering empathy, perspective taking and healing. Through support groups, committees can be formed for prisoners' children so that their opinions are recognised in terms of services that they feel would be beneficial to them and that they would like to access through the education system. An analogous approach to consider in Ireland, would be that representatives from the committee could bring their ideas to Comhairle na nÓg to give children the opportunity to have a voice on services, policies and issues that affect them.

This foregrounding of attachment and loss-related issues for children with a parent in prison highlights the imperative need for emotional counsellors in Irish primary schools. Counselling and support groups would help children to cope and positively impact on their educational attainments (Donlevy et al., 2019). They could be accessed through schools which would help to provide children with support and assistance across every stage of imprisonment (King, 2002). Not only would they assist in the acknowledgment and naming of the emotions felt by a child enduring this loss but would also provide opportunities for better coping strategies to be achieved and enabling the child to channel their emotions into a positive state of self-regulation. Such supports in schools would alleviate the negative impact that this type of behaviour can cause and thus would equip children with the necessary skills to achieve their full range of potentials. Employing emotional counsellors, including play and art therapists, would reduce the risk of early school leaving (Donlevy et al. 2019; Educational Disadvantage Centre, 2020) and would be a step forward in breaking the cycle of educational exclusion.

There are no emotional counsellors available in schools beyond ad hoc examples (Educational Disadvantage Centre, 2020). The only mention of counsellors outlined in the DEIS Plan, is for career guidance in post primary schools. Even the emotional support programmes in place in primary schools such as Rainbows or The Big Sister mentoring programme, make no reference in their descriptions to catering for the emotional needs for children who are suffering the loss of a parent through imprisonment. This highlights a huge gap, not only in policy and systemic level but at a school level too. "It is worth considering that doing nothing—not recognising the situation—can be a form of discrimination in itself" (Haines in Lynn, 2017, p. 9). The role of the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) in reacting to critical incidents is insufficient to provide enduring counselling/therapeutic supports for children experiencing trauma. Increasing the number of psychologists is the only concrete commitment in the *DEIS 2017 Action*

Plan regarding additional staff in schools for provision of emotional supports. This is a plainly insufficient response to the issue of trauma, despite the recognition by the Joint Oireachtas Committee Report on Early School Leaving 2010 that trauma is a key factor in early school leaving.

Theme 4: promoting system quality features

Having a parent in prison can often result in children being bullied or rejected by their peers. They may withdraw from friends out of fear of being stigmatised and thus prevent a child from accessing and receiving the support they greatly need. (Action for Prisoners and Offenders' Families, 2017).

Research carried out by Barnardos suggests that the range of emotional responses which can be experienced by a child, completely depends on the stage their parent may be at in relation to the "offender journey" (Barnardos, 2015). They also stress the need for teacher training in ensuring this process is fully understood. The Irish Penal Reform Trust further highlights the urgent need for initial teacher education and continuous professional development (CPD) in this area.

Whilst children with a parent in prison are individuals with their own set of personal circumstances and moderating factors that make their situations unique, international longitudinal research has found them to be a highly vulnerable group with multiple risk factors for adverse outcomes (Murray and Farrington, 2005). Irish studies also document negative implications of parental imprisonment on the child (King, 2002; Bedford Row, 2007; Martyn, 2012; Ryan-Mangan, 2019). Although gaining increased recognition, children of prisoners remain omitted from Irish policy. Longitudinal research is required to enable a rich understanding of the lived experiences and feelings of children in Ireland with a parent in prison and to critically examine the dynamics and mechanisms of risk. A concrete and systematic knowledge base must be developed so that the needs of prisoners' children are met, and their rights respected (Martyn, 2012). This might enable a shift from recognising this cohort and proving the worth of targeted interventions to discovering good practice to develop, implement and sustain effective and appropriate services.

As suggested by both Barnardos and the Irish Penal Reform Trust a school policy must be developed around supports for children with a parent in prison, to guide and support teachers in this sensitive matter. This policy could be further enhanced through better communication links between Home School Community Liaison (HSCL), School Completion Programme teams and social workers so that teachers can provide relevant support to the children who are most at risk. Approaching supports at school from the perspective of relationships, not crime, is key (Haines in Lynn, 2017). This whole process needs to be underpinned by policy at a systemic level for it to be purposeful.

Policy Level

A charter needs to be drawn up to ensure the rights of children whose parents are imprisoned are recognised, upheld, and respected. This charter will act as a framework and provide structural indicators (Downes, 2018) which will underpin services and supports at a systemic and school level. This charter will then further facilitate policy and

service provision assessment. One such right would be “the right to support as I face my parent’s imprisonment”, building on Right #6 in the San Francisco Children of Imprisoned Parents Partnership Bill of Rights. This would reinforce the need for employing emotional counsellors in schools. These rights also go beyond the issue of parental imprisonment and have strong implications for children who have experienced a parent in prison. These issues include child-care arrangements, prison visits, the treatment of parents and their children by An Garda Síochána and the participation of children in decisions which directly impact upon them.

In order to progress this work, a system must be established to ensure the on-going compilation of statistics and information to determine an accurate figure of the number of families, in particular children, affected by imprisonment. This system would be in addition to the current statistical compilation carried out by the Irish Prison Services.

This system could then be used to assist the planning and allocation of supports and services. This groundwork would be paramount. The charter and the statistical information together would ensure that the compelling need for emotional counsellors would be recognised at all levels.

Key emerging considerations for a proposed action plan to support children who have a parent in prison

A visible thread that links all children in Ireland is the education system and it is intertwined with parental imprisonment as “life circumstances and experiences of children outside the classroom directly affect their ability to be physically and emotionally present and ready to learn inside the classroom” (Krupat, Gaynes and Lincroft, 2011, p. 52). It is increasingly evident that schools have a duty of care to children which extends far beyond the classroom. Schools can provide prisoners’ families with information and act as a gateway to access supports (Roberts, 2012), and also act in conjunction with multidisciplinary team services (Xhomaqi, Downes & Psifidou 2019). Furthermore, a wrap-around approach for children affected by imprisonment needs to incorporate supports within the education system as part of multidisciplinary teams (Edwards & Downes 2013).

As teachers spend at least five hours per school-day with children in primary schools, they will play a key role in identifying children who may require additional support from an emotional counsellor. In Denmark, legislation states that school leaders can choose to recommend a student for pedagogical-psychological assessment, the results of which may initiate a process where the student may receive psychological support. Croatia and Bulgaria also have legislation in place that provides for emotional counselling and psychological support (Donlevy et.al., 2019). However, as outlined previously, issues may arise which the teacher is not aware of, but the HSCL may be. In this instance, they too can recommend a child to receive this support. Other staff members who have a direct line of communication between the school, home, and the wider community (i.e., social workers, care teams, community workers) must also be enabled to put a child forward to receive such support. However, this ‘waiting-list’ must act on a needs-basis. Therefore, those children who are experiencing crisis will receive support immediately and those whereby a risk still exists, but the risk is not imminent could, we propose, access the support in due course. Again, this will depend on the need and the context and circumstances of individual schools.

Whilst teachers and school staff may have some background information on children, it is important they are equipped with the skills to identify children at risk. Therefore, teachers will need continuous professional development on identifying risk factors for children. This would ensure early intervention can take place. A study conducted across Australia and the United States, identified staff training as the most significant step schools can take for children affected by imprisonment and should be the cornerstone for every other intervention and programme (Roberts, 2012). The criminal justice system, issues around imprisonment, supports available to children and how the teacher can best support the child are relevant in the education system. Training should be available to schools to educate staff and gain practical advice in terms of such issues. The Invisible Walls Accord project in Wales focuses specifically on enabling schools to develop awareness and to equip children and families affected by imprisonment with supports. Without relevant training, teachers could unintentionally aggravate the child's vulnerabilities: "It is through the school system that children are tracked and monitored and it is within this community that stigma and trauma might be exacerbated" (Roberts, 2012, p. 4).

It is also important to note, having emotional counsellors/therapists in schools would coincide with the current supports and practices of some schools such as breakfast clubs, after-school clubs, homework clubs and parent classes. Schools could also have children's books as a resource, such as *The Night Dad Went to Jail* by Melissa Higgins which provides factual matter alongside easily relatable characters which may help children to make sense of their own situation. They should not be available exclusively to children affected by imprisonment; they can be used by teachers to inform all children and to develop increased understanding which could help to challenge social stigma. This would ensure a holistic approach is taken in dealing with an issue such as parental imprisonment.

Guiding principles

There are several issues which need to be acknowledged to introduce emotional counsellors to schools. Ensuring these issues are addressed will lead to a successful roll out of a phased action plan.

1. Database of relevant knowledge: Whilst the link between parental imprisonment and adverse outcomes for children is highlighted in the research, it is totally omitted from Irish policy. Without an anonymised database which provides on-going, up-to-date information regarding where these children are and what their needs are, developing an effective support system in school or elsewhere would be extremely challenging. Therefore, a solid knowledge base is the foundational structure to establishing a successful system and its supporting policy.
2. Integration of services: Consistency and common values and objectives shared by those who work with and for children are essential (Kilkelly, 2007). Ensuring every child receives the same educational opportunities requires systems of educational, psychological, and social services communicating and working together to ensure the effective provision of such a service. These services include the Irish Prison Service, Tusla, School Completion Programme, HSCL teachers, schools, community mental health services, child therapy and youth mental health services such as CAMHS.

3. Voices of children: Article 12 of the *UN Convention of the Rights of the Child 1989*, states that the voices of children should be heard and consulted with in all matters that concern them (Bradshaw & Muldoon, 2017). Therefore, children's ideas and opinions should be sought and respected at all levels, policy, systemic and local level. One suggestion might be to involve children in generating the charter which would ensure they are aware of their rights and would be a step forward to ensuring the rights of children whose parents are imprisoned are respected and upheld (see also Kilkelly, 2007; Day et al., 2015). It would also afford children whose parents are imprisoned the relevant knowledge to speak out in relation to their rights.

Conclusion

Examples presented in this article highlight the positive role schools can play in supporting families affected by imprisonment and provide suggestions for obtainable and beneficial programmes which could easily be developed for use in Irish schools. However, just as programmes inside prisons alone cannot fully address the holistic needs of children on the outside, supports in schools cannot be provided effectively in isolation. Children affected by imprisonment require ongoing sensitive and appropriate service provision. Programmes which impact them are not piloted or researched sufficiently in Ireland. The commitment of government policy is required to support and protect the families of those involved with the criminal justice system. Integrated and systematic approaches would mitigate risks and alleviate the weight of emotional difficulties that children with a parent in prison can face.

Children who suffer the loss of a parent through prison, are a largely hidden and unheard group in Ireland. The implications that this loss can have on their educational attainment and mental health are widely recognised elsewhere. These children also present greater risk of becoming offenders in their lives. If this issue is not addressed at an Irish policy and systemic level, the problems will increase greatly.

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≡ Book reviews ≡

Childhood, Religion and School Injustice by Karl Kitching is a deeply thought-provoking and timely book. All who wish to see education, schools and wider policy systems develop to improve children's lives would benefit from reading it.

The book is written within the context of intensified debates about religion in Irish schools over the past three decades. Early on in the book, the author demonstrates how following the 2011 establishment of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector, Irish education policy developments (however well intentioned) which have promoted increased parental patronage choices to accommodate diversity have in fact served to "marketize" and "commodify" education.

To address this issue, the book does not promote one overall school patronage system over another. Rather, to achieve more just and ethical schooling, the vision throughout is that of encouraging us to navigate our way beyond an already "marketized" education system, grounded as it is in a fundamental misrepresentation of the human person as a free, independent, "consumer" of knowledge and experiences. The book then explores educational issues from "post-secular" and "post-human" perspectives. It is post-secular in that it acknowledges the entanglement of the religious and the secular in the social. It is post-human in that it sees as intrinsic to our being not a superior anthropocentrism but rather our state of open-ended development, in ongoing dynamic relation with all human, non-human and more than human others.

At the heart of this book are the author's discussions of the experiences of a range of children's, young people's, parents', teachers', clerics' and senior citizens' experiences of childhood and First Communion. The discussions are shaped by the above perspectives.

They reflect and sensitize us to the many complex and interconnected ways in which the past, majority and minority cultures and the material world can influence children's thinking and development. The author then demonstrates how the interplay of such influences, if not managed appropriately and ethically for children, can cause and perpetuate suffering and injustice. These injustices can resonate across the life span and across society.

In order to overcome injustice and to help society to positively develop for all, the book's final chapter points to the need for deep, creative and respectful engagement with social complexity, plurality, the non-human and the more-than-human (including the environmental crisis). It explores these issues at the socio-political level and at the curricular policy level in schools. It maps out ways that all schools across all patronages can become "micro-publics", supporting children to "grow sideways", around injustice and towards new, more ethical ways of living and understanding.

This book is contemporary in its outlook and scholarly in its approach. You may or may not agree with all the author says. However, if you give this important book the time it deserves, it can inspire you. You will see that we can really only meet our urgent but “unchosen obligations to known and unknown others” through challenging majoritarianism and neoliberalism at all levels of society. This then creates space for the return of the intrinsic good of education – its potential to emancipate all, helping us to learn, grow and flourish together.

REVIEWED BY CIARÁN CAUFIELD, CLONTARF DUBLIN 3

Teachers and Teacher Unions in a Globalised World by John Carr and Lori Beckett, an anniversary book written for the sesquicentenary of the INTO, yields rich and thought-provoking insights into a range of issues that are central to primary education and teacher professionalism in Ireland. The clue to what lies between the covers of the book is to be found in the subtitle – History, Theory and Policy.

John Carr (former INTO General Secretary) and Lori Beckett trace and explore the complex interplay between political and social developments in this country and beyond, and their influence on the Irish educational landscape. The role of teacher activists in shaping this landscape is underlined throughout and the reader is left in no doubt regarding the importance of research-active teachers and teacher union research in addressing the challenges presented to educational policy and practice in Ireland.

A number of themes permeate the book. For example, as the authors probe our history, recent past and present, we are prompted to reflect on the common (mis)interpretation of terms such as ‘activism’ and ‘professionalism’ and to reconsider their true meaning. Watershed moments in the history of education are analysed, such as the 1922 National Programme of Primary Instruction and the INTO 1941 inquiry into the Irish language question. The significance of teacher input into debate at national level is made clear, not least because ‘collectively, teachers have seen it on all the island of Ireland in regard to the ways ordinary people live in local school communities north and south’.

The level of detail and analysis in the book is quite extensive, making for a challenging read at times, especially for those who might be less familiar with educational-political discourse. The book is likely to be of particular interest to teachers who are currently engaged in educational research or those who are keen to do so but are seeking avenues to explore.

REVIEWED BY ANNE ENGLISH, BLACKROCK, CO DUBLIN

This review previously appeared in the *InTouch* magazine, January 2020.

A limited number of copies of this book is available from the INTO Head Office.

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- Saoirse O’Reilly Cullen, Bronagh Fagan and Paul Downes* **The emotional impact of parental imprisonment on children in primary schools: Developing an agenda for reform.**



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