Irish Teachers' Journal

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Irish Teachers' Journal

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⸺ Editorial ⸺

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the 11th edition of the *Irish Teachers' Journal.* This year, we have reverted to our more traditional format of a guest article and seven others after the publication of our bumper 10th Anniversary edition in 2022. However, this year for the first time ever, we include a poem in the journal, *Bláth Draíochta,* contributed by Gabriel Rosenstock. Gabriel is a poet whose work is well known and loved by all teachers on this island. Táimid thar a bheith buíoch dó as ucht a chuid oibre a roinnt go fial agus go flaithíúil linn.

Once again, we can say with some authority, the world and the world of education continues to experience incredible changes.

This year has seen the publication of the *Primary Curriculum Framework* and the new *Primary Mathematics Curriculum*, heralding significant curriculum change at primary level. Development groups continue to work under the auspices of the NCCA in the areas of language, STEM, wellbeing, arts, and social and environmental education in preparation for the roll out of a new *Primary Curriculum* in the coming years. Revised child protection procedures have been put in place and the *Cinealtas Action Plan* has been published, heralding among other developments, a revision of the *Anti-Bullying Procedures.*

We have seen developments in senior cycle reform and the design of new subjects at post primary level. The area of special and inclusive education has seen the employment of extra teachers, and the opening of new special classes. However, the lack of wrap around and therapeutic services for children and young people continues to be a serious issue for schools and their communities.

Hundreds of schools continue to have access to substitute supply panels and teaching principals retain one day per week release time for school administration with substitute cover. However, despite these advances, the issue of teacher supply continues to be a serious, daily issue in our schools. Recent research carried out by the INTO, IPPN and the CPSMA indicated that 800 long term posts remain unfilled in Irish primary schools. This and the continued challenges of filling short term vacancies is putting our system under severe and unsustainable pressure.

Irish schools, along with many others across Europe continue to welcome pupils, and their families, fleeing the ongoing war in the Ukraine, now into its second year. We had welcomed almost 16,000 pupils into Irish schools by the end of the last school year and new families continue to seek refuge here. Schools and their communities across the country continue to support these children, their language needs, their educational needs and their social and emotional needs. The Department of Education has continued its provision of additional staffing, EAL and SET support where required.

The conflict in Gaza has shocked us all, with huge death tolls and the destruction of communities. These wars and conflicts serve to remind us how important it is to maintain peace and stability in our own country.

Despite all of these challenges, recent research from the Medical Council found that teachers are the most trusted profession in Ireland, a testament to the hard work and dedication of Irish teachers.

The *Irish Teachers Journal* continues reflect the research interests of Irish teachers. This year, while we have articles on a variety of topics from our contributors, there is a strong focus on research on Leadership. In light of this focus, we are delighted to have Mary Nihill, former Director for the Centre for School Leadership and current Divisional Director of the Oide Leadership Team as our guest contributor.

Mary's article, *Developing teacher and middle leaders in Irish schools* notes that the role of the school leader has become increasingly complex. She discusses the continuum of leadership while focussing on the challenges for principals in an era of accountability and the consequent challenges in delegating leadership. She highlights the importance of developing teacher leaders and middle leaders in our system if school leadership is to become more sustainable and posits that single person leadership is insufficient in our current system.

While discussing the challenges of time, workload and school culture change, she makes the argument for a redefinition of leadership and a move to a more truly distributive leadership model, a model which is not based on the delegation of tasks but the distribution of responsibility. She also reinforces the need for time and ongoing professional learning to support building capacity in teacher and middle leaders in our schools.

Paul Butler's article *The impact of leadership coaching in building a model of distributed leadership in schools* examines the development of distributed leadership using a coaching model and further develops some of the ideas introduced in our guest article.

True distributed leadership focuses on a more democratic style of governance which involves the sharing and delegating of responsibility. Paul argues for the need to build capacity in the leadership team and identifies the challenges of resistance, school culture and staff skillset to the introduction of the concept at school level. He also observes that there are many theories as to what distributed leadership may be but not as many examples of how to achieve it.

He explores how coaching might provide a platform for where a collaborative means of achieving a distributed model of leadership can be obtained. His research found that the coaching model helped overall performance, improved problem solving, reduced stress, developed personal skills and led to enhanced wellbeing.

In "*Leadership Matters: An investigation into the leadership behaviours that predict teachers' morale*", Danielle Egan, Úna Forde, Orlaith Galligan and Jolanta Burke investigate the leadership behaviours which have an impact on morale in schools. While noting that the majority of research on morale is based on job satisfaction, the literature shows the importance of teacher morale on all aspects of the teaching and learning environment. They also note the importance of staff morale in an ever-changing educational landscape and how leaders need to be aware of how their behaviour can impact or improve the level of morale in the school.

The researchers go on to explore how relationships are essential to school morale, the importance of school leaders getting to know their teachers and being cognisant of work/life balance. The research notes that strong relationships lead to a sense of belonging. It also identifies that the leadership behaviours impacting most on morale included:

- Providing involvement in decision making
- Clear communication
- Respect and trust in teachers as professionals

While concluding that creating a sense of community is a strong predictor of staff morale, it is also important that school leaders should have good organisational and management skills. The research adds to the understanding of what school leaders can do to boost morale in their school communities.

Our next leadership themed article, "*The Domino Effect: The impact of school leadership on teachers' wellbeing*", focusses on a study carried out among post-primary teachers by Annemarie Dolan, Jolanta Burke and Celine Healy.

The study notes that while enhancing pupil wellbeing has been a priority area for many governments, the area of teacher wellbeing has been more neglected. The study attempts to highlight this area in the understanding that if teachers are to teach well, they need to feel well. The research is also carried out in the context of teachers coping with increasing demands, increased levels of day-to-day stress and UK research which suggests that teachers experience higher levels of stress than other professionals.

The authors note that putting supports in place for teachers and school leadership caring for teachers had more impact on teacher wellbeing than having a wellbeing policy, regular CPD on wellbeing or having wellbeing as a regular agenda item at meetings. Once again, the importance of leadership is highlighted in this research.

On a departure from the leadership focus of preceding articles, Dr John Meegan, Elva Casey and Niamh O' Brien examine "*Integrating 21st Century Skills into Irish Primary Schools*".

The research is a study of the outcomes, experiences and observations of teachers who participated in the *Magical Leaders* programme.

Written in the context of the growth and development of competency-based learning in European and OECD based schools, it is very topical in the context of the recently published *Primary Curriculum Framework* and the *Primary Mathematics Curriculum.*

Competency based learning hopes to prepare learners for an uncertain future where transferable skills will be crucial. Education systems globally, are adapting their curricula in light of the value currently being placed on 21st Century or Future Skills.

The participants in this study had used the *Magical Leaders* programme over the course of one year with their pupils. Teachers found that pupils developed critical thinking, collaboration, communication, creativity and innovation skills by their participation. It was also noted that the pupils enjoyed the programme. Challenges with the digital components of the programme and the length of lessons were identified. The study makes interesting reading and its findings are in line with other studies carried out on school-based interventions.

The next article in this edition is one from Deirdre O' Toole on "*Phonemic Awareness Instruction -What, when, why and how?*" Deirdre suggests that while the importance of phonemic awareness has long been acknowledged in academic articles, it has been argued that teacher knowledge may be lacking in this area.

Research cited acknowledges that phonemic awareness is a reliable predictor of future reading attainment and Deirdre examines several common teaching practices and their effectiveness. She has also carried out a comprehensive review of the literature in this field. She raises interesting questions as to how we should teach phonemic awareness and the question of using phonemes only for young children who have not yet mastered letter recognition is discussed.

Deirdre concludes that phoneme awareness alone is not enough in teaching reading and writing and that the skills of encoding and decoding print must also be taught. She also concludes that there is a place for all strategies discussed in her article in everyday language lessons with all skills strengthening each other in a continuous cycle. The article makes thought-provoking reading for those interested in the development of reading and writing skills in children

In our penultimate article, Trevor O' Brien looks at "*The views of early career primary teachers on the impact of an undergraduate specialism on special education on their work as teachers.*" The young teachers who had all undertaken a specialism in special education, but subsequently found themselves working in mainstream classrooms, participated in a focus group to discuss how the specialism had impacted on their work as teachers.

The specialism undertaken by the teachers was in addition to core modules on inclusive education and dealt with practical inclusive strategies, behaviour support and the language of SET. The teachers reported increased confidence in supporting inclusion in their classrooms, supporting findings in the literature reviewed. They also reported a higher level of skills and felt that they could adapt their teaching to the needs of their pupils with profiled needs.

They also felt more prepared to deal with issues around behaviour as they had more practical strategies on which to draw. They also reported higher levels of confidence when engaging with other staff and non-teaching professionals. All young teachers felt that the expertise gained during the specialism had a positive impact on the school and increased their collaboration skills.

While the value of such a specialism at initial teacher education level is obvious from this research, both the researcher and the participants recognise that it is just a starting point and that ongoing professional learning is vital.

In the final article, Peter Melrose uses peer observation of teaching and a Professional Learning Community (PLC) in his school to develop and enhance collaboration and details his action research project in his article "*Turning the Wheel: Increasing teacher collaboration through peer observation".* The stated aim of the project was to influence school culture and to increase distributed leadership. Peter notes the dearth of research on the topics of collaboration and peer observation at primary level. Peer observation is used here as a collaborative, developmental tool which facilitates teacher collaboration. It allows teachers to work closely together and engage in professional conversations and participants in the study experienced many of the benefits of collaboration cited in the literature. Peter also comments on the impact of COVID-19 on teachers' opportunities for face-to-face collaboration and the PLC in particular helped to address feelings of isolation and was intrinsic to enabling teacher collaboration. Once again, lack of time is cited as an obstacle to collaboration, as are the difficulties of ensuring cover for teachers while observing colleagues.

The articles in this edition of the Irish Teachers' Journal reflect and highlight the current issues in Irish education, the issues that interest, excite and exercise our teacher researchers and writers. We thank them all for their interest and their contributions. We would like to encourage all teachers across the island and at all levels of the system to contribute to the journal, to teachers' research, discussion, and debate.

We would again like to take this opportunity to thank especially our reviewers. They have read, reviewed, suggested, edited and provided constructive feedback on all of our articles and their work ensures the quality of the journal. It is greatly appreciated by both the Editorial Board and our contributors.

I reserve a special word of thanks for Claire Garvey, INTO official for her indefatigable dedication to the publication of the journal. Míle buíochas Claire.

Máirín Ní Chéileachair, Eagarthóir

Author notes

Mary Nihill

Mary Nihill started her career in education as a post-primary science and maths teacher. She completed a Masters in Education in 1993 and was appointed principal of St Paul's in 1994. In 2005 she was seconded as assistant national coordination to the Leadership Development for Schools (LDS) team and coordinated programmes such as *Misneach -* the programme for newly appointed principals and *Forbairt* –a development programme for established principals and deputy principals. She was appointed as principal of Calasanctius College in Oranmore Galway in 2010. Mary was elected as president of The National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD) in October 2014. In 2015 she was seconded as the national director of The Centre for School Leadership (CSL). Mary is currently the director of leadership in Oide and heads up the leadership division which supports school leaders in both primary and post primary schools. Mary is currently completing a PhD study in the area of professional learning for school leadership with the University of Galway.

Paul Butler

Paul Butler is a school principal, former education centre director and part time lecturer in the University of Limerick. He lectures on the Postgraduate Diploma in School Leadership and also supervises Masters in Educational Leadership students. An MBA graduate Paul completed his PhD in the area of leadership coaching psychology and is a senior practitioner coach with the European and Mentoring and Coaching Council.

Danielle Egan, Úna Forde, Orlaith Galligan and Jolanta Burke

Danielle Egan is a mathematics and geography teacher with several years' teaching experience. She completed the Professional Master of Education at Maynooth University before returning in 2020 to complete her Masters in Educational Leadership and Management.

Úna Forde is a primary school teacher, currently working in Baylin NS in Co Westmeath. She holds a Master of Arts in Education from Mary Immaculate College and a Post-graduate Diploma in Educational Leadership and Management from Maynooth University.

Orlaith Galligan is a primary school teacher in Gaelscoil Bhréifne, an Chabháin. She holds a Post-graduate Diploma in Educational Leadership and Management from Maynooth University.

Jolanta Burke, PhD, is a Chartered Psychologist and Associate Professor at the Centre for Positive Psychology and Health, University of Medicine and Health Sciences. For more information, go to: www.jolantaburke.com. Her research interests include: Exploring the mechanisms of wellbeing, e.g., psycho-genetic profiling, that maximise the impact of wellbeing interventions; exploring new wellbeing interventions, e.g., pro-environmental, positive health, lifestyle medicine interventions and their impact on physiological health and wellbeing; nature and environment in the context of health and wellbeing.

Annemarie Doran, Jolanta Burke and Céline Healy

Annemarie Doran is a lecturer in education in Hibernia College, Dublin, with over 20 years post primary teaching experience. She was awarded the first ever *Early Career Research Award* by the Educational Studies Association of Ireland in April 2022 for the significant contribution that early career researchers make to educational knowledge and practice, both in Ireland and further afield. Dr Doran was recently invited as a guest editor for a special edition for the *Irish Educational Studies Journal*, aimed specifically at new voices and emerging change makers in education. Her research interests include leadership and wellbeing and educational policy.

Céline Healy is assistant professor at Maynooth University. Her research interests centre on teaching and learning with particular reference to foreign languages education, second language acquisition, creative approaches to teaching and learning, initial teacher education, teacher education, literacy, plurilingualism and multiculturalism in schools.

John Meegan and Elva Casey

John Meegan is an assistant professor in digital learning with the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education in Maynooth University. Before this role, John worked as a lecturer in primary education in the School of Education with Hibernia College, and as an advisor on the Primary Digital Technology Team with the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST). John is a trained primary school teacher having taught for seven years in mainstream and SEN settings. John completed his PhD with Maynooth University and has published research in the areas of doctoral teacher-research identity and social-emotional learning. John's research interests include digital technologies for teaching, learning and assessment, social-emotional learning, narrative research, future skills, and educational design research.

Elva Casey is college registrar at Hibernia College. Elva is currently engaged in doctoral studies at Trinity College on school placement partnerships at primary level. She has presented at national and international conferences of a diverse range of topics including academic integrity, the *National Quality Framework*, school placement and collaborative practice. She is co-chair of HAQEF, the HECA quality enhancement forum and serves on a number of internal and external committees and boards on academic integrity, ethical education and academic practices. Prior to her current role, she was director of the Primary Professional Master of Education. She has also worked for over 12 years as a qualified primary school teacher at a variety of class levels and positions.

Deirdre O'Toole

Deirdre O'Toole has been teaching in Co Meath since 2005. She has a particular interest in literacy acquisition and is currently studying for a PhD in Literacy Education at Mary Immaculate College. Deirdre is founder of the group *Science of Reading Discussion for Irish Teachers* on Facebook, which has 3,300 members and growing. She was awarded *Science of Reading Teacher of the Year* by Nessy in 2023. Deirdre also works with education centres to deliver professional development webinars on literacy and play to primary school teachers around the country.

Trevor O'Brien

Trevor O'Brien is an assistant professor in inclusive and special education at Mary Immaculate College. He lectures at undergraduate and post graduate levels and is also the coordinator of the Post Graduate Diploma in Special Education. His areas of research include qualitative research, student voice, specific learning differences, inclusive pedagogies, professional learning for teachers and teacher identity.

Peter Melrose

Peter Melrose is a primary school teacher Dunderry NS, in Co. Meath. Graduating from St Patrick's College in 2010, he went on to earn a Master's in Educational Leadership and Management from Maynooth University in 2022. His thesis, *Turning the Wheel: Increasing Teacher Collaboration and Developing Leadership Skills through Peer Observation,* was awarded first-class honours. He is also an award-winning filmmaker, with his documentary on integrated education in Derry City, *Growing Strong*, being selected for numerous national and international festivals, including several nominations for best short documentary. His academic interests include teacher collaboration, transformational leadership, and school culture in the Irish education system. He is the current branch organiser for INTO Navan.

Bláth Draíochta

⥽ Gabriel Rosenstock ⥼

Thugas bláth do mo mhúinteoir
Mar bhí sí an-chineálta,
Bláth draíochta is ea é
A fhásann thall i Málta.

"Go raibh míle maith agat," ar sise,
"Cuirfidh mé é i vása,
Ní fhaca mé aon rud riamh, riamh,
Chomh hálainn le do bhláthsa!"

Gabriel Rosenstock is a bilingual poet, tankaist, haikuist, novelist, short story writer, critic, children's author, playwright and translator who was awarded the *Children's Books Ireland Award* in 2023 for his unique contribution to children's literature: Gabriel is a member of Aosdána (the Irish academy of Arts and Letters) and POP (Poets of the Planet).

Bláth Draíochta is a poem by Gabriel Rosenstock in which a child gives a flower to her teacher in gratitude for her kindness.

Developing teacher and middle leaders in Irish schools

⇶ Mary Nihill ⇷

Abstract

This article explores the wider definition of the term 'school leader' which up until recently has been used to refer to the school principal. The concept of a continuum of leadership roles within the Irish education system is explored in terms of the need for the provision of coordinated professional learning for teachers at each stage of that continuum. The article proposes that reconceptualising a career in teaching as a journey and not a destination and viewing career progression as developmental, requires a rethink of both the approach to and development of teachers as leaders at all levels in the system. Two leadership roles, that of teacher leaders and middle leaders, are explored in greater detail and the potential that both of those leadership roles have in influencing positive learning outcomes for students is discussed.

Keywords: **leadership, teacher leaders, middle leaders**

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Introduction

There has been a growing acknowledgement in the literature of the impact of leadership on school outcomes (Fullan, 2006). The role of the school leader and that of the principal has become increasingly complex, seeking to embrace change management arising from political, societal, and economic demands. The centrality of leadership to school effectiveness and school improvement has been cited by transnational organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2008) and McKinsey with the latter noting that "The most successful systems actively foster the development of the next generation of system leadership from within" (McKinsey, 2010, p.23). Furthermore, there is also a growing recognition of the increasingly complex nature of school leadership, and of the fact that sustained school improvement depends on the leadership of many rather than few. In the Irish context, key Department of Education (DE) circulars such as *DES 0044/2019* highlight the potential for a school's development of middle leadership. However, up until relatively recently, the term school leader was predominantly associated with the leadership role of the principal with little or no attention focused on other leadership roles in the system. This article examines the continuum of leadership roles in schools with an emphasis on middle and teacher leadership.

Continuum of leadership in Irish schools

The concept of a leadership continuum has evolved in many jurisdictions in recent years. The *Improving School Leadership Country Background Report for Ireland* (OECD, 2007) referenced the need for the Irish school system to develop "a clearer analysis of the leadership roles and functions which teachers play at different levels within the school organisation" (OECD, 2007, p.67). The OECD report welcomed the growth in the provision of professional learning for school leaders at every level in a school but recommended that "it is time to look at the overall continuum of professional development" (OECD, 2007, p.68). Similarly, the *School Leadership in Ireland Report* (Fitzpatrick, 2018) noted that it is common practice in many jurisdictions to divide cohorts of leaders into groups such as aspiring leaders, new leaders and established leaders, and to offer bespoke professional learning to these distinct groups. Therefore, reconceptualising a career in teaching as a journey and not a destination, and viewing career progression as developmental requires a rethink of both the approach to and development of teachers as leaders at all levels in the system. Developing concepts, such as teacher leadership as well as the notion of distributed leadership which sees leadership being 'stretched' (Spillane, 2006) across a school, have provided the impetus for many educational systems to challenge themselves to provide quality professional learning for teachers across their career. Indeed, teacher leadership has now become a feature of initial teacher education in many Irish colleges (King, 2017).

A continuum of professional learning for leadership which includes cumulative opportunities for learning also ensures that there are sufficient teachers both interested in and able to move into various leadership positions in schools including that of principalship. Constructing a leadership development continuum is an important policy tool for the development of leadership capacity at both school and system levels. A well-constructed continuum potentially provides a framework for both aspiring and serving school leaders at different levels to plan their learning pathways. Nonetheless, one of the many challenges in Irish education today is to define the increasing complexity of the various leadership roles in Irish schools. The increased emphasis on whole-school improvement and the focus on quality teaching and learning in the school have become key functions of leadership. The changing school environment requires an ever-increasing breadth and depth of leadership talent within the school community. Therefore, an implication of policy is highlighting the centrality of effective leadership and the need for a strategy around leadership development as part of this reform agenda. A further challenge is to build a shared understanding around forms of leadership that currently have limited traction in the Irish education system such as teacher leadership and system leadership. The Centre for School Leadership (CSL) now part of the leadership division of Oide, proposed a continuum of leadership roles as represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The continuum of leadership roles in the Irish education system (Centre for School Leadership, 2018)
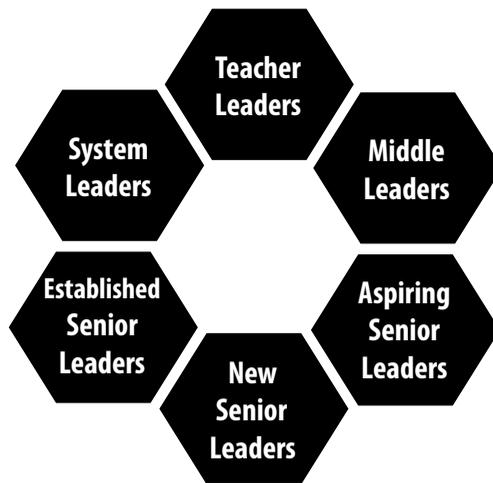
This continuum represents the variety of leadership positions that exist in Irish schools, and these are set out cyclically to emphasise the intended integrity of each type of leader as well as counteracting any notion of "an upward trajectory" (Forde, 2016, p.124) from teacher leadership to system leadership. Each role is identified in terms of the requirement for bespoke professional learning for that particular role. Two leadership roles, that of teacher leaders and middle leaders, are explored here. An exploration of how these leadership stages are defined both internationally and in the Irish context as well as how they might be further developed through professional learning is discussed.

Teacher leaders

A common understanding of what teacher leadership is and how it operates is still very much in its infancy in most jurisdictions (Poekert et al., 2016). Yet, most scholars agree that teacher leadership occurs within and outside classrooms to influence school-wide instructional practice (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009). There is growing evidence of the potential of the collective leadership of teachers who lead both within and beyond the classroom. The CSL defined teacher leaders as "teachers who would remain in the classroom but would assume other leadership responsibilities in their schools" (CSL, 2020, p.24). York-Barr and Duke's (2004), seminal literature review of teacher leadership describes the characteristics of teacher leaders as those who "assume a learning orientation in their work and demonstrate or are viewed as having the potential to develop leadership knowledge, skills, and dispositions" (York-Barr & Duke, 2004, p.289). Muijs and Harris (2007, p.112) draw from Katzenmeyer and Moller's (2001) widely used definition and discuss the nature and role of teacher leadership:

> Teachers who are leaders lead within and beyond the classroom, identify with and contribute to a community of teacher leaders and learners, and influence others towards improved educational practice (Katzenmayer & Moller, 2001, cited in Muijs & Harris 2007, p.112).

Time or the lack thereof, is the most frequently cited challenge to the development of teacher leadership and the Poekert et al., (2016) study across several jurisdictions including Ireland, highlighted that for many individuals "teacher leadership development represented a change in their self-perception and their actions" (Poekert et al., 2016, p.322) pointing to the fact that when pressed for time, "teacher leaders retreated to focus on their core function as a teacher" (Poekert et al., 2016, p.322). Poekert et al., quotes an Irish participant explaining:

> It's a massive thing … you take on extra responsibilities as a teacher leader in school, you have to. You have to be prepared to do that, and that means time outside of school, because … first and foremost, you are a teacher. You have to meet the needs of the students (Poekert et al., 2016, p.322).

Smylie and Eckert (2018) focus on leadership development of teacher leaders discussing four key insights which can be drawn from the literature on teacher leadership. They state firstly, that developing new leadership means developing a new system of leadership for all as "new leadership is not developed without developing current leadership." (ibid, p.559) This insight highlights the importance of developing school principals so that they use "more collaborative forms of leadership" (ibid, p.560) so that they in turn, can play an important part in the development of their teachers. It is in school that teachers will build their leadership capacity, therefore all school leaders must create a climate that is conducive to developing teachers as leaders. This conclusion also makes a strong case for experiential school-based learning as a strong component of professional development for teacher leadership. The current DE part-funded Post Graduate Diploma in School Leadership (PDSL), has a focus on providing participants with these experiential learning opportunities in the form of leadership visits that facilitate observation of and reflection on leadership in many settings. For the third insight, Smylie and Eckert (2018) draw on the work of many authors and in particular on day (2001) in noting a distinction between the development of the leader (the person) and the development of leadership (the process and practice). They conclude that:

> the implication for teacher leadership development is that while developing the capacity of the teacher for leadership is important, it is insufficient. A crucial focus of development should be on the employment of this capacity in the practice of leadership (ibid, p.571).

The fourth insight is that teacher leadership development should be informed by research including that on "adult and career development" (ibid, p.572) as teachers and schools are all at different stages of readiness and motivation. Context plays an important part in teacher leadership development and schools have a significant influence on this area of development. In the Irish context, the concept of teacher leadership until recently was largely underdeveloped. However, several current Irish educational policy documents have highlighted specifically the role of the teacher as a leader in their classroom. *Cosán* (Teaching Council, 2016) for example, states that the development of professional standards is central to the work of the Council. These standards expect that teachers will be:

reflecting critically on their teaching and their learning, and the relationship between them, identifying areas for further professional learning, planning for their learning, celebrating their learning experiences and accomplishments, and demonstrating their ongoing commitments as learning professionals (Teaching Council, 2016, p.22).

Cosán (Teaching Council, 2016) identifies the teacher as a leader of their learning and allows them the autonomy to select what is appropriate for themselves in their specific learning environment. The statements of practice in the teaching and learning dimension of the *quality framework* (DE, 2022) reminds teachers of their leadership role stating that: "The framework also recognises that all teachers play a leadership role within the school, and seeks to support teachers in recognising their leadership attributes and qualities" (DE, 2022, p.10).

Accordingly, the School Self-Evaluation (DES, 2012) process was developed "as a collaborative, inclusive, reflective process of internal school review" (DES, 2012, p.6). It promotes teacher agency and empowerment, viewing schools as dynamic learning organisations, where "teachers are enabled to work individually and collectively to build their professional capacity in order to support continuous improvement in teaching and learning" (DE, 2012, p.16).

The introduction of new curricula such as the new *Primary Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2023) and the requirement of teachers to discuss ways of teaching and outcomes for students, is an example of an area necessitating the development of teacher leadership in the Irish context. These developments present potentially an opportunity for what York-Barr and Duke (2004, p.288) claim is integral to the process of teacher leadership, that of "influencing their colleagues, principals, and other members of school communities to improve teaching and learning practices with the aim of increased student achievement". The range of reforms could also provide an opportunity for teachers to lead both within and outside of their classroom with a focus on the improvement of learning outcomes for students. The development of teacher leadership in Ireland is, therefore, dependent on providing professional learning for those on the leadership team so that they can build collegial cultures in Irish schools.

Middle leaders

The term 'middle leader' is often used as an overarching title to describe a leadership position in a school that involves additional responsibilities outside of the classroom. The literature around middle leadership acknowledges the central role that middle leaders play in influencing learning outcomes because of their proximity to the classroom.

Middle leaders in schools may have different areas of responsibility. These may include pastoral leadership, curriculum leadership, the leadership of additional student supports, the leadership of a team who are delivering a particular programme, or the leadership of a specific school improvement priority. Thus, middle leadership is defined as those roles which have an 'out-of-classroom' remit and a leadership strategic remit (CSL, 2018). What has filled this middle leadership space has evolved over many years in different systems and

is largely related to the hierarchical organisational structure of schools in that system (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013). The common theme running through most of the definitions of what this role constitutes refers to it as the teachers who are the 'middle layer' in the school's organisational structure between senior leadership, (the principal and deputy principal) and classroom teachers. Forde et al., (2019, p.299) when comparing middle leadership policy development in Scotland and Ireland, identify the dual nature of this role - "A central dimension of middle leadership common to both systems is the dual nature of the role – teaching alongside 'out-of-classroom' responsibilities – positioned between teachers and senior leadership".

Odhiambo (2014, p.1) also acknowledges "the rival expectations of monitoring and collegiality" inherent in the role. The role often has tensions related to dealing with competing, if not conflicting expectations and demands. While most middle leaders find their role rewarding, nevertheless, Bassett and Shore (2018) found that they experience the tension of being both teacher and leader. The challenge, particularly for newly appointed middle leaders, involves navigating these conflicting expectations as well as coping with the transition from peer to leader of others in a time of changing policy.

Even though there is a growing belief that single-person leadership, such as that of the principal, is insufficient when it comes to leading learning and teaching in a complex organisation like a school, hierarchies continue to exist. Considerable power still resides with the principal in the school, particularly in shaping ethos and setting policies. Gurr and Drysdale (2013, p.56) found that the "senior leadership team usually shapes the school's ethos, sets policies and establishes guidelines, and that the middle leaders "… work to apply and realise them". Harris and Jones (2012) also reinforce the idea that the quality of middle leadership is heavily determined by the extent to which they have autonomy and responsibility to engage with teachers in supportive and innovative ways.

Historically, when posts of responsibility were introduced into the Irish education system as a middle management tier, they were not conceived of as leadership posts but as positions which provided the means to recompense staff who took on duties in addition to their classroom responsibilities. Seniority was an important criterion in the appointments to these posts. It is against this historical backdrop that the current development of middle leadership is taking place. Given the increasing reform agenda currently being experienced in Irish education, the development of this leadership layer in schools is particularly significant. The quality framework *Looking at Our School* (DE, 2022) definition of school leaders includes those who hold "formal leadership roles, and also includes teachers with posts of responsibility and those who have undertaken roles related to the school's priorities" *(*DE, 2022, p.10). The publication of circulars such as *0044/2019* (DES, 2019, p.33) further underscores the importance of leadership for the wider school context. This circular has signalled a move from the concept of 'posts of responsibility' positions intended to recompense teachers taking on additional out-of-classroom tasks to assistant principal roles which are envisaged as a genuine leadership position in this middle level. Furthermore, the development of solid middle leadership structures in schools is linked to policy expectations around school improvement:

Assistant principals occupy positions of strategic importance in the leadership, management, and administration of the school. In line with the principles of distributed leadership, assistant principals work in teams in collaboration with the principal and/or deputy principal and have shared responsibility, commensurate with the level of the post, for areas such as:

- Learning and teaching;
- Leading school development (including curriculum development);
- Pupil support including wellbeing;
- School improvement;
- Leadership/management and development of individuals and staff teams;
- Special education and inclusion;
- Supporting teachers during the induction phase of their career.

However, McVeigh (2019) identifies a challenge in implementing this more distributed form of leadership as one of misunderstanding by both principals and middle leaders as to what distributed leadership looks like in the Irish context and he states that:

This is presenting serious challenges for school leaders as traditionally they have interpreted and understood their role by a set of assigned duties and responsibilities rather than the principles of distributed leadership practice [...] Consequently, there is growing widespread misunderstanding and misconceptions regarding the concept of distributed leadership and the principals' role in executing this effectively. (McVeigh, 2019, p.14)

Kavanagh (2020, p.36) concurs with this view, noting that in the Irish context, the "release of a traditional hierarchical power structure is likely to be difficult in an era of accountability". Therefore, the development of this leadership role in the Irish system still has some way to go.

This broader conceptualisation of leadership in the school context away from just the senior leadership role of the principal to a more distributed model exercised across the school, challenges those providing professional learning to facilitate the development of leadership at all levels within schools. This professional learning must also address the understandings and practices related to leadership of learning as the core activity in a school. Grootenboer et al., (2015) when commenting on the role of the middle leader, noted that because of their positioning in the middle, they can "directly impact classroom practices" [...] and as such can be in "a powerful position to be professional development leaders and to promote and sustain quality teaching and learning practices in schools" (Grootenboer et al., 2015, p.509).

Kavanagh's (2020) study spoke of the need for "a team of leaders who use their collective intelligences to transform the school into a learning community". She further notes that "investment in those teams is necessary to ensure that senior and middle leaders have the necessary skills to work together" (Kavanagh, 2020, p.37).

Research commissioned by professional associations (IPPN, 2022) has highlighted the need to redefine what is meant by leadership in Irish schools, with requests for a clearer analysis of the leadership roles and functions which middle leaders and indeed, teachers play at different levels within the school. McGovern's (2015) study which examines the principles of sustainable leadership from the perspectives of newly appointed principals in Irish primary education, notes however, that "Distributed leadership is not a quick fix support for principals. Authentic and successful partnerships take time and considerable effort" (McGovern 2015, p.55).

The *Middle Leadership Action Research Pilot Project* (MLAR), undertaken by The CSL which was funded by the Teacher Education Section (TES) of the Department of Education, aimed to develop understandings around building middle leadership capacity in Irish schools (Forde, 2023). The collaborative nature of this pilot programme was pivotal, whereby the principal, deputy principal, middle leaders and teachers could learn together to strengthen leadership capacity for the benefit of students and the school community. The pilot project also set out to learn about system-level development of leadership capacity across schools. The CSL team designed a programme that comprised several different components including online competency workshops to be undertaken by leaders in school, leadership visits, and school-cluster twilight sessions facilitated by a CSL facilitator. In addition, each leadership team in the school undertook a practice-based leadership development project. The evaluation report (Forde, 2023) recognises the central role that the external facilitators played in the pilot project. Their skills and experience as a school principal and as an external person building connections across the leadership teams, and facilitating critical and productive discussions, were key drivers of the project. The school-led, collaborative, practice-based learning approach provided powerful learning experiences that enhanced practice.

Conclusion

The need to develop the role of both teacher and middle leader is evident. However, there is still a way to go in developing the capacity of senior leaders to be alert to and to facilitate opportunities for teachers to develop as leaders in their schools, empowering them to make decisions and to be accountable for those decisions. Principals and deputy principals need to focus on the potential that these roles offer as a vehicle for the development of leadership capacity. This concurs with the findings in the *Chief Inspector's Report* (2013-2016) when Dr Harold Hislop questioned the capacity of Irish school leaders at that time to establish goals and expectations in an environment of collaboration and collegiality:

> The assumption that principals have the capacity to do so is not one we can rely on – professional learning opportunities for principals have been underdeveloped in Ireland and there is an ongoing requirement to develop programmes that nurture relevant leadership skills to cultivate collaborative, reflective cultures in schools and engage in the challenging conversations that will be necessary (Hislop, 2015, pp.102-103).

There is also evidence that teachers and indeed middle leaders themselves do not reflect on their leadership development and do not initially identify as leaders. The potential that the *Looking at Our Schools* framework (DE, 2022) has to raise awareness of the leadership role of teachers and middle leaders is probably not fully exploited by school communities. There may be a lack of awareness of the framework at the teacher level in particular and some evidence that it is not being used as a developmental document with too great of an emphasis by schools on its use as part of school evaluation and as a framework for interview for senior and middle leadership roles exclusively. The busyness of the school day and the lack of structured time to focus on leadership development is also a challenge at school level with some principals noting that there was a lack of clarity around what leadership looks like at school level. This may indicate that there is still a residue of leadership being viewed as formal roles with specific associated tasks and that Irish schools are still some distance away from creating a climate of empowerment.

There is potential to further develop roles such as teacher and middle leader, but it will require professional learning for both those who undertake the role and for senior leaders in promoting teacher agency. This also brings to the fore the complex concept of 'layering of leadership' which entails a significant role for an effective senior leader, particularly the principal, in developing this concept within the school. Priestly (2015) notes that it is this interplay between individual teacher agency and school context and leadership development that is key to the viability of teacher agency. It will also require a re-thinking of school structures, the potential for the concept of time for meaningful facilitation of leadership development and professional learning to be incorporated into the working day of teachers and middle leaders and not seen as an add-on. Finally, the potential of the school as the site for this learning needs to be prioritised and valued.

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The impact of leadership coaching in building a model of distributed leadership in schools

⪜ Paul Butler ⪛

Abstract

Distributed leadership suggests a model of leadership that aims to not only improve instructional leadership but also to enhance the skill sets and capacity of teachers, with an overall focus towards a model of school improvement. Underpinning such a model of leadership is the suggestion that sharing and delegating responsibilities result in a more democratic style of governance in schools. While it may place additional demands on middle management and teachers, it aims to promote shared ownership and accountability. This, combined with the workload of principals becoming unsustainable, also suggests a need to distribute and empower others on the school management team and teachers accordingly. However, distributing leadership tasks and responsibilities can present challenges for principals, as can getting 'buy-in' from all staff to agree to take on this new responsibility. Principals need skills to change the culture of the school so that a distributed leadership model of leadership is embraced. Principals must reflect on the way a distributed model of leadership can be built, on the way leadership coaching can provide a space to rethink their approaches, and how the capacity of the leadership team can be enhanced through the development of personal skills.

Keywords: **coaching, distributed leadership, delegation, accountability**

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Introduction

The demands of the role of the school leader are well established in empirical research (Sebastian et al., 2017; Whitaker, 2003) and the need for school principals to build leadership competencies among staff to both lessen their workload and build a more distributed model of leadership is also well debated (Robinson, 2008; Spillane, 2006). School leaders face many challenges and demands and the possibility of spreading the workload amongst a range of colleagues and gaining different perspectives and possible solutions to problems is an attractive consideration for a model of distributed leadership (Supovitz et al., 2019). Notwithstanding, the ability of school leaders to establish a distributed model is often met with challenges such as staff resistance, school culture and the skill sets of staff (Mohd et al., 2016). Leadership coaching training for principals aims to develop the personal skills of leaders to help them manage the challenges of running a school. This article seeks to assess the impact of leadership coaching training on principals who endeavour to both distribute leadership in their schools and develop leadership capacity as a result.

Literature review

There is a wide range of empirical findings about educational leadership, highlighting the positive impact that effective leadership has on organisational learning outcomes (Bush, 2007; Day, 2007; Gorham et al., 2008; Harris & Jones, 2018). Within these many styles, there is a recognition that the core purpose of leadership for principals is to do with leading learning, with accountability emerging as a subsequent requirement of the role (Sardar & Galdames, 2018). However, in recent years, the role of educational leader has been met with many challenges. Accountability has been underestimated (Gross, 2018) and the managerial tasks of principalship have left principals unprepared for the leadership aspect of their role (Bush, 2018). Principals need further training to be able to address these challenges.

Distributed leadership

Research on leadership presents many styles and definitions including visionary, transformational, transactional, democratic, coaching, servant, and distributive. According to the OECD (2007), there is a real challenge for education systems to form a definition of leadership. In their findings, they acknowledge that there are core competencies that need to be developed outside of the leadership roles of the principal and deputy principal to develop learning within a school and a distributive style of leadership may present as a solution.

According to Hairon and Goh (2015, p.693), "distributed leadership is one of the most prominent contemporary leadership theories in education". While it is often associated with the distribution of tasks, it involves communicating with others in particular contexts and involves a social dimension around "influencing others to make change" (Robinson, 2008, p.243). Gronn (2002) posits that there are two aspects to consider when looking at distributed leadership. The first is the practical aspect of building other leaders, who can now act as a support to school principals and their workload. Crucially, the second is the consideration of taking a holistic approach to leadership that can be provided through a distributed model. Thus, there is much more at stake than a traditional assigning of duties to an in-school management (ISM) team and teachers. It involves a certain type of open communication and empowerment acknowledging that the role of the school principal has become too broad to be carried out by one person alone. Thus, distributed leadership can have the ability to empower many views in the school, rather than the few. It is therefore more appropriate to consider it as leadership practice rather than focusing on leaders and/ or their roles, functions, routines, and structures (Spillane, 2006). Key to the success of distributed leadership is the interactions that exist among its leaders and followers. Such a leadership style involves not only the development of learning, but it requires personal growth and the self-development of teachers (Murphy & Brennan, 2022). While consistent with Spillane's perspective that distributed leadership is about practice rather than formal roles, Irvine (2020) notes that it may be difficult to define exactly what it entails, while suggesting an interaction around activity to produce a desired outcome. He submits that a culture of trust and collective efficacy exists in such a model that can have positive impacts on pupils. Indeed, there can be benefits for staff too as he proposes that the benefits of

distributed leadership include the development of staff (building leadership capacity), collaboration/relationship building, a desire by teachers for change and 'staff buy-in' as they now are involved in the decision making.

Coaching: A definition

With coaching now being supported and recommended as a means to support principals in managing their schools in Ireland (CSL, 2015), it is important to clarify what it entails for school leaders and how it can contribute to embedding a culture of distributed leadership in schools. When considering coaching approaches, such words as personal, executive, leadership, life and well-being are often used to describe its essence. Peterson (2011) suggests a challenge in attempts to define such a broad diverse practice, as coaching often assumes areas such as counselling, therapy, business consulting and psychology. However, at the core of most definitions of coaching is an acceptance of a relationship where a process of facilitation exists to improve practice. It normally involves a one-to-one relationship assuming a level of trust provided by a professional that is both goal and growth-orientated (Peterson, 2011). Gavin (2018, p.138) suggests that coaching has an element of "growing and developing" around an area of change. It normally involves a structured approach with the use of a framework or model to give it focus as highlighted in Figure 1.

Reproduced from Whitmore (2019), Figure 1 presents a model of coaching that is often used in a coaching approach to leadership. Known as the GROW model, it focuses on a GOAL, looking at the REALITY of the situation now, considering OPTIONS and finally some action through a WRAP-UP or WILL.

Figure 1: Reproduced from Whitmore (2019)

Coaching and distributed leadership

Distributed leadership therefore can enhance communication, influence change, build leadership capacity, provide support to principals and their workload, empower others, and offer a more holistic approach to leadership in schools. Notwithstanding the benefits

of distributed leadership, there are contentious impacts of distributed leadership with student achievement and school improvement difficult to measure (Irvine, 2020) and the acknowledgement that distributed leadership is not a blueprint for change alone (Camburn & Ham, 2009). Other issues include school size with smaller schools unable to have a real distributed model through lack of capacity with some teachers believing an increased workload has no benefit for them, with others lacking self-belief in their leadership skills (Mohd et al., 2016).

"Empirical research on the role of tools in distributed leadership practice is in its infancy", and while there may be many merits to be found in distributing leadership throughout an organisation or school, it can still be difficult to implement (Robinson, 2008, p.250). Distributed leadership is now part of national policy in Ireland (see, for example, DES, 2016), yet achieving this is by no means straightforward. For some the process of distributed leadership may be interpreted as exercising influence over others and, therefore, it should be distinguished from other sources of power relationships such as force, coercion, and manipulation, and instead should create the conditions that others can think and act differently (Robinson, 2008). A distributed leadership style focuses on leaders that build school capacity, by supporting and empowering staff to take on school tasks. This type of empowerment is also evident in a coaching style of leadership with coaching considered a significant strategy for organisational leadership and change (Fay, 1987). Distributed leadership also involves a level of growth within a school and as such has a similar aim to a coaching approach to leadership, with coaching being part of 'the how' of distributed leadership that will support its implementation more successfully.

In addition, coaching may provide a platform where a collaborative means of achieving a distributed model of leadership can be obtained, through the enhancement of the personal skills of the principal. These skills associated with coaching include listening skills, building rapport and effective questioning, with the aim of coaches/teachers meeting their potential through a coaching model (Anthony, 2017; Sonesh et al., 2015). Coaching skills can assist principals as they can use them to devolve responsibility in an empowering way, thus reducing resistance and conflict as cited above. Using a coaching framework provides an avenue that has the potential to motivate staff members intrinsically, thus breaking down the barriers of an imposed distribution of tasks that are often associated with distributed leadership models.

There is no doubt that schools are challenging and busy work environments that "require an ever-increasing breadth and depth of leadership talent within the school community" and coaching can support this (CSL, 2015, p.1). While distributed leadership is now national policy in Ireland (DES, 2016), there are challenges to its realisation which include staff resistance, ambiguity surrounding its impact on pupil learning outcomes, and the view that it is "externally mandated" (Amels et al., 2020, p.3). Based on the foregoing, it is reasonable to suggest that coaching as a process can assist principals in overcoming such challenges, as it both focuses on collaboration and the development of others through engagement and understanding, rather than the delegation of tasks alone.

Methodology

This research sought to investigate how leadership coaching psychology impacted principal leadership and well-being. To this end, a mixed methods approach was employed whereby a quantitative survey was carried out with 49 participants who had completed a Diploma in Personal and Executive Coaching that was accredited by QQI Ireland and had a Level 6 component. Completion of this diploma involves 100 hours of study and supervised practice in coaching. This was followed with a qualitative component in which an in-depth semi-structured interview was conducted with 12 of these participants. Participants of the study needed to have completed a diploma in coaching and were limited to existing principals, deputy principals and assistant principals based in Ireland. Darling-Hammond et al., (2009, p.5) suggest "teachers typically need substantial professional development in a given area (close to 50 hours) to improve their skills and their students' learning." Thus, the selection criteria for the samples would glean insight from participants with relevant qualifications and experience in coaching skills.

In light of a literature review, data collection and analysis of findings were considered using Bandura's (1978) theory of reciprocal determinism using a pragmatic world-view. The analysis was carried out using the use of coding and correlation analysis using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for the quantitative data, with thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) being used to analyse the qualitative data using the Nvivo software package. The dual approach aimed to triangulate the results to generate greater credibility (Guthrie, 2010).

Procedure

There were two data-gathering parts to this research, a quantitative survey, and follow-up semi-structured interviews. For this research, the survey aimed to gather statistical data, and the interviews involved a deeper examination of elements that emanated from this data.

The stages of data analysis employed were:

- Data preparation – includes coding, cataloguing and loading into the software;
- Initial exploration – looking for trends, correlations and recurrent themes;
- Analysis of the data – using statistical tests such as descriptive statistics, factor analysis, cluster analysis and coding by theme;
- Presentation and display of the data in tables and figures with written interpretation of the findings to include quotes;
- Validation of the data – external benchmarks, internal consistency, comparison of explanations and data triangulation.

(Denscombe, 2010, adapted from Creswell & Plano Clarke, 2011)

Quantitative methods

Having imported the data into the software programme SPSS, several correlation analysis techniques were used to test the relationship between variables. Fisher's exact test and Spearman's rho were used to examine relationships for this study. These tests examined variables such as gender, the number of years of experience as a principal, age, qualifications, school size, and whether the principal was a teaching or administrative principal, and looked for correlations between these factors and coaching as a leadership style.

Qualitative methods

Using the software package Nvivo, codes were applied to the data with a secondary analysis of coding using emotional coding (Saldaña, 2013, pp.86-93) carried out. Participants were given pseudonyms for the data analysis. Initially, free coding was applied logically to the data, based on themes that were emerging, frequency of language used, and cognisance of the framework that was guiding the study. The overarching framework (Bandura, 1978) considered the influences of personal, environmental and, finally, behavioural factors which worked in a triad of reciprocity. For personal factors, these were aspects such as biology, cognition, and background; for environment such influences as school culture or home life were considered, which in turn have an impact on the third part of the triad, that of behaviour.

Findings

The key themes that emerged from the data relating to coaching demonstrated:

1. It is a reflective practice.
2. Through self-awareness, principals began a process of a 'distribution of practice' whereby principals who normally tried to solve problems for staff, began to use coaching skills acquired through the training to empower teachers and staff to solve their own problems. Skills developed during the training that assisted this process included self-awareness, the use of listening skills, effective questioning, and taking small action steps using the GROW model. This process enabled principals to distribute tasks more effectively.
3. The coaching process built new leadership capacity and led to a distribution of leadership.
4. Coaching enhanced the well-being of both the principal and the teacher who now felt empowered to solve problems.

The findings from this research are reflected in extant literature, as illustrated in Figure 2 (Butler, 2021).

Figure 2: Butler (2021)

When analysing the data through the lens of the theoretical framework several themes emerged relating to distributed leadership. Almost three-quarters of respondents (n=34, 71%) either agreed (n=26) or strongly agreed (n=8) that they now have the skills to be a competent coach after having graduated with a coaching diploma. All participants of this study agreed that their leadership skills had been developed because of leadership coaching training, with the demographics of their gender, age experience and role as administrative or teaching principal not impacting this. This is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

	Strongly agree		Agree		Neither agree nor disagree		
	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	p-value[1]
Gender							0.824
Male (n=19)	(57.9)	11	(36.8)	7	(5.3)	1	
Female (n=28)	(53.6)	15	(32.1)	9	(14.3)	4	
Role							1
Administration/other (n=32)	(56.3)	18	(34.4)	11	(9.4)	3	
Teaching (n=15)	(53.3)	8	(33.3)	5	(13.3)	2	
Age							0.315
25-44 years (n=12)	(33.3)	4	(58.3)	7	(8.3)	1	
45-54 years (n=18)	(55.6)	10	(33.3)	6	(11.1)	2	
55+ years (n=16)	(68.8)	11	(18.8)	3	(12.5)	2	
Number of years as a school principal							0.892
0-5 (n=8)	(50.0)	4	(37.5)	3	(12.5)	1	
5-10 (n=10)	(50.0)	5	(40.0)	4	(10.0)	1	
10-15 (n=11)	(54.5)	6	(36.4)	4	(9.1)	1	
15+ (n=15)	(73.3)	11	(20.0)	3	(6.7)	1	

[1]from Fisher's Exact Test

Significantly, the vast majority (92%) of participants agreed that coaching helped with their overall job performance and assisted them in managing conflict. The interview data cited the significant benefits of leadership coaching training as being the development of skills that support developing a distributed model of leadership, enabling the distribution of responsibilities, the empowerment of others and the development of staff. Almost three-quarters (n=35, 71%) of participants strongly agreed that coaching skills developed their effectiveness with staff, while over three-fifths (n=31, 63%) agreed it impacted their effectiveness with students. A significant majority (n=41, 86%) of respondents cited that leadership coaching helped build the capacity of the ISM team, a core aim of distributed leadership (DES, 2016).

Figure 3: Benefits of coaching
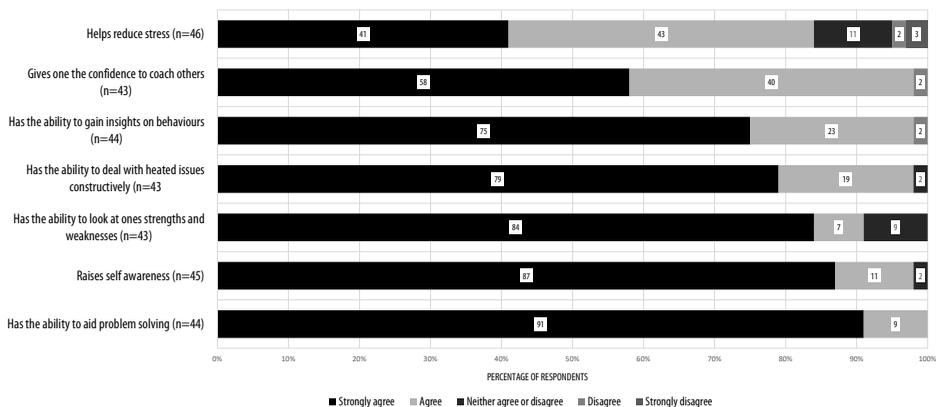
Figure 3 highlights that respondents rated coaching as an aid to problem-solving with all participants (100%) either strongly agreeing or agreeing with this. Virtually all (98%) respondents reported that coaching raised their self-awareness and helped them examine their weaknesses and their strengths. The same proportion (98%) strongly agreed or agreed that coaching could deal with heated issues more constructively with over 96% of respondents strongly agreeing or agreeing that they now had the confidence to coach others. A significant majority (84%) cited the reduction of stress as a factor of coaching training and while the interviews highlighted that coaching did not eliminate stress, it helped participants manage it better with a new range of skills.

The development of personal skills was also a theme that emerged during this study, with areas such as listening skills, questioning skills, not responding with answers and drawing out from other colleagues solutions to their problems cited as key skills developed during the training. This was noted by almost all participants (91%) who strongly agreed that leadership coaching aided problem-solving, with principals now moving away from solving the problems of all staff, but through effective questioning were now probing staff, developing them in the process and allowing them the autonomy to self-solve and take on some new additional duties, a core attribute of distributed leadership. For example, regarding solutions to problems raised by staff, Amanda (principal coach) stated: "I would certainly not be telling anybody what I think anymore. I would really tease it out of them [the solution] … You know it has to come from the person" This behaviour change was echoed by Edel (principal coach) who as a teacher herself referred to "the awfulness of the teacher always having to have the ready answer and the advice and being able to curb that in myself … most teachers have a tendency to provide answers.' This self-discovery allowed it to be acceptable not to have the answers and to aim to develop the person to explore solutions thus building a distributed type of leadership style while also building leadership capacity. This leadership coaching reflects what Peltier (2010, p.72) referred to as the "existential way" of living and the idea that teachers often have the answers within themselves when they are probed and coached towards a solution.

Coaching assisted Fred greatly in developing a culture of distributed leadership:

I've learned not to advise unless necessary, really necessary. It's a whole new mindset, really it is … you know coaching sessions are about expanding people's capacity and confidence in acting for themselves, which ultimately takes a lot off the principal's shoulders because people will know how to solve their own problems basically. Growing leaders to develop their leadership skills, empower them, it enables them. Helps them to take responsibility which is all about the new mindset for Irish education at the moment, distributing leadership.

The data indicated the personal skills developed during the coaching training also contributed towards developing the potential of staff. Amanda (principal coach) noted that she developed her intuition skills commenting:

Certainly, the whole area of questioning, I realise now the importance of questioning. You know, asking good questions and questions that will move you forward and move people forward and I loved the whole idea of this feeding forward and I've tried to use that so much since.

For her, this change of practice from previously trying to solve all problems presented, allowed the development of staff, thus enhancing distributed leadership.

Fidelma (principal coach) also noted that while coaching did not take away the challenges of being a principal, it brought about an awareness and skill set to distribute leadership and to develop the capacity of others:

I can say the coaching does have a very positive impact and it is in this way, the challenges you're faced with as a principal still remain the same, but through coaching you develop an ability to realise that the other person has the ability to generate solutions for themselves and can take responsibility for their own actions and their own decisions … So, yes coaching definitely has definitively [impacted positively].

Well-being

A factor identified by participants was that adopting a coaching approach to leadership enhanced the well-being of principals with over four-fifths (83%) either agreeing or strongly agreeing with this. It was noted that participants felt that as a result they had permission not to have all the answers and saw the growth and development of staff through coaching skills as a positive influence on their sense of self and the self-efficacy of those they coached. Almost all participants (88%) stated that coaching helped to deal with the stresses of the job and 86% of participants cited that coaching helped build the capacity of the ISM team.

While almost all participants (98%) rated the role of the principal as stressful, 93% stated that coaching builds resilience, with some citing enhanced assertiveness skills (83%) and reduced stress as benefits. Distributing responsibility to others was not seen as an arduous task, nor one that would be met with much resistance. John noted that he finds his job quite stressful from time to time but has suggested that leadership coaching helps him to recognise his stressors a lot more and hopefully, this helps him to deal with them better "I'm able to recognise it a lot more. And you know hopefully dealing with it better."

The ability to manage conflict was also developed through coaching with most participants (83%) strongly agreeing or agreeing that leadership coaching had improved their general sense of wellbeing. It helped to build resilience, to reframe problems thus enhancing assertiveness skills in managing conflict and improving relationships generally. It also helped build the confidence of participants in their roles and assisted them in managing their roles better, citing their ability to manage conflict much better, a factor that is often associated with trying to delegate and distribute leadership tasks. Thus, building a distributed model of leadership through a coaching approach had the impact of enhancing the well-being of both the principal and the teacher. In addition, coaching helped leaders manage their stress, build resilience and build the capacity of the ISM team, a key factor of distributed leadership. A summary of these impacts is presented in Figures 4 and 5.

Figure 4: Leadership coaching has improved my general sense of well-being (n=48)
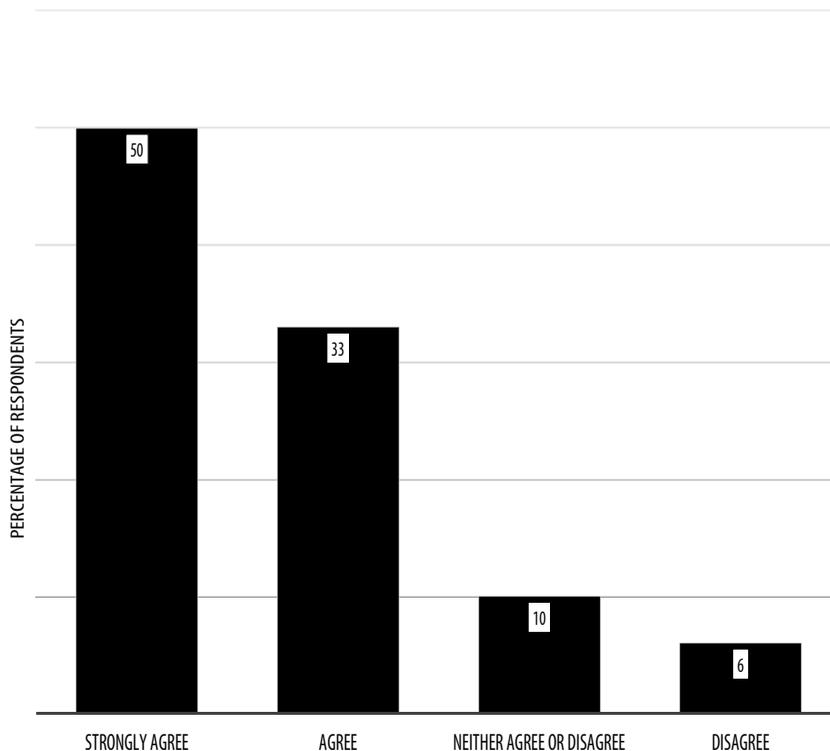
Figure 5: Level of agreement (n=48)
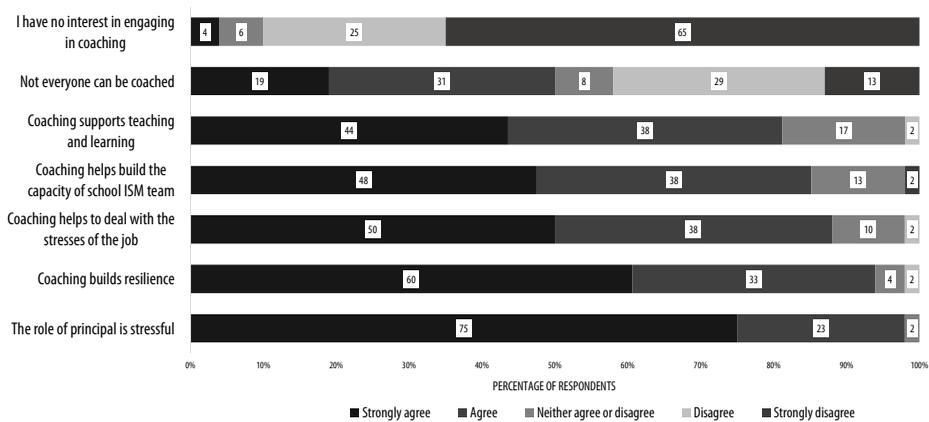
Challenges

While this research highlighted the benefits of coaching in building a model of distributed leadership, many factors contribute to the effectiveness of coaching. Time was cited by all participants as a major factor, second to curriculum overload (see Table 2 and Figure 6). This was irrespective of being a teaching or administrative principal. Coaching as an endeavour requires one-to-one conversations in a structured way to be effective and time is a major hindering factor. For Schneider (2018), lack of time was already an issue for school principals even before coaching may have to be scheduled.

Table 2: Time restraints are a main challenge to creating a coaching culture at school

	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Neither agree nor disagree		Agree		Strongly agree		
	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	p-value[1]
Role											0.116
Administration/other (n=32)	(3.1)	1	(12.5)	4	(6.3)	2	(28.1)	9	(50.0)	16	
Teaching (n=14)	(0.0)	0	(0.0)	0	(21.4)	3	(7.1)	1	(71.4)	10	

[1]from Fisher's Exact Test

Figure 6: Ranked as the most important issue that can affect the successful delivery of coaching for school leaders (n=48)
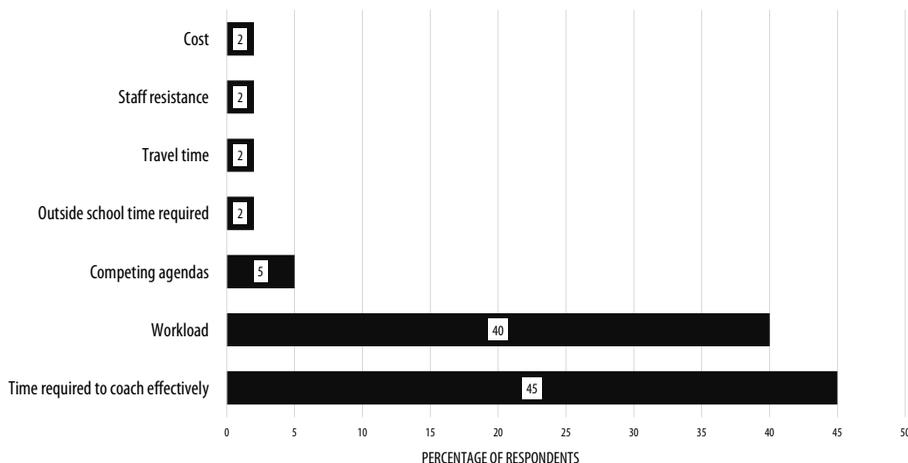
Another factor impacting the success of leadership coaching in Irish schools was that coaching as a leadership style is relatively new and unknown (see Figure 7) and is not being encouraged by many support partners in education. The lack of opportunities for principals to take up formal coaching training was also noted.

Figure 7: Factors that are the main challenge to creating a coaching culture at school
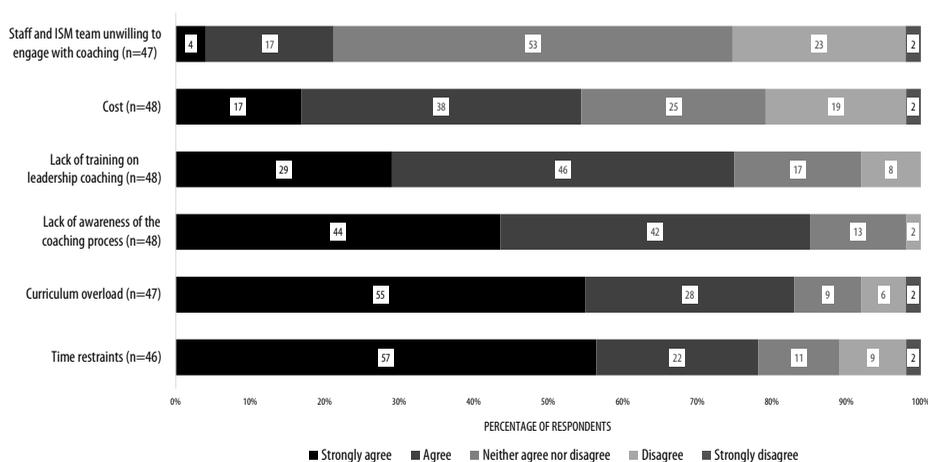
Discussion

The results of this study suggest that coaching is a useful method to enhance a model of distributed leadership in schools. This is consistent with other empirical studies that emphasise the value of coaching (Beere & Broughton, 2013; Chase, 2018; CSL, 2015; Gavin, 2018; Page & De Haan, 2014).

The following themes were derived from the findings of the data:

- Leadership coaching as a reflective practitioner activity and impact on leadership;
- Leadership coaching and distribution of practice leading to a model of distributed leadership;
- Leadership coaching and building leadership capacity;
- Leadership coaching and leader well-being.

These themes and the possible impacts of coaching for building a distributed model of leadership in Irish schools provide insight into how distributed leadership can be enhanced in Irish educational leadership.

Leadership coaching as a reflective practitioner activity and impact on leadership

Coaching promotes reflective practice and builds the skills of school leaders in areas such as effective listening, effective questioning, and getting others to take responsibility for their actions while looking inward for solutions to problems. This research demonstrated that from coaching, participants developed self-awareness of their leadership styles and of their ability to manage and lead others in a much more empowered way, where others now took responsibility for their actions and problems, a very important aspect of distributed leadership. These elements corroborate the assertions in the theoretical literature which cite the benefits of reflection not only for the individual but also for the people one manages (Hargreaves & Page, 2013).

Leadership coaching and distributed leadership practice

The findings of this study indicate the personal skills of principals were developed from coaching which supported them in developing and empowering their staff to discover solutions to their problems, as reflected in the literature (Peltier 2010; Beere and Broughton, 2013). This distribution of practice (a change from problem-solving for teachers) had the added advantage of teachers becoming self-motivated to solve their issues, and to take responsibility for issues in school, thus distributing responsibility for workload for the principal in the process. It is reasonable to posit that this empowerment (Page & De Haan, 2014) helped develop leadership capacity within the school, and held people responsible (Chase, 2018). According to McGovern (2015) distributed leadership needs a sense of collegial respect and trust, and coaching skills assist with this. It is part of the 'how' of distributed leadership as well as the 'why'. Amanda's recollection of never telling anyone what to do anymore but instead teasing out and generating the solutions from the other person pointed to that 'change of practice' towards distributing responsibly is illustrative. Acknowledging that sometimes colleagues just need to be listened to and heard as a precursor to coaching in action is a useful understanding of how leaders can start to build capacity and build distribution (Yarborough, 2018).

Leadership coaching and building leadership capacity

Building leadership capacity and distributed leadership are key elements of national policy *(Looking at our School 2016: A Quality Framework for Post/Primary Schools* (DES, 2016)). It

is also an important part of distributed leadership (Aguilar, 2013; Gross, 2018). Through the coaching process, principals developed an understanding that people are motivated when they feel accomplished and can extend their performance when motivated successfully (Bandura, 1978). As indicated in the findings of this study, coaching facilitates the self-development of staff thus enabling them to grow as leaders, which can in turn strengthen the leadership of the school.

Empirical research highlights the benefits of distributed leadership, but few studies focus on how this can be done successfully and without conflict. The findings of this study indicate the use of effective coaching techniques by school principals allowed teachers to be empowered to take responsibility for solving problems themselves and realise their potential as leaders in their schools. In so doing, it has helped fill the gap in research and points to leadership coaching to help deliver a cooperative and collaborative approach to distributed leadership.

Leadership coaching and leader well-being

The findings demonstrate that participants in this research study developed as reflective practitioners and gained new skills, particularly personal skills that assisted them in understanding themselves and others, allowing for a more collaborative approach to building a model of distributed leadership in schools. One of the unexpected consequences of this study however was how this process of coaching others impacted the principal when it came to their well-being. Principals now felt it was acceptable to not always have the answers, and discovered that drawing out a solution to problems from within the person was a more effective means of problem-solving.

This change of mindset was very useful in enhancing the well-being of both parties involved in the coaching process, as not alone did teachers feel heard and were now able to solve some of their problems, they were more willing to engage in school leadership issues. This in turn helped principals to feel better about their role, a factor also cited by Anthony (2017) in the literature. Participants cited increased confidence, ambition, and improved relationships as a benefit of coaching training, with most suggesting that leadership coaching helped them identify stressors and deal with them in a better way. This new way of leadership for the participants involved effective coaching and associated distribution of practice, and as a consequence, there was a movement towards a more effective means of distributing leadership.

Limitations

Participants of this study were advanced students of the theory and practice of coaching therefore this research does not capture the generic views of principals who may not have either the experience or knowledge of coaching approach to leadership. While the aim of the study was guided by Darling-Hammond et al.'s (2009) recommendations regarding effective practice, further studies could garner the view of a wider group of school principals who may have mixed views and understandings of coaching and indeed the views of teachers on the effectiveness of the coaching.

Future research possibilities

Further research could be undertaken with a wider group of principals who do not have a formal qualification in coaching. In addition, the views of ISM and teachers could be gathered to assess their views of how a coaching approach to leadership could impact distributed leadership in schools.

Recommendations

There are many recommendations gathered from this study that could inform future policy and practice which are highlighted in Figure 8 below and developed hereunder. These include funding provision for training for principals in leadership coaching, extra time allocation for principals, coaching support from support services such as the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) and the important role of the Centre for School Leadership (CSL) in future provision of coaching.

Figure 8: Level of agreement with how coaching should develop in the future for school principals/deputy/AP1/AP2
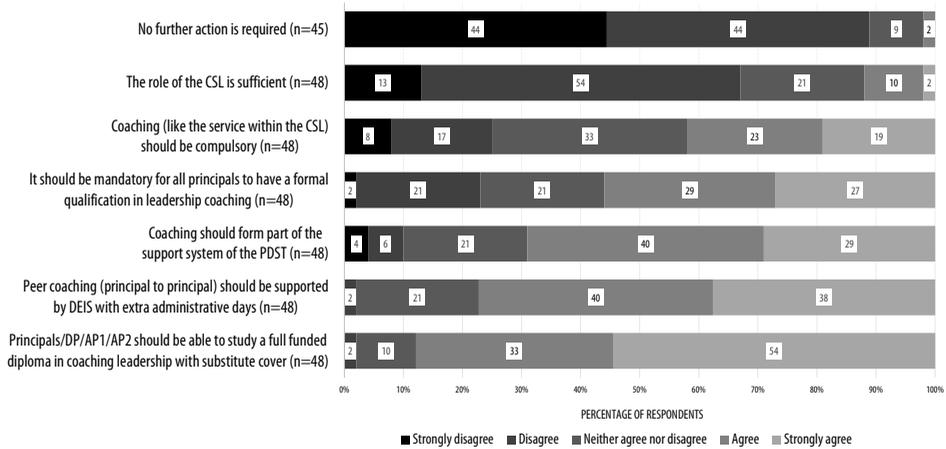
The following recommendations are based on all data collated during the study.

Data from this study suggest that coaching as a leadership process can have a positive impact on the role of school principal. While it is acknowledged that the Department of Education (DE) provides support for school leaders to undertake a Postgraduate Diploma in School Leadership, further funded courses in leadership coaching could be made available to school principals or fully supported and funded by boards of management.

An awareness and understanding of coaching to build leadership capacity successfully and enhance distributed leadership within the school must be addressed by the support services where all staff can see the merits and benefits of a coaching approach to distributed leadership.

Time was cited by all participants as a barrier to implementing a coaching culture in schools (See Table 2). Time needs to be given to principals to distribute leadership in a coaching style through enhanced administration time for teaching principals and further middle management posts for administrative principals.

Support services such as the PDST, INTO, IPPN, CPSMA and the inspectorate need to be made aware of the benefits of coaching in supporting school leadership with the potential to further develop the *Looking at Our Schools* (LAOS) document (2016; 2022) to add further support to coaching as a leadership style.

Interview boards need to recognise coaching qualifications as part of the recruitment process for middle and senior management positions, a factor that has been highlighted by some of the participants of this study.

A formal appraisal system would provide an opportunity for school principals to utilise coaching skills more formally with staff. This could assist in the further development of building a model of distributed leadership in schools. Enhanced administrative support would be necessary for this to be viable.

Leadership coaching needs to be understood in educational policy as a very useful means of building leadership capacity, through engagement rather than delegation. Future amendments to the SSE policy and the *LAOS* (2016) document updates should emphasise to school staff the benefits of a coaching style of leadership practice.

Conclusions

The findings of this study indicate that coaching is a useful skill to develop in school leadership to enhance and further develop a distributed model of leadership in schools. The personal skills developed and the ability to develop the capacities of teachers to solve problems for themselves in more effective ways are skills that can lay the foundations for a culture of distributed leadership. The change of practice whereby principals do not always need to have the answers and to seek out solutions from within teachers is undoubtedly fundamental to capitalising on the leadership practice of the many rather than the few. However, challenges remain with time, curriculum overload (Riley, 2011; Maxwell & Riley, 2016) and lack of acknowledgement of what coaching is and should be for teachers persisting as significant barriers. It is time for national policymakers to fulfil their roles as leaders in education in advancing a coaching culture in schools, one that will in turn support a more effective model of distributed leadership.

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Leadership matters: An investigation into the leadership behaviours that predict teachers' morale

⇛ Danielle Egan, Úna Forde, Orlaith Galligan and Jolanta Burke ⇚

Abstract

The level of morale experienced by teachers can have both positive and negative impacts on student learning, organisational performance, and the achievement of a school's goals. With this in mind, leaders must have the necessary leadership capabilities to foster positive morale amongst their staff. This quantitative online survey aimed to investigate the leadership behaviours that have a positive impact on morale in schools in Ireland. *The School Organisational Health Questionnaire* was adapted to assess staff morale against a list of leadership behaviours obtained from the literature review. A total of 200 primary and post-primary school teachers from the Republic of Ireland completed the survey. Two stepwise regression models revealed that building a sense of community through strengthening relationships, ensuring staff needs were met, and providing opportunities for professional development predicted staff morale. The implications of the study which inform policy and practice in schools, particularly for school leaders, are outlined as well as recommendations for further research.

Keywords: leadership, morale, leadership behaviours, staff needs, motivation

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Teacher morale influences all aspects of the teaching and learning environment (Baylor & Richie, 2002), with the level of teacher morale having both positive and negative impacts on student learning (Hollinger, 2010; Crane & Green, 2013; Hughes, 2013; Gadson, 2018). Leadership behaviour affects overall teacher satisfaction and commitment (Anderman, 1991; Stiles, 1993), which in turn affects organisational performance and success (Hill, 2007; Kruger et al., 2007; Neubert et al., 2008). Considering these effects on morale, the ability to improve teacher morale is an important skill for leaders to possess (Okafor-Ufondu, 2005).

The vast majority of staff morale research in Ireland concerns job satisfaction (Darmody & Smyth; 2011; Scully et al., 2019), which while related to morale (Evans, 2000; Miraj et al., 2018; Saleem et al., 2019), does not indicate it. Yet, now more than ever, this research is necessary, with the ever-increasing challenges facing teachers due to the demanding and changing curriculum (Hislop, 2015) and decreases in teacher morale caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Kurtz, 2020). Therefore, with the demands of the Irish education system, as well as the possible lower level of morale in schools due to COVID-19, leaders need to be aware of how their behaviours can impact and improve the level of morale in their school. The purpose of this research was to investigate what leadership behaviours have an impact on teachers' morale in Irish schools.

Staff morale

Morale is a difficult concept to define and has been compared to a "quagmire" due to its elusiveness (Williams, 1986, cited in Evans, 1997, p.832). Even though it has been largely regarded as a feature of a group, it also describes individuals within that group (Peterson et al., 2008). For this reason, the current research explored the impact of leadership behaviours on both individual and staff morale.

The most widely used definition of morale perceives it as "the professional interest and enthusiasm that a person displays toward the achievement of individual and group goals in a given job situation" (Bentley and Rempel, 1980, cited in Lumsden, 1998, p.2). Another definition considers it as an individual's "cognitive, emotional, and motivational stance toward the goals and tasks of a group" (Peterson et al., 2008, p.3). Both definitions draw on the concept of morale occurring at an individual level, with Evans also describing morale as an individual phenomenon (1997). While the individual is at the heart of these definitions, there is also agreement among them that these individuals come together to approach a collaborative goal.

Washington and Watson (1976, cited in Lumsden, 1998) defined morale as the feeling an individual has about their job based on how the individual perceives themselves in the organisation and the extent to which the organisation is viewed as meeting the individual's own needs and expectations. Evans' definition (1997) is similar, as it incorporates this reference to a person's needs; stating that a person's morale is imputable to the level of satisfaction of their needs which are important to that person in their work. Blum emphasises a person's social need to feel a sense of acceptance and belonging to a group, by working towards common goals (Briggs & Richardson, 1992). This highlights the effect that a group can have on an individual's morale; if a person's social needs are not met, they may struggle to work towards the group's goals. These definitions draw on *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*, where physiological, safety and social needs must be satisfied before an individual can begin to fulfil their esteem and self-actualisation needs, thus maximising motivation and developing a positive morale (Whitaker et al., 2008).

All these definitions of morale acknowledge the professional motivation that teachers display towards the achievement of their school's goals. Individual morale relates to being part of a group, but there is a distinction between individual morale and group morale. Definitions of morale originated in a military setting, with Grinker and Spiegel (1945, cited in Manning, n.d., p.3) defining it as "the psychological forces within a combat group which impel its members to get into the fight", while Leighton (1943, cited in Manning, n.d.) defined it as the capacity of any group of people to pull together consistently for a common purpose. These definitions speak about morale as a group dynamic, where people work together as one unit.

Several features of morale make more sense when considered at the group level, such as leadership, trust, respect, loyalty, social cohesion, and sacrifice (Peterson et al., 2008). Social cohesion is a particularly important aspect of group morale, which refers to the bond people have that sustains their will and commitment to each other in accomplishing their goals, despite challenges such as stress (Manning, n.d). It is a sense of camaraderie, respect for leaders, concern for the group's reputation and an urge to contribute to the

success of the group, that promotes a strong level of social cohesion, which leads to high morale. This sense of social cohesion does not appear in the literature around individual morale and thus emphasises the fact that morale should also be considered at a group level. The concept of group morale will be referred to as 'staff morale', and considering the above research will be defined for this research as: The ability of all the teachers in a school to work together with the same level of intent towards the achievement of the school's goals.

Teacher morale in Ireland

To achieve a school's goals, there must be a unified effort, which requires high morale (Briggs & Richardson, 1992). High morale allows for a collaborative, engaging school culture in which students excel (Hollinger, 2010) because teachers who have high morale put more effort into their work, which in turn has a positive impact on student learning (Crane & Green, 2013; Gadson, 2018). When teacher morale is high, there will likely be a healthy school environment, where teachers have a sense of accomplishment from their jobs (Hoy et al., 2012).

Low morale can create a negative environment in which teachers are unmotivated (Briggs & Richardson, 1992). If teachers are unhappy in their jobs, it could impede student success (Westergard, 2007; Hollinger, 2010), and can often increase teacher attrition (Crane & Green, 2013; Gadson, 2018). A low level of morale among teachers can lead to a decrease in rapport between themselves and students, which decreases student learning (Hughes, 2013). As well as affecting the rapport with students, low morale in one staff member can lower the morale of their colleagues. This, in turn, has the potential to diminish productivity and lower teacher expectations, resulting in a decrease in student learning and school performance (Hughes, 2013). Therefore, it is imperative for a school's success that leaders have the capabilities to foster positive morale amongst staff, to create an environment where teachers have high morale and feel motivated.

Research is scarce about the level of morale experienced by teachers in the Irish context. However, there have been some studies concerning job satisfaction. This is relevant for this study, as there is a correlation between job satisfaction and morale, with an increase in job satisfaction leading to heightened morale (Evans, 2000; Miraj et al., 2018; Saleem et al., 2019). Therefore, studies on job satisfaction could indicate the level of morale in schools in the Irish context. It has been found that there is a relatively high level of job satisfaction amongst teachers in Irish primary and post-primary schools (Darmody & Smyth, 2011; Scully et al., 2020), indicating that there is potentially a high level of morale amongst staff in Irish schools.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic which reached Ireland in February 2020, had the potential to affect the high level of job satisfaction in the Irish educational context found in pre-pandemic studies, and consequently the inferred high level of morale. In March 2020, many educators moved to online teaching, creating the need to master unfamiliar technology quite suddenly (Shine a Light, 2020). Although studies around the effects of the pandemic are only emerging, it has been reported in an UK study, that teacher morale is much lower than it was before the pandemic (Kurtz, 2020). The pandemic caused more stress, which in turn led to teachers being less satisfied in their work (Will, 2021). Therefore, it can be deduced that similarly in Ireland, morale may have been lowered in the past year in comparison to pre-pandemic times, however, more research is required to confirm this.

Leadership behaviours that impact morale

Effective leaders contribute significantly to high morale, while the opposite can be said for ineffective leaders (Hollinger, 2010). Although there are influences on morale which are outside of the school leader's control, it is the school leader who holds the key to improving those things that can be controlled (Vail, 2005). The leader sets the tone of the school, and the environment they create can have a positive or negative effect on teachers and students (Gadson, 2018). Morale can be easily overlooked, as has already been seen through the lack of research on this topic in Ireland, but leaders need to know what factors affect teacher morale as it can make a school a success or a failure (Smith & Eisterhold, 2010; Gadson, 2018).

Lewin et al.'s (1939) work on leadership styles, classifying leadership into distinct styles of authoritarian, democratic and laissez-faire, laid the foundations for the future study and development of many more definitions of leadership styles, such as distributed, transformational, authentic and transactional, which have taken on important roles in the educational setting. Research has suggested that of these predominant styles, transactional leadership is less successful at promoting morale (Nguni et al., 2006; Randolph-Robinson, 2007), than the more democratic approaches of distributed and transformational leadership, which both have a positive effect on morale (Sheppard et al., 2010). While each of these leadership styles can influence morale in some regard, it is unclear as to whether one style is better at promoting positive morale than another style. Previous studies found that there is no significant relationship between these broad leadership styles and faculty morale or job satisfaction (Bhella, 1982; Ramsey-Hearn, 2013). However, there are specific leadership behaviours that constitute defined leadership styles (Robinson, 2010), which appear to promote morale above others, which will now be explored.

When teachers feel that their leader is concerned for their welfare, it can increase morale (Cook, 1979). As identified previously, definitions of morale often centre around the needs of the individual being met (Washington & Watson, 1976; Evans, 1997; Lumsden, 1998; Whitaker et al., 2008). Paying attention to the personal needs of teachers, such as stress management, health and social interaction, are important behaviours of an effective leader (Koerner, 1990), as well as offering emotional support where needed, as morale suffers when this support is lacking (Kelehear, 2004; Kinsey, 2006). Traits such as being caring, personable, and empathic towards their staff's needs are traits that have been associated with increased morale and job satisfaction in the workplace (Robinson, 2010; Lambersky, 2016; Gadson, 2018). Although not always in the direct control of the school leader, physical working conditions such as well-maintained buildings and adequate facilities, can also affect teacher morale, so leaders must do what is within their control to ensure these needs are met (Koerner, 1990).

Getting to know teachers as individuals allows leaders to meet their specific needs (Houchard, 2005). Being cognisant of teachers' work-life balance, and obligations outside of school ensures demands on time such as excessive workloads and paperwork that can lower morale, are avoided (Tye et al., 2002; Moore-Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Kinsey, 2006; Whitaker et al., 2008; Hollinger, 2010; Norwood, 2016). As well as this, when teachers feel that principals have tried to get to know them and build a relationship, teacher-

principal rapport is strong, making teachers feel appreciated (Hughes, 2013; Lambert, 2014), thus increasing morale (Barth, 1990). These strong relationships enhance a feeling of belonging and unity, which can influence the level of morale in a school (Koerner, 1990). When a leader encourages strong relationships throughout the staff, a 'family culture' can be created, which can impact morale in a positive way (Sherwood, 2013, p.73). Therefore, school leaders must build relationships with staff, allowing them to be knowledgeable of and empathic towards their needs, to enhance staff morale.

Similarly, in relation to the needs of the teacher being met, teacher morale is associated with the level of support given by leaders (Levin, 2008; Hughes, 2013; Lambert, 2014; Gadson, 2018), with a strong, supportive leader contributing to high morale (Morgan & O'Leary, 2004; Koerner, 1990). Visible leaders, who are seen engaging around the school throughout the day and available for support, can enhance morale (Devi & Mani, 2010; Lambersky, 2016). The level of support provided by the leader to deal with discipline problems or conflict with parents, can affect morale (Napier, 1966; Lambersky, 2016; Gadson, 2018), with the teacher's feeling of value as a member of the school team increasing as more support is offered (Kelley, 2005; Sherwood, 2013). Strong communication skills, specifically listening, are important skills for a leader to have to foster high morale (Robinson, 2010). It is recommended for increased morale, that school leaders should have an open-door policy, where teachers feel that they can communicate concerns at any time (Sherwood, 2013). For teachers to feel valued, thus enhancing morale, principals must be available to listen to the concerns of teachers and support their needs accordingly.

A school leader's openness to creating a school environment where collaboration is encouraged has also been found to contribute to morale (Gideon & Erlandson, 2001; Spillane et al., 2007; Hughes, 2013; Norwood, 2016). Where leaders empower teachers to share their vision and goals, by allowing the opportunity to work collaboratively, it enables the creation of a shared vision and an effective school climate, where morale is high (Koerner, 1990; Ramsey-Hearn, 2013; Norwood, 2016). Involving teachers in the decision-making of the school, where they have input on the development of policies and curricular issues, will lead to teachers gaining a sense of ownership and feeling that their voice is being heard (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Koerner, 1990; Devi & Mani, 2010; Al-Husseini & Elbeltagi, 2016), thus increasing teachers' commitment, job satisfaction and morale (Raines Evers, 2011; Norwood, 2016). Likewise, morale can be increased when teachers feel that their leader has confidence in their competence as teachers (Napier, 1966). There is a need for teachers to be treated as professionals for them to be satisfied with teaching (Levin, 2008; Lambersky, 2016), which can be shown through behaviours such as being consulted on school programmes, implementing change, and providing teachers with autonomy (Blase & Blase, 2001; Darmody & Smyth, 2011; Lambersky, 2016). The opposite behaviour to autonomy, micromanaging, is seen to harm morale (Sherwood, 2013). Higher teacher morale is also associated with the provision of opportunities for professional development (Koerner, 1990; Blase & Blase, 2001; Levin, 2008; de Paor, 2016), where teachers can develop their competency. Therefore, to enhance morale, school leaders must encourage collaboration and enable staff involvement in decision-making. Allowing for autonomy, and providing and encouraging opportunities to develop professionally, are behaviours which school leaders can enact to enhance morale in the school.

Another leadership behaviour which can affect morale is the recognition of achievement, gestures of appreciation, and offers of positive feedback (Stewart, 2014; Stewart-Banks, 2015). High morale is associated with teachers being individually recognised and appreciated by leaders (Koerner, 1990; Gadson, 2018). This may be done informally where teachers are complimented or praised for their efforts (Clough, 1989, cited in Houchard, 2005), or given positive feedback on their work (Sherwood 2013). When done consistently, this contributes to a positive environment, where morale is boosted (Rowland, 2008; Devi & Mani, 2010). This relates to the concept of 'comparison of other', where if teachers feel they are not appreciated as much as others, it can result in the lowering of morale (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 1996, cited in Whitaker et al., 2008). Recognising the achievements of staff fairly and where appropriate, can lead to a healthier morale in the school, and therefore should be a regular behaviour of the school leader.

The purpose of this research was to investigate how leadership behaviours such as those explored above, impact morale specifically in the Irish educational setting. Thus, our research question was: How much of the variance in teacher morale can be explained by leadership behaviours?

Method

An online quantitative survey design was applied in the current research, which followed a post-positivist perspective. Ethical approval was obtained from the Faculty of Social Sciences at Maynooth University.

Participants

A total of 200 eligible participants completed a survey from 300 randomly selected schools in the Republic of Ireland. The process of random selection of schools involved accessing lists of Irish schools on the Department of Education's website (DES, 2021) using a random number generator. An equal number of primary schools and post-primary schools were selected. The majority of participants (80%) were primary teachers and 20% were post-primary teachers; 87% of participants were female, and 13% male. Most of the respondents were experienced teachers, with 71% having ten plus years' experience, while 19.5% had been teaching for 4-9 years and 9.5% for 1-3 years. Of the respondents, 63% had worked with 1-3 principals, 33% had worked with 4-6 principals, and 4% had worked with seven-plus principals. All the provincial regions of the Republic of Ireland were represented, with the majority, 51%, hailing from Leinster, followed by 19.5% from Ulster, and Connacht and Munster with respective participation of 15.5% and 14%.

Measures

Apart from the demographic questions, *The School Organisational Health Questionnaire* (Guidetti et al., 2015) was adapted, whereby all questions relating to the morale component of the survey were applied. They related to individual and staff morale separately. This distinction was made based on Peterson et al.,'s (2008) advice that group and individual morale should be measured independently, as they both need to be conceptualised separately. Both questionnaires were five-item measures on a four-point Likert scale

ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Sample statement for the individual questionnaire: "I take pride in my work"; sample statement for the group questionnaire: "Teachers take pride in our school". Cronbach's alpha for individual morale was ≤0.85 and for group morale was ≤0.87, thus indicating good internal reliability in the current sample.

The second questionnaire included a list of leadership behaviours (Table 1). It was a 15-item measure on a four-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Cronbach's alpha was not required as the indicators were considered individually in this case. Moreover, an open-ended question was included, where participants were asked to comment on any other leadership behaviours which may enhance morale. This open-ended question allowed for more honest and personal comments, giving "gems of information", which may have been otherwise missed (Cohen et al., 2018, p.45).

Table 1: A list of leadership behaviours comprising the leadership behaviour questionnaire.

Leadership behaviours
1. My leader has adequate expectations for planning and paperwork demands.
2. My leader has good organisation skills to manage facilities and resources.
3. My leader shows a valued interest in my work.
4. My leader creates a sense of community within the staff.
5. My leader treats me with respect and has confidence in my professionalism.
6. My leader is empathetic and shows concern for my welfare.
7. My leader is approachable.
8. My leader creates opportunities for social interaction.
9. My leader encourages collaboration and input in decision-making.
10. My leader provides opportunities for leadership.
11. My leader recognises my efforts and achievements.
12. My leader provides support when dealing with discipline problems and conflicts with parents.
13. My leader encourages and provides opportunities for professional development.
14. My leader focuses on student learning and achievement.
15. My leader is visible in the school and knowledgeable about the students and school activities.

Analysis

All statistical analyses were carried out using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) (Version 26: IBM Corp., 2019). Two methods of analysis were considered: correlation and stepwise regression. While it is noted that there are some disadvantages to using stepwise regression, such as the use of degrees of freedom, the identification of the best predictor set, and replicability (Thompson, 1995), it was considered the most applicable to this study because it allowed the most variability in the dependent variables to be found with the fewest possible predictors (Lewis, 2007). Data gathered from the open-ended question was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis to identify recurrent themes. Having become familiar with the data, codes were generated, which were collated to allow for the emergence of themes, where comparisons could be made and meaning interpreted from the data.

Results

The demographic statistics identified that staff morale scored higher (M=1.86, SD=0.598) than individual morale (M=1.60, SD=0.456). Across all the leadership behaviours, "My leader shows a valued interest in my work" scored the highest (M=1.92, SD=0.76), closely followed by "My leader creates a sense of community within the staff" (M=1.91, SD=0.84), with "My leader is approachable" scoring the lowest (M=1.57, SD=0.66). Table 2 provides further detail.

Table 2: Results from descriptive statistics (N=200).

Variables	Mean	Standard deviation
Individual morale.	1.60	0.46
Group morale.	1.86	0.58
My leader has adequate expectations for planning and paperwork demands.	1.82	0.72
My leader has good organisation skills to manage facilities and resources.	1.82	0.74
My leader shows a valued interest in my work.	1.92	0.76
My leader creates a sense of community within the staff.	1.91	0.84
My leader treats me with respect and has confidence in my professionalism.	1.58	0.65
My leader is empathetic and shows concern for my welfare.	1.61	0.71
My leader is approachable.	1.57	0.66
My leader creates opportunities for social interaction.	1.87	0.79
My leader encourages collaboration and input in decision-making.	1.80	0.79
My leader provides opportunities for leadership.	1.90	0.75
My leader recognises my efforts and achievements.	1.80	0.73
My leader provides support when dealing with discipline problems and conflicts with parents.	1.77	0.72
My leader encourages and provides opportunities for professional development.	1.71	0.63
My leader focuses on student learning and achievement.	1.77	0.62
My leader is visible in the school and knowledgeable about the students and school activities.	1.66	0.73

Individual morale

The effects of the 15 leadership behaviours on morale were examined using stepwise regression. Preliminary analyses were conducted for both individual and staff morale to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity. For individual morale, the final model carried out included the two leadership behaviours of "encourages and provides opportunities for professional development" (professional development) and "has good organisation skills to manage facilities and resources" (management). For individual morale, 12% of the total variability was predicted by these two leadership behaviours (R^2=0.12, $F_{[2,199]}$=65.98, p<0.05). Both independent variables, 'professional development' and 'management', predict individual morale equally (β=0.20). This means that leaders who create opportunities for professional development and who manage resources and facilities well can improve individual morale

(Table 3).

Table 3: Results for the stepwise regression for leadership behaviours predicting individual morale (N=200).

	Professional development	Management	R²	F change
Model 1			0.10	20.73
B	0.22			
SEB	0.05			
β	0.31***			
Model 2			0.12	5.85
B	0.14	0.12		
SEB	0.06	0.05		
β	0.20*	0.20*		

*p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

Group morale

The effects of the 15 leadership behaviours on staff morale were then examined using stepwise regression. The final model included the three leadership behaviours of "creates a sense of community within the staff" (community), "encourages and provides opportunities for professional development" (professional development), and "has good organisation skills to manage facilities and resources" (management), with a higher amount of variance predicted in this model compared to that in individual morale. For staff morale, 48% of the total variability in morale can be predicted by these three leadership behaviours (R²=0.48, F[3,199]=41.44, p≤0.05). While the statistical significance of 'management' is lesser (*p*=0.05) than the other items, 'community' and 'professional development' (*p*<0.001), from examining β=0.13, we are accepting that this finding is significant. It is noted that both 'professional development' and 'management' emerged as indicators for morale at both the individual and staff levels. This means that leaders who create opportunities for professional development and who manage resources and facilities well can improve both individual and staff morale, while leaders who create a sense of community can also have a positive impact on staff morale. Looking at these results in more detail (Table 4), of the three independent variables, 'community' was a stronger predictor of staff morale (β=0.44) than 'professional development' and 'management' (β=0.23 and β=0.13, respectively).

Table 4: Stepwise regression for leadership behaviours predicting staff morale (N=200).

	Community	Professional development	Management	R^2	F change
Model 1				0.41	136.36
B	0.44				
SEB	0.04				
β	0.64***				
Model 2				0.47	85.90
B	0.34	0.26			
SEB	0.04	0.56			
β	0.49***	0.28***			
Model 3				0.48	59.41
B	0.30	0.21	0.11		
SEB	0.05	0.06	0.05		
β	0.44***	0.23***	0.13*		

*$p \leq 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$

Leadership behaviours impacting morale

Ten themes emerged from the thematic analysis of the open-ended question relating to additional leadership behaviours affecting staff morale. The three most salient were (1) providing opportunities for involvement in decision-making, (2) practising effective, clear and open communication, and (3) respecting teacher autonomy and trusting in teachers as professionals. Table 5 provides further detail.

Table 5: Results from the thematic analysis of additional leadership behaviours affecting morale.

Leadership behaviour
1. Providing opportunities for involvement in decision-making.
2. Practising effective, clear and open communication.
3. Respecting teacher autonomy and trusting in teachers as professionals.
4. Providing opportunities for social activities.
5. Providing gestures of appreciation, praise and positive feedback, as well as appreciating small daily achievements and good practice.
6. Being aware of the personal needs of teachers and showing an interest in staff's lives.
7. Providing support when dealing with parents and disciplining students, supporting teacher wellbeing and providing emotional support.
8. Encouraging CPD opportunities.
9. Trusting staff and modelling trusting behaviour.
10. Providing opportunities for and encouraging team-building activities and collaboration.

Discussion

The quantitative results have shown that having a leader who creates a sense of community within the staff is the strongest predictor of staff morale. Qualitative findings of this research validate this result, with several participants referencing the dimensions of a sense of community such as membership, integration and fulfilment, and a shared emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). This result is consistent with findings from other research, where an increased sense of community in a workplace was associated with higher job satisfaction (Royal & Rossi, 1996). It has also been previously found that there is a strong relationship between a principal's leadership style and a school's sense of community (Belenardo, 2001). This finding is not surprising, as definitions of community include elements which are often associated with having an impact on morale, such as the relationships amongst members of the community, for instance interdependent caring relationships, commonalities of interests, skill and norms, commitment to group purpose and shared identity (Grover et al., 2015; Jones & Davenport, 2018; Durkheim, 1964 in Jones & Davenport, 2018; Bradshaw, 2008; Belenardo, 2001; Royal & Rossi, 1996).

Responses to the survey's open-ended question corroborated the research finding that staff morale is increased by a leader creating a sense of community within the staff. One such example places an emphasis on leaders showing an interest in the lives of the staff to enhance staff morale, "Someone who has interest in your life outside of school". This is consistent with previous studies where it has been found that where leaders build strong relationships with staff, feelings of belonging can be enhanced, which results in an increased level of morale (Clough, 1989, cited in Houchard, 2005; Koerner, 1990). This strongly correlates with the membership dimension of a sense of community, which refers to belonging to a group by believing that one fits in, with a feeling of acceptance (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Therefore, to enhance a sense of community, which in turn will enhance staff morale, leaders must encourage a sense of belonging amongst members of staff by getting to know them and encouraging them to know each other, to build relationships and increase a feeling of acceptance in the school community.

Other responses which also highlighted the impact that a sense of community can have on staff morale refer to their leader providing increased opportunities for social activities. With bonding being key to the community (Bradshaw, 2009), it is not surprising that opportunities for social interaction were identified by participants. This correlates with the dimension of a sense of community of shared emotional connection, which ensures social ties are strong (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), giving a sense of being part of something (Belenardo, 2001). However, contrary to this, "My leader creates opportunities for social interaction" was not deemed a significant predictor of staff morale in the quantitative findings. It is possible that the impact COVID-19 had on the opportunities to interact socially with other staff members contributed to this discrepancy in data, as it was not relevant to staff experiences at the time of writing when social interaction was at a minimum. The qualitative data did indicate that COVID-19 hurt morale, which some attributed to a lack of social activity. Nevertheless, leaders must develop a shared emotional connection with their staff by providing opportunities for social interaction amongst all staff, to create a sense of community and thus, enhance morale.

A key point to note is that although community emerged as a strong predictor for staff morale, this was not the case for individual morale. This could be explained by the fact that community is usually experienced as a group phenomenon. Definitions of community often reference interdependent relationships and commitment to a group purpose (Sarason, 1974; Belenardo, 2001; Jones & Davenport, 2018), which is similarly seen in definitions of morale in the literature, with social cohesion being a key factor. Morale is high when there is a sense of camaraderie amongst staff, and a common desire to improve the school's reputation and success by working towards a common goal (Manning, n.d.). In this regard, having a sense of community within the staff would have a direct correlation with improved camaraderie, thus improving staff morale. The same cannot be said for individual morale. Although individuals still work towards achieving the school's goals, the various definitions of individual morale do not place any significance on completing tasks as a group. A person can have high individual morale, and work by themselves towards a school's goal, regardless of whether there is high morale amongst the entire staff. This might explain why community did not appear as a predictor for individual morale, however, more research is required to investigate this disparity further.

Nonetheless, several responses to the open-ended question highlighted the importance of leaders being aware of the personal needs of teachers and showing flexibility, care and empathy around these to enhance morale. This is consistent with the definition of individual morale for this study, which embodies the requirement for the needs of individuals to be satisfied before they can have professional motivation towards achieving the school's goals. These responses also correlate with another dimension of a sense of community, integration and fulfilment, which relates to the benefits members and their communities reap (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) through their needs being met.

The research findings show that having a leader who encourages and provides opportunities for professional development, is also a significant predictor of both individual and staff morale. Education reform expects high standards for student achievement, which requires changes to teachers' classroom practices. For teachers to meet these standards, they require support and guidance (Banks & Smyth, n.d.). Other studies support this finding, with higher teacher morale having been associated with the provision of opportunities for professional development (Blase & Blase, 2001; Koerner, 1990; Levin, 2008; de Paor, 2016; Gore et al., 2017).

Responses from the open-ended question supported the quantitative finding that when leaders provide opportunities for professional development, morale is improved. Similarly, the link between professional development and morale was further highlighted by one respondent, who stated that their morale was negatively affected as a direct result of their professional development needs not being met. This correlates with the findings of other studies, where CPD leads to teachers feeling more competent and confident, whilst experiencing greater enthusiasm, greater self-efficacy, and a willingness to learn and innovate, leading to more involvement in their job (Wenger, 2000; Cordingley et al., 2003).

Qualitative responses around the topic of professional development also referred to the importance of being allowed to collaborate, with one participant noting the positive effect that collaboration has had on staff morale in their school. This qualitative finding is supported by other studies, where having participated in collaborative training days,

teachers felt a positive impact on morale (Barnes & Bennett, 2001). Collaborative practice has many benefits, including the opportunity for teachers to gain relationships with other teachers which makes the career less isolating (Davis, 2020; Gore et al., 2017). This reiterates the previous discussion on community and morale, where when teachers feel a sense of belonging in their school community through the building of relationships, morale can be increased (Koerner, 1990). Although this infers that school-based collaborative enquiry as a form of professional development could contribute to improved morale, it is important to note that "My leader encourages collaboration and input in decision making" did not emerge as a predictor of morale in the quantitative findings. This highlights the limitations of this study using the single method of an online questionnaire, where finer details cannot be explored and the answering of closed questions can, at times, be done mindlessly (Cohen et al., 2018). It is however positive to note, that in the Irish context, it is recommended in educational policy, that school-based collaborative enquiry is carried out by teachers as a model for CPD (DES, 2016a), which if encouraged by leaders could enhance morale in Irish schools.

The quantitative findings show that having a leader who has good organisation skills to manage facilities and resources is a significant predictor of both individual and staff morale. This correlates with other studies, where it has been found that well-maintained buildings and adequate resources and facilities, can impact the morale in a school (Koerner, 1990). It has also been found previously, that to ensure the teachers' working environment needs are met, leaders must have good organisational skills to manage resources (Robinson, 2010), while a lack of managerial support contributes to job dissatisfaction (Xiaofu & Qiwen, 2007, cited in Bridges, 2009).

As with both previously discussed predictors, community and professional development, the management of facilities and resources corresponds with meeting the needs of staff. It has been found previously that poor working conditions are a precursor to elevated levels of school staff turnover (Loeb et al., 2005 cited in Bridges, 2009). The correlation between poor management of working conditions and high levels of turnover can be attributed to the needs of staff members not being met, which is imperative for high morale. In the definition of individual morale in this study, the significance of a teacher's physiological, safety and social needs being met, before they can focus on their esteem and self-actualisation needs, was explored (Lumsden, 1998; Evans, 1997; Whitaker et al., 2008). This could explain the significance of management being a predictor of morale.

Limitations

The study comes with three main limitations. Firstly, COVID-19 may have influenced the findings of this study. This was also evident in the responses to the open-ended question, with many respondents citing COVID-19 as a reason for experiencing low morale. Thus, it is recommended that the study be replicated post-pandemic. Also, given that the sample is homogeneous with all participants working in Ireland, a similar study with an international sample is recommended. Finally, the study design is correlational, thus causation could not be established. It is recommended that an experimental study is carried out which identifies the clear impact of leadership behaviour on teachers' morale.

Conclusion

Despite the three limitations, the current study provides preliminary data on the impact of specific leadership behaviours in the context of teacher morale. Specifically, leadership behaviours of creating a sense of community within the staff, encouraging and promoting opportunities for professional development, and having good organisation skills to manage facilities and resources, best predicted morale in Irish schools. Both professional development and organisation emerged as predictors for individual and staff morale, while community emerged as a predictor for staff morale only. This research adds to the literature on rapidly emerging school communities' morale and advances understanding of what leaders can do to boost their team's morale, which indirectly affects well-being.

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The domino effect: The impact of school leadership on teachers' wellbeing

≋ ANNEMARIE DORAN, JOLANTA BURKE AND CÉLINE HEALY ≋

Abstract

Whilst enhancing the wellbeing of students has been a priority for many governments, the same cannot be said of teacher wellbeing, given the scarcity of research in this area. The current study examined to what extent, after controlling for age, factors such as having a wellbeing policy, wellbeing continued professional development (CPD), management caring about staff, having wellbeing on the staff meeting agenda, and support strategies in place, predict teachers' wellbeing. A total of 293 teachers participated in the study, from a range of second-level schools located in both rural and urban areas across all four provinces in Ireland. The *Mental Health Continuum Short Form* (*MHC-SF*) was applied to measure wellbeing. The results indicated that only two factors (i) putting support strategies in place, and (ii) school leaders caring about teachers, predicted teacher wellbeing. The implications of the study are discussed together with recommendations for future research.

Keywords: **leadership, wellbeing, policy, support, management**

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Introduction

The ability of teachers to cope with the increasing social and emotional demands of the profession directly impacts their wellbeing (Curry & O'Brien, 2012). Many are struggling as a result of day-to-day stress, levels of which some reports note as being higher than in other professions (Stoeber & Rennert, 2008; Kyriacou, 2001). While there is a considerable amount of research and policies that promote the wellbeing of students, it seems reasonable to assume that teacher wellbeing should be addressed as well (Roffey, 2012). Yet, the research surrounding teacher wellbeing remains scarce (Parker, Martin, Colmar, & Liem, 2012). The importance of the health and overall wellbeing of individuals at work has long been on the agenda in many organisations (Arnold et al., 2010), however, research about the wellbeing of teachers has lagged. Today, the crisis imputable to the COVID-19 pandemic has made the issue of teacher wellbeing more urgent than ever.

Teachers in nearly 200 countries worldwide were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (UN, 2020). They became frontline education providers amid chaos, which resulted in many of them experiencing lower job satisfaction and emotional exhaustion (Chan, Sharkey, Lawrie, Arch, & Nylund-Gibson, 2021). Teaching young people through a period of collective trauma took a toll on educators' wellbeing (Crosby, Howell, & Thomas, 2020), the consequences of which may continue for years. In Ireland, an assessment of teacher wellbeing demonstrated that they experienced more stress and lower levels of wellbeing

nine months into the pandemic compared with a year before (Dempsey & Burke, 2021). Whilst more research is required to confirm this, teachers' wellbeing may well have been at its lowest during this period.

Before the COVID-19 challenges, a teacher's role was already complex. Traditionally, the teaching role involved developing and nurturing students' potential; however, in an ever-changing society, school policies and guidelines have increased teachers' workload significantly adding a greater intricacy to their daily tasks, which go beyond teaching and nurturing (Hillel Lavian, 2015; Teneva, 2019; Thorkelsdóttir, 2020). As early as 1999, Smyth stated "These are tough times to be a teacher" (p.59). Two decades later, not much has changed.

Teachers play a valuable role in helping children grow (Evers, Tomics and Brouwers, 2004), however, to do this, they must remain physically and mentally well. According to Smith & Bourke (1992), there is an apparent dissonance between perceived capacities and the expectations of their role, yet they continue to carry out their work. This may have implications not only for their physical and mental wellbeing but also for their professional competence as a teacher. However, if teachers are to teach 'well', they must also be and feel 'well'. A sense of positive professional identity and wellbeing is vital for their own and the school community's success (Day, Stobart, Sammons & Kington, 2006) and critical for school wellbeing and stability, as promoting teacher wellbeing enhances the capacity of schools to meet the needs of diverse populations (Roffey, 2012).

Defining wellbeing in a school setting

Evident in the literature is the lack of consensus as to what wellbeing is and how it should be defined (Burke, 2021). The definitions of it are blurred and too broad to understand (Forgeard, Jayawickreme, Kern, & Seligman 2011). While undoubtedly wellbeing is not a new concept, it has become more important in recent times in the educational context as evidenced by its inclusion on agendas of international organisations such as the WHO, UN and UNICEF (WHO, 2021; UN, 2021; UNICEF, 2021). Nonetheless, teachers and management continue to struggle to grasp its meaning (Fitzgerald, Keenan, & McGill, 2020), which makes the implementation of a wellbeing policy and framework more difficult (Camfield, Streuli & Woodhead, 2009).

Models of wellbeing

There are various models of wellbeing (e.g., Diener & Ryan, 2009; Seligman 2011; McCallum & Price, 2016) with two conceptual, philosophical approaches dominating this field (Burke, 2021). The hedonic wellbeing encompasses happiness and living a life full of pleasure. In contrast, eudaemonic wellbeing incorporates a virtuous life filled with purpose and meaning. Subsequently, psychologists created parallel theories of subjective wellbeing (SWB) comprising of life satisfaction, lower levels of negative affect and higher levels of positive affect (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999); and a theory-based model of psychological wellbeing (PWB) entailing autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations, purpose in life and self-acceptance (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). With the emergence of positive psychology, which is the science of wellbeing (Seligman

& Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), these two perspectives have been combined into the *Mental Health Continuum (MHC)* model (Keyes, C.M.L. 2009). There is evidence of using this model in an educational context in research by Capone & Petrillo (2020), who measured and examined the association between mental health and teacher burnout, depression and job satisfaction based on the classification proposed in the *MHC* model by Keyes (2005). However, to date, no research measured the school-related factors that impact teachers' wellbeing.

Factors impacting wellbeing

Policy

Policy can be referred to as a plan of what to do, that has been agreed to officially, by either a group of people, an organisation, or a government, to achieve a set of goals (Birkland, 2016) and established to standardise processes. This standardisation ensures that minimum requirements are met. There is a greater recognition of the importance of the integration and collaboration of different departments and organisations in the promotion of wellbeing and policy development. In 2009, Finland merged the National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health to form the National Institute for Health and Welfare (National Institute for Health and Welfare, 2009). An initiative was also created to expand the focus of health policy beyond healthcare policy. The Finnish initiatives focus on the health impact of policies formulated in sectors other than health, which they have referred to as "health in all policies". In Scotland, the Scottish parliament passed landmark legislation in 2014 as the healthcare and social services budgets were merged (The Scottish Parliament, 2014) and in 2016, the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) announced the *Accountable Health Communities Model*, which linked clinical and community-based services (HHS, 2016). Some researchers claim that having wellbeing as an ultimate objective of health policy should be part of every post-primary school's wellbeing policy, by opening the discussion of teacher wellbeing rather than teachers' health (Evans & Stoddart, 2016). Others, however, demonstrate that having a policy is not associated with health changes (Lucarelli et al., 2015).

The Department of Education in Ireland acknowledged that the promotion of wellbeing for all is central to its mission to enable individuals to achieve their full potential and contribute to Ireland's development (DES, 2018). It is also acknowledged that the foregrounding of wellbeing is a key component of educational policy and discourse. There are policies outlined in the various circulars issued by the Department of Education (2018), which include teacher absences, a sick leave scheme for registered teachers, and assaults on teachers/school employees. However, with increasing focus on wellbeing across the educational spectrum including the recent changes to the *Junior Cycle Programme* (DES, 2018), what is obvious and evident from the framework is the omission of emphasis on teacher wellbeing. This *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018-2023* was launched by the then Minister of Education and Skills, Richard Bruton, TD on 20 July 2018. In his statement, Minister Bruton explained how this policy will "inject momentum into supporting schools to nurture resilience in our students". The policy emphasises the importance of the wellbeing needs and the best interests of the students, with limited

reference in the policy to that of teacher wellbeing. While the wellbeing of the student is undoubtedly important, and in the current climate needs to be addressed and supported, the same can be said for that of the teacher, who seems to have been left behind.

There is currently no specific policy about wellbeing on a national level in Ireland. Given that wellbeing can be difficult to define and complex to measure closer attention needs to be paid to whether and how the current wellbeing policy environment provides conceptual clarity and intelligible implementation pathways (Powell & Graham 2017). In their research, Powell & Graham (2017), suggest that approaches to supporting wellbeing are constrained by an ad hoc policy environment and a consequential lack of clarity regarding how wellbeing is understood and best facilitated within the context of schools. Considering a collaborative approach between key stakeholders to a teacher wellbeing policy or framework would help develop an inclusive wellbeing policy suitable for an educational context. This policy could impact activities and supports in the school environment and subsequently, teachers' wellbeing which is why policy was assessed in this study.

Management support

When considering how wellbeing might be supported, a recent study carried out in the UK by Westfield Health reported that 79% of their employees indicated that their employers could do more to support them (Hancock, 2018). The research also reported that 63% of employees said they would use wellbeing services if their employers provided them, while 62% believed the government does not do enough to promote wellbeing. Interestingly, 74% think it would be a good idea to direct some of their National Insurance payments towards improving wellbeing in the workplace. Similarly, Irish research has indicated that 11% of all second-level teachers in Ireland retire due to ill health, with stress, anxiety and depression attributing to 50% of disability retirements (Fitzgerald, 2008). Adding to this, data from Medmark (2013), the occupational health care service for teachers in Ireland, has indicated that mental health/stress accounted for 35% of ill health retirements. This was compared to cancer, which accounted for 20% of ill health retirements in 2013. A total of 34% of occupational health assessments for teachers' long-term leave was for mental health/stress, suggesting that more support is needed at a school level to both alleviate teacher stress, as well as provide teachers with strategies to help them look after their wellbeing.

Support strategies and CPD

Support strategies and interventions for teachers are slowly beginning to appear alongside student wellbeing programmes in many developed countries (Jones et al, 2013). In the UK, research with 300 teachers showed that those who were able to manage their work-life balance and display the resilience to maintain their wellbeing were more effective based on SAT scores for their pupils (Bajorek, Gulliford & Tskila, 2014). Similarly, a study with 390 teachers carried out at the beginning and end of a school year found that learning wellbeing interventions enhanced teacher wellbeing (Duckworth et al., 2009). While many things in the educational context are outside of a teacher's control, school management

can take steps to show teachers they care, which may in turn improve their wellbeing. Given that there is no research showing a direct link between management caring and teacher wellbeing, this is what the current study aimed to address.

Meeting agenda

Teachers in the UK are suffering from high workloads, a lack of work-life balance, a perceived lack of resources and a perceived lack of support from senior managers relating to student behaviour (Ofsted, 2019). When teacher wellbeing is low there is a need for emphasis on creating a positive and collegial working environment in which staff feel supported, valued and listened to while also having an appropriate level of autonomy, indicating that, a supportive school culture can reduce the risk of stress in schools (Howard & Johnson, 2004). The supportive school culture suggested by Howard & Johnson (2004) could be achieved by including teacher wellbeing on staff meeting agendas, and by supporting and developing wellbeing CPD. The survey also found that teachers feel an overwhelming sense of "initiative overload" which can affect their overall wellbeing. In March 2019, the UK announced a new expert advisory group to look specifically at how teachers and school leaders can be better supported in terms of their wellbeing. The advisory group, consisting of head teachers, unions, professional bodies and mental health charity MIND, will work with the government on how best to promote teacher wellbeing. Including wellbeing as part of a collaborative school community approach will lead to significant benefits not only for student wellbeing but also for increasing student achievement, teacher wellbeing and productivity (Scoffham & Barnes, 2011)

Taking all into consideration, the current study explored the impact of factors such (1) wellbeing policy, (2) wellbeing-related CPD, (3) support strategies, and (4) having wellbeing on staff meeting agendas on teachers' wellbeing. Specifically, the research question was: How much of the variance in wellbeing scores can be explained by systemic variables (policy, management caring about them, wellbeing being on the meeting agenda, support strategies in place, wellbeing-related CPD), after controlling for the age of the participating teachers?

Methodology

This was a quantitative mixed-methods design carried out online in the first three months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participants and procedure

The study was carried out with 293 participants who worked in a variety of secondary schools located in both urban and rural areas. The majority of these were female (69.5%) who held various roles as teachers (50%), deputy principals (22.7%), and principals (14.9%). A strategic sampling method was applied in recruiting schools through the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD). This was to ensure that participating schools were representative of all types of post-primary schools in the Republic of Ireland (voluntary secondary 26.2%, community 34.8%, comprehensive 19.1% and private 5.0%). It also ensured that schools were from across each of the four

provinces, Connacht (9.9%), Leinster (58.2%), Munster (19.9%) and Ulster (12.1%). This type of strategic sampling attention was also given to the representation of schools of the various denominational affiliations (Roman Catholic, Church of Ireland, multi- and non-denominational), language use (English and Irish), and student gender (girls-only, boys-only and co-educational schools).

This research was guided by the *Maynooth University Research Ethics Policy* and the *Maynooth University Research Integrity Policy*. The research project was conducted per the *Maynooth University Data Protection Policy* and adhered to data protection laws and was carried out over four months, from February to May 2020.

Measures

Two measures were selected for the current analysis, the *MHC-SF (*Keyes, 2009) which consisted of three subscales, emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing, and a survey. The survey consisted of general questions relating to age, gender, position held in school and length of service. A Likert scale was also used with participants asked to rate their level of agreement with various statements on a scale moving from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". The four questions contained the following statements:

- "Management cares about teacher wellbeing";
- "Teacher wellbeing is on the staff meeting agenda";
- "There are support strategies and supports available at my school for teacher wellbeing";
- "There is specific wellbeing-related CPD in place in my school".

There were also four open-ended questions relating to both formal and informal wellbeing initiatives in their school and suggestions as to how both the Department of Education and school leaders might enhance teacher wellbeing.

The second measure used in the current study was the *MHC-SF* (Keyes 2009), a 14-item measure, on a six-point Likert scale from "never" to "every day" which assessed personal wellbeing (emotional, social and psychological) by the frequency with which participants experienced each symptom of positive mental health. The measure was used to distinguish three levels of wellbeing among participants: flourishing, moderate and languishing. Of the 14 items, three items for emotional (hedonic) wellbeing, five items for social wellbeing, and six items for psychological wellbeing were included. Examples of statements included, "During the past month, how often do you feel satisfied with life?"; "During the past month, how often do you feel that you had something important to contribute to society"; "During the past month, how often do you feel that you had experiences that challenged you to grow and become a better person?". In the current study, the Cronbach alpha score was 0.95.

Results

SPSS (Version 25: IBM Corp., 2019) was used to conduct the statistical tests. Hierarchical multiple regression was used to assess the ability of the control measures (policy, management caring about them, wellbeing being on the meeting agenda, support strategies in place, wellbeing-related CPD), after controlling for the influence of age to predict levels of wellbeing as assessed by the *MHC*. Preliminary analysis was conducted

to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, multicollinearity and homoscedasticity. Age was entered at step 1, explaining 5% of the variance in wellbeing *MHC*. After the entry of the other four variables in step 2, the total variance explained by the model as a whole was 17% R^2 = .17, F=(6, 275) = 9.63, p<.001. The four measures explained an additional 12% of the variants in wellbeing after controlling for age R^2 change = .12, F change F(5,275) = 8.07 p< .001. In the final model only two of the control measures were statistically significant with support strategies for teacher wellbeing (beta = .26,p< .05) recording a higher beta value than management cares about wellbeing (beta = .20, p < .05). See Table 1 for further details.

Table 1: T test result

Factors	Leaders		Teachers				Eta
	M	SD	M	SD	df	t	squared
Wellbeing policy	1.74	0.50	2.11	0.76	272.14	-4.94*	-0.04
Wellbeing on meeting agenda	2.46	0.89	1.92	0.79	203.52	5.13*	0.04
Management cares	3.62	0.59	2.82	0.83	268.64	9.29*	0.06
Support strategies in place	3.00	0.86	2.16	0.78	273.00	8.33*	0.06
Wellbeing-related CPD	2.73	0.93	2.02	0.79	195.49	6.46*	0.05

*p<.001.

Discussion

The results of the current study indicated that the only two factors that predicted teacher wellbeing in the model were (i) management having support strategies put in place for teachers, and (ii) teachers knowing that their management cared about them. Both factors related to leadership effectiveness in creating an environment that helped employees to flourish. This is consistent with previous, robust research that linked leadership behaviour with employees' wellbeing, thus emphasising the fundamental role that leaders play in ensuring that their team is well (e.g., Briker, Walter, & Cole, 2021; Cherkowski, 2018; van der Vyver, Kok, & Conley, 2020; Zhong, Zhang, & Zhang, 2020). Nonetheless, it is the first study that identified leadership factors as being more impactful on teachers' wellbeing than other considerations such as having a wellbeing policy, regular wellbeing CPD and keeping wellbeing on the meeting agenda – factors which are usually recommended to educators who wish to enhance their wellbeing (Falecki & Mann, 2020; Lester, Cefai, Cavioni, Barnes, & Cross, 2020). Further research needs to be carried out with a larger sample to confirm this finding

Establishing a wellbeing policy is often one of the first recommendations given to schools to ensure their community's wellbeing is prioritised and improved (Brown, Fitzmaurice, Milne, & Provoost, 2020; Frijters & Krekel, 2021; Hoffman et al., 2016). However, the current study demonstrated that it did not predict teacher wellbeing. This is consistent with other studies demonstrating that some policies do not change behaviours (Lucarelli, 2015). This may be due to how the wellbeing policy was implemented and enacted, for example,

whether it was imposed on teachers, or introduced collaboratively. Involving teachers in policy creation and the change associated with it yields better results than setting it up for them and expecting them to adhere to it (Beryl et al., 2009). Therefore, collaboration is required when developing a wellbeing policy for schools because ultimately, teacher wellbeing is a shared responsibility which creates an opportunity for schools and sectors to work in partnership with managerial agencies and professional associations (McCallum & Price, 2012).

The current study implied that two important factors need to be considered when designing a wellbeing strategy for school, i.e., putting support strategies in place and management showing they care for their team. These findings can therefore (i) inform the policymakers of the components that need to be incorporated in developing an effective wellbeing policy and interventions (ii) inform the stakeholders and school leaders that if you put both support strategies in place and show staff that you care, you can potentially enhance teacher wellbeing, and (iii) encourage leadership educational programmes to ensure that school leaders are aware of the impact of their behaviour on teachers' wellbeing. Further research needs to be undertaken to evaluate these potential support strategies that management can implement and to measure their effectiveness

To conclude, when teachers feel appreciated and empowered, they are much more likely to show patience and empathy to their students. They are also more likely to share and work with others to support their students and promote wellbeing (Roffey, 2012, p.15), thus creating a domino effect. This can only be a positive thing for all involved.

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Integrating 21ˢᵗ century skills into Irish primary schools: A study on the outcomes, experiences, and observations of teachers

⇌ JOHN MEEGAN AND ELVA CASEY ⇋

Abstract

The implementation of 21ˢᵗ century skills and competency-based learning in European and OECD countries' educational curricula indicates affirmative action across global educational systems to develop a wider breadth of skills beyond traditional literacy and numeracy skills. With this explicit focus on competency and skills-based education, many schools seek to develop skills through innovative teaching methods or by employing specific skills-based interventions. This article presents a small-scale pilot case study of the *Magical Leaders* programme, a 21ˢᵗ-century skills intervention programme suitable for primary school students between 10 and 12 years of age. The study investigated Irish primary school teachers' attitudes to and perspectives on the *Magical Leaders* programme, the 21ˢᵗ-century skills outcomes, the programme's resources, and the core peer-to-peer teaching methodology. Analysis of focus group discussions highlights the positive development of students' 21ˢᵗ-century skills, teachers' and students' perspectives of engaging with the programme, and the peer-to-peer teaching methodology. Several challenges to programme delivery were identified, including an over-reliance on the programme's digital components and inadequate teacher training.

Keywords: **21ˢᵗ-century skills, competency-based learning, peer-to-peer methodology, primary school-based interventions**

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Exploring the concept of 21ˢᵗ-century skills

In a rapidly globalising world, education faces the challenge of preparing learners for an uncertain future where interdependence and transferable skills are crucial (Hargreaves et al., 2009; Kotsiou et al., 2022). Future skills, formerly known as 21ˢᵗ-century skills, are now essential for strategic decision-making within education (Chen, 2019). These skills, falling into cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal domains of competence, encompass the knowledge, attitudes, values and skills required to transform society and shape the future for the better (Guerriero, 2017; Miller, 2018; National Research Council, 2012; OECD, 2019; Taguma et al., 2018). Kotsiou et al.'s (2022) literature review identifies ten meta-skills: higher-order thinking, dialogue, digital and STEM literacy, values, self-management, lifelong learning, enterprise, leadership, and flexibility.

Numerous 21st-century skills frameworks have been analysed and reviewed, including those by Chalkiadaki (2018), Voogt and Roblin (2012), Binkey et al., (2012), and Dede (2010). Kotsiou et al.'s (2022) scoping exercise expanded on previous analyses by including frameworks developed by private institutions, such as the World Economic Forum's (WEF) *Future of Job Reports 2020* and updated frameworks like the OECD's *The Future of Education and Skills: Education 2030* and P21's *Results that Matter: 21st Century Skills and High School Reform*. Other frameworks focused on digital literacy skills development (Park & Gentile, 2019) and democratic competencies (Barrett, 2016). While there is no clear consensus on the definition of 21st-century skills, there is agreement that they are crucial in order to prepare future generations for jobs that do not yet exist and to solve problems that have not yet arisen. The identification of these skills in educational policy and practice is common in many countries, but expectations for their integration with curricula are unclear. This research study's question was, what are teachers' attitudes and perspectives of the *Magical Leaders* programme's 21st-century skills outcomes, resources, and core teaching methodology? This article begins by outlining the current literature on curriculum implementation of 21st-century skills, developing students' 21st-century skills and the peer-to-peer teaching methodology. Next, the researchers describe the *Magical Leaders* programme, the methodology, and the research findings. The paper finishes with sections on ethical considerations, research discussion, limitations, and the conclusion.

Curriculum implementation of 21st-century skills

Education systems globally are adapting their curricula to include 21st-century skills beyond traditional literacy and numeracy (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009; Gordon et al., 2009; McGuinness, 2018). Countries such as Canada, Singapore, Mexico, Pakistan, Kenya and Zimbabwe have implemented reforms with varying degrees of success to support these skills (Boyd, 2021; Chaudry & Tajwar, 2021; Fomiškina et al., 2021; Gory et al., 2021; Islasm Calef & Aparicio, 2021; Rajandiran, 2021), while teacher education programmes have been improved to build teacher capacity (Reimers, 2020). The importance of 21st-century skills is widely agreed upon and reflected in national and international competency frameworks (Guerriero, 2017), including in Ireland, where *Aistear, The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*, and the new *Primary School Curriculum* (DE, 2023) highlight key competencies such as being a digital learner, fostering wellbeing, and learning to be a learner (NCCA, 2009, 2020). Such frameworks emphasise the concept of 'deeper learning,' where transferable knowledge supporting procedural reproduction, factual retention, ideas, techniques, and metacognition is essential (Greeno, Pearson & Schon Field, 1996; Guerriero, 2017; Mayer, 2010), and raise the question of how to better equip students with these skills.

Developing students' 21st-century skills

Educational policies and curricula have increasingly incorporated 21st-century skills, leading to the adoption of various school-based interventions and innovative teaching approaches. These include using maths games to support higher-order thinking (Aprinastuti, 2019), inquiry-based learning for scientific reasoning (van der Graaf et al.,

2019), alternative pedagogies for collaborative thinking and communication skills (Yusoff et al., 2018), and programmable robots for creativity (Um Albaneen Yusuf, 2019). Social and emotional learning (SEL) programmes aim to develop five core competencies in students, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2013). These skills are associated with improved social relationships, academic achievement, and school attendance (Clarke et al., 2015; Corcoran et al., 2018; Durlak et al., 2011). Teachers' capacity to teach broader cognitive or socio-emotional skills is vital, and high-quality initial teacher preparation and professional support are key factors in teacher performance (Jensen et al., 2012; Reimers, 2020; 2021). Developing institutional and teacher capacity is critical for the sustainable development of students' 21st-century skills (Reimers, 2020), as teaching quality remains a significant influence on student learning opportunities (Hattie, 2009).

Peer-to-peer teaching methodology

Piaget's *Theory of Cognitive Development* (Piaget & Brown, 1985) emphasises the importance of peers in learning. Peer-to-peer teaching strategies, defined by Boud, Cohen, and Sampson (1999), involve students learning from each other without direct teacher intervention. Peer-to-peer methodologies have the potential to create enriching learning environments (Friederichs, 2019) and have positive social benefits (Ponferrada-Arteaga & Carrasco-Pons, 2010). However, Kimbrough et al., (2022) suggest that the efficacy of peer-to-peer teaching is dependent on the ability levels of the peers and that low-ability students may suffer from the absence of high-ability peers. Ponferrada-Arteaga and Carrasco-Pons (2010) also found that peer-to-peer teaching could impact school climate, including social relationships, popularity, and adherence to rules and regulations.

The *Magical Leaders* programme overview

The *Magical Leaders* programme is an innovative approach to teaching 21st-century skills and entrepreneurship education in primary schools for students aged 10-12. It was developed collaboratively by the Irish Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment, Enterprise Ireland, and the educational company Zeeko, and is available to all primary schools in Ireland. The programme consists of two parts, with part one focusing on seven one-hour lessons, each with a specific 21st-century skill focus, and part two currently under development. The teaching methodology is peer-to-peer led instruction, and the programme was developed in response to several European and national research reports and policies such as the *UN Sustainable Development Goals* (Lee et al., 2016), and the *Global Entrepreneurship Monitor: Entrepreneurship in Ireland 2019* (Fitzsimons & O'Gorman, 2020). This study investigated teachers' attitudes and perspectives on the programme's resources and the core teaching methodology of part one. The findings will inform future programme development.

Ethical considerations

The researchers were independent agents consulted by Zeeko to carry out this research with objectivity and openness to the findings. The research team had no previous engagement with, or experience of, the *Magical Leaders* programme before the programme review. Reflexivity in this study was valued as central to the research team's ethical considerations. The lead researcher took measures to prevent bias through peer consulting and continually demonstrating reflexivity. The research participants were identified and invited to participate in the study by Zeeko, which raised a conflict of interest that was made clear to Zeeko by the research team. The team made efforts to ensure a diverse sample of teachers and schools were included but acknowledged that the small sample size was a limitation of the study.

Methodology

Our research aimed to investigate teachers' attitudes and perspectives of the *Magical Leaders* programme, the programme's 21st-century skills outcomes, resources, and core teaching methodology. The research team envisions this pilot study will precede future larger studies of the programme to support improvements to future programme design, development, and delivery. The overarching research question was:

What are teachers' attitudes and perspectives of the *Magical Leaders* programme's 21st-century skills outcomes, resources, and core teaching methodology?

The main objectives for the investigation were to:

1. Evaluate teachers' perspectives of the *Magical Leaders* programme and achievement of 21st-century skills.
2. Evaluate and summarise teacher insights into the components of the programme.
3. Investigate teachers' perspectives of the programme's peer-to-peer teaching methodology.

Chosen for its suitability to address the research questions, a pilot case study (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014) involving a small group of teachers (n=12) who had delivered the *Magical Leaders* programme between January 2021 and January 2022 was carried out in February and March 2022. Adopting an interpretivist pragmatic paradigm, this study intended to understand and investigate teachers' complex experiences of delivering a 21st-century skills programme. An interpretivist pragmatic paradigm is best suited for qualitative studies investigating 'what works' in education (Yin, 2014).

Focus groups

Focus group questions were designed to elicit teachers' personal experiences and perspectives of the programme. The research team followed Creswell and Poth's (2018) guide to conducting semi-structured interviews including creating open-ended questions, identifying interviewees, collecting data, designing interview protocols, piloting the questions, obtaining consent, and determining transcriptions logistics. The

questions focused on (1) teachers' perspectives of the programme, (2) 21st-century skills development, (3) students' experiences of the programme, and (4) the peer-to-peer teaching methodology. The focus groups were held online using the college's secure online communication platform.

Gathering data and sampling

Owing to the short timeframe to carry out this research and the small sample size of teachers who had, or were soon to, deliver the programme, all participants were identified and invited to participate in this research by Zeeko via their secure database. Using purposive sampling, 12 teachers (n=12) were interviewed across four focus group sessions between February and March 2022. The focus group teachers delivered the programme between January 2021 - January 2022 and ethical approval was obtained from the Hibernia College Ethics Committee in January 2022. A research privacy notice, informed consent form, and information sheet were shared with all research participants before the commencement of this study. Teachers were invited to take part in the focus groups via the college's secure online communications platform. Participants gave consent orally before the online focus groups began. Throughout the study, the research team reassured participants of their right to opt out of the project at any time. Data was stored on a secure college-approved cloud-based platform, and all research data was handled according to the actions outlined in the ethical review submission. Table 1 shows the focus group details.

Table 1: Focus group details

Focus group no.	No. of focus group participants	Participant identifier	Gender of participants	School patronage	Class types represented
Focus group 1	3	Teacher A Teacher B Teacher C	Female Male Male	Gaelscoil Multi-denominational Catholic	6th class 6th class 6th class
Focus group 2	2	Teacher D Teacher E	Female Female	Gaelscoil Catholic	5th class 6th class
Focus group 3	3	Teacher F Teacher G Teacher H	Male Female Female	Catholic Catholic Catholic	6th class 6th class 5th & 6th class
Focus group 4	4	Teacher I Teacher J Teacher K Teacher L	Female Female Female Female	Catholic Catholic Catholic HSCL	6th class 6th class 5th & 6th class 1st – 6th class

Data analysis

The focus group data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-step thematic analysis approach. The research team started by becoming familiar with the interview data. This involved repeatedly reading and listening to the interviews to gain a comprehensive understanding of the content. Next, researchers identified meaningful units of data and generated initial codes or labels to describe them. Then, the researchers searched for potential themes by systematically organising and sorting the generated codes. The

identified themes were reviewed and refined to ensure that they accurately captured the essence of the data. Finally, the research team defined each theme in a succinct and easily understandable way before narratively presenting the findings in this article. Following a procedure provided by Bree and Gallagher (2016), themes were processed using Microsoft Excel, colour coded and later refined and integrated using a thematic map. Bree and Gallagher (2016) provide researchers with a robust physical process of managing data analysis that reflects the analysis framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2013; 2021).

Findings

A thematic analysis of the focus group data (Braun & Clarke, 2021) identified five major themes: (1) 21st-century skills development, (2) teachers' perspectives of the programme, (3) students' perspectives of the programme, (4) the peer-to-peer teaching methodology, and (5) the challenges to programme delivery. This section will present the findings from the thematic analysis under the previously stated themes.

21st-century skills development

Four subthemes were identified under the 21st-century skills development theme: (1) students' development of 21st-century skills, (2) making visible and acknowledging student voice, (3) building awareness and understanding of 21st-century skills, innovation, entrepreneurial education, and global development goals, and (4) students' use of 21st-century skills across different contexts.

Students' development of 21st-century skills

Through engagement with the programme, 12 teachers indicated students developed a range of 21st-century skills. Teachers expressed that communication, critical thinking, teamwork, and collaboration skills were especially well-honed. During focus group conversations, Teacher D remarked:

> I really liked the critical thinking element. When they had a decision to make or think maybe differently, or why you would do things. I found that area got a lot out of children that I wouldn't normally get an awful lot out of.

Making visible and acknowledging student voice

Nine teachers noted that student voice was made evident through opportunities for teamwork, collaboration, and respectful communication. Teacher A stated that "the collaboration and communication, just the teamwork and the ability to be able to work within a group and to be respectful of everybody in the group and to listen was great."

Teachers indicated students developed their critical feedback skills and their ability to reflect on and give voice to their reflections on their work and that of others, as expressed by Teacher L when they stated:

I think it was wonderful for them to have the opportunity to speak and get some other child to say, "Well, did you understand what they said?" or to give feedback to that pupil and for them to listen to one another and have a collegial forum together to explore themes rather than just being one person talking down to everybody and realising each of them has something to bring.

Teachers indicated students' confidence and their ability to express opinions and ideas and acknowledge others were supported and developed. Group work instilled responsibility and ownership of their learning in students, as Teacher B noted:

It was one of the things that appealed to me in doing the programme, giving them time, putting the onus on them to be a bit more responsible … It just gives them a greater insight into working together when they have a common goal at the end.

Quieter students were allowed to make their voices heard as being authentic, unique, and valued by themselves and others. The programme especially gave quieter students a platform and opportunity to lead activities, build confidence and practise presentation skills, as suggested by Teacher K who observed, "I think kids definitely gained confidence and some of your quieter children can gain that confidence maybe that you never thought they'd have." The programme allowed quieter students to present themselves to their peers in a different light and it opened new educational possibilities and experiences for others. Teacher G noted:

It has given the quieter children in the class who wouldn't necessarily share their voice, it has given them a little bit more confidence. Also, the children maybe who would be prone to thinking outside the box, and not go for the obvious answer all the time. I think definitely those children are more confident with putting their ideas forward because they were obviously encouraged to do that.

Building awareness and understanding of 21st-century skills, innovation, entrepreneurial education, and global development goals

According to seven of the teachers, the programme had a positive impact on students both inside and outside of the classroom as skills learned were transferred into other contexts and students gained an understanding of 21st-century skills, innovation, entrepreneurial education and global development goals. Teacher E stated:

It made them think, and those skills were transferable, then added onto the yard to say, okay, I don't really like playing with that person, but I'm after learning a way around that, so can I put my learning into operation there on the yard.

The potential to adopt these skills in a post-primary school setting was also evident to teachers. Teacher H noted, "It was beneficial and especially for 6th class pupils going into first year where they will have to make more presentations."

Students' use of 21ˢᵗ-century skills across different contexts

Six teachers described students as making use of 21ˢᵗ-century skills across a variety of contexts and for different purposes. The development of students' emotional regulation skills was noted as being beneficial, especially returning to school after the COVID-19 school closures. The programme developed students' resilience skills as they had to self-regulate when the group did not use their ideas. Teacher I observed:

> One that they were really, really interested in was the emotional regulation because of COVID-19 everybody was, when they were in lockdown, there was a pressure cooker kind of scenario in different houses.

Teachers described how students also related to real-life entrepreneur stories. The explicit naming and describing of key terms such as 21ˢᵗ-century skills, innovation, and entrepreneurial education concepts and ideas, built students' awareness and understanding of these concepts as Teacher H reported, "The terminology is great because I do another project, but in that programme, you don't actually name the skills." Teacher C observed, "I think the programme definitely drew a bit more attention for us in the class to entrepreneurial and innovation skills in the world around us."

Teachers' perspectives on the programme

Two sub-themes were identified under the theme of teachers' perspectives of the programme: (1) teachers enjoyed teaching and delivering the programme, and (2) the programme integrated well across the curriculum.

Teachers enjoyed teaching and delivering the programme

Eight teachers described enjoying and delivering the programme. The thematic structure and the programme's outcomes and objectives were well received. Teacher D asserted, "I enjoyed doing it. I think I enjoyed it more than the children". Teachers also enjoyed the demands it put on students to think critically, work collaboratively, and develop creativity and innovation skills. Teacher E added, "To recognise a problem, and then to know that there are multiple ways of solving a problem that stood out for me.

The programme integrated well across the curriculum

Five teachers indicated the programme integrated well across the curriculum, with Teacher J noting, "It was good, in that it tied in with the new *Primary Language Curriculum* as well."

Students' perspectives of the programme

Three sub-themes were identified under the theme of students' perspectives of the programme: (1) students enjoyed engaging with the programme and the peer-to-peer methodology, (2) the programme deepened students' awareness of the planning and preparation involved when presenting to others, and (3) the programme disrupted traditional power relations in the classroom.

Students enjoyed engaging with the programme and the peer-to-peer methodology

Eight teachers indicated that students enjoyed the programme content, structure, and peer-to-peer methodology. Teacher K noted that, "I think they enjoyed it. They seemed to be enthusiastic about participating and they liked preparing and being given time to get their lesson ready." Students enjoyed engaging with the game-based environment as it was novel to them. They also developed their skills in using technology as a tool for learning.

The programme deepened students' awareness of the planning and preparation involved when presenting to others

Six teachers outlined how the programme deepened students' awareness of the preparation involved when presenting to their peers and the role and responsibility of teachers daily. Teacher C observed, "There was that little bit of understanding, as to what it's like to present. They sometimes said look, we understand that it's not easy to teach, so there was a bit of empathy there as well" while Teacher F remarked that, "I think they learned a valuable lesson in empathy through their presentations."

The programme disrupted traditional student power relations in the classroom

Four teachers indicated how more outgoing students had to negotiate a new role during the programme and listen while less outgoing children were presenting. Teacher D indicated:

> That was definitely a challenge for some of the children who would be used to being centre stage that they weren't given that role automatically. That they had to assume another role in the group. I do feel the children struggle with that a little bit. Maybe not being number one all the time.

Teachers also indicated that all students had an opportunity to contribute and that they listened attentively to their friends and respected each other's opinions. Teacher K remarked, "You might have the one that might make a smart comment just try to get someone going, but I think they developed respect, more respect for each other as it went along."

The peer-to-peer teaching methodology

Three sub-themes were identified under the theme of the peer-to-peer methodology: (1) the peer-to-peer methodology is a novel way of teaching, engaging and interacting with students and (2) the peer-to-peer methodology allows teachers to observe and become facilitators, not leaders of the learning, and (3) the peer-to-peer methodology can be adopted across other curricular areas.

The peer-to-peer methodology is a novel way of teaching, engaging, and interacting with students

Six teachers said that the peer-to-peer methodology is a novel way of teaching, engaging, and interacting with students. Teacher I said, "I think the peer education was great. The collaboration, the idea that they're working in collaboration, was good. It straight away gave you buy-in."

The peer-to-peer methodology allows teachers to observe and become facilitators, not leaders of the learning

Four teachers described how the peer-to-peer methodology allowed teachers to observe and become facilitators, not leaders, of learning in contrast to traditional teacher-led pedagogies. Teacher A noted, "I got to see the class as a whole kind of from the back and you don't get opportunities like that when you're teaching, because you're always on call, so it gave a great opportunity for me to see how groups were interacting together to see how they engaged."

The peer-to-peer methodology can be adopted across other curricular area

Six teachers also employed the peer-to-peer methodology across other curricular areas to support self-reflection, critical thinking, and peer-to-peer feedback. Teacher C noted, "I've actually used it an awful lot myself across other curricular areas and just getting them to look inwards and even other groups to kind of think critically, but fairly assess their peers' work."

The challenges to programme delivery

Three sub-themes were identified under the theme of challenges to programme delivery: (1) digital components, (2) teacher training and programme preparation, (3) physical resources, and (4) adhering to programme fidelity.

Digital components

Eight teachers indicated they faced challenges with the digital components of the programme for a variety of reasons such as the programme being too ICT dependent to deliver effectively due to technical issues in some schools. Teacher C mentioned that "I found the actual programme itself, that it wasn't an issue with our laptops or computers or the internet. The programme itself was quite unresponsive and it took a lot of time to get from place to place within it." Teachers indicated they, and their students, became frustrated by the digital elements of the programme and that the graphics were outdated, causing students to lose interest. Teacher D responded:

> I thought the graphics were fine, but for the children it wasn't maybe as modern, or up-to-date, or as techy as they would've liked. I found I was trying to nearly compensate a little bit for that element of it.

The reliability, responsiveness, and integration of the digital programme elements across devices and different school infrastructures was problematic for teachers and students. The programme was not app-ready which teachers found frustrating, Teacher C observed, "It just was a little bit too slow for them at times to move to the next phone, so I sometimes ended up skipping ahead and just watching the video, so I really had to adapt it myself and that was probably one of the biggest challenges."

Teacher training and programme preparation

Eight teachers indicated the programme training was ineffective and impractical. Teachers felt unprepared to deliver the programme, and so students struggled to engage with the programme. The teacher training focused on organisation strategies, not on what a successful lesson looked like or the effective way to teach and deliver the programme, focusing on 21st-century skills outcomes and success criteria. Teacher F noted:

> I didn't feel prepared in any way to actually deliver the programme. [...] Now again, I understand there were external factors and I know that COVID-19 didn't allow the proper teacher training to take place, and we were doing it over Zoom. I'd love to have somebody show me, "Look, this is how it works. This is what it looks like".

Teachers found preparing student groups, planning and pre-teaching students to deliver the lessons time-consuming and challenging to manage, as Teacher K noted, "I suppose one of the challenges was their preparation ... giving them time even to go out of class or whatever, and being able to give them time in their preparation as well, because you nearly needed to work with them to guide them a little bit as to how you're going to present this."

Teachers also indicated the time allowance for lessons was unrealistic, as noted by Teacher D, "The recommended allocated time, if I had said initially I was going to give an hour, it turned into an afternoon".

Students lacked deep and meaningful content knowledge when delivering the peer-to-peer lessons. They became unnerved when posed questions from their peers they did not readily know the answers to. Teacher I remarked that:

> I suppose the fact that they didn't have a very deep knowledge of what they were presenting on. If some of the other children asked them a question, they were going, "I don't know." They literally knew I'm presenting this little bit of information, but they didn't know anything beyond that.

Physical resources

Eight teachers said they faced challenges with the physical resources. Teacher guidelines and students' workbooks were repetitive, content heavy and some language was deemed too advanced for some students. Teacher E observed, "The vocabulary is still too difficult for 5th and 6th class. A lot of pre-teaching of the vocabulary is needed, which is very time-consuming". Teacher A shared, "I thought there was just too much in the workbook. There's an awful lot of great points, but less is more in my opinion for the workbook."

Adhering to programme fidelity

Seven teachers found adhering to the programme challenging due in part to COVID-19 restrictions, time constraints on planning and delivering the lessons and negotiating this as part of a busy curriculum. Teachers indicated they completed particular lessons in a bespoke way and focused on the skills they felt most beneficial to their school and

classroom context. Teacher C stated, "From my point of view, I picked and chose what I was able to do, the skills that we could do, and we're trying to have them doing a little bit of leadership." Teacher A stated, "I suppose we did it slightly differently. We did it in a reasonably short timeframe. I gave them a little bit of time in school, and the children presented one day after another, after another."

Discussion

The findings suggest that the delivery of the *Magical Leaders* programme was challenging for teachers due to the programme's digital complexity, time-consuming preparation, and unrealistic lesson time allowance. Furthermore, students' lack of deep content knowledge and the workbook's heavy content and advanced language also added to the difficulties. The challenges in adhering to programme fidelity were compounded by COVID-19 restrictions, time constraints, and the need to fit it into an already busy curriculum. Despite these challenges, the findings also highlight the benefits of the programme, such as increased student engagement, improved teamwork and communication skills, and greater awareness of business concepts. These findings have important implications for programme designers and educators seeking to implement entrepreneurship education programmes in primary schools. Designers should consider simplifying programme content and providing more support for teacher training and student preparation. Educators should be given more time and resources to prepare and deliver the programme effectively and to select the most relevant programme components for their students' needs. Finally, future research could investigate how best to implement entrepreneurship education programmes in primary schools to maximise their benefits while minimising the challenges.

Limitations

The study in question was carried out under a short timeframe, with a small sample size of teachers who were involved in delivering the *Magical Leaders* programme. The team also acknowledged the lack of student voice due to time constraints and hopes that the findings of the pilot study will support future reviews that involve a broader range of stakeholders, including students, school leaders, and parents/guardians. The team welcomed the possibility of a more comprehensive study with a larger sample size and statistical analysis in the future.

Conclusion

This research shows that teachers have a positive view of the *Magical Leaders* 21st-century skills-based programme and that students have developed critical thinking, collaboration, communication, creativity and innovation skills, in line with other studies on school-based skills interventions (Clarke et al., 2015; Corcoran et al., 2018; Durlak et al., 2011; Durlak et al., 2015). However, the study also highlights challenges to programme delivery, including digital components, teacher training, preparation time, physical resources, and adherence to programme fidelity. These findings support the need for building teacher capacity to teach broader sets of skills and for high-quality teacher preparation and professional support, as indicated in the literature (Jensen, Hunter, Sonnemann, & Burns,

2012; Reimers, 2020, 2021). The study also highlights the positive impact of peer-to-peer teaching methodology but also notes that it may depend on the ability levels of the peers involved, with low-ability students being disadvantaged in the absence of high-ability peers to scaffolding their learning using this approach (Kimbrough et al., 2022).

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Phonemic awareness instruction – What, when, why, and how?

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Abstract

While the importance of phonemic awareness instruction has been recognised in academic circles since the 1970s, it has been argued that teacher knowledge has been found to be lacking in this area. Decades of research demonstrate the causal relationship between phonemic awareness and reading and writing development. However, disagreements arise regarding when, how, and to what extent phonemic awareness should be taught. This article examines the literature surrounding these points of debate while reflecting on the connections to classroom practices in this area.

Keywords: **phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, reading instruction, emergent reading, junior infants, senior infants**

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The Primary Language Curriculum (NCCA, 2019) identifies three fundamental strands of language learning: oral language, reading, and writing. These areas are mutually supportive, intertwining with each other in every language lesson that we teach. Awareness of the associations between the strands is important, not just for teachers but also for children. In this article, some literature on the oral and auditory skill of phonemic awareness is explored as well as its importance for reading and writing, and how it may be successfully implemented in the classroom.

The importance of phonemic awareness (PA) instruction has been recognised in academic circles since the 1970s (Liberman, 1973). However, teacher knowledge is lacking in this area (Moats & Foorman, 2003; Cheesman et al., 2009). To master the alphabetic principle, understanding the relationship between letters and phonemes is essential. To be able to decode words, we must know letter-sound correspondences and apply the skill of blending the phonemes to pronounce the words. Furthermore, phonemic awareness is a reliable predictor of future reading attainment. (Adams, 1990; Cunningham, 1990; Ball & Blachman, 1994; Lane et al., 2009; Melby-Lervang et al., 2012). Despite the plethora of evidence available, PA is still misunderstood by many (Cheesman et al., 2009; Walsh 2009).

Research demonstrates the causal relationship between PA and reading and writing development (Liberman, 1989; Cunningham, 1990; Adams, 1994; National Reading Panel, 2000; Lane et al., 2009; Moats, 2010; Melby-Lervang et al., 2012; Foorman et al., 2016; Moats, 2019; Rehfeld et al., 2022). In this article the disagreements regarding when, how, and to what extent phonemic awareness should be taught are examined.

1. A traditional practice in teaching phonological awareness is to begin with larger units of sound, such as syllables, before working at the phoneme level (Lane et al., 2002). In contrast, Brady (2020) suggests that such practice is unnecessary and does not improve attainment in phoneme awareness.

2. Oral-only phonemic awareness instruction is debated fervently. *The National Reading Panel Report* (2000) is often credited with the recommendation that phonemic awareness activities are best taught with letters. Kilpatrick challenges this interpretation and claims it "misrepresents the findings" on teaching PA with or without letters (Kilpatrick et al., 2021, p.2), and asserts that oral phonemic awareness activities are indeed beneficial.

3. The notion that some phonemic awareness skills should be taught before the introduction of alphabetics is supported by many researchers (Adams et al., 1998; Blevins, 1997; Lane & Pullen, 2004; O'Sullivan, 2019). However, letters are often introduced very early, before any explicit phonemic awareness instruction.

The literature surrounding these three points of debate is reflected on and the teacher researcher's personal experience is referred to.

Effects of phonemic awareness Instruction on reading and writing

Phonemic awareness can be defined as the conscious sensitivity to the individual speech sounds in spoken language. (Adams et al., 1998; Lane & Pullen, 2004; Heggerty, 2020). Speech has evolved with the human race, and we process it automatically. On the other hand, reading and writing are more recent inventions, meaning that learning to read requires more intentional analysis of words (Wolf, 2007). It was only a few thousand years ago that humans realised that words differ from each other based on their internal structure, a discovery that Alvin Liberman (1989) described as "surely one of the most important ever made" (p.149).

Many studies have examined the impact of PA training on reading success. In California in 1990, Cunningham conducted a quasi-experimental study of PA instruction for kindergarten and first-grade pupils and their subsequent gains in general reading achievement. The experimental groups significantly outperformed the control group in the standardised reading test at the end of the intervention. Studies continue to find positive long-term effects of PA instruction on reading and spelling. The National Reading Panel (2000) examined 52 reports of experimental and quasi-experimental studies to confirm the hypothesis that teaching PA improves reading outcomes over alternative instruction or no instruction. The results were positive and conclusive, with an overall effect size of $d=0.53$ on reading and an overall effect of 0.59 on spelling. The National Early Literacy Panel (2008) conducted another meta-analysis, and similar findings were reported.

Syllables or phonemes first?

There can be some confusion around the terminologies of 'phonemic awareness' and 'phonological awareness'. One of the reasons for this is that phonemic awareness (conscious awareness of individual phonemes) falls under the umbrella of phonological awareness

(awareness of sound structures in words). Brady (2020) said, "Having the same term to encompass all levels … invites confusion and contributes to misinformation" (p.4). Hence, she proposed the term "phonological sensitivity" be used to describe the awareness of syllables and sensitivity to rhyme, as originally described by Torgesen and Mathes in 1999.

Many commercial phonological awareness programmes begin with phonological sensitivity tasks. One popular programme is the *Heggerty* programme, developed by Michael Heggerty in the 1990s and revised by Alisa VanHekken in 2022. The *Heggerty* programme consists of daily explicit and systematic phonological and PA lessons for pre-k, kindergarten, and first grade. While the main focus is at the phoneme level, it begins with 'phonological sensitivity' tasks, as these are easier to blend, segment, and manipulate. The *Letters and Sounds* programme (DfES England, 2007) begins with general sound discrimination activities before moving on to a sequence of phonological awareness activities. *A Sound Beginning for Reading* is a programme developed by Irish teacher and researcher Jennifer O'Sullivan and published in 2021. It also incorporates phonological sensitivity tasks before commencing work at the phoneme level. O'Sullivan (2019) describes a developmental progression from "from a sensitivity of larger linguistic units of sound (e.g., words, syllables) to the smallest linguistic unit (e.g., phoneme)" (p.24).

This theory of a continuum of phonological awareness skills from larger to smaller units of sound is also supported by Blevins (1997), Adams et al., (1998), Paulson (2004), Shaywitz (2005), Moats (2010) and Foorman et al., (2016). Conversely, Brady (2020) and Seidenberg (Seidenberg Reading, 2022) disagree with this theory. They maintain that syllable awareness is unnecessary, and not a prerequisite to phoneme awareness. Brady is critical of the notion that phonological awareness is a hierarchy of skills and states that it is a "misinterpretation" of research from the 1990s. She refers to a study by Nancollis et al., (2005) that compared a group of preschool children receiving phonological sensitivity instruction to a control group that received no instruction. Upon examination, this study provided mixed results, with the experimental group performing better in rhyme awareness and non-word spelling but the control group performing better in phoneme segmentation. The research findings on this topic are not clear-cut, and more studies may be needed to come to a more definitive conclusion.

Having taught phonological awareness to junior infants, I would concur with the hypothesis of Lane and Pullen (2004) that phonological sensitivity tasks are "useful for initial instruction in detection, segmentation, blending, and manipulation" (p.102). In my experience, many children need time to 'settle in' in the first term of junior infants. Syllables are relatively easy for most to grasp, with many children already possessing a natural awareness. Syllables of spoken words can be felt in the opening and closing of the jaw (Adams et al., 1998), whereas phonemes are more elusive and ambiguous. Rushing into explicit phoneme awareness instruction may only be developmentally appropriate for some children in the class. Furthermore, children must have an awareness of syllables because all syllables contain a vowel, which is extremely helpful when learning to encode.

Phonemic awareness: In the dark?

In recent years, there has been much disagreement as to whether PA activities should be done 'in the dark,' i.e., as an oral and auditory task, or performed with letters. When I first encountered this idea, I was sceptical, as to my mind, PA activities carried out with letters were phonics activities. The *Heggerty* curriculum, as described earlier, contains oral phonemic awareness tasks without print, as does the *Equipped for Reading Success* programme by David Kilpatrick (2015). The use of programmes like these has been harshly criticised by some academics who advocate for the use of letters for phonemic awareness instruction (Clemens et al., 2021; Seidenberg Reading, 2022). Concern has also been expressed about what "might be omitted in the classroom" when oral-only phonemic awareness activities are given daily attention (Clemens et al., 2021, p.5).

The National Reading Panel (2000) meta-analysis indicated that "PA instruction may be most effective when children are taught to manipulate phonemes with letters" (pp.2-6). The outcome for children trained with letters was higher than that for children trained without letters. Rehfeld et al., also recently completed a meta-analysis earlier this year, recommending "meaningful inclusion of graphemes into phonemic awareness instruction" (p.1198).

Kilpatrick asserts that PA training does not always need to use letters as prompts and that this has been a misinterpretation of the findings of the National Reading Panel. The analysis did not directly compare studies that used letters with studies that did not; rather, oral activities were used in all the studies, and letters were not consistently used (Kilpatrick 2015; Kilpatrick et al., 2022).

This opposing view is put forward not only by Kilpatrick and Heggerty but also by Walsh (2009), who states that "The contention that there is no point in teaching children about speech sounds unless they are linked to letters has perhaps prevented real phonemic awareness instruction happening in classrooms" (p.223).

Likewise, Adams et al., (1998) describe the importance of oral phonemic awareness activities as follows: "Those of us who already know how to read and write harbour a number of illusions about speech as a consequence … you should take care not to let your knowledge of spellings delude you about how various words sound; for example, pitch really does rhyme with rich" (p.92).

This quote resonated with my own experience in the junior infant classroom. Some of the children who came to school with letter knowledge found it quite challenging to focus on the oral aspect of phonemes, e.g., when asked, "What sound can you hear at the beginning of the word 'shop'?" they would say the letter name "s" instead of identifying the /sh/ phoneme. Some of these children struggled when it came to blending phonemes to decode CVC (consonant vowel consonant) words, as they had not engaged fully in the oral PA activities.

Rather than taking a black-and-white view of the issue of whether PA activities should be done with or without letters, it may be sensible to utilise the advantages of both. There is a reciprocal relationship between PA, reading, and spelling. Drawing children's attention to the speech sounds in words contributes to learning the alphabetic principle, which improves phonics knowledge and facilitates orthographic mapping. Interaction with print, in turn, improves phoneme sensitivity. Phoneme segmentation skills enable invented spelling, and practice at invented spelling also benefits phoneme awareness (Cunningham, 1990; O'Sullivan, 2019).

Cunningham's study (1990) included two experimental groups, one of which received 'skill and drill' PA instruction, while the other group "were shown how the skill should be applied, along with examples of when and where the skill should be used in a reading situation", in addition to the skill and drill instruction (p.436). The latter group performed significantly better in standardised reading achievement tests following the intervention. Teaching PA skills is of little use if the children do not know how to apply these skills to print. It is necessary to provide explicit instruction on how to transfer the skills of blending and segmenting to decoding and encoding (Cunningham, 1990). Phonemic proficiency is a means to facilitate reading and spelling rather than an end in and of itself (Heggerty, 2020). Conversely, if PA tasks are only ever performed with letters, there is a danger that the children will not develop phoneme awareness (Kilpatrick, 2015). It is safer to conclude that there is merit in PA tasks that are oral-only and also in those implemented with letters.

Which should come first: phonemes or ABCs?

"As phonological awareness skills develop, they must be integrated with letter-sound knowledge and word reading" (Kilpatrick, 2015, p.265).

When it comes to PA activities for young children who have not yet mastered letter recognition, teachers face a 'chicken-or-egg' dilemma. If there is value in both oral and print-based phonemic awareness activities, then which should come first? Many researchers and academics recommend including letters in PA activities (Blevins, 1997; National Reading Panel, 2000; Kilpatrick, 2015; Brady, 2020; Rehfeld et al., 2022), but they do not give much attention to what should happen at the very beginning of the reading journey. Phonemic awareness activities with print can only include graphemes that the children are familiar with. The inclusion of letters cannot extend beyond the knowledge that they have gained so far (Spector, 1995; Rehfeld, 2022). Moreover, oral PA tasks allow access to all 44 phonemes of the English language before graphemes for all of them have been mastered.

So, should we ensure that children possess PA skills before learning letters? Lane and Pullen (2004) state that phonological awareness precedes proficient decoding, and Blevins (1997) describes it as a "prerequisite" to phonics instruction. Brady (2020) also agrees that children must "first become aware of individual phonemes in spoken words in order to subsequently learn that those phonemes are represented by letters" (p.2). However, many commercial phonics programmes for beginner readers begin teaching letter-sound correspondences from the very first lesson, with some even targeted at the preschool level.

When we think of the alphabetic principle, we deem letters to be not just symbols on a page but representations of the individual phonemes in the words we speak, read and write. Concerning my own experience of introducing new phoneme-grapheme correspondences, when I drew the children's attention to articulatory gestures, they were more able to make meaningful connections to the letters. For example, in previous years, when discussing a particular letter sound, I would ask the children to orally provide words that began with that sound. Often, children would suggest unrelated words such as 'tractor' or 'dinosaur' for the phoneme /p/. When I began to place more emphasis on phoneme awareness before introducing the grapheme, this confusion did not happen. Children could correctly identify words that contained the given phoneme and whether it was at the beginning, middle, or end of a word.

Shaywitz (2020) tells us that the initial goal for beginner readers is to become aware of the "sounds of language" (p.177), however, phoneme isolation or identification is one of many skills that could be beneficial to develop before phonics instruction begins. O'Sullivan (2019) argues that "children should be exposed to the blending and segmentation of the sounds of their language before being expected to perform these same tasks with letters" (p.62). Oral blending and segmenting activities help children hear how phonemes can be pieced together to build words, just as words can be broken apart into phonemes (Blevins, 1997). If a child cannot blend a simple CVC word orally, they will have great difficulty decoding that word in print. Teachers may be familiar with the scenario of a child correctly 'sounding out' a word, only to then look at the corresponding picture and supply a completely different word with confidence, e.g., "/d/ /o/ /g/ … puppy!" Discovering the reason for difficulties like this was eye-opening for my teaching. I knew that blending and segmenting were essential skills for reading and spelling, but I had not considered that oral skills were required.

In the context of a junior infant classroom, there is a place for oral-only PA instruction before introducing letters. Short pre-reading programmes facilitate the PA skills that are needed to benefit from phonics instruction. With just a few weeks of explicit and systematic teaching, children can learn to "tune in" to the sounds in words (Shaywitz, 2005; O'Sullivan, 2019; Rehfeld et al., 2022). This helps to build a solid foundation for skilled reading and writing and can help to prevent future reading failure.

Implications for the classroom

"Reading and writing present a cognitive hurdle that speaking and listening do not" (Liberman, 1988, p.149).

The research is clear on the importance of PA for reading and writing. Awareness of the internal structure of words is not automatic. The skills of phoneme isolation, blending, and segmenting can and should be taught to beginning readers systematically. However, PA alone is not enough, and children must be explicitly shown how to transfer and apply the skills to decoding and encoding print (Cunningham, 1990, Heggerty, 2020, Shaywitz, 2020). After all, "The goal of phonemic awareness instruction is not to blend and segment phonemes for the sake of blending and segmenting phonemes" (Lane, cited in Pedagogy Non-Grata, 2022).

When learning the skills of blending and segmenting, it seems sensible to begin with syllables rather than phonemes, as they are easier with larger units of sound. Children will achieve success more quickly, which may help with confidence for those who need it. A few weeks of practising this is sufficient before moving on to the crucial phoneme level.

As regards the debate on PA activities 'in the dark' versus 'with letters', the evidence suggests that there is a place for both in everyday language lessons. Concentrating on articulatory gestures helps children to identify the sounds within words. This skill is crucial for skilled decoding and encoding, and removing print from the activity shines a spotlight on the phonemes. Oral and auditory tasks can also serve as a useful warm-up to phonics lessons and can be carried out at a moment's notice, with no need for any resources other than one's voice.

A short period of oral-only PA instruction before introducing letters is valuable. It is suggested that six to eight weeks allow for plenty of practice in phoneme isolation, blending, and segmenting and will set the children up for success in reading and spelling. When they are shown how letters and sounds work together to form words, they can gain a solid understanding of the alphabetic principle.

Phonemic awareness, reading and writing are reciprocal. As each one receives attention and practice, it strengthens the others in a continuous cycle of development. Without PA, many children will struggle to read and write at their highest level of potential. The National Reading Panel (2000) specified PA as one of the five pillars of effective literacy instruction, alongside phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Scarborough (2009) also identified it as a crucial strand in the "Reading Rope" of skilled reading. Many children learn to read and write very well without training in PA. However, there are many more who could attain a greater degree of proficiency if they had access to explicit, systematic instruction in their early years of schooling. The research on the importance of PA instruction is clear. What is needed now is for that research to transfer to our classroom practices.

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The views of early career primary teachers on the impact of an undergraduate specialism in special education on their work as class teachers

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Abstract

This paper explores the perspectives of five primary school teachers who had completed a specialism in special education as part of their initial teaching degree. Along with two core modules focusing on inclusive education for all students, these students completed an additional five modules in the area of special education. All five teachers were at the early stage of their careers and worked as class teachers. A focus group was set up and participants were invited to share their experiences and thoughts about the impact of the specialism on their practice. The findings indicate that the specialism had a positive impact on the teachers' professional practice, particularly in terms of skill development, confidence, having a whole school approach and acknowledging the need for continuing professional learning. The participants also spoke positively about the two core modules on inclusive education, which they claimed laid the foundation for subsequent learning.

Keywords: **teacher education, special education, specialism, inclusive education**

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Introduction

This article considers the views of five teachers who completed the undergraduate specialism in special education at one higher education institution (HEI) in Ireland. While a focus group was used for this research, the paper is part of a larger study, where teachers were also interviewed. This specialism has been available to undergraduates in the Bachelor of Education programme since 2013 when the programme moved from being a three-year degree to a four year degree. As well as input from core modules in inclusive special education, these students completed additional modules relating to inclusive strategies, behaviour support, language, literacy and mathematics in special education, home-school partnerships, and a thesis in special education. On completion of the course, teachers were awarded a Bachelor of Education degree, with a specialism in special education. The research focuses on the views of teachers and how they feel this specialism has impacted their ability to teach in the inclusive classroom. It is deemed timely for this research to be conducted as the specialism is relatively new and its impact on practising teachers has not been evaluated up to now.

The article begins with a review of the literature, with a particular focus on the competencies required for inclusive teaching. The literature search included keywords/phrases about the research question, such as inclusive pedagogy, teacher skills, initial teacher education, provision for special education and teacher identity. The methodology is outlined, describing the process of conducting a focus group before the findings are presented and discussed. It is contended that the views of these teachers could offer insights for teachers, teacher educators, college students and policymakers.

Literature review

Quality of teaching

The quality of teaching is often cited as paramount when aiming to include all children in schools (Alexiadou & Essex, 2016; DES, 2022; EADSNE, 2022). To this end, teachers need to be aware of evidence-informed approaches to teaching and learning and to keep abreast of the evolving nature of inclusive and special education (Hornby, 2015; Mitchell & Sutherland, 2020). It is particularly important that teachers have high expectations for all children in their contexts and that they adopt supportive approaches in classes, catering for a diverse group of learners (Beacham & Rouse, 2012; EADNSE, 2022; NCSE, 2019). It is worth noting that the Report on *Initial Teacher Education for Inclusion* referenced above (NCSE, 2019) was a large-scale, longitudinal study using a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods for data collection and analysis. Having high expectations may involve having an awareness of the *Universal Design for Learning* framework, catering for all learners (Hornby, 2015; Novak, 2016; O'Brien, 2022; The Teaching Council, 2020), as well as more targeted and differentiated approaches for those with identified needs (DES, 2022; Ní Bhroin & King 2020). The quality of teaching in schools does indeed have the greatest impact on student learning (Armstrong, 2012; Beacham & Rouse, 2012; DES, 2022), so teachers must be prepared at the initial teacher education (ITE) stage to become innovators, driving effective teaching and learning for all (NCSE, 2019; Teaching Council, 2020). It is also necessary that teachers view diversity as normal and that learner differences are seen as an opportunity to plan and assess in a way which addresses the needs of all children (EADSNE, 2022; Westwood, 2018). This may require teachers to become skilled in collaborative practices (Mitchell & Sutherland, 2020; NCSE, 2019) and to engage in pedagogies which aim to build capacity in schools (Teaching Council, 2022). It is worth acknowledging that teachers' agency is fundamental to making informed decisions about teaching and learning (Slee, 2010; Teaching Council, 2020) and this agency may foster teacher wellbeing, which in turn, may support the wellbeing of pupils. Children's wellbeing is, after all, intrinsic to a holistic view of learning (DES, 2022). As quality teaching is child-centred, the views of pupils and how they see themselves as learners should be at the forefront of the teaching and learning process (Mitra, 2018). The inclusion of these views increases pupil participation (Mitra & Gross, 2009) and teachers should continue to explore creative ways to engage pupils meaningfully in issues which affect them (DES 2022; O'Brien, 2019; Westwood, 2018).

Self-reflection

Teachers' attitudes are critical determinants of successful outcomes for all children (Florian & Rouse, 2009; Ross-Hill, 2009), and this is particularly relevant for pupils with special needs, who require teachers to understand their unique strengths and areas of need (Beacham & Rouse, 2012; O'Brien, 2019). These attitudes are often formed by experiences and teachers need to continually reflect on how they understand inclusion and what constitutes inclusive pedagogies (Alexiadou & Essex, 2016; Florian, Young et al., 2010). In doing so, it may be helpful for teachers to interrogate concepts of inclusive education and what it means in their practice (EADSNE, 2022; Florian & Camedda, 2020). This process of reflection may empower teachers to become more competent and confident in their work with all pupils (Kauffman, Anastadiou et al., 2016) and it may also allow teachers to reflect on their role and what it means to be a teacher (Fielding, 2004). It is necessary that teachers at the ITE stage are encouraged to become self-directed and this could be supported by providing activities which support them to reflect critically on their practice (Beacham & Rouse, 2012; Teaching Council, 2020). This critical reflection, beginning at the pre-service stage, may impact how teachers view themselves when they begin their professional careers (Lambe & Bones, 2008). It also provides pre-service teachers with opportunities for both individual and collaborative reflection, ultimately benefitting all children in schools (Slee, 2010; Teaching Council, 2020). Furthermore, providing opportunities to engage with research at the pre-service level supports student teachers to reflect critically on evidence-based practices and this is also a critical skill for practising teachers (Beacham & Rouse, 2012; Florian & Rouse, 2019). As the quality of teaching matters, it may be helpful when teachers are encouraged to reflect continually on the decisions they make to improve the learning experiences and well-being of all children (Alexiadou & Essex, 2016; DES, 2022).

Collaboration

Collaborating with peers and non-teaching professionals is central to teacher education and professional practice (Ní Bhroin & King, 2020; Teaching Council, 2020). The complex nature of teaching is best supported when open channels of communication exist between teachers and others, aiming to provide all pupils with worthwhile learning experiences (EADSNE, 2022). Although this collaboration is important for all pupils, it may be particularly critical for pupils with special needs, who may present with unique and additional challenges. Many inclusive strategies, such as co-teaching, highlight the importance of teacher collaboration when addressing pupils' needs and these collaborative structures may be adopted to support teacher learning and assessment (Hornby, 2015; Mitchell & Sutherland, 2020). As well as collaboration between teachers, collaborating with pupils is crucial and this practice has gained momentum in recent years (Conner, 2022; Council of Europe, 2022). As already mentioned, the inclusion of pupil's views improves outcomes for all and it is necessary to include pupils in matters which directly impact them (Council of Europe, 2022; Flynn, 2018; Lundy, 2007). As schools aim to improve practice, a successful agent of improvement may involve the collective insights of staff, pupils and parents (DES, 2022). This sharing of views, promoting common values, has the potential to affirm best practices and to inform change, when required (Florian & Camedda, 2020). In

the case of teachers who have specialist knowledge in special and inclusive education, there may be opportunities to collaborate and disseminate information in a way which supports class teachers to work successfully with all pupils (Beacham & Rouse, 2012; Hornby, 2015; Westwood, 2018). These specialist teachers have an important role in the collaborative process and in optimising the outcomes for all pupils, particularly those with special needs (Hornby, 2015). Finally, as quality leadership is closely linked to positive outcomes for pupils (EADNSE, 2022), it may be said that all teachers assume a leadership role and that collaboration between staff may support teachers in identifying their leadership qualities and attributes, ultimately benefitting all pupils (DES, 2022).

Ongoing professional learning

As special and inclusive education includes a quickly evolving knowledge base, ITE must be understood as a foundation for lifelong professional learning (EADSNE, 2022; NCSE, 2019). As teachers begin their professional careers, they find themselves in different contexts with varying levels of need in their classrooms (Armstrong, 2012; Novak, 2016). It is, therefore, important that they recognise the imperative of lifelong learning (Lambe & Bones, 2008; Teaching Council, 2020). While ITE aims to prepare inclusive teachers to begin their professional careers, it may be naïve to assume that even the most competent teacher may be able to address all pupil's needs at this point. Also, as professional learning is closely linked to reflection and collaboration, it may be viewed as a career-long endeavour, which includes working with others and striving to make good decisions (DES,2022; Hornby, 2015). Having high expectations for all and understanding the challenges of a neuro-diverse classroom requires teachers to evaluate the teaching and learning process continually (Armstrong, 2012; NCSE, 2019). This may be achieved by engaging in continuing professional learning (CPL), particularly when the models of professional learning are collaborative and relevant to teachers' contexts (NCSE, 2019; Ní Bhroin & King 2020).

Methodology

Before the research, an email was sent to the principals of primary schools in the Republic of Ireland, inviting teachers who had completed the specialism in special educational needs (SEN) at one HEI to take part in the study. The email contained the researcher's contact details, so teachers were free to get in contact directly, or not at all. When teachers got in contact, they were asked if they were clear on what was expected of them before they signed the consent form. It was emphasised that they were free to withdraw from the research at any point and that this would not impact them in any way. It was also made clear that the data would be anonymised and this anonymised data might be shared in the form of a publication and a conference presentation. Full ethical approval was granted by a HEI in the Irish Republic.

There were five teachers included in this study, each of whom had graduated with a Bachelor of Education degree with a specialism in special education since 2017. All five teachers worked as class teachers in primary schools. The group met on one occasion to discuss the questions which had been emailed to them beforehand. All of the questions

related to how the specialism had impacted their work as teachers and they were also free to discuss any related areas which had not been included in the schedule. I adopted an interpretivist approach, attaching meaning to what the teachers had to say (Silverman, 2010). It is acknowledged that all meaning is socially and contextually laden (O'Donoghue, 2007) and that multiple views of reality exist, which is particularly evident in a group situation. The focus group offered participants the opportunity to share and discuss their views and experiences openly (Flick, 2009). As the teachers lived in different parts of the country, it was deemed appropriate to conduct the session online and this session lasted for just over one hour. The data was recorded on a tablet. The aim was to give space and voice to participants and to moderate in a way where all of the teachers had the opportunity to speak. The issue of dominant participants is cited as a disadvantage of focus groups (Berg, 2004) but this did not arise in this instance. Following the session, the data was transcribed and then analysed using Braun and Clarke's model of analysis (2021). Four key themes emerged and these are presented below.

Findings

Skill development

This was by far the most prominent theme which emerged from the discussions, with all of the participants testifying to the high level of skills acquired while undertaking the specialism. One teacher commented "it was the skills development that we learnt and it was very practical" with another citing "so I suppose one of the biggest skills was getting a child's profile and then setting targets from there and setting your smart targets and differentiating the curriculum". The teachers appeared enthused by this, all agreeing that they felt equipped to address the needs of students with profiled needs, as a result of the specialism. When probed to discuss the content which they felt benefitted them most as teachers, two teachers spoke about the "practical aspects" and the way they felt more able to plan for inclusion. They discussed the importance of understanding the child's profile when planning resources, with one stating "you got a profile of a child and I think we designed a visual resource at one stage on how to include the child in the mainstream class. That was really good".

Along with the strategies to address academic challenges, the issue of behaviour was raised on a few occasions, which isn't surprising for early career (or indeed experienced) teachers. The participants mentioned that the focus on this area during the specialism was particularly strong and enabled them to respond appropriately in their practice. One teacher said, "we learnt so much about just being able to respond to behavioural issues and that was really good". The others nodded and another comment included "all of the strategies we learnt were really good but especially the ones to deal with behaviour. You see the child as a person and realise that the behaviour is a result of the child's experiences". There appeared to be general agreement about this and another teacher said "I know that my friends who did the course didn't feel as prepared as me to work with children with behavioural issues. That's not to say I know it all, I don't, but it was a good starting point". This area of supporting peers arose on a few occasions and all of the group agreed that they have supported colleagues to develop their skills in different ways, with one teacher reporting that she was able to support a more experienced teacher:

> I think my understanding was way better from it. And just like I was talking to one of my friends, she is teaching one year more than me. And she was asking me questions one day … and I was like, I'm actually able to help you with this.

The teachers also mentioned that they thought the specialism should be "compulsory for all", as it would enable and empower all teachers to meaningfully support all pupils. One teacher commented that this may not be possible but that "the deeper level of understanding" as a result of the specialism was beneficial and that "having done the specialism I was definitely more equipped". Adding to this another teacher said, "Yeah, I feel like we learnt a lot in the core modules, but having the elective on top of it was brilliant". Interestingly, all of the teachers in the group worked as class teachers (not SETs) and were adamant that the skills they learned "could be applied in every context". With the focus of the specialism on the inclusion of all pupils, one teacher said:

> So the strategies or the methodologies or even the research that you come across yeah absolutely, it's going to really benefit the child who has additional needs in your classroom but will also benefit the child who doesn't. I think that's the most important point … that it's a very inclusive module.

Confidence

All of the teachers in the group spoke about feeling confident and competent when striving to meet pupils' needs, with one stating "the specialism, it heightened my confidence" and another saying "without the specialism I definitely wouldn't be as confident in adapting to all the needs in the class, because as I said, you don't know what the need is until you actually figure it out for the specific child because all the children are different". This key issue of difference was raised on a couple of occasions, with the teachers appreciating the complex nature of addressing the challenges faced by children, who are indeed all different. On this point, one teacher said: "I think it has been really important for my confidence going into the classroom to work with different children … and even hearing the different needs that I was going to have to deal with, I'd be like oh that's ok, that I know I'll be able to do this for them". The issue of assessment was raised as an advantage of the specialism and how they were confident in administering and interpreting appropriate diagnostic tests. Recounting her first year teaching, one teacher said, "I was able to test and see where they were and then plan according to that. And I feel that without the specialism I wouldn't have been as confident doing that either". Agreeing with this, another teacher spoke about the behavioural challenges she had encountered in the classroom, saying, "l have come across challenging behaviour and I feel like from the specialism I was able to really listen and figure out where the child was coming from, where the behaviour was coming from and what meaning it had behind it".

They also emphasised that they felt better able to communicate with other professionals and parents, as they had the language to do so and also felt that they were better equipped to make important decisions. One participant spoke about the importance of being aware of the associated language and stated, "I suppose when you are graduating and stuff, I suppose

you have the professional language and if I hadn't done the specialism I may not have the vocabulary to converse, be that with parents or psychologists". All of the group agreed that the specialism gave them a heightened awareness of the importance of collaboration with others and the need to use the correct language in their practice. It was clear that they were confident in addressing the needs of pupils and satisfied with how the specialism was organised. Again, the teachers remarked on the benefits the specialism would confer on all pupils, with comments including "I think I would have loved it for everyone to have that experience because I think that I'm just ... that bit more confident even going into the school having learnt more about the needs than just in the core modules, which were also really good".

Impact on the whole school

When asked if they had an opportunity to share with others what they learned, the teachers spoke about the importance of collaborative practice and the way they supported each other. One teacher discussed co-teaching in the school and how it was important for one teacher to have specialist knowledge in special education when working with a whole class. She noted that "the two of us (teachers) kind of set up a system where we were able to teach and observe, noting any difficulties the children had. Other teachers came in and observed us co-teaching." Another teacher remarked, "I'm just lucky that I'm in a school where collaboration is quite a big thing." Each of the participants noted the imperative of collaboration to foster professional learning and to be able to share knowledge and experiences. Cognisant of the time pressure in schools, the teachers identified staff meetings as an opportunity to share with others. One teacher said, "in our school we have the time to talk about what works well at our meetings and I spoke about some of the maths strategies I learned on the specialism." On this point, another mentioned, "yeah, you are always feeding back to others what works or doesn't work." The teachers spoke about the impact that the specialism had on all pupils and not just those with special needs. One teacher remarked that special education teaching is "just good teaching" and that everything she learned could be applied in a range of contexts. The others agreed with other comments including "you don't necessarily have to be in a special education role to apply the strategies, I think they are just informed and it makes you a better teacher for everybody" and "yeah, everyone benefits from the strategies". It was clear that the teachers' professional identities were impacted by the specialism as each of them viewed inclusion and special education as central to their roles in supporting all pupils. While reflecting on this, one of the group noted that "I am probably using more SEN strategies than I'm even aware of ... they just become so embedded into practice now, that I say that I have been doing it for years. It's just what I do". One of the teachers had recently entered a leadership role in the school and contended that this allowed her to "say more at meetings" and have an impact on school policies.

Continuing professional learning

During the discussion, it was acknowledged that pre-service education is merely the beginning of a teacher's learning journey. While the quality of ITE is crucial, one teacher remarked "And I think it's impossible as an undergrad to come out and know everything because I think you really do need to go in and kind of walk the walk and make your mistakes and ask the questions" with another noting that context is important to be able to make connections so that the content is more "meaningful". All of the teachers had engaged in CPL in some form since beginning work and this was deemed to be helpful. The context of schools was mentioned on a few occasions and the teachers spoke about the way all teachers have different experiences and the sharing of ideas was very worthwhile. One teacher remarked that "all teachers have different ideas in supporting the students … they have different methodologies and resources." As the teachers asserted that CPL was crucial, they also spoke about the value of the specialism in supporting them to make connections with what they learned in college and new information delivered as part of CPL courses. One teacher said "I actually have benefited a lot from talking to teachers on courses about what they do" while another remarked, "some courses are really practical and similar to what we did in college. It's good to consolidate what we did in college and to hear it in a different way, if that makes sense". They also spoke about the importance of being released from school to undertake courses, stating "I think teachers appreciate that they are invested in as well, when they are actually given the release time from school to go and do it". On this point, another teacher said that it "goes back to the school culture". The same teacher noted, "I definitely think it has to be supported by leadership and they really have to get behind you". All of the group felt supported to engage in CPL and discussed the way the undergraduate specialism had laid a foundation for subsequent learning, with one teacher commenting "I can build on that myself from now on".

Discussions

All of the teachers in the group testified to the strong emphasis on skill development during the course of the specialism and how this benefitted them in their teaching. The importance of understanding pupils' profiles was raised on a few occasions and the teachers remarked that this was vital to plan for pupil's needs (EADSNE, 2022). It is worth noting that there is also an emphasis on understanding needs and the importance of teaching to children's strengths on the core modules of the programme. However, the specialism offers students further time and opportunities for collaboration and to tease out ideas to support pupil's needs. It appeared that the teachers' understanding of evidence-based strategies had improved, which is key when aiming to include all pupils in the mainstream classroom (Hornby, 2015; Mitchell & Sutherland, 2020). As already noted, all of the teachers worked as class teachers (not SETs) and they emphasised the strategies for behavioural issues in the mainstream classroom. They understood the targeted approaches necessary for individual pupils with such needs (NCSE, 2019; Ní Bhroin & King, 2020) and remarked that many special education strategies can indeed be adopted to support all pupils.

The teachers displayed a sense of confidence when working as inclusive teachers and also noted the imperative of collaboration with others, which is central to inclusive education (Beacham & Rouse, 2012; EADNSE, 2022; NCSE, 2019). They remarked that they were confident in administering and interpreting assessments and that they were able to support other teachers in their schools when addressing pupils' needs. The language of inclusion is central to teaching and learning, and the teachers noted the confidence they had when using the appropriate language with pupils, parents and external professionals. They also displayed a strong awareness of self-reflection, which is key to the improvement of practice (Florian, Young et al., 2010). It was clear that all the teachers were satisfied with the input on the core modules but felt that the specialism gave them a "deeper understanding", which they appreciated.

As collaboration was important to the group, they discussed ways for teachers to collaborate when planning for all and noted the opportunities for shared learning in this regard. This sharing of knowledge and ideas has the potential to improve outcomes for all children and may be especially beneficial when one teacher has more extensive or specialist knowledge (Beacham & Rouse, 2012; DES, 2022; Hornby, 2015; Westwood, 2018). There is an opportunity for teachers with specialist knowledge to lead and to disseminate information to others in schools and this was evident in the ways co-teaching practices were employed, along with the practice of sharing knowledge of strategies at school meetings.

The participants spoke about the importance of CPL and have undertaken various courses since graduating. As early career teachers, they very much acknowledged the need to upskill continually and to engage with various stakeholders, which is a key feature of inclusive education (Lambe & Bones, 2008; Teaching Council, 2020). It may be particularly beneficial when it is relevant to the needs of teachers (Ní Bhroin & King, 2020). They were aware that ITE was just the beginning of their learning journey and that future professional learning was required to address the needs of the pupils in their classes.

Although some of the teachers expressed a view that the specialism should be available and "compulsory" for all, this may not be possible as students are free to choose a specialism from a wide variety of topics, which is of interest to them. However, there may be opportunities for cross-fertilisation of ideas in ITE, where principles and practices in other modules could incorporate some of what the teachers in this research considered particularly beneficial. It may be interesting to ask other teachers who have completed a different specialism of their views, which may also be correspondingly high. These teachers, while not having undertaken the special education specialism, also have opportunities to engage in professional learning in inclusive and special education. This may be an opportunity to build on the input from the two core undergraduate modules, which the teachers in this research claimed formed the foundation for subsequent learning.

Conclusion

This paper considered the views of class teachers on issues relating to the special education specialism offered to pre-service teachers since 2013. It was evident that the teachers in this group were satisfied with the way they were prepared to meet the needs of all pupils and they acknowledged the need for CPL in this regard. While this study was small-scale and

involved one cohort at a time, the teachers' perspectives provide worthwhile insights about some important issues to consider, when striving to improve the learning experiences of all pupils in schools.

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Turning the wheel: Increasing teacher collaboration through peer observation

≣ PETER MELROSE ≣

Abstract

This research sought to increase teacher collaboration through the introduction of peer observation of teaching in our school. The literature review examines the significance of teacher collaboration in relation to teaching and learning; peer observation and its influence on teacher collaboration and the role of professional learning communities (PLC) and leadership in teacher collaboration. The research was conducted using qualitative methods, primarily focus groups and reflective journals. Teacher action research was chosen as the methodology as it best represented the research aims. The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-stage cycle of *Thematic Analysis*. The findings recognise the PLC as the fulcrum of teacher collaboration. The research further finds that peer observation of teaching acts as a catalyst for teacher collaboration by allowing dedicated time for "Collaborative Dialogue", which includes reflective, craft, and informal dialogues. This research highlights the lack of allocated time for continuing professional development, and the importance of this dedicated time for teacher collaboration. Recommendations arising from this research include: conducting peer observation in triads in order to promote "Collaborative Dialogue", collaborating with external organisations such as the Inspectorate in order to facilitate class supervision for peer observation, and further investigating the role of middle leaders in enabling teacher collaboration.

Keywords: **teacher collaboration, peer observation, leadership, reflective dialogue, professional learning communities**

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Introduction

This research aimed to increase teacher collaboration in our school by introducing and engaging in peer observation (PO) of teaching. I specifically chose PO because research shows that the practice of observing others could increase teacher collaboration by encouraging professional conversations among colleagues and facilitating observation meetings to discuss teaching and learning practices (Fullerton, 2003). Crucially, it could also mitigate teacher isolation and routinisation (Cosh, 1998), an issue that had become prevalent in some schools as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions placed on social interaction (Stuart, 2022).

I also aimed to establish a professional learning community (PLC) in our school. The PLC engaged collaboratively with numerous aspects of the research process, such as introducing PO to my colleagues as a viable form of continuing professional development

(CPD); guiding participants through the processes of PO and action research cycles; creating leadership opportunities for participants through distributed leadership and facilitating professional conversations. An overarching aim of the research was to influence school culture to be more amenable to future collaborative planning, teaching and projects.

The research process took the form of teacher action research, a repeating cyclical process of reflective educational inquiry by teachers with the expressed goal of improving every day teaching and learning practices in their school or university (Herr & Anderson, 2012; Kemmis, et al., 2014; Levin & Rock, 2003; Mitchell, et al., 2009; Pine, 2008). Data were collected using qualitative methods such as PLC meetings (n=5), where two meetings acted as a focus group, along with three observation meetings, audio recordings of these meetings, written reflective journals (n=3), and notes from observations and relevant informal conversations.

Literature review

Peer observation and its influence on teacher collaboration

Peer observation (PO) of teaching can be defined as the observation of the work practices of colleagues to provide constructive feedback to improve standards of teaching and learning in an educational setting (Swinglehurst, Russell, & Greenhalgh, 2008). As such, PO can be a collaborative, developmental tool which facilitates teacher collaboration in several ways. For example, it can promote professional dialogue between staff; develop mutual support among colleagues; and provide scheduled time to discuss teaching and learning through pre- and post-observation meetings (Fullerton, 2003). It can also help to encourage improved planning and organisation (McCarthy, 2011) and mitigate common issues for teachers such as isolation and becoming routinised (Cosh, 1998). PO can also improve collegiality through better communication, increase teacher confidence (Grainger, Bridgstock, Houston, & Drew, 2015) and prompt deep reflection on teaching practices (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2005). These benefits also seem to increase, as the practice becomes more normalised among staff (Shortland, 2004).

Despite the potential benefits of PO, the reviewed literature highlights several contentious points about introducing PO to teachers. These include: interpreting feedback as critical and negative rather than developmental (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2005); prejudging PO as intrusive and laborious (Bell & Thomson, 2018, p.277); and viewing it as a threat to professional agency (Carroll & O'Loughlin, 2014). Therefore, the need for and importance of trust and collegiality in PO is a prevailing issue (Bell & Thomson, 2018; Carroll & O'Loughlin, 2014; Gosling, 2013; Karagiorgi, 2012; O'Keeffe, et al., 2021; Walker, Patten, & Stephens, 2022). Bell and Thomson (2018) conclude that if PO is not implemented in a collegial and trusting environment, it can be viewed negatively by staff and result in a failure to capitalise on its potential benefits.

In the reviewed literature, PO appears to act as an umbrella term, encompassing several different approaches to observing and reflecting on teaching and learning practices. Within that canopy, three specific models are offered by Gosling (2002) based on the nature of the observation. In the 'Evaluative Model', an external observer provides critical, competency-based feedback for purposes such as quality assurance models. Any example of this in an

Irish context would be school inspections by the Inspectorate. The 'Developmental Model' consists of more established teachers, including those in leadership positions, who observe and provide feedback to newly qualified teachers (NQTs). There is a focus on the benefits of the tutor/learner dynamic. The Droichead framework for NQTs is an Irish example of the developmental model, where NQTs observe experienced teachers and vice-versa. Finally, in the 'Collaborative Model', teachers in the same school observe and reflect on each other's practices in dyads, triads or teams. Teachers choose the time and aspect of teaching and learning to be observed. There is a focus on mutual support and teacher autonomy.

The literature I reviewed on PO appears to be indicative of an extensive and wide-ranging research topic in higher education; (Barnard, et al., 2015; Bell & Thomson, 2018; Carroll & O'Loughlin, 2014; Fullerton, 2003; Peel, 2005; Swinglehurst, Russell, & Greenhalgh, 2008). In Ireland, this has manifested in several third-level institutions such as the University of Limerick, Dublin City University and Trinity College Dublin promoting a policy of voluntary PO among staff. Conversely, at primary level, there seems to be less research published (Karagiorgi, 2012), which could suggest that PO is not as prevalent in primary education, or that there is a dearth of research on the subject.

The significance of teacher collaboration to teaching and learning

Teacher collaboration can be broadly defined as teachers who work closely together with the shared objective of improving teaching and learning practices. This collaboration is primarily achieved by engaging in professional and reflective dialogue (Woodland, Lee, & Randall, 2013). The importance of teacher collaboration in an Irish context can be seen through its promotion by the Teaching Council in recent years. To this end, the Council has developed Droichead, an induction framework for NQTs and *Cosán*, a professional development framework for more established teachers. Droichead places a strong emphasis on the importance of collaboration between NQTs and more established teachers, while *Cosán* recognises teacher collaboration as an intrinsic feature of effective, constructive professional development (The Teaching Council, 2016).

The literature on teacher collaboration reports many potential benefits to both staff and students. These include but are not limited to moral support, increased efficiency, improved effectiveness and reduced overload, which Hargreaves (1994, pp.245-246) cites among his "principles of collaboration". Further benefits consist of greater teacher confidence in learning practices, developing of positive collaborative experiences, and an increased willingness to engage in and develop new practices (Rempe-Gillen, 2018). A mark of the significance of Hargreaves' (1994) writings is its continued popularity in conversations about teacher collaboration, forming the basis of 'Civitas Parium', a new collaborative CPD framework developed by the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) (O'Donnell, 2022).

There is agreement in the literature that trust and collegiality are fundamental to the success of meaningful teacher collaboration (Hargreaves, 1994; Johnson, 2003; Lavié, 2006; Lipscombe, Buckley-Walker, & McNamara, 2020; Little, 1990; Nguyen & Ng, 2020). Johnson (2003, p.343) suggests that trust and collegiality can be built for collaboration through "teacher-talk": the opportunity to share personal and professional stories in a

group. Nguyen and Ng (2020) concur that sharing is an effective way to build trust but stipulate that this must become ingrained in the "daily interactions" of staff (p.649). In contrast, Hargreaves (1994, p.254) highlights that an over-dependence on "personal trust" where trust is exclusively devoted to people and not spread out to include trust in expertise and processes, can lead to forms of collaboration that are "paternalistic and parochial".

From an Irish policy perspective, *Cosán* recognises and values the agentic teacher by catering for individual learning as part of its framework, which is indicative of the holistic approach that the Teaching Council is taking to teachers' learning (Figure 1). This suggests that balance may be the best navigational tool. A lack of appreciation of the micro-political dynamic can limit any reforms or more general calls for increased collaboration in a school (Johnson, 2003). Little (1990, p.521) stipulates that such a move towards this level of collaboration increases the chances of conflict among staff, as deeply held views are debated, but that this is done with the interests of students in mind and is indeed necessary for "integrative agreements". Hargreaves (1994, p.247) notes the necessity of this robust collaboration, as "safe" collaboration can lead to complacency.

Figure 1: Cosán's Dimensions of Teachers' Learning (The Teaching Council, 2016)
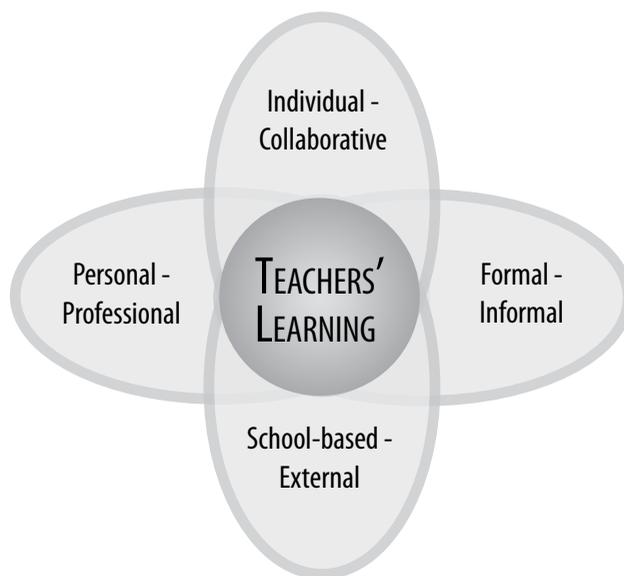

Methodology

Introduction

"Research that produces nothing but books will not suffice" (Lewin, 1946).

Action research was chosen as the methodology as it was hoped promote change in the collaborative culture of our school by engaging in PO. While there are many variants due to its popularity as a research paradigm (Herr & Anderson, 2012; Kemmis, McTaggart, &

Rhonda, 2014), action research can typically be described as a repeating six-stage cycle or spiral of inquiry; planning, acting and observing, reflecting, re-planning, acting and observing and reflecting. (Figure 2) (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Rhonda, 2014, p.18). There is a strong focus on participation and reflection with action research, as it is conducted 'by' or 'with' members of the organisation or community, rather than on them (Altrichter, Kemmis, McTaggart, & Zuber-Skerritt, 2002; Herr & Anderson, 2012). In an educational context, it is research conducted with the intention of "improving teaching practices" (Corey, 1954, p.375).

*Figure 2: Action research spiral (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Rhonda, 2014)*
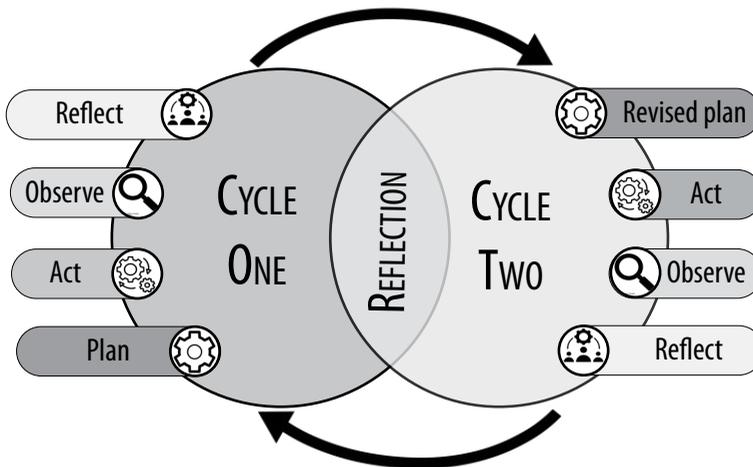
School context

Our school is in a rural setting with a small teaching staff (n=7); the principal is a teaching principal, and the secretary works in a part-time capacity. The school culture is positive and the atmosphere relaxed and collaborative. Barth (2002, p.7) describes school culture as "a complex pattern of norms, attitudes, beliefs, behaviours [sic], values, ceremonies, traditions, and myths" that is rooted at the heart of the organisation, and "apparent to the newcomer" (p.6).

PO through action research was selected as a catalyst to strengthen professional relationships in the school (Figure 3).

Teacher action research

Figure 3: The cogs of the research hopes and aims

RESEARCH HOPES AND AIMS

Teacher Collaboration

Teacher collaboration will improve collegiality strengthen professional bonds, and have a 'positive contagion' effect on staff.

POT Through Action Research

POT will afford the opportunity to engage in specific time for teacher collaboration and improve teaching and learning in the school.

School Culture

School culture will be more amenable to future collaborative projects between teachers.

In educational research, the terms "collaborative action research" (Mitchell, Reilly, & Logue, 2009), "classroom action research" (De Beer, 2019; Kemmis, McTaggart, & Rhonda, 2014; Mettetal, 2002), "practitioner action research" (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007), "teacher research" (Herr & Anderson, 2012) and "teacher action research" (Levin & Rock, 2003) have been used interchangeably to describe a repeating cyclical process of reflective educational inquiry by teachers with the expressed goal of improving every day teaching and learning practices in their school or university (Herr & Anderson, 2012; Kemmis, McTaggart, & Rhonda, 2014; Levin & Rock, 2003; Mitchell, Reilly, & Logue, 2009; Pine, 2008).

The term "teacher action research" was adopted as it best described the approach of this research. Pine (2008) defines teacher action research as a form of professional development which can "empower" teachers to analyse critically and reflect on their circumstances and practices and take ownership of improving practice (p.94), which was directly compatible with the research aims.

Sample

The sample for this study was a voluntary selection of the teaching staff in our school. The participants (n=3) worked together as a PLC and co-researchers in a participatory manner.

Data gathering techniques

In *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983), Schön highlights the importance that reflection plays in mitigating routinisation and creating new meanings and perspectives:

> Through reflection, he can surface and criticize [sic] the tacit understandings that have grown up around the repetitive experiences of a specialized [sic] practice and can make new sense of the situations of uncertainty or uniqueness which he may allow himself to experience (p.61).

Reflection was a core element of my research and identified a central cog in both PO (Bell & Thomson, 2018; Grainger, Bridgstock, Houston, & Drew, 2015; Shortland, 2004) and action research (Herr & Anderson, 2012; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Mitchell, Reilly, & Logue, 2009). Data-gathering techniques were centred around capturing reflective moments from participants.

While there were reflective opportunities throughout the series of the five PLC meetings, the first and last meetings in particular incorporated a focus group setting. Dialogue was facilitated through questions posed and prompts that promoted reflection. Research has shown that the group dynamic of focus groups can yield "deeper and richer" data compared to one-to-one interviews (Fatemeh, 2004, p.656).

Reflective journals were specifically "solicited diaries", i.e. they were written especially for the research (Jacelon & Imperio, 2005, p.992). Solicited journals can provide the researcher with indications as to the significance of events for the participants, and their reflections on those events. (Jacelon & Imperio, 2005). These journals were compiled because of their potential to be an important conduit for reflexivity for the participants (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013). Participants were given reflective prompts at the end of each PLC meeting and were encouraged to write reflections over the course of the research.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis (TA) was used to analyse the data collected over the course of this research. TA is a technique for recognising, analysing, and recording patterns in data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) by identifying "common threads" across qualitative research methods such as interviews and focus groups (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013, p.400). The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2019) updated six-stage cycle of TA (Figure 4). Due to its hazy categorisation as a data analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018; Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017; Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013), TA has been described as a "flexible" method of data analysis that can be tailored to suit the needs of the research (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.78; Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017, p.2). I agree with Braun and Clarke's (2006) assertion that the language of "emerging" themes (p.80) diminishes the active role that the researcher plays in identifying the themes across data.

The PLC and observation meetings were recorded and cross-referenced with the reflective journals that participants kept. Notes of any relevant informal conversations with participants were also recorded. This was done to triangulate the data i.e., include "multiple perspectives" to increase credibility (Herr & Anderson, 2012, p.56).

Findings and discussion

Figure 4: The six-step process or thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019)
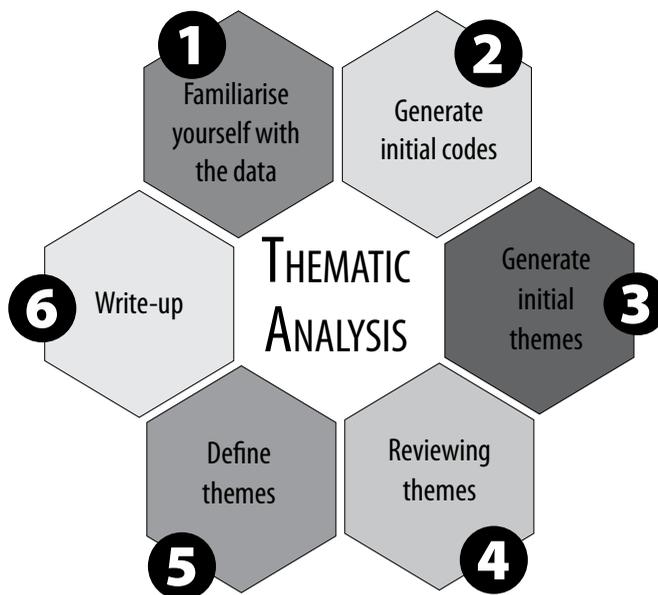
The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2019) updated six-stage cycle of thematic analysis (Figure 4), as outlined in methodology. The data were divided, reviewed and refined into the themes of *The PLC as a Fulcrum of Collaboration; Peer Observation as a Catalyst for Teacher Collaboration; Allocated Time for CPD;* and *Organisational Structure. Organisational Structure* was later phased out as this topic was covered in the other themes. A summary of the findings is outlined in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Summary of the main findings

1. Centrality of the PLC
The PLC was central to the success of both the action research and peer observation.

6. Allocated time
Allocated time for CPD is vital for its success and sustainability.

5. Empowering participants
Empowering participants to claim ownership of the research was a crucial aspect of successful peer observation.

2. Collaborative dialogue
Collaborative dialogue was identified as the mechanism by which participants communicated throughout the research.

3. Trust and collegiality
Building trust and collegiality were essential for strengthening personal and professional bonds.

4. Distributed leadership
Distributed leadership and successful PLCs are intertwined

The professional learning community as a fulcrum of collaboration

The professional learning community transpired to be the fulcrum around which every aspect of the research turned. It was the key to planning and organising both the PO and action research, as it allowed time and space for participants to build 'trust and collegiality', develop a shared rationale and responsibility and move into a leadership space to claim ownership of the research.

Time and space to collaborate

The COVID-19 pandemic hindered informal face-to-face teacher collaboration due to the restrictions placed on physical distancing in the school. This created an isolating environment where staff were anxious about going into the staff room or into each other's classrooms, typically where such informal collaboration would occur. The PLC sought to address that by creating time and space for staff to collaborate. Teacher A noted that the meetings provided an opportunity for teachers to improve their teaching and learning:

> The [PLC] meetings were … a chance to share ideas and brainstorm ways to enhance all of our teaching practices … it felt refreshing (A, Reflective Journal).

> Teacher C pointed out in the final PLC, "just to have the time to have a meeting" gave comfort. Teacher A states that they found the scheduled meetings "therapeutic":

> I looked forward to all of our meetings as I knew they would provide me with an opportunity to chat about how my week in the classroom had gone, what areas went well, and what areas were challenging me and causing stress (A, Reflective Journal).

Allocated time to discuss teaching and learning was highlighted in the literature as both a benefit of the PO (Fullerton, 2003) and a vital component of a successful PLC (Hord, 1997). Dedicating scheduled time for teachers improves teamwork and the quality of team interactions (Lipscombe, Buckley-Walker, & McNamara, 2020). However, Hargreaves (1994, p.97) does caution that scheduled time is not a panacea and that some teachers may prefer to use allocated "teacher time" for preparation and individual work instead of collaboration.

Collaborative dialogue

The reviewed literature suggested that many of the benefits of teacher collaboration and PO overlapped with that of the PLC. However, it was only by participating in the research that it became apparent just how intrinsic a PLC can be to enabling teacher collaboration, and how it can make "true changes" to teaching practices (Vangrieken, Meredith, Packer, & Kyndt, 2017, p.52).

The PLC afforded time and space for 'collaborative dialogue' (CD). Taking CD as an umbrella term meaning any form of professional interaction between staff, the research has led to a further division of the term between three types of dialogue: "reflective dialogue"

(Louis & Kruse, 1995, p.31), 'craft dialogue' and 'informal dialogue' (Figure 6). Collaborative dialogue informed numerous aspects of our research, from organisation and planning to reflection on teaching and learning practices, and the discussion of wider educational issues.

Figure 6: Collaborative dialogue

Collaborative dialogue

Reflective dialogue: In-depth conversations about local teaching and learning with an awareness of ones' own teaching (Louis & Kruse, 1995).

Craft dialogue: Discussions of local and wider educational issues including the latest teaching and learning practices, with shared expertise at its core.

Informal dialogue: Casual unplanned professional discussions, usually an exchange of ideas and resources, but which can overlap into either reflective or craft dialogue.
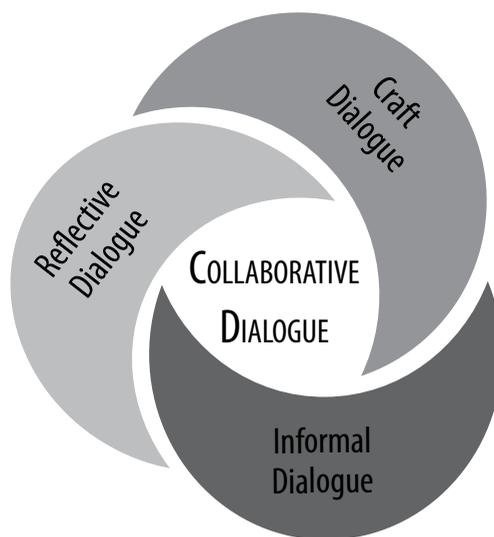
Experience

Several factors have influenced the arrival at the term 'collaborative dialogue'. Firstly, the experience in the research led to the identification of the three areas of "reflective dialogue", 'craft dialogue' and 'informal dialogue', as outlined in the above figure. These dialogues would often overlap, particularly as the research progressed and became more ingrained in our day-to-day teaching lives. For example, Teacher A and I would often greet one another in the morning as I walked through their classroom to get to my classroom. Invariably, this led to 'informal dialogue' about upcoming meetings and observations. These were casual, unplanned conversations, where we engaged in brief discussions about schedules and objectives regarding observations. While they were generally organisational in nature, they would sometimes become a short "reflective dialogue", maybe about a thought or idea that occurred to us in-between formal meetings. These passing exchanges were small boosts of collaboration that enthused me as I headed to my classroom. Therefore, I intentionally continued an 'informal dialogue' with Teacher A after the research had ended. It subsequently evolved into quick chats about whole-school activities, teacher collaboration, and organisational structure, which furthered increased teacher collaboration and showed the lasting effect that the research has had on the school.

Literature

Secondly, the literature informed my thinking on CD. "Reflective dialogue" continually emerged from the reviewed literature as an intrinsic benefit and key component of a PLC (Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas, & Wallace, 2005; DuFour, 2004; Hord, 1997; King, 2011; Louis & Kruse, 1995; Malone & Smith, 2010). "Reflective dialogue" can be described as teachers' in-depth conversations about their teaching and learning with an awareness of both one's teaching and a standard of quality teaching (Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996). This was experienced as focused reflective conversations about the particular teaching and learning practices employed in observed lessons e.g. the methodologies employed, what resources were used and why they were suitable for particular lessons, and pupil differentiation. By comparison, 'craft dialogue' involves open, broad discussion on teaching as a profession; comparing lived experience of the education system as pupils to where it is today as educators, and what the future may hold in terms of policy and curriculum developments. It also included conversations on wider educational issues such as organisational structure and the resourcing of schools. This was inspired by what Barth (2006) describes as "craft knowledge"; insights teachers can offer in areas such as "discipline, parental involvement, staff development, child development, leadership, and curriculum" (p.9). These conversations, which empowered participants by drawing on their insights and expertise, were central to forming "shared values and vision", one of the key characteristics of a PLC (Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas, & Wallace, 2005). Based on the experience of this research, it is argued that 'craft dialogue' deserves to be recognised for its importance in increasing teacher collaboration.

The importance of informal dialogue

Lastly, the importance of 'informal dialogue' in CD must be emphasised due to its progressive prevalence in the research. As collegiality improved, the positive effects of PLC meetings and observations began to spill out into the wider staff. It was hypothesised that if empowering experience were created for the research participants, then that would spread to the rest of the staff like a "positive contagion" (Fullan, 1992, p.26). The ultimate goal was to normalise 'informal dialogue' and integrate it into everyday staff interactions. Malone and Smith (2010) observed in their research that, even when formal PLC meetings had been discontinued, teachers had developed the capacity to engage in more informal meetings which could provide similar opportunities for professional conversations. While it is too early yet to tell if this is sustainable, 'informal dialogue' has become more frequent in the school and teacher collaboration has improved substantially, as evidenced by the informal dialogue now regularly taking place, and the whole-school collaborative projects now being organised at staff meetings.

Since the research, whole-school collaborative projects have returned, and events such as *Mental Health Week, Engineers' Week* and *Fairtrade Week* have taken place. It is contended that the research primed the staff to engage in 'informal dialogue' in a way that they had not done previously, thereby validating its inclusion in CD. Creating the term 'collaborative dialogue' was a way to articulate the experiences in the research.

Trust and collegiality

As outlined in the literature review, PO, action research, and PLCs all require high levels of trust among staff for change to succeed. The onset of the pandemic, subsequent school closures, staff movement and COVID-19 restrictions, led to the realization that, as a staff, we didn't know each other that well, personally or professionally. Listening back to the recording of the first PLC meeting, it is clear that all participants, relaxed into the safe space provided. A pivotal moment was the introduction of humour, as Teacher A described the first time Teacher C came into the class in their role as a SET:

> I remember the first lesson C came in. I was teaching Irish, like; 'Oh, my God. Oh, my God. I hope I do an okay job. I bet you [they've] got phenomenal Irish'. But then I was like; 'aw [they've] got really bad Irish it's fine'".
>
> C (laughing): "How dare you!" (A + C, 21:23, PLC 1, 17/11/2021)

The atmosphere changed at that moment: it was just the right blend of personal and professional bonds strengthening. Teacher A felt safe enough in the space to use humour to convey their point about different personalities working together in the same classroom. Deal and Peterson (2016) highlight the benefits of providing rituals for people to "let their hair down", citing that it can reduce stress, improve communication, aid bonding, soften boundaries, and spark creativity (p.109). It relaxed the professional atmosphere and set the tone for subsequent meetings.

Another way trust was built with the participants was by developing a sense of shared ownership of the research. As well as observers leading the nature and focus of their observations, the collaborative nature of our research was emphasised, identifying all participants as 'co-researchers'. This created parity in the group and helped to develop a sense of comfort and relatability among participants. Shortland (2004) notes that introducing the PO with a managerial, competence or quality-assurance undertone can lead to "suspicion, mistrust and resistance" (p.220). All presentations clearly articulated that the rationale for the research was genuine and collaborative:

> And I feel like [teacher collaboration has] … waned off a little bit. And there's other reasons, there's Covid reasons and there's whole other things going on. But … I think I would enjoy the job more if there was [sic] … people just having little chat about professional things … It makes you feel better about your job that you … can talk to someone that might have an idea that would help you out (B, 23:58, PLC 1, 17/11/2021).

As a result of the meetings and observations, the positive aspects of the research began to filter through the school. The following reflection was written the week of the first observations after an interaction with a staff member who was not directly involved with the research:

> … our collaboration is having an effect on other members of staff. This morning, I said hello to Teacher D, who said [they] would like to get involved the next time we are doing a cycle of observations. I literally fist-pumped on the way down the corridor! This is exactly the type of interaction I wanted us to have as a staff, and it is what I hoped would happen: when the participating staff members talked about the positives of being involved in peer observation, other staff members would want to get involved too … it's working! (Reflective Journal, 11/01/22)

Peer observation as a catalyst for teacher collaboration

From the outset, PO proved to be an effective way to increase teacher collaboration in the school. My experience of PO was largely congruent with the benefits in the reviewed literature.

Improved planning and organisation

The pre-and post-observation meetings afforded participants dedicated time and space to engage in professional and reflective conversations about their teaching and learning practices, which was consistent with the reviewed literature (Fullerton, 2003; O'Keeffe, et al., 2021; Shortland, 2004). Ostensibly, these meetings involved the sharing of lesson ideas for the observations. The meetings served the dual purpose of PLC meetings and pre-observation meetings for all our first observations. By planning and discussing our observation lesson ideas together, we were openly exchanging ideas on teaching and learning practices through 'craft dialogue' and "reflective dialogue". This came to particular prominence in our observation meetings between cycles, as we used feedback to inform methodologies and resources for the next cycle. For example, in the first cycle, an observer suggested in the post-observation meeting that puppets could help provide an extra dimension when teaching new vocabulary, which then informed the second cycle lesson, which went much better. These tangible outcomes solidified the effectiveness of the observations for our group.

Deep reflection on teaching practices

Reflecting on our teaching and learning practices was also a key feature of our PO experience. Peel (2005, p.492) cites critical reflection as "a necessary prerequisite" to engaging in the discussions and dialogue related to the PO, and the value of having colleagues regularly observe and give feedback on lessons became evident to us as we completed our first observations:

> Our first post-observation meeting … really brought home for me the core of the peer observation and its benefits. I was receiving positive feedback and encouragement which rarely happens in your every day as a teacher … I didn't realise how much I needed to hear, 'You're doing a good job' (A, Reflective Journal).

Sharing critical feedback on colleagues' observations was a challenging but valuable aspect of increasing teacher collaboration. Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond (2005) cite the difficulty of giving and receiving meaningful feedback. They highlight the importance of robust relationships where participants can move beyond superficial feedback. This proved to be a difficult area to judge. I feel that participants gave honest, open and specific feedback, tailored to improve the teaching practices of the observed. I consciously created a safe environment by establishing trusting relationships, crucial to sharing critical feedback in PO (Shortland, 2004). I succeeded in this task, as evidenced by Anne's reflections:

> … there was advice and constructive criticism, but it didn't feel like criticism as it was being communicated by people who I felt had my best interests at heart (A, Reflective Journal).

Shared responsibility and the mitigation of isolation

Once trust and collegiality had sufficiently developed, the strengthening of professional bonds became evident. A feeling of shared responsibility for the student learning outcomes was a result of these improved relations. This feeling of responsibility is cited as essential to successful PLCs (Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas, & Wallace, 2005; Webb, Vulliamy, Sarja, Hämäläinen, & Poikonen, 2009).

An example of our shared responsibility was linking the research to our school's School Self-Evaluation (SSE) objectives on oral language. This was an important step because the SSE objectives ran parallel to the objectives of this research: SSE is a "collaborative, reflective process of internal school review" designed to allow schools to take "ownership of their own development and improvement" (the Inspectorate, 2016, p.6). Incorporating our SSE objectives showed that action research and teacher collaboration could have benefits on a whole-school level, and the reflective journal notes included, 'I am excited about [choosing oral language] because it means that the project will have a tangible impact on the school's teaching and learning' (Reflective Journal, 08/12/2021).

The group engaged in CD on oral language that continued throughout our meetings in the build-up to the observations, reflecting on the effects of school closures on oral language, with one participant noting that it was "an area that definitely has weakened with the pandemic" (Teacher C, PLC 3, 07/01/2022).

We all agreed that oral language needed particular attention in the school, and we agreed to pursue it.

Having our pre-observation meetings together as part of the PLC meetings, as opposed to a series of one-on-one meetings between the observer and observed, also facilitated a shared sense of responsibility. While it was initially implemented as a logistical solution, it allowed for greater collaboration between participants, as it added an extra dynamic of an external voice, who acted as the "devil's advocate" 'critical friend' (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007, p.5). Working in triads also ensured parity and avoided complacency (Gosling, 2002).

Allocated time for CPD

In the second PLC meeting, Teacher D, a SET noted the hectic nature of the job can make it difficult to prioritise time to engage in CPD, saying "… we're all so busy in our own classrooms … the opportunity doesn't really come up" (D, PLC 2, 08/12/2021).

Hargreaves (1994) affirms that teachers feel they do not have time for collaboration, with any time to work together taken away to meet the demands of their classes. Previous studies (Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas, & Wallace, 2005; King, 2011; Lipscombe, Buckley-Walker, & McNamara, 2020) have highlighted the importance of prioritising CPD for staff by providing specific time and space. Allocated time for CPD is an issue that featured prominently throughout this research, specifically time dedicated to the observations and PLC meetings. Teacher C lamented the lack of resourcing for enabling CPD, by either providing supervision for observations or scheduled release time for teachers, saying "We have no member of staff that could come in here and facilitate this on an ongoing basis"(C, PLC 1, 17/11/2021).

The intention was to facilitate CPD by providing supervision of participants during school hours to attend meetings and observations. Teacher N volunteered to provide supervision to our classes. However, we are a small school staff (n=7) with only two SETs, one of whom was a participant in the research. Teacher A outlined her concerns around supervision in the first PLC meeting, suggesting that we might have to "leave the door open" between classes – due to the layout of the school - to conduct our observations (PLC 1, 17/11/2021).

There was inadequate supervision for CPD for observations and meetings over the course of the research. This was the combined result of Covid-related staff absences and a chronic lack of substitute teachers. Teacher N was working in the school on a part-time basis and would only be present to facilitate two observations. This made a tangible difference to those observations, as it allowed participants to fully engage in the CPD without needing to check in on their class every few minutes.

Shortland (2004) suggests that without the structure of allocated time for meetings and feedback, the process of PO becomes "meaningless" (p.221). While the potential benefits of PO are diminished by a lack of allocated time, it is not true to say that the entire process is rendered meaningless. Through collaborative problem solving, which is a tenet of successful PLCs (Hord & Sommers, 2007), we managed to complete the observations and meetings to the best of our ability, primarily by meeting after school and leaving the doors open between classes..

Limitations and recommendations

Action research

Timeframe - cycles

It was clear from the outset that the research was ambitious in terms of its timeline. It left very little room for error or the extenuating circumstances with which we were presented. However, it was important to undertake at least two cycles of action research, as it was hoped that all participants would fully experience reflecting on cycles and collaborating to improve for the next cycle. Action research is at its essence a reflective undertaking, and it was felt that research would be incomplete without this element.

Although we did manage to engage in two cycles of action research, it felt as though we were still largely at the beginning of our reflective journey. The timeframe between conducting research and the write-up of the thesis was limited. The cyclical nature of action research felt somewhat truncated and this gave rise in the second cycle to the "implementation dip" (Fullan, 2001). We knew that the research was ending, and it felt like there was less momentum, particularly as the substitute teacher shortage worsened and supervision became even more challenging.

If time permits, it is recommended that more than two cycles of action research be undertaken to increase the potential of PO embedding into the culture of the school. It would also provide more opportunities for collaboration, reflection and leadership.

Integrating action research/PLC meetings with POT meetings

Logistical challenges were pervasive throughout this research. One challenge in particular was figuring out how to be most productive with our meeting schedule. To condense our meetings, it was decided for the first cycle that we would integrate our pre- and post-observation meetings into the PLC meetings. For the pre-observation meetings, this worked very well, with participants acting as critical friends, thereby adding an extra dynamic to the process. However, for the post-observation meetings, we tried to recreate this scenario by leaving all post-observation discussions until the next PLC meeting, which was the week after the first round of observations. This did not go as well because several days had passed, and the observations were not fresh in our minds. We reflected on the process and decided for the second cycle to have the post-observation meetings sooner and separate from the PLC meeting. Also, for logistical reasons, these second-cycle post-observation meetings would only take place between the observer and the observed, which allowed us to have those meetings on the same day as the observation. While this was better logistically, something was lost in the process; the triad dynamic worked very well for the pre-observation meetings and collaborative dialogue flowed freely.

A recommendation of this research is to conduct pre- and post-observation meetings in triads and prioritise a post-observation meeting as soon as possible after the round of observations is fully complete. This requires collaboration with and support from senior leadership to create allocated time and space for the observation, the post-observation meeting, and the supervision of participants' classes. This further highlights the value of administrative and systematic support from leadership to enable teachers to collaborate.

Peer observation

Inadequate supervision

Teacher absences and the substitute teacher shortage due to the COVID-19 pandemic greatly affected our research. Regardless of the extenuating circumstances, the provision for facilitating CPD became a feature of our discussion in the PLC meetings. A recommendation from this research is to investigate options to facilitate CPD for teachers, particularly in smaller schools where there is inadequate substitute cover for teachers. Furthermore, options should be explored for facilitating CPD without the use of SETs,

who are ethically obligated to support pupils with additional needs. One option could involve inspectors from the Inspectorate or advisors from the professional development service for teachers (PDST) facilitating the PO by supervising observers' classes while the PO is happening in a different classroom. The inspector or advisor could also act as a critical friend in pre- and post-observation meetings. This would not only solve a logistical problem but also foster professional bonds between staff and educational organisations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the research has been a worthwhile and engaging personal and professional experience. It has catalysed positive changes in the levels of teacher collaboration in our school, and introduced staff to action research, PO and working in PLCs. The research has highlighted the importance of leaders providing allocated time for teacher CPD, the centrality of a PLC to school change and collaboration, and the importance of sustaining change. It has a tangible impact on collaboration in our school, with the establishment of monthly staff meetings and the return of whole-school collaborative projects. What is crucial now is sustaining the changes that the research has enabled with 'all' staff, particularly through shared ownership and leadership. As Fullan (2001, p.2) states: "Deep and sustained reform depends on many of us, not just on the very few who are destined to be extraordinary".

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