Irish Teachers' Journal

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into
Irish National Teachers' Organisation
Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann

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Irish National Teachers' Organisation
Vere Foster House
35 Parnell Square
Dublin 1

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

General Secretary: John Boyle

Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann
Áras Vere Foster
35 Cearnóg Parnell
Baile Átha Cliath 1

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

Rúnaí Ginerálta: Seán Ó Baoill

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Editorial

Once again, it gives me great pleasure to welcome you to this year's edition of the *Irish Teachers' Journal*, our 12th edition. I hope that you will enjoy this edition, which provides us with a picture of the breadth of research being carried out by teachers and others in the field of education in Ireland.

We continue to live in a time when the world and education are experiencing ongoing change and uncertainty. On a political level, the world continues to experience turbulence. The war in Ukraine has entered its third year and, while arrivals have slowed, we continue to welcome new pupils from Ukraine and other war-torn countries to our schools and communities, while still supporting those who have made their homes here. The war in the Middle East has escalated to Lebanon, and the death toll in Gaza is rising daily. It is in this context that the INTO will host a conference on the Rights of Palestinian Children at Liberty Hall, Dublin, in January 2025.

As threats to democracy mount across the globe, at home we prepare for a general election which will select a government to guide our country towards 2030.

In the field of education, this year has seen a comprehensive consultation on the five new specifications for a redeveloped *Primary Curriculum*, the report of which will be published in the near future. This redeveloped curriculum, our first for 25 years, will bring significant changes at primary level, and will require government support for schools and teachers to ensure its effective implementation. The recommendations in the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's (NCCA) publication *Supporting systemwide primary curriculum change* must be implemented. In that regard, the government's recent announcement of €9m as a first step to resource curriculum implementation was very welcome. Schools must be given time and space and adequate resources to introduce the redeveloped curriculum. Curriculum change must also be prioritised by the system, and the current initiative overload being experienced by schools must be slowed and effectively managed so that schools are not further overwhelmed.

Current consultations on the school self-evaluation process and the review of Croke Park hours must align to ensure that school development planning processes and procedures are streamlined for ease of use and implementation in schools.

The area of special and inclusive education continues to be to the fore. We have seen the employment of even more teachers and the opening of more special classes and new special schools across the country. The Department of Education's recent *Forward Planning Circular 80/2024*, indicates that this trend will continue.

The INTO's Special Education Symposium held in February 2024 focussed on the challenges created by the lack of wrap around and therapeutic services for children and young people with special educational needs (SEN). The call from INTO General Secretary, John Boyle, to have therapists directly employed by the Department of Education has been answered with the introduction of the enhanced *In-School Therapy Pilot Scheme* to supplement the work of community network disability teams. We have also seen the welcome extension of the *Counselling in Primary Schools Pilot* to 61 urban DEIS primary schools in Tallaght, Clondalkin, Finglas, Ballymun and Darndale.

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The lack of co-ordination and availability of therapies and other support services for children also featured in the OECD's *Review of Resourcing Schools to Address Educational Disadvantage in Ireland*, published in July. While the report was overwhelmingly positive with regard to the work of schools, it highlighted the need for ongoing teacher professional learning (TPL) to be provided for teachers and school staff, along with better inter-departmental co-ordination and collaboration to ensure the provision of vital services for children at risk of educational disadvantage.

INTO research this year highlighted the ongoing teacher supply crisis in Irish schools, particularly in urban areas. An INTO survey undertaken in 2024 indicated that there were in excess of 950 vacancies in primary schools in the first term of the year, an increase from 800 at the same time in the previous year. The major challenges of filling both long- and short-term vacancies is putting our system under severe and unsustainable pressure.

Despite all of these challenges, tens of thousands of teachers across the country continue to support their pupils, their families, and other members of their school communities. They ensure that schools are central to their communities, that pupil wellbeing is to the forefront of what they do, and that educational outcomes and achievements – which are among the highest in Europe – are maintained.

The *Irish Teachers' Journal* continues to reflect the research interests of Irish teachers. This year we have articles on a variety of topics including: English as an additional language (EAL); issues and implications for the redeveloped curriculum; inclusion; career change teachers; and some learnings, both positive and thought provoking, from the COVID-19 pandemic.

We are delighted to welcome Dr Gerard McHugh, former Director of Dublin West Education Centre, as our guest contributor. Education centres have made an important contribution to the Irish educational landscape for many decades, and 2023 heralded the start of the education centre network's 50th anniversary celebrations. At an event in Croke Park in November 2023, attended by Minister for Education, Norma Foley, the establishment of the first 11 centres was marked by the education community, and the publication of *Tús Maith: 1973-2023 50 Years of Education Centres in Ireland* was launched.

Gerard's speech from that occasion forms the content of our guest contribution. He refers to the development of education centres from their early years as study groups, their evolution to teachers' centres, and their current incarnation as education (support) centres. He also acknowledges the role played by volunteers in the development of the centres, the role of centres locally, nationally, and internationally, and the innovation and creativity displayed throughout the network over many years.

We are also privileged to publish a short essay by the late Professor John Coolahan, *Safeguarding The Quality Of Leadership Of Education Centres*. John wrote this short essay in 2015, when recommendations from the Centre for Management and Organisation Development (CMOD) threatened the funding for education centres, and when the Department of Education began to consider changing the terms and conditions of secondment for education centre directors. John cautioned against reducing the term of secondment and argued that a term of at least 10 years was necessary. His advice has been taken, albeit after some time.

We would like to extend our sincere thanks to Gerard McHugh who made this previously unpublished piece available to us, and to Mary T. Coolahan, John's widow, who gave us permission to print it, pointing out in her letter that John was a great supporter of both the INTO and education centres. Ár míle buíochas di agus ar dheis Dé go raibh anam dílis John.

Aoife Merrins, Gillian Lake and Pádraig Ó Duibhir note the proliferation of children in Ireland for whom Irish or English is not their home language in their article *Towards shaping a new policy for EAL support in Irish primary schools.* The authors caution on the lack of knowledge within the Irish education system on how to best support learners in increasingly diverse contexts. They also examine the potential of the *Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal* programme as both a resource and an opportunity for teacher professional development. The programme places strong emphasis on oral language development which has proven to be a key factor in supporting EAL learners with school success. The study found that there were benefits for both pupils and teachers in using the programme, despite the limitations of the study and other factors such as timetabling and staff shortages in participating schools. Their conclusions focus on the need for the provision of concrete resources and opportunities for TPL for teachers when responding to the growing linguistic diversity of their classrooms. The article is an interesting read for all teachers, not just those working in EAL settings.

In their timely article, *Integration, pedagogy and assessment in the redeveloped Primary School Curriculum: Innovations, issue and implications*, Patrick Burke and Paula Lehane look at the latest research on these issues and explore their application in the classroom. They also look at previous curriculum reforms in Ireland and examine the emphasis on both pupil and teacher agency in the documentation on the redeveloped curriculum.

They point out that integration is an often contested and poorly understood concept and caution that it may not always lead to reduced workload for teachers. They discuss the nuanced nature of pedagogy and stress the importance of using several strategies, including direct teaching, which still has its place in the classroom. Their emphasis on assessment focusses on using a number of approaches, none of which should be considered as superior to another.

In their discussion on previous curricular reform, it is noted that no formal review has been conducted of the most recent curriculum change at primary level, the *Primary Language Curriculum*, despite reported difficulties with its early enactment and the potential learnings from the move to a learning outcome structure.

While focussing on *Inclusive practices in primary education*, Sharon Grady explores inclusion and inclusive practices though the lens of special educational needs (SEN). Exploring the concept of what constitutes inclusive education, she discusses understanding, beliefs, and attitudes, and posits that inclusion goes far beyond the mere presence of pupils with SEN in mainstream schools. She examines barriers to inclusion such as lack of time and resources, along with bias, both conscious and unconscious. The vital role played by special education teachers and special needs assistants is discussed, and the importance of inclusive policies and practices at a systemic level is emphasised, with particular emphasis placed on research and policy development carried out by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE). International models are examined, with a particular focus on

Finland and Japan. Some examples of practical programmes and an emphasis on strengths-based approaches, growth mindset, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and teacher professional learning conclude her article.

Should I stay or should I go? An exploration of the experiences of career change teachers in Ireland makes for fascinating reading, particularly in a time of teacher shortage both in Ireland and worldwide. In her article, Annette Geoghegan examines what motivates career changers to choose teaching, noting that many cite positive learning experiences or an inspirational teacher from their past. She also discusses the concept of 'homecomers' to the profession – those for whom teaching was always an attractive prospect – and the 'converted' – those who come to teaching after a significant life event, possibly seeking better work/life balance. She notes the wealth of knowledge that career change teachers (CCTs) bring to the profession and recognises the significant financial and human investment required of CCTs to become teachers.

In her discussion on the subsequent attrition of CCTs from the profession, among the reasons mentioned were being unsuited to the role of teacher, financial considerations, and the inability to secure a permanent position (at post-primary level).

In her conclusion she makes several recommendations, including flexibility of timetabling at initial teacher education (ITE), the development of mentoring and peer support structures, and the provision of financial support to compensate for the lack of salary while studying. If these and other measures were to be put in place, a cohort of career change professionals with a wealth of experience could be motivated to choose teaching as a career, enhancing the diversity of the profession and helping to address teacher supply shortages.

Our final two articles focus on learnings from the COVID-19 pandemic. In the first of these, Margaret Nohilly, Bernie Collins and Veronica O'Toole focus on *Silver linings for educators and education following the COVID-19 pandemic,* and explore which learnings schools intended to carry forward in their practice post-pandemic. Many participants spoke about the isolation brought about by school closures and the positive impact of reopening, the rekindling of the sense of belonging in school communities, and the significance of the pupil-teacher relationship.

It is interesting to note that the restrictions on visitors and external coaches to schools was actually viewed by some as positive. The competing demands placed on schools by many sporting and cultural organisations can erode curriculum teaching and learning time, and schools felt the absence of such interruptions meant they had more time to engage with the curriculum. Many schools reviewed established procedures and felt that positive changes were accelerated by measures put in place during the pandemic, including changes to parent-teacher communication and parent-teacher meetings. Schools also used the opportunity to reassess their practice and policies around homework, as many schools suspended written homework in the first few weeks of re-opening.

One positive emerging from the pandemic was the retention of one administrative day per week for teaching principals, which has helped considerably in managing the workload associated with the administrative element of their work.

The researchers conclude by recommending that schools need to "press pause and take stock" so that the silver linings will not be lost.

Our final article by Patrick MacAogain, *Barriers to teaching and learning in a time of pandemic*, looks at the transition from classroom to online learning and the particular challenges experienced by teachers. MacAogain identifies three major emerging themes:

- Teacher perfectionism
- Lack of support
- Time constraints

Many teachers felt unsure or uncertain of the success of their online lessons and worried about not being "good enough". They also felt under extra scrutiny from parents who had access to their online lessons. Several teachers felt a lack of support both from their schools and support services, and saw the lack, or unsuitability, of professional development programmes as a barrier to effective practice. Teachers also cited the issue of time pressures given there was increased workload in the development of lesson plans and resources for online learning.

He recommends that Irish teachers should be provided with robust and comprehensive resources, or links to online resources, to save time and effort.

The articles in this edition of the *Irish Teachers' Journal* reflect a number of the current issues in Irish education. These are the issues which motivate teachers to study, and to research the areas which interest and excite – or perhaps even frustrate – them.

We are grateful for and appreciative of their contributions. We would like to encourage all of our readers, teachers and educators at all levels of the system, to consider contributing to the *Irish Teachers' Journal*. As it is distributed to every school, it is a unique opportunity to have your research read by all teachers, not just those accessing academic writing as part of a course of study.

The publication of the *Irish Teachers' Journal* is truly a team effort. I would like to thank all those involved, especially staff in both the Communications Section and the Education Section of the INTO. I would also like to acknowledge the input of our Editorial Board.

A special word of thanks to our reviewers. They have read, reflected, reviewed, considered, edited, and provided constructive feedback on all of our articles. Their work ensures quality and consistency in the *Journal*. It is greatly appreciated by both the Editorial Board and our contributors.

This year saw the retirement of our long-term proofreader, Mr. Jim Bennett. Jim's dedication to the *Journal* has been incredible, and there are no words to express our gratitude. Míle buíochas ó chroí Jim.

This year we must also give a special word of thanks to Dr Deirbhile NicCraith, who came to our aid as proofreader, arís, ár míle buíochas.

And finally, for her incredible dedication to the publication of the *Journal*, we acknowledge the motivational force that is INTO Official and colleague, Claire Garvey.

Máirín Ní Chéileachair, Eagarthóir

Author notes

Dr Gerard McHugh

Dr Gerard McHugh is a native of Ballintubber, Co Mayo. He qualified as a teacher from St Patrick's College of Education, Drumcondra, and taught in various primary schools in Dublin – in Inchicore, Bayside, Rush and Ladyswell – before becoming principal of San Carlo Senior School, Leixlip, Co Kildare in 1985. Between 2001 and 2018 he was Director of Dublin West Education Centre and was involved in the management of national support services reaching every primary and post-primary school in Ireland.

Gerard holds a Bachelor of Arts and a Higher Diploma in Education from University College Dublin. He was awarded a first class Honours Masters in Education by University College Galway, a Diploma in Management by the National College of Ireland, and a Doctorate in Educational Leadership by Dublin City University.

He has lectured widely to professional organisations in Ireland and Europe on issues such as the role of the school principal, leadership, educational management, continuing professional development, and European cooperation in education. He was the chairperson of the Digital Schools of Distinction (DSoD) programme in Ireland and the Digital Schools of Europe (DSoE) project involving eight European countries.

Dr Aoife Merrins, Dr Gillian Lake and Prof Pádraig Ó Duibhir

Dr Aoife Merrins is a primary school teacher with a decade of mainstream and support teaching experience. Her doctoral research was funded by the DCU-INTO150 PhD scholarship and supervised by collaborating authors, exploring the design, development, and delivery of *Tell-a-Tale* | *Inis Scéal* for linguistically diverse infant classrooms. In recent years, Aoife has facilitated in-service teacher professional development by delivering EAL webinars through education centres, and by leading DE approved EAL summer courses.

Dr Gillian Lake is Chief Education Officer at Child Paths. Before this, she was an associate professor in the School of Language, Literacy and Early Childhood Education at DCU Institute of Education. She was a primary teacher in Ireland before undertaking an MSc in child development and education and then a PhD in education at University of Oxford under the Elfrida Talbot Scholarship, focusing on language development and ECE.

Prof Pádraig Ó Duibhir is Professor Emeritus of Education at Dublin City University. He gained extensive experience as a primary school teacher and principal in the Irish language immersion sector before his work in teacher education. His major research interests lie in second language acquisition and pedagogy applied to minority languages.

Dr Patrick Burke and Dr Paula Lehane

Dr Patrick Burke is an Assistant Professor in the School of Language, Literacy and Early Childhood Education at the Institute of Education, Dublin City University. He formerly worked as a primary school teacher, advisor with the PDST, and lecturer at Mary Immaculate College. His research interests include literacy development and curriculum integration. He is the chairperson of the NCCA Primary Language Development Group and the incoming president of the Literacy Association of Ireland.

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Dr Paula Lehane is an Assistant Professor in the School of Inclusive and Special Education at the Institute of Education, Dublin City University. She previously worked as a primary school teacher and was the special educational needs coordinator of a large urban primary school. Her current research interests include inclusion, literacy and educational assessment. She is the current chair of the M.Ed in Specific Learning Difficulties (Dyslexia) at DCU.

Sharon Grady

As a support teacher in a primary school setting, Sharon Grady brings a strong passion for special education and inclusion. Currently overseeing three autism classes, she actively advocates for diverse learners. Holding a Master's in Education and a Post Graduate Diploma in Inclusive and Special Education, she will shortly commence a PhD in UCC (Education Cohort). Her expertise lies in creating inclusive environments and championing the needs of every student, ensuring equitable opportunities for all.

Dr Annette Geoghegan

Dr Annette Geoghegan is a primary school teacher with 22 years' teaching experience, and is deputy principal in St Anne's Loreto PS, Navan. She is currently on job-share in St Abban's NS, Killeen, Co Laois. She holds a B.Ed from St Patrick's College, a M.Ed, and a post-graduate diploma in educational leadership from Maynooth University. She graduated in November 2022 from Maynooth University with a Doctorate in Education, specialising in teacher education. Annette also works with Hibernia College on the Professional Master of Education (PME) programme as a PE and SPHE tutor on the health and wellbeing module.

Dr Margaret Nohilly, Dr Bernie Collins and Dr Veronica O'Toole

Dr Margaret Nohilly is Assistant Professor in SPHE and wellbeing at Mary Immaculate College (MIC). She teaches SPHE and wellbeing at both undergraduate and postgraduate level, and co-ordinates the Professional Master of Education (PME) programme. Her other research interests include child protection and the development of SPHE and wellbeing.
Dr Bernie Collins in a retired lecturer of SPHE at Dublin City University. She completed her PhD in the area of circle time and has published research and practical resources in the area. Her research interests include SPHE and wellbeing and gender equality.
Dr Veronica O'Toole is a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Education at the University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand. Her research focuses on emotions, emotion regulation, and social emotional wellbeing of teachers including post-disaster. She teaches on emotion and wellbeing courses at undergraduate and postgraduate level, including supervision of masters and PhD theses. In 2019, Veronica was a visiting scholar to the University of Limerick.

Patrick MacAogain

Patrick MacAogain is a primary school teacher from Tipperary. He has a special interest in pedagogy, teacher training, and curriculum. Patrick is currently on a career break while he finishes his doctorate examining wellbeing in teachers.

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The education centre network remembering 50 years: Evoking the bright fields that lie beyond the view of the regular eye

Gerard McHugh

Background note

The following text is a lightly edited and slightly abridged version of an address by Dr Gerard McHugh to the Education Support Centres Ireland (ESCI) 50th anniversary celebration event at Croke Park on 7 November 2023.

Go raibh maith agat Ultan as ucht an chuiridh agus as ucht na fáilte. A Aire, a phríomhchigire, a aíonna uaisle agus a cháirde go léir.

It is indeed, a great honour, a profound privilege, and my great pleasure to have the opportunity of addressing you on this auspicious occasion as we look out on the historic, the hallowed and the holy ground of Croke Park. I can see that you are an august, diverse, intelligent, multifaceted audience, abounding in E factors; erudite, experienced, energetic, excited, enlightened, and that is just the beginning.

We are ag ceiliúradh caoga bliain. I have a personal understanding of that half-century, as last month 50 years ago, I believe my wife Bernadette and I met at a third level institution just a kilometre from here. Based on custom and practice established over half a century we followed each other here again this evening.

Because of the nature of the emergence of education centres, there is no single date that marks a beginning. There are multiple dates as evidenced in the publication, *Tús Maith, 1973-2023, 50 Years of Education Centres in Ireland*. However, 1973 is a good year to mark that commencement. It was the year Ireland, joined the European Economic Community (EEC), now the European Union (EU).

During the half-century there were many occasions when secretaries-general, the International Section of the Department, and others, sent delegations to Dublin West Education Centre, so that we would speak to them about the Irish system of education and about education centres. Many of these educators came from Europe and Asia. Invariably many of them would say when they were leaving, "we haven't these education centres in our own countries, we wish we could have education centres." In this context I am reminded of a civil servant who worked with education centres, who said repeatedly that if we didn't have education centres in Ireland we would have to invent them. Well, we didn't

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need to invent them then and that is because of the vision of the volunteers 50 years ago who initiated the network. Neither do we need to invent them now, because of those who sustained the network for the first half-century through times of expansion, excitement and enlightenment. And through not so great times, when some reports and some individuals wanted to diminish our capacity and curtail our centres. Those visionaries, in the words of poet and philosopher John O'Donoghue, were "servants of the frontier, not functionaries… evoking bright fields that lay beyond the view of the regular eye". One very important word has underpinned the work of centres, and that is values; values giving rise to integrity, to truth, to trust and to high standards.

I was asked recently to address a group of 27 Danish teachers who were coming to Dublin West about the organic emergence of our education support centres. The picture that is conjured in my head when I think of the organic emergence of education centres, is of primary teachers gathering in study groups with copies of the two tan coloured curriculum books, *Curaclam na Bunscoile 1* agus *Curaclam na Bunscoile 2*, launched in 1971, under their arms. The second picture is of the embryonic subject associations, founded by groups of post-primary teachers. Those teachers who founded the study groups to consider the new curriculum books were engaging in a significant professional discourse, as there was little in-service training accompanying this very new and innovative curriculum.

While it was the case that teachers themselves, manifesting their professionalism, gathered in groups and organised professional learning, soon the teachers' unions and the Department of Education supported the study groups and the subject associations, as they emerged throughout the country in the early years of the 1970s. The Department provided some funding as teacher in-service education became the responsibility of the Primary Administration Branch. The notion of teacher in-service education to support curriculum and pedagogic innovation was gaining credence, influenced by reports such as the James Report (1972) in the United Kingdom, entitled *Teacher Education and Training*.

We can say historically, that initially there were study groups, then there were part-time teacher centres. Over a period from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s, nine centres became full-time teachers' centres. In 1997, our major expansion occurred when we expanded from nine full-time to 20 full-time centres. A twenty-first centre was to follow later. It was a great and visionary Minister for Education, the late Niamh Bhreathnach, who made the announcement of the expansion of centres. Her successor as Minister, the current Tánaiste, Micheál Martin, was in power when the expansion took place, and addressed the enlarged group of directors in Drumcondra Education Centre at a directors' meeting in 1997. Nine part-time centres continued with continuing professional development (CPD) provision, supporting teachers and schools alongside full-time centres, ensuring that all parts of the country had access to education centre provision.

The *Education Act (1998)* followed, a year later; Section 37 dealt with what would be known henceforth as 'education support centres', officially, but in general parlance for many years as 'education centres'. Congratulations are due to the visionaries who advocated, agitated, and promoted the notion strongly that the network should be recognised in this very significant piece of legislation. It is very important that the education centre network has such recognition.

A building programme marked the expansionary phase. There were many new buildings, and there were older buildings that were converted such as the School of Music in Cork, a parochial house in Kildare, a secondary school in Carrick-on-Shannon.

When I addressed the Danish teachers about the emergence of education support centres, I said there were four headings under which we could discuss centres: local provision, national provision, centres as businesses, and centres as radicals at the periphery. In addition to those four loose headings, I should also say that education centres afforded access to teachers throughout the whole country to university and postgraduate degrees in an innovative and significant collaboration with third-level institutions on the island of Ireland, and beyond.

Local provision of CPD opportunities for teachers was the raison d'être of our centres. We've had spring, summer and autumn courses and programmes in almost 30 centres for half a century – that is a lot of learning! The 'summer course' has been in our system since 1909, long before the existence of education centres. However, centres used the summer course model to provide CPD opportunities to thousands of teachers every year during their summer holidays. Imagine the numbers: about 20 teachers on each of many courses in 30 full-time and part-time centres over a period of half a century.

I don't wish to alarm department officials who may be here by mentioning radicals at the periphery, because I can say that the Department was a big beneficiary of the radicals, even if some civil servants didn't notice it or appreciate it. Indeed half a century ago when I was in college, Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner had written a book called *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*. Education is not neutral. It needs radicals, despite the efforts of neoliberalism to dismantle the notion.

I suggest that education centres operated a dual role superbly. Firstly, they committed themselves to be central, to be mainstream, and to be pivotal. They enabled, they facilitated, and they ensured the delivery of national reforms in conjunction with the department. Secondly, operating as radicals at the periphery, they instigated, they explored, they hypothesised, they drafted, they probed, they niggled, they failed, they succeeded, and they harvested creativity and positive change from the chaos and the cacophony of ordinary life.

There are multiple examples of how the radicals at the periphery contributed significantly to the Irish education landscape since the early days of centres. In the words of poet Christopher Logue, echoed by President McAleese at her inauguration in 1997, some directors encouraged the notion, "come to the edge and fly". When the late Pat Diggins started work on school planning in the 1980s it wasn't mainstream, it was at the periphery. By the 1990s it was coming into mainstream and a decade later it was firmly established within official policy. When a group of teachers, early innovators, in Navan teachers' centre, developed the *Reading Assessment in Navan (RAIN*) test in the early 1970s, they weren't mainstream, they were at the periphery. But the *RAIN* test became a mainstream assessment tool in primary schools for two decades. In Blackrock Education Centre over a period of a quarter of a century, there were multiple innovations and initiatives including significant initiatives in early technology in education. Their initiatives were very much outside of the mainstream. Blackrock's radical technology in education initiatives, initially seen as irrelevant in official circles, could later be found at the centre of official policy.

The late Pat Diggins was instrumental also in presenting Irish principals and teachers

with opportunities to meet and learn from some of the leading international educators of the day. Many of us had our first encounters with Dean Fink, Robert J. (Jerry) Starratt, Andy Hargreaves and many others in Drumcondra, arising from Pat's vision, tenacity and his credibility with international presenters. While nowadays many organisations welcome international speakers, it was a rarity 40 years ago.

Let's think back to 1973 for a moment. We were a much more autocratic and patriarchal country than one might imagine. I had occasion recently to look at the website of St Olaf's National School in Dundrum in South Dublin, where a female principal in the early 1970s had to stand aside when the number of girls and boys in her mixed school reached 80. The rules of the Department of Education (DE) said that a female could not be a principal of a mixed gender school of 80 pupils or more, so when enrolment reached that number, the female principal had to stand aside and be replaced by a male teacher. Thank goodness for the EEC/EU. The DE rules changed in 1975, two years after we joined the EEC. Today we have a female minister who is here with us this evening, a female secretary general, and a female chief inspector, among the myriad of other women in leadership roles in education.

In 1973, we had no boards of management, no parents' associations or parents' council, no Education Act or Teaching Council. Governance was simple, child-centred education was entering the primary system. Student-centred education in post-primary schools was well in the future, and student voices amounted to some shouting on playing fields. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Ireland was white, Irish, and Roman Catholic. It has been a busy half-century!

Our education centre network expanded alongside boards of management from 1975, Educate Together schools from 1978, the National Parents' Council from 1985, some post-primary reform, followed by Stay Safe and relationships and sexuality education. The network was a key partner as the 1999 *Primary School Curriculum* emerged, and worked closely alongside 35 (at one point) primary and post-primary support services and a comprehensive induction programme for teachers. Local courses reflected these national developments also, as well as pursuing strictly local interests.

What those groups of teachers in the early 1970s were doing with regard to the (then) new primary curriculum and the subject associations at post-primary level, we still do today but we use fancier nomenclature: communities of practice. So where are we now, what is happening in education support centres in November 2023? A quick glance reveals a strand that deals with autism, dyslexia, dyscalculia, special needs, diversity and NEPS training. There is the strand encompassing well-being, children's resilience, mood matters and challenging behaviour. There is a strand that includes climate justice, eco-ed for all, plant a planet, awareness of COP 28. There is so much more such as Chat GPT, cúpla focal, reading and oral language development, leading an attachment aware school, emotional resilience, Droichead, health and safety for the caretaker, peer observation and teaching strategies, student-led poetry. There's leadership for principals, for in-school management teams and for those aspiring to leadership.

Leadership has been ever present over 50 years of the existence of education centres. We have left behind, I hope, the autocractic model of leadership as we moved towards other leadership models, such as transactional leadership to transformational leadership to transpersonal leadership. That is a type of leadership that regards obstacles as

opportunities, that embraces paradox, it is collegial, inspiring and inclusive. I hope we can point to transpersonal leaders in education centres, in schools, in government, and in public affairs; leaders who operate beyond the ego while continuing personal development, and learning, leaders who are radical, ethical, and authentic, while emotionally intelligent and caring. I think in society we have many such leaders, but we have some distance to travel before we can be satisfied with the standard of leadership. I believe that the education support centre network has, in the words of Andy Hargreaves, "helped school leaders to enable their schools to be agile, safe and effective places of learning that help young people develop the knowledge and character that will empower them to shape their futures". Many of those I have seen and continue to see operating in education support centres at levels of management, of director, and of staff are people who seek no exemption from the common obligation to give of themselves.

Every primary and post-primary teacher should have been through the doors of education centres on multiple occasions, as national support services brought reform with regard to curriculum, to special needs provision, and to leadership. This interaction has been dynamic, exciting and exhausting. Secondly, education centres are managers with the Department of most of the 35 support services that I mentioned earlier. In my own case I worked closely with 11 national directors, several of these were truly outstanding and a number of them are here today. I conducted more than 3,000 interviews as some excellent teachers sought to become teacher educators.

However, we are a network; some centres lead on certain national and innovative projects, and others follow. The order is reversed with regard to other initiatives. Each education centre takes responsibility for areas in which it has expertise. This is the essence of a network. The relationship between education support centres and national support services is underlined by values; integrity, truth, trust and very high standards. It is imperative that this continues into the future. We must take nothing for granted, collegiality sans ego.

Many ministers and Department officials understood the creativity of education centres, in fact some of them encouraged that creativity. I believe that when a minister, or secretary general, or a senior Department of Education official sees education centres performing very successfully at a very high level in national and international fields, they can be proud of such achievements in the name of Ireland, and encourage such entrepreneurial spirit. I will cite three such initiatives: an initiative such as Blackrock Education Centre, under the leadership of Dr Séamus Ó Canainn, exporting technological expertise to China and elsewhere with an entrepreneurial spirit earning funds for Ireland Inc.; Galway Education Centre, exuding entrepreneurial spirit, partnering successfully with major companies discharging their corporate social responsibilities, educating women and girls in the Middle East; Dublin West Education Centre innovating in school leadership with six Nordic countries, the countries the rest of the world aspire to emulate, and in many instances leading these Nordic educators. I recall here what Nordic school leaders told me after Dublin West welcomed them to Ireland for a leadership conference, incorporating visits to schools and the education centre in 2017. They said that in the 15 years they had been visiting their Nordic neighbours they had not encountered anything better than what they saw in the primary and post-primary schools introduced to them by Dublin West, and

indeed the quality they found in the work of Dublin West itself. Indeed, there is a lot in which we can be proud in Irish education and our education support centre network has contributed significantly to this.

Many ministers and Department officials understood the creativity and entrepreneurial spirit of education centres. Former Minister Noel Dempsey was minded to ignore negative recommendations with regard to some centres emanating from the Centre for Management and Organisation Development (CMOD). Furthermore, he worked closely with his local education centre. Former Minister Mary Hanafin understood the creativity of education centres. Former Minister Ruairí Quinn wasn't personally associated with any particular education centre; nevertheless, 10 years ago this month he invited directors of education centres to the department buildings to discuss their work and he made genuine commitments to support centres in key matters. Former Minister of State Ciarán Cannon designed initiatives with education centres and education centre directors that led to improvements in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) education. Former Education Minister, Jan O'Sullivan, understood education centres, following Ruairí Quinn she also invited directors to a meeting in Marlborough Street. Taoiseach Enda Kenny understood education centres when he invited all full-time directors to the Taoiseach's office in 2015. To this pantheon of ministers and Taoiseach, who understood education centres, I add Minister Foley. Minister Foley attended a meeting of directors in Dublin West Education Support Centre. Furthermore, Minister, *Statutory Instrument SI 125/2023*, signed by you is most welcome, the education centre network is most appreciative of the vision and commonsense you displayed in the matter of directors' tenure. In that context, I might mention another Kerry person, in my view the most eminent Irish educator of the 20th and early 21st centuries, Professor John Coolahan, an educator who advised 12 governments in four continents, and referred to the work of education centres and our support services in positive terms very frequently. A few weeks before his untimely death, John sent me an email. Among his sentiments was a remark that would have supported the approach in *SI 125/2023*.

There has been very positive and frequent collaboration between Department of Education officials and education centres during the last half-century. For much of the period, Department of Education officials attended directors' meetings. In the golden era, the model involved a principal officer attending two to three times per year. Once a year or more, the principal officer would be accompanied by an assistant principal officer, a higher executive officer, and two inspectors. Imagine all the understandings and the agreements that can be put in place with regard to education centre work in a meeting lasting three to four hours in Athlone Education Centre for instance, or in the department's own buildings, or indeed at any location. The national agenda can be addressed, there can be reference to local education centre activity. Pursuing creativity and vision can be forged together. It would be wonderful to return to this most successful model, let's hope it will be reintroduced.

One might feel that from my perspective of a former education centre director, I may see the world through rose tinted glasses, that all EC days were halcyon. I hasten to add that earlier this year I had the privilege of sitting on three selection boards appointing directors of education centres and my message is that there are extraordinarily talented

individuals sitting in Directors' chairs. I can certainly say that is the case in three centres, and of course as I am on the management committee of Dublin West Education Support Centre I can therefore attest to another top class current director.

Returning to the radicals at the periphery theme I want to refer to two O'Malleys. Is there anyone in the room, anyone in Ireland, who believes that after Donogh O'Malley delivered his historic speech on 10 September 1966, announcing what is known as free secondary education, heralding the famous yellow buses, that he should have consulted the Department of Finance and allow himself be talked out of the radical initiative?

The second O'Malley, Grace O'Malley, Gráinne Uaile, came from my own county of Mayo. When addressing principals and principals' conferences, I challenge them with 'fortuna favet fortibus' - fortune favours the brave. It could be a motif for education support centres. In a few words, Grace O'Malley was dissident, subversive, mould-making, radical, sometimes heretical. She was fearless, audacious, politically pragmatic and taciturn. She was a shrewd and able negotiator, she had style and panache. She was a mother goddess, and a warrior queen. A pity Mayo couldn't have had her in Croke Park!

Education support centres need to operate as businesses, as I indicated earlier. They receive funds from the Department of Education. In some centres, these funds cover part of the payroll costs only. That means that centres must generate funds for the remainder of payroll and for everything else. That is a major challenge but centres meet this challenge and they deserve enormous credit for the ingenuity, creativity and enterprise they employ in generating funds in order to keep their centres alive and productive. We commend centres on their resourcefulness in operating successful business models, as well as delivering a superb and diverse service to individual teachers, schools and the system. When managing public and generated funds it is essential to have high levels of accountability and common sense. Common sense without accountability brings about a headless chicken scenario and worse and accountability without common sense connotes inertia and nonsense. We are grateful to all the treasurers, to the other members of management committees and to staffs for exercising what amounts in my experience to watertight internal controls. We thank also those who are involved in external controls, who safeguard the process through impartial oversight.

In summary, we are 'ag ceiliúradh caoga bliain ag fás'. There has been an extraordinary contribution on the part of centres to Irish education and to Irish life during that period. No less a contribution, creativity and commitment will be required as the second half-century commences. The network of education centres emerged in the shadow of the two books outlining the 1971 curriculum, it expanded in conjunction with the 23 books of the 1999 curriculum iteration, and in the future, the network will address the opportunities and challenges of the new vision for education proposed by the curriculum framework launched by the Minister earlier in 2023. Each of these milestones is mirrored by curriculum improvement in the post-primary sector also.

As I conclude, I reiterate our gratitude to those visionaries and volunteers who started this movement and for whom values were paramount. I reiterate our gratitude to the volunteers who developed and sustained this movement, again values laden. I reiterate our gratitude to those who led teachers' centres, education centres, education support centres as part-time directors, as full-time directors, as volunteers, and as professionals and who

sought no exemption from the common obligation to give of themselves. We are grateful to the staff so have kept the wheels of the education support centres oiled and turning in good times, through recessions, in pandemics… every day. We are grateful to those valued values-laden Support Service personnel, secondees and staff who worked with education centres, and where integrity, truth, trust and high standards were the norm. May it always be so!

John McGahern contended that "any nation or society that does not place education at the forefront of its values, will soon have no sense of itself apart from narcissistic illusion". We need education to have a sense of tradition, renewed continually, leading to civilisation. The education centre movement can be proud that its value system, high standards and hard work have served our nation well, have protected our tradition and advanced our civilisation. Echoing, Nobel laureate Wangari Maathai, "we must now continue, seeking higher moral grounds". As we go forward in the next half-century, I invoke O'Donoghue again, "may we continue as servants of the frontier… never as functionaries… so that we can evoke the bright fields that lie beyond the view of the regular eye".

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Safeguarding the quality of leadership of education centres

John Coolahan

Background note

The following is a memo authored by the late, great John Coolahan, one of Irish education's most-respected minds. It was addressed to Dr Gerard McHugh, then Director of Dublin West Education Centre, and dates from February 2015, when the Department of Education was considering changing the terms and conditions in relation to the secondment of directors of education centres.

John passed away in 2018. He is deeply missed. During his exhalted career, he was professor emeritus of education at Maynooth University where he worked for 17 years; founding member and president of the Educational Studies Association of Ireland; a prolific academic author; a member of the OECD's review team of education; vice-president of the EU committee on education; chair of The Ark board and the Irish Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the primary sector. Upon his passing, the Teaching Council called him "the father of Irish education".

- The role of the directors of education centres and the duration of their terms of employment should be considered in the context of the historical and strategic role the centres have been playing in modern Irish education, and not in the context of contemporary and temporary recessionary measures affecting the general public service.
- The first centres were established in 1971/72 in the context of major reforms in Irish education, particularly affecting curricula and pedagogy. This was also a period when the concept of in-service teacher education was getting official recognition and support, influenced by reports such as the *James Report* of that time. Their key role was reconsidered, renewed and extended in the mid-nineties when educational policy was undergoing major renewal and reform.
- During the four decades since their original establishment, the centres, both individually and as a co-operating network, have made major qualitative improvements to the education system, operating as support agencies, through a great range of initiatives. As was proper, the programmes and supports offered by the centres changed over time as part of a dynamically evolving system.

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- The centres and their directors are now at another juncture of change. It is crucial that the policy changes now underway are such as to underpin and secure the qualitative work of the Centres and to equip them to fulfil their vital educational roles. It would be a major error if changes were now made to their operation, at the instigation of a department of state, other than the DES, which has no intimate understanding of how such centres operate, or of what their historical experience indicates about how they should be directed to reach their optimal impact.
- The tradition has been to appoint very skilled, experienced and innovative teachers to direct the education centres. Many have been in a position for extended time periods and have built up high credibility among teachers. They have developed skilled approaches to planning centres' work schemes, relating effectively with management boards and liaising with relevant stakeholders. Over recent years significant and very promising partners have been nurtured with key agencies, including the higher education institutions in relation to varied and innovative continuing professional activities. A recent new involvement is with the *Arts-in-Education Charter*.
- The intended application of a new directive for the general public service of a five-year period of secondment if applied to teachers as directors of the centres indicates a lack of awareness of the character of the work of the centres. If implemented, it is likely to be very injurious to their progressive development.
- There are two dimensions to the directive, each of which is injurious to the leadership of the centres, and to their successful operation. One relates to staff who have specialised as directors over a long period of time, away from the classroom. It is wasteful of the experience, skills, contacts built up and general 'know how' of the leadership roles to cut them off from the centres at this stage and require them to re-adapt as classroom teachers. As directors they have developed the understanding, management and planning skills, awareness of the needs of teachers, and the motivational persona which are so important for this type of work. The number of personnel involved is small, and the proposed action cannot be defended on educational or economic grounds. It would be best for the system and the individuals that this cohort of directors be left in position, unless they wished to leave voluntarily.
- The second dimension relates to new appointees as directors of centres. If officialdom now considers it best to put a limit on terms of directors' secondments in the interests of 'fresh-blood' appointments, then the duration of five years is clearly too short to get established and achieve success in the role. Furthermore, such a term is highly unlikely to attract the high quality candidates which are required for new appointees. For future appointees it is proposed that the initial term should be of seven years duration. Subsequent to this a formal review of performance should be undertaken. If the review is favourable, then the incumbent should be offered the choice of a further three years in post, following which the secondment period would cease.

- The adoption of this proposed policy is in the best interest of the centres, of the system, of the incumbent personnel, of future appointees and of the schools from which the secondments take place. It preserves the continuation of proven successful achievement, and provides an educationally defensible process for future leadership of the education centres.

Education Centres today

Despite strong resistance, the term of secondment of education centre directors was limited to five years by *Statutory Instrument (SI) No 394* of 2017 signed by the then Minster for Education, Richard Bruton, on 1 September 2017. This remained the case until the introduction of *SI No 125* of 2023 by Minister Norma Foley on 22 March 2023, which now allows directors to reapply for a second five-year term.

Towards shaping a new policy for EAL support in Irish primary schools

Aoife Merrins, Gillian Lake, Pádraig Ó Duibhir

Abstract

The number of children in Ireland speaking languages other than English and/or Irish in the home has proliferated in recent decades. Responding to this seismic shift in linguistic demographics, the integrated *Primary Language Curriculum* (DE, 2019) is the first curricular document in the history of Irish primary education to recognise and encourage the use of alternative home languages in Irish classrooms. Though teachers welcome this inclusive ideal, questions remain about how to integrate alternative home languages without being knowledgeable in them (NCCA, 2018). This article introduces *Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal* as one approach to embracing all learners' languages in junior primary classrooms. It was implemented as part of qualitative research in six infant classrooms with 20 teachers and 130 junior and senior infant pupils. Key considerations emerge from sharing the programme's benefits and challenges to inform national linguistically responsive policy for schools that embrace a wide array of alternative mother tongues within their local communities.

Keywords: **English as an additional language (EAL) policy, *Primary Language Curriculum*, linguistic diversity, bilingualism, oral narrative, teacher professional development**

Introduction

'New Irish' originate from almost 200 countries (CSO, 2016; DES, 2017a), with foreign-born residents now representing over 20% of the Irish population (Eurostat, 2024). Almost one in every ten children attending Irish primary schools speaks a foreign language at home (CSO, 2024). These pupils are often referred to as learners who speak English as an additional language (EAL) and are characterised as Irish-born residents with an alternative mother tongue to English and Irish, those who have yet to achieve sufficient English language proficiency for curriculum access, or recent arrivals with or without literacy proficiency in another language (NCCA, 2006). International research highlights the stark reality that EAL learners often struggle to access the language of schooling and learning due to a lack of English academic language proficiency and are therefore 'at-risk' of academic failure in English-medium settings (Cummins, 2000; Murphy, 2019). Additionally, researchers in Ireland caution strongly that teachers in the Irish education system lack knowledge on how best to support such learners in increasingly diverse contexts (Devine, 2005; Gardiner-Hyland, 2021; Murtagh & Francis, 2012). Thus emerges the question of what can be done to respond to EAL learners' academic language needs and teachers' professional development needs in Irish primary schools. This article explores the current state of languages in the

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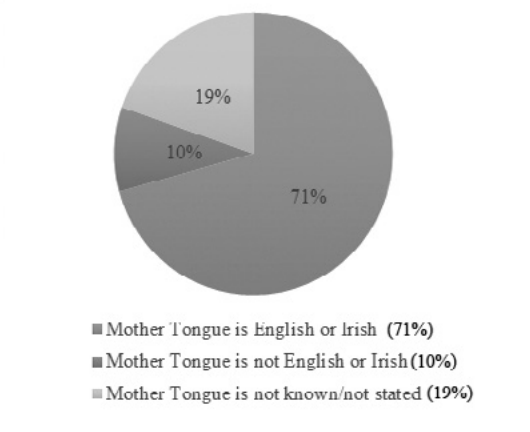
Primary School Curriculum in Ireland. It outlines the potential of the *Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal* programme for both teacher professional development for EAL and practical integration of diverse languages in primary classrooms at junior levels. It proceeds with an account of the steps involved in the programme's implementation and subsequent teacher-based inquiry. The article concludes with the reported benefits and challenges of implementing such a programme in linguistically diverse contexts to inform future EAL policy for Irish primary schools.

Languages in the Primary School Curriculum in Ireland

The Central Statistics Office (CSO) in Ireland reports that 554,788 children were enrolled in Irish primary schools in 2022 as per data gathered via the Primary Online Database (CSO, 2024). Parents/guardians of those enrolled were asked whether they spoke English, Irish or another language at home, with no follow-up question regarding what alternative language(s) were spoken. The percentage breakdown of mother tongues used by primary school children is summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Percentage breakdown of mother tongues used by primary school children (CSO, 2024)



While 71% of those enrolled spoke English or Irish as their mother tongue, 10% spoke a language other than English or Irish, and a staggering 19% of primary school learners' mother tongues remain unknown (ibid). This incomplete dataset (Figure 1), coupled with a lack of knowledge regarding the other mother tongues that exist in primary schools, challenges the Irish government to do better when gathering and reporting data relevant to the inclusion for EAL learners. The recent Irish census found that almost half of non-Irish citizens living in Ireland were citizens of European Union countries (CSO, 2022). The most common languages other than English or Irish at home in 2022 were Polish, Romanian, French, Spanish and Portuguese (ibid). The quantitative distribution of the top ten minority languages in Ireland are depicted in Figure 2 with a combination of 172 'other' languages leading the way.

Figure 2: Quantitative distribution of minority languages in Ireland (CSO, 2016)

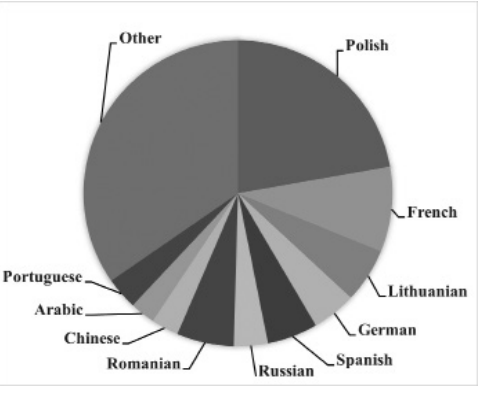


Figure 2 affirms the linguistically diverse backdrop for Irish primary education today and the minority status of several home languages. The lack of data that exists regarding the home languages of children in Irish primary schools warrants further exploration at government level to appropriately inform linguistically and culturally sensitive policy in the Irish education system.

The introduction of the integrated *Primary Language Curriculum* (PLC) represents one significant response to linguistic diversity in Irish primary schools (DE, 2019). Prior to its inception, primary school teachers in Ireland followed two different curricular documents for the teaching of English and Irish (NCCA, 1999a; 1999b) with limited connection, crossover, and integration between the instruction of both languages. There were also several publications in support of EAL learners around this time, which included *Intercultural Guidelines* (NCCA, 2005); *EAL Guidelines* (NCCA, 2006); *Up and Away EAL Resource Book* (Integrated Ireland Language and Teaching (IILT), 2006); and the *Primary School Assessment Kit* (IILT, 2007). Nonetheless, almost a decade lapsed before any further EAL-specific support materials surfaced for utilisation in Irish primary schools. Furthermore, the provision of EAL support was critiqued for its lack of training, guidance, and help for practitioners teaching EAL (DE, 2011a; Travers et al., 2010), as research cautioned the insufficiency of resources, space, and support for EAL learners within mainstream classrooms (Wallen & Kelly-Holmes, 2006; Murtagh & Francis, 2012). This indicates that the introduction of EAL support materials alone was insufficient without opportunities for either professional development or resource procurement. The integrated PLC (DE, 2019) is the first curricular document in the history of Irish primary education to recognise and encourage the use of alternative languages in Irish primary classrooms. One of its underlying principles is the transferability of knowledge, concepts, and skills between and across languages, thereby resulting in a consistent approach to teaching languages for all learners within the primary classroom, as well as concise learning outcomes (65% reduction when compared to previous curricula) and differentiation tools (progression continua) to cater more precisely for diverse language learning needs. While primary school teachers in Ireland have engaged with mandatory professional development opportunities for the realisation of the integrated PLC in their practice, the question of resource procurement

to enact such training remains. Though new support materials offer clear guidance on how to support integrated language instruction in primary schools (Connaughton-Crean & Ó Duibhir, 2015; Little & Kirwan, 2021), there remains a gap in evidence of translation to practice using appropriate resources that support the ideals of integrated language teaching.

Policy for the provision of EAL support personnel has shifted over time. In the early stages of catering for EAL instruction, language support teachers (LSTs) were allocated based on the enrolment and performance of EAL learners in primary schools (DE, 2009; 2007). These posts were temporary (Devine, 2005), with inconsistent teacher allocation (Nowlan, 2008) and frequent redeployment as substitute mainstream teachers when staff shortages prevailed (Wallen & Kelly-Holmes, 2006), resulting in devalued posts and missed EAL tuition. In tandem with language curricula reform, the DE removed "the distinction between [learning/language support and resource] posts" (2017b, p. 18), opting for a diverse support role titled 'special education teacher' (SET) which is "a combined post which allows schools to provide for all of their special education teaching needs from within [a] single allocation" (ibid). It is vital to acknowledge herein that learning EAL is not a special educational need (SEN) and research cautions strongly against amalgamating EAL with SEN (Tangen & Spooner-Lane, 2008). Nonetheless, the autonomy that is afforded to primary school leaders for the deployment of support staff for both EAL and SEN support can be capitalised upon through collaborative and inclusive teaching approaches for mainstream classrooms. A co-ordinated and inclusive strategy to support EAL learners is not only endorsed by Irish researchers (Murtagh & Francis, 2012), but also by the Department of Education Inspectorate in Ireland (DE, 2024). A programme like *Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal* adopts small-group parallel instruction for the collaborative and inclusive teaching of English oral narrative skills (Merrins et al., 2024). It also supports knowledge, concepts, and skills transfer between and across languages as per curricula ideals (DE, 2019) by integrating equivalent Irish oral narrative content and inviting EAL learners to share their home language translations of target *Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal* vocabulary. Further exploration of its design, development, and delivery, can illustrate the full potential of realising the integrated PLC (DE, 2019) and autonomous support teaching structures (DE, 2017b) in linguistically diverse Irish primary classrooms.

Supporting English as an additional language (EAL) learners

The language of schooling, otherwise termed 'academic language', is a formal and complex language register that is crucial to school success. International research highlights the stark reality that EAL learners often struggle to access such language due to a lack of academic English language proficiency and are therefore 'at-risk' of academic failure in such settings (Cummins, 2000; Murphy, 2019). Oral communication includes speaking and listening to share knowledge, ideas, and feelings (Silverman & Hartranft, 2015). It provides a foundation for learning (Englezou & Fragkouli, 2014), literacy skills and educational outcomes (Murphy, 2014; Powell, 2018). Therefore, oral language development is a key factor in any endeavour to support EAL learners with school success. Additionally, narrative retell relies on the competent use of diverse vocabulary, increasingly complex

grammatical structures, and coherent narrative organisation (Bitetti & Hammer, 2016), all of which are key academic language skills (Schleppegrell, 2004; Snow & Uccelli, 2009). Therefore, storytelling is an appropriate activity for oral academic language development in linguistically diverse junior primary classrooms. *Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal* is an English-Irish oral narrative programme that was designed to support child language development and comprehension through oral narrative retell. Furthermore, in preparing teachers to deliver this programme, professional learning opportunities therein respond to Irish research that cautions a lack of knowledge about how best to support EAL learners (Devine, 2005; Gardiner-Hyland, 2021; Murtagh & Francis, 2012).

The *Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal* programme was designed, developed, and delivered as part of a qualitative PhD study (Merrins, 2023), providing a child-centred, interactive, and engaging language-learning experience for infant primary pupils to improve their oral narrative retell skills. The programme's primary tenets of interaction with others, and with concrete resources, stem from sociocultural and interactionist theoretical principles (Bruner, 1981; Vygotsky, 1978). Both theories emphasise the key role of social interaction for language development, endorsing dialogic practices i.e., interactive shared reading (posing questions throughout whole-class shared reading of both English and Irish traditional tales); group and paired language activities (use of vocabulary flashcards, role-play props, sequencing images etc.); and purposeful language usage in a social environment i.e., retelling tales for peers in a paired, small-group or whole-class context. Participant teachers, and peers, often assumed the role of more knowledgeable others (Vygotsky, 1978) to help learners with their oral narrative retell of traditional tales. This 'scaffolding' process (Bruner, 1981) frequently interchanged between language lessons, where native-English speaking learners assisted EAL learners with English language skills, and EAL learners supported native-English speaking learners with Irish language skills, due to having the plurilingual skillset of learning Irish as a third language (L3). Furthermore, opportunities for demonstrated, shared, guided, and independent oral narration (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983) represented key scaffolding features of programme delivery on a weekly basis. Finally, the programme recognises the theory of 'Common Underlying Proficiency' (Cummins, 1981), which asserts that language skills, ideas and concepts are transferrable from first language (L1) to second language (L2). Therefore, connections are drawn between L1, L2 and subsequent languages, so that language learning becomes interdependent (DE, 2019). The universality of traditional tales in alternative languages (Hepler, 2007) meant that in many cases, participant pupils had some background knowledge of story content in their home languages, and could transfer this comprehension to the English and Irish versions of the traditional tales within the programme.

Teacher professional development entails continued growth of knowledge and skills to support pupils' learning throughout teaching careers (Borg, 2018; Eun, 2008; Guskey, 2002). Despite global recognition for the importance of developing "special knowledge and skills" for EAL instruction (Lucas, 2011, p. 6), Irish primary school teachers have had minimal EAL-specific training (Devine, 2005; Kitching, 2006; Nowlan, 2008; Murtagh & Francis, 2012), citing a lack of confidence and competence for responding to linguistic diversity (Gardiner-Hyland & Burke, 2018; Skinner, 2010; Travers et al., 2010). Furthermore, recent government recommendations outline that EAL professional development should

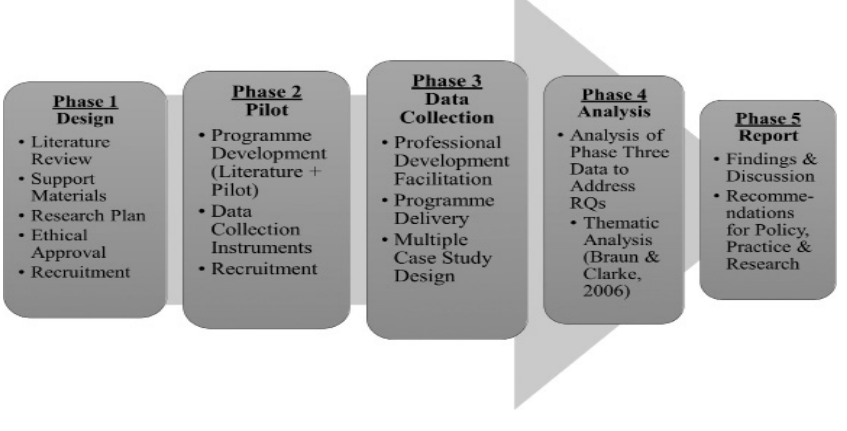
be a priority for any teacher who is responsible for EAL learners (DE, 2024). A Vygotskian framework underpins teacher professional development for *Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal.* This resulted in the adoption of sociocultural practices as per Eun (2008), which were also deemed effective by previous studies of EAL professional development (Kalinowski et al., 2019; Merchie et al., 2018) to include; on-site workshops; reflective activities; continuous follow-up support via professional networking and journals/articles; and the provision of resources for programme delivery. This framework was the foundation for a 20-hour mentoring model of professional development (Kram, 1983) for *Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal* delivery in linguistically diverse contexts (see methodology for further details).

Curriculum reform (DE, 2019) and autonomous deployment of support personnel for additional educational needs (DE, 2017b) have shed light on the shortcomings of EAL policy and practice in Ireland, specifically segregated approaches to teaching languages and unsatisfactory opportunities for EAL professional development. Wider research cautions that EAL learners require specialist and explicit support (Lucas, 2011) for developing English academic language skills (Cummins, 2000; Murphy, 2019). This article proposes that the *Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal* programme offers one approach for primary school teachers to upskill for the teaching of oral narrative retell skills while supporting the transfer of knowledge, concepts, and skills between and across English, Irish and the other languages of the classroom. This programme complements the introduction of modern foreign languages (MFL) in primary education from third to sixth classes (NCCA, 2024), which will not only be an ideal platform for EAL learners to showcase their plurilingual talents (Cenoz, 2013; Jaensch, 2013), but also offer essential plurilingual knowledge and practices for teachers. The methodological elements of the *Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal* programme are hereafter documented to support its transferability to similar primary school contexts.

Methodology

This five-phased research study explored the design, development, and delivery of a bilingual English-Irish oral narrative programme in linguistically diverse junior primary classrooms. Figure 3 outlines the key processes involved in each phase.

Figure 3: Five-phased study



Having finalised both theoretical and practical implications for the delivery of *Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal* in the early stages of this project, the primary investigator adopted a qualitative case study design for programme delivery in six mainstream infant classrooms (20 teachers and 130 junior/senior infant pupils) with three focal aspects for qualitative exploration:

- participant mainstream and support teachers' experiences of professional development;
- participant mainstream teachers' experiences of bilingual English-Irish oral narrative instruction; and
- participant children's responses to the programme.

This section outlines the application of the multiple embedded case study design for study conduct and charts the steps followed for ethical practice. The mechanical elements of programme delivery are depicted to include an outline of professional development procedures. Thereafter, participant profiles and data collection tools are highlighted. Findings reported herein represent a sub-set of broader themes that were generated from the thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of data gathered within the larger scope of this study.

Multiple embedded case study

Case study is concerned with the empirical investigation of contemporary phenomena using multiple evidence sources within real-life settings (Yin, 2009). *Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal* delivery in several school contexts facilitated the empirical study of bilingual oral narrative programme implementation as a contemporary response to increased linguistic diversity in Irish primary schools. Additionally, the triangulation of multiple data collection tools adhered to the case study ideology of using many evidence sources for reliable conclusions of the cases under investigation.

Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal was implemented in more than one classroom resulting in the establishment of multiple contexts i.e., six classrooms across five school contexts and cases (Creswell & Creswell, 2018); with 20 teachers (six of whom were mainstream teachers and all of whom were distributed across these classrooms), and 130 children (50% of whom spoke EAL and all of whom were also distributed across these classrooms). In focusing on multiple cases (i.e., mainstream and support teachers, mainstream teachers, and children), there were a total of three embedded units of analysis specific to each case study group in each context. The first unit of analysis was specific to mainstream and support teachers' professional development experiences from programme participation. The second unit of analysis related to mainstream teachers' reported experiences of bilingual English-Irish oral narrative instruction. The third unit of analysis was concerned with participant children's responses to programme participation. This deemed the multiple embedded case study design appropriate to the aims of this study.

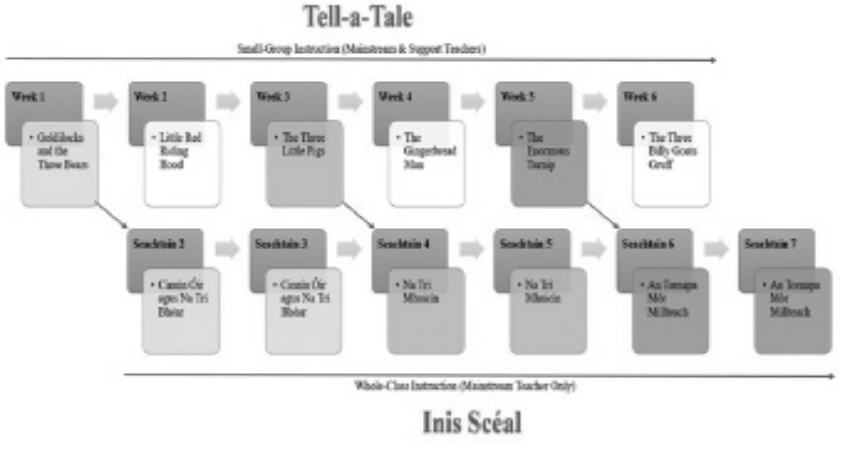
An Ainscow inspired axiological stance was adopted when conducting this research, with the ethical beliefs that inclusion and equity offer "pathways to the overall improvement of education systems" (2020, p. 131). Mindful of the ever-changing demands of education (Biesta, 2015), the study was conducted with ontological and epistemological beliefs founded in pragmatism (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), which enables researchers to focus

on real-time research problems and purposes, prior to availing of pluralistic approaches to derive knowledge about, and offer solutions to, such problems. Pragmatic researchers are free to adopt "whatever works" (Fraenkel et al., 2012, p. 559) to unveil solutions to problems in educational practice.

Programme delivery

The *Tell-a-Tale* | *Inis Scéal* programme provides a child-centred and interactive language learning experience for junior primary pupils to improve their oral narrative language skills. It adopts daily dialogic shared reading of six weekly traditional tales in English and three fortnightly traditional tales in Irish (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Programme overview



*seachtain = week

Tell-a-Tale is delivered through collaborative small-group instruction by mainstream and support teachers, while *Inis Scéal* is delivered independently by the mainstream teacher using whole class instruction. *Tell-a-Tale* begins one week before *Inis Scéal* to allow for exposure to the English version of the story. Both *Tell-a-Tale* and *Inis Scéal* complement one another in many ways, namely by employing shared reading of the same content in English and Irish, using similar resources to further support the development of vocabulary, grammar, phonological awareness, and comprehension skills, while occurring within the mainstream classroom over a six-week period. The *Tell-a-Tale* | *Inis Scéal* programme uses storybooks from the Ladybird Picture Books Collection and An Gúm. The limitation herein is that the English and Irish versions of these traditional tales differ somewhat in book size, content, and imagery, which is an important methodological consideration for its replication in other contexts.

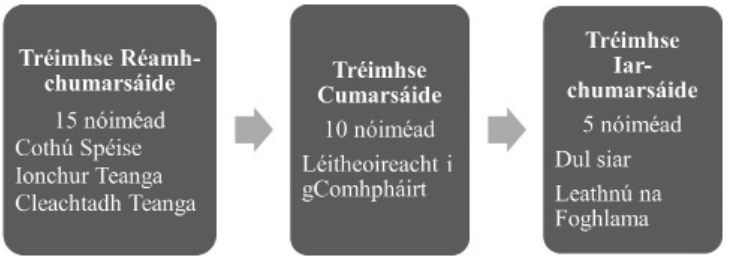
Tell-a-Tale is delivered for 35 minutes per day from Monday to Thursday with a 10-minute recap every Friday, totalling 15 hours of English oral narrative language instruction for participant children. Typical *Tell-a-Tale* lessons include whole class shared reading, small-group language activities and a whole class plenary.

Figure 5: Tell-a-Tale structure

Each week begins with a new traditional tale, which is read by mainstream classroom teachers daily, posing pre-planned questions throughout for a dialogic shared reading experience. Support teachers then enter the classroom to collaboratively facilitate children's engagement in small-group activities within the mainstream classroom. Each teacher (mainstream and support) works with the same group of children (n= 6-8). These activities last for 20 minutes and include vocabulary, phonology, grammar, and comprehension tasks to develop children's oral narrative language skills. Key resources to support narrative retell include role-play retell props (lollipop stick figures, small-world figures, cone figures, masks, realia, and puppets) and narrative sequencing images. All props were sourced by the primary investigator and provided free of charge to participant schools. Paired sequencing images were also provided to enable peer-to-peer interaction and collaborative oral narrative retell. Each *Tell-a-Tale* lesson concludes with the children retelling the story with their mainstream teacher as part of a whole-class plenary.

Inis Scéal, literally 'tell a story or tale', is delivered for 30 minutes per day from Monday to Friday which totals 15 hours of Irish oral narrative language instruction for participant children. Typical *Inis Scéal* lessons are instructed in an entirely whole class approach using three communicative phases (Figure 6). Mainstream class teachers facilitate whole-class, group, and paired Irish language activities specific to the content of each narrative. They use both concrete and digital resources to maintain learner interest, provide explicit language input, and opportunities for language consolidation in different group contexts. Then, they share one traditional tale daily over the course of two weeks to include: *Cinnín Óir agus Na Trí Bhéar (Goldilocks and the Three Bears), Na Trí Mhuicín (The Three Little Pigs), An Tornapa Mór Millteach (The Enormous Turnip)*. Finally, they consolidate new Irish vocabulary and grammar throughout the school day as part of informal Irish language exposure.

Figure 6: Inis Scéal structure



The role-play retell props from *Tell-a-Tale* are recycled during *Inis Scéal* which further illustrates the transferability and complementarity of this bilingual oral narrative programme.

Professional development for programme delivery

Participant mainstream and support teachers played a crucial role in *Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal* delivery. Teachers shared generously and practically during a pilot iteration of this study to support the development of a feasible programme between November 2019 and March 2020. The initial theoretical design was merged with practical insights so that *Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal* could be implemented again in six mainstream infant classrooms (four junior infant and two junior/senior infant) between March and June 2021.

The primary investigator supported participant mainstream and support teachers with programme delivery in each school context through a 20-hour mentoring programme. There were ample opportunities for collaborative discussions and critical reflections on practice specific to English as an Additional Language pre-, during, and post-programme delivery. These occurred through focus group discussions, professional development discussions, independent reading and reflective writing activities, researcher on-site support visits, an interview, and miscellaneous support via e-communication. The support sequence documented in Table 1 showcases these in-action in preparation for programme delivery (sequence 1-8) and during programme delivery itself (sequence 9-18).

Table 1: Professional development schedule

Support Sequence	Duration	Content
1. Introduction	1 hour	Introduce Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal to participant teachers
2. Focus Group Discussion 1	1 hour	Examine mainstream and support teachers' practices and professional development experiences to-date for English as an Additional Language
3. Professional Development Discussion 1	1.5 hours	Support mainstream and support teachers with understanding programme theoretical principles and application
4. Professional Development Discussion 2	1.5 hours	
5. Professional Development Discussion 3	1.5 hours	
6. Independent Reading & Reflective Writing 1	1 hour	Enable participants to engage with literature to support their pedagogical content knowledge for Tell-a-Tale delivery.
7. Professional Development Discussion 4	1.5 hours	Support mainstream and support teachers with understanding programme theoretical principles and application
8. Independent Reading & Reflective Writing 2	1 hour	Enable participants to engage with the Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal handbook to further support them before its delivery.
9. Researcher Site Visit 1	1 hour	Support for programme delivery
10. Researcher Site Visit 2	1 hour	
11. Independent Reading & Reflective Writing 3	1 hour	Enable participants to engage with literature to support their pedagogical content knowledge for Tell-a-Tale delivery
12. Focus Group Discussion 2	1 hour	Examine mainstream and support teachers' ongoing practices and professional development experiences from Tell-a-Tale delivery
13. Researcher Site Visit 3	1 hour	Support for programme delivery
14. Researcher Site Visit 4	1 hour	
15. Researcher Site Visit 5	1 hour	
16. Miscellaneous Support	1 hour	Support for programme delivery through incidental circumstances via text, phone, and email.
17. Focus Group Discussion 3	1 hour	Examine mainstream and support teachers' new practices and professional development experiences resulting from Tell-a-Tale delivery
18. Mainstream Teacher Interviews	1 hour	Examine mainstream teachers' new practices and professional development experiences resulting from Inis Scéal delivery

This structure correlated with sociocultural and mentoring theoretical underpinnings for supporting programme delivery across five school contexts (Eun, 2008; Kram, 1983).

Study participants

This research project was conducted with ethical approval granted by the DCU Research Ethics Committee and compliant with DCU regulations. Plain language statements used accessible, clear, and concise language to outline what study involvement would entail for prospective participants. Physical copies of informed consent were first signed by the chairperson of each participant school's board of management. *Qualtrics*, an online survey platform used in social sciences (https://www.qualtrics.com), was then used to gather informed consent from adult participants and was conveniently programmed to offer translated versions of the plain language statement and informed consent for parents of EAL learners. Children were invited to assent to study participation with parental consent using visuals of what the study would involve and colouring happy/sad faces beside such visuals to indicate whether they wanted to engage or not.

Purposive sampling was used to target linguistically diverse areas for the recruitment of appropriate primary schools for this study. As infant mainstream class teachers and collaborating support staff were imperative to programme delivery, purposive sampling was also used for staff recruitment. Thereafter, participant children were sampled by convenience (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), subject to parental consent, as they were readily available if their teachers consented to study engagement. The recruitment process unveiled five schools' commitment to supporting oral narrative language development. These schools observed that inequitable home-schooling provision during school closures imposed by COVID-19 had widened the achievement gap among children in their contexts (Bailey et al., 2021). Though the study sample surpassed the criteria, the primary investigator enabled participation for all five settings due to context unpredictability, which allowed for attrition without any impact on the study, yet no participant withdrew before formal project cessation. All participant contexts were Catholic-ethos schools in urban areas providing English-medium education to enrolled pupils with a minimum population of 25% EAL learners.

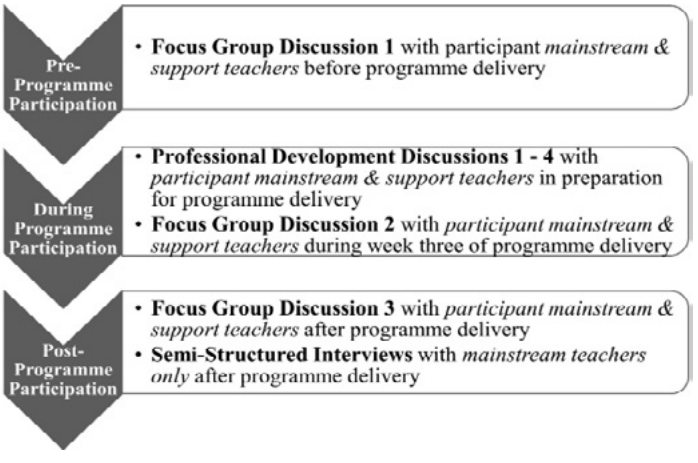
Table 2. Participant profiles

Site	U-School	V-School	W-School	XY-School	Z-School
Pupil Enrolment	*199*	*472*	*573*	*377*	*237*
Gender	Co-education	Co-education	Segregated education	Co-education	Co-education
DEIS Indicator	Non-DEIS	Non-DEIS	Non-DEIS	DEIS	DEIS
Participants x 20 Teachers + their years of experience as teachers	x 5 Teachers U1 – 9 yrs U2 – 16 yrs U3 – 30 yrs U4 – 16 yrs U5 – 2 yrs	x 2 Teachers V1 – 6 yrs V2 – 3 yrs	x 7 Teachers W1 – 1 yr W2 – 30 yrs W3 – 35 yrs W4 – 10 yrs W5 – 10 yrs W6 – 10 yrs W7 – 1 yr	x 4 Teachers X1 – 34 yrs Y1 – 11 yrs XY2 – 13 yrs XY3 – 1 yr	x 2 Teachers Z1 – 2 yrs Z2 – 9 yrs
x 130 Pupils	x 16 Pupils JI U-Class	x 24 Pupils JI V-Class	x 19 Pupils JI W-Class	x 52 Pupils JI/SI X-Class JI/SI Y-Class	x 19 Pupils JI Z-Class
Junior Infants (JI) Senior Infants (SI)	CU1 – CU16	CV1 – CV24	CW1 – CW19	CX1 – CX27 CY1 – CY25	CZ1 – CZ19
Percentage of EAL Learners	25% EAL	50% EAL	25% EAL	50% EAL	90% EAL

Data collection tools

The primary investigator gathered data in each school as shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Data collection schedule



The focus group discussions and professional development discussions included both mainstream and support teachers, while the semi-structured interviews were conducted with the mainstream teachers only. This data was recorded using a digital voice recorder (Olympus VN-540PC) and stored securely for transcription on a password protected laptop.

Thematic analysis

The six steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) for thematic analysis (TA) are recorded, systematised, and disclosed below to establish how this study generated its findings. Thematic analysts are advised to:

i. become familiar with the data,
ii. generate initial codes,
iii. search for themes,
iv. review themes,
v. define themes, and
vi. write-up (ibid).

These six stages had distinctive analysis phases to support findings saturation points, which establishes a "convincing concept" (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013, p. 194) of generated themes to the point that no new information is revealed in the analysis process. Thus, data was first analysed on a semantic level, checking participant commentary for 'surface meaning', and then on a latent level, where ideas, assumptions, and ideologies were identified and examined according to existing literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The primary investigator first engaged with manual analysis of one focus group discussion to obtain and develop important skills for the rigorous application of TA. This involved reading a hard-copy transcript, using highlighters and sticky notes to code data, generating, and consolidating preliminary themes, and depicting an overview of one participant school's response to the research questions posed. Having gained confidence with this manual application of TA processes, the researcher then imported electronic copies of transcripts to NVivo 12 (Lumivero, 2021), a qualitative analysis platform, to ensure systematic data management with a full understanding of the processes therein.

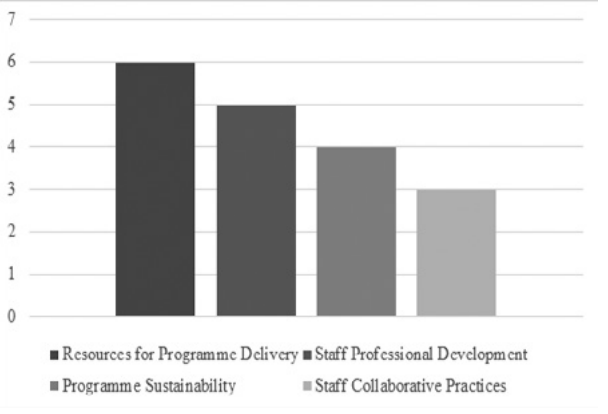
Findings

Recorded and transcribed conversations with participant teachers (i.e., focus group discussions, professional development discussions, and semi-structured interviews) yielded information regarding the benefits and challenges of the *Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal* programme for participant schools, teachers, and children. The findings that emerged from rigorous TA are accounted for below.

School benefits and challenges

The four main reported benefits of school participation in the *Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal* programme included the resources for programme delivery, staff professional development opportunities, programme sustainability, and staff collaborative practices. Figure 8 illustrates the representation of these findings across all six contexts for programme delivery.

Figure 8: School benefits from Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal delivery



The provision of resources for programme delivery was deemed the greatest advantage of programme participation for schools. Teachers (n=11) commended the concrete programme resources, saying: "they were very lucky children to have them" (U3), and "they were brilliant" (W2; X1; Z2). "Having ready-made resources was definitely the highlight of the programme" (U1), as everything "was laid out so well" (V1), "organised" (W1) and "ready to go" (W1; Z1). Teachers reported a big benefit from having so many resources (XY2), that "they were so handy" (Z1) to have, with "no pressure" (V1) to make them, which "definitely made [their] lives easier" (U1).

The opportunities for professional development were also considered advantageous for participant schools. Participant teachers (n=10) endorsed the training for programme delivery as "really great" (W2) stating that "we can't underestimate the benefits of training or the impact of that on the school culture" (U3), and "I would feel like I'm getting better at my job so therefore making a difference to the school" (Z1). Teachers across five contexts referred very specifically to the benefits of upskilling for teaching the Irish language, which included a criticism of "overloaded" digitised Irish programmes (X1) and *Inis Scéal* implementation as an opportunity to develop confidence with Irish language teaching more generally: "I am more than capable now of teaching the Irish lesson by myself without the online programmes" (V1). Teachers were also complimentary of the opportunity for the school to not only gain appropriate resources to support Irish oral narrative instruction, but also for children to be exposed to the Irish language as a "living language" (X1) within the classroom setting: "it always kind of took my breath away when they started using the Irish, and speaking it, and having the confidence to" (U1).

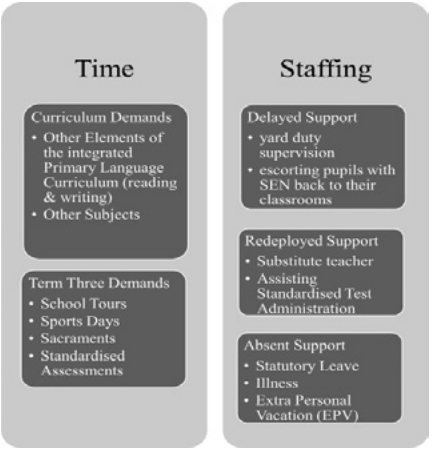
Teachers (n=6) emphasised the added benefit of the *Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal* programme being made available to the school for continued usage into the future. Five of six mainstream teachers were committed to programme continuity beyond the life cycle of the research project, while the outstanding teacher was unsure if they would be working in the school in the next academic year, but concluded: "I am 100% sure teachers will be availing of it, whoever is here next year" (V1).

To a lesser extent, staff collaborative practices were charted as added benefits to school

participation in the *Tell-a-Tale* | *Inis Scéal* programme. Having emerged from the isolation of national measures to control the spread of COVID-19 (i.e., withdrawal support teaching methods), participant teachers (n=5) welcomed the opportunity to teach collaboratively as part of programme participation. Teachers explained that it was great to collaborate "as a team and to see how that worked so effectively" (U1), valuing the "encouragement and collaboration with the other supporting teachers in the room" (V2) and highlighting that "there was great collaboration among staff and there have been great positive stories when other teachers are enquiring about it" (X1). So much so that "the vice principal was even saying that it would be great if we could apply it to the senior end" (XY2).

Despite these reported benefits of school participation in the *Tell-a-Tale* | *Inis Scéal* programme, there were two consistent challenges – time and staffing.

Figure 9: Challenges for Tell-a-Tale | *Inis Scéal delivery in schools*



Curriculum demands placed a major strain on school ability to implement a programme that focused intensively on oral language development. Additionally, the time of year (end of term three) posed challenges where extra-curricular activity prevailed. Staffing also added another layer of difficulty for schools with programme implementation as support personnel were either delayed, redeployed, or absent.

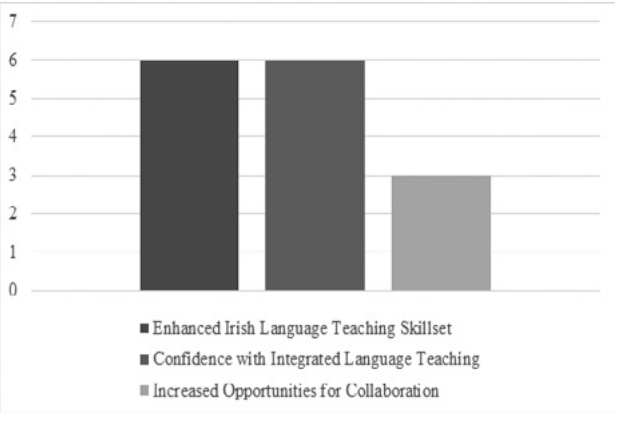
Teacher benefits and challenges

The three consistent reported benefits for teachers implementing the *Tell-a-Tale* | *Inis Scéal* programme were:

- enhanced Irish language teaching skillset;
- confidence with integrated language teaching; and
- increased opportunities for collaboration with colleagues.

Figure 10 illustrates the representation of these findings across all six contexts for programme delivery.

Figure 10: Teacher benefits from Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal delivery



Having reflected on their experiences of programme participation, teachers commended the opportunity to upskill for Irish language instruction, with all six mainstream teaching participants noting never having had input specifically for Irish oral narrative instruction for in-service teaching. Additionally, all six mainstream teachers had not yet read any physical Irish book to their junior or junior/senior infant class prior to programme engagement, as the digitised Irish programmes in use across each setting had some pre-recorded versions of various narratives and did not provide a corresponding hard copy book of these Irish stories. As such, *Inis Scéal* was a very new approach to sharing Irish stories in each classroom and resulted in extensive opportunities for practitioners to upskill for the teaching of Irish to include:

- shared reading of a physical book with interactive questioning throughout (i.e., *cé hé/hí seo?* [who is he/she?]; *cad é/í seo?* [what is this?] etc.);
- modelling paired conversation using whole-class, group and paired instructional models to illicit the responses (*seo é/í* _____ [this is _____]); and
- role-play props engagement to assist with group and paired conversations (i.e., characters presented as puppets/masks/lollipop figures; vocabulary flashcards; paired conversation cards with visuals).

All six mainstream teachers mentioned that this was a much more interactive way to teach Irish than previously adopted digitised programmes and *Inis Scéal* had enhanced their Irish language teaching skillset as a result. Teachers had "never seen such good results; children feeling confident about saying their little bits of Irish" (X1), "making a connection to it in English first, then in Irish, and that's building on their confidence that… I do know what's happening. It was just amazing to see that!" (U1). This encouraged participant teachers to "make Irish more interactive (in the future) and not just follow by the script of a digital Irish programme" (V1).

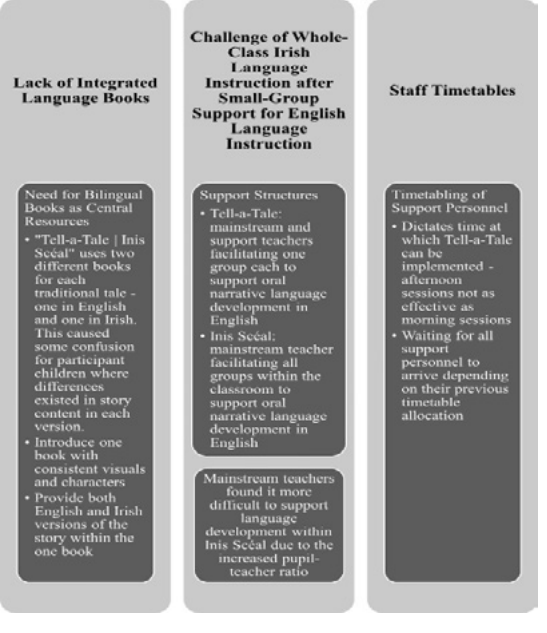
Participant teachers (n=6) across all six settings reflected on the fact that their engagement in the programme had increased their confidence with integrating language content, knowledge, and skills across their teaching of both English and Irish. Pupils across

all settings demonstrated keen abilities to integrate their learning between English and Irish which further reassured teachers with their integrated language teaching practices. The most rewarding part of programme delivery for one teacher was witnessing "that light bulb moment… they're understanding the correlation between the two… they're becoming bilingual!" (U1), while for another: "I was doubting myself, and doubting them, but then the reward at the end was to see actually… they can do this in English and in Irish" (V1).

Finally, the increased opportunity for collaboration with others while implementing *Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal* was important in three school settings. As noted within the benefits for school participation in the programme, teachers enjoyed working together "as a team" (U1) after the previous term's isolation of restricted social contact to control the spread of COVID-19. Collaborating colleagues offered "encouragement and reassurance" (V1) for the delivery of a new programme within the school. The collaborative aspect of programme delivery gave teachers "courage because you know you are going to work as a team – I'm not going to be left on my own here"(X1) which enabled innovation and confidence to embrace any change in education.

However, *Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal* implementation was not without its challenges for participant teachers, including the lack of integrated language books; the transition from small-group to whole-class teaching; and the logistics of support staff timetables.

Figure 11: Challenges of Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal delivery for teachers



Teachers (n=6) cited the need for bilingual books as central resources for programme implementation so that the content could be consistent between both English and Irish narrative language lessons: "we're doing *An Tornapa Mór Millteach* at the minute and there was Lapaí the dog, and then Máire, whereas in the English version, they don't have names"

(U1). Additionally, mainstream teachers (n=6) saw such value in small-group support for English language development, they suggested that it would be a wonderful addition to educational policy if similar supports existed for the teaching of the Irish language in the same way. Teacher Z1 summarised these thoughts as follows:

> I think the most challenging part of it is probably not having the support for the Gaeilge… I know it's not possible to have the support for that. But, for example, when they're going to their work, or their group work… just facilitating that, and trying to get around to everybody… I found it hard sometimes to just manoeuvre around the room and get to everybody that needed support.

Finally, the pre-allocation of support staff timetables limited programme implementation to specific times of availability which had its own complications: "I just found that it was harder to do *Inis Scéal* in the afternoons when the kids just wanted to play and go home" (V1), and "it was difficult to keep their attention for an oral-specific lesson later in the school day" (Y1).

Reported pupil benefits and challenges

Participant teachers of the *Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal* programme observed several advantages for their pupils partaking in such an initiative. Leading benefits for pupils across all six contexts for programme delivery included

- using the Irish language as a living language;
- having fun language learning experiences;
- being exposed to multiple languages;
- engaging in social opportunities; and
- developing their language skills.

Figure 12 summarises these findings.

Figure 12: Child benefits from Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal delivery

The pupils who participated in the *Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal* programme were observed to have benefitted immensely from hearing and using Irish as a living language. Irish narratives were a "great way to bring (Irish) into real life… as the children used the language very naturally… without learning off" (X1). "Hearing them use Irish" (Z1) was deemed the most rewarding aspect of the programme for four participant mainstream teachers (U1; V1; X1; Z1), while the "bilingual" elements that enabled the transfer of skills from English to Irish stories were most rewarding for the remaining two participant mainstream teachers (W1; Y1). As such, children who participated in this programme gained competence for Irish language usage in real-life situations.

Participant pupils across all contexts also benefitted from *Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal* due to the fun language learning experiences that were facilitated across both English and Irish lessons. Teachers remarked: "it makes teaching languages a lot nicer… a lot more fun… because you can see they're enjoying it" (Z1); "they were having fun" (W1); and "when you keep it as fun as possible" (V1), the programme becomes so beneficial as a language learning experience.

The introduction of English, Irish and other languages within the *Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal* programme enabled all pupils to become exposed to the other languages that existed within their classroom. Several EAL learners in this study brought alternative linguistic versions of traditional tales to school – some of whom instinctively expected their teacher to be able to read it to the class after having seen both English and Irish versions of the same story being shared. Native-English speakers really enjoyed the challenge of trying to say key words from stories in alternative home languages, while EAL learners were visibly delighted by the opportunities to share their home languages and showcase their broad linguistic talents. Some native-English speakers concluded the programme believing that they could also now speak the alternative languages of their peers after having been exposed to some vocabulary in their languages.

Social opportunities were beneficial for participant pupils within the small-group learning experiences. Pupils enjoyed working with peers due to the friendly, collaborative, playful and conversational opportunities that stemmed from this approach (see Merrins et al., 2024 for further detail on this finding).

Participant pupils also gained broader language skills from their engagement with the *Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal* programme. They developed greater language awareness by being exposed to multiple languages within the classroom; acquired the ability to transfer knowledge, concepts, and skills from English to Irish, and vice versa; and expressed interest in the languages of others which supports motivation for plurilingual competence.

Timing for programme delivery was the most significant reported challenge for participant pupils of the *Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal* programme. In some cases, there had been no outdoor play at break times due to wet weather, which made it very difficult for children to concentrate by the time the programme was implemented in the afternoon. Additionally, in many cases, there were issues with programme delivery due to either delayed or absent support personnel, which made it difficult for children as they had to wait for their small-group teacher to arrive or were moved to participate in a new group with a higher pupil-teacher ratio.

Discussion

The *Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal* programme was well-received by participant schools, teachers, and children. This section of the article explores the implications of reported benefits and challenges for future policy in support of learners who speak English as an additional language (EAL).

Previous research in the Irish context has critiqued EAL provision as having insufficient resources (Gardiner-Hyland & Burke, 2018; Murtagh & Francis, 2012). Participant teachers in this study were abundantly clear that the introduction of any new initiative in their classrooms necessitated the provision of ready-made resources for its implementation to support their buy-in, reduce workload, and ease their transition into new practice. *Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal* was sustainable for most participant mainstream teachers who were committed to its continuation beyond the life cycle of the research project due to the provision of such resources for use again in the future. Furthermore, the implementation of *Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal* elicited school-wide interest as other staff either inquired about its operations or were inspired to transfer similar instructional methods to other classes. Wider stakeholders across the primary education system should consider the potential that might be gleaned from introducing purpose-built programmes for schools that not only adhere to the principles of the integrated *Primary Language Curriculum* (DE, 2019), but also provide the necessary learning resources to enact recommended new practices and provide ongoing support for its sustainability.

The opportunities within *Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal* for staff professional development were reported as advantageous for schools, teachers, and children alike. Participant teachers enhanced their Irish language teaching skillset and developed confidence with integrated language teaching. The Department of Education (DE, 2022) chart ongoing concern about Irish-language teaching and learning in English-medium schools at primary level. International researchers agree that, developmentally, there can be no substitute for real-life experience and interaction for oral language development (Courage & Howe, 2010; Ebbeck et al., 2016). Digitised Irish language programmes were a dominant approach to teaching Irish across all six participant settings prior to the implementation of *Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal*. The programme's benefits reportedly enhanced both participant teachers' Irish language teaching skillset and participant children's language skills following exposure to Irish as a concrete and living language within their classrooms. It is conceivable that previously segregated language curricula (NCCA, 1999a; 1999b) have had a long-lasting impact on teaching practices in Ireland, which necessitates considerable effort to ensure that Irish primary school teachers are supported in adopting integrated language teaching approaches that adhere to those recommended within the integrated PLC (DE, 2019). Programmes like *Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal* have the potential to support ongoing professional development for curriculum implementation in a real and practical way. Policy for the teaching of languages should caution strongly against an over-reliance on digitised programmes and invest in the provision of concrete programmes to support teachers with realising the integrated PLC (DE, 2019), and indeed, the introduction of MFL (NCCA, 2024), in Irish primary classrooms.

Both teachers and pupils referred prominently to the social elements and experiences of

participating in the *Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal* programme. Teachers enjoyed the opportunities for collaboration and reaped the rewards of enhanced collaborative staff practices across schools, which responds to previously recommended approaches for EAL provision in Irish primary schools (Gardiner-Hyland & Burke, 2018; Murtagh & Francis, 2012). The social opportunities for learning were also important to participant children (Merrins et al., 2024) and reminiscent of long-standing support for sociocultural and interactionist theoretical principles in practice (Bruner, 1981; Vygotsky, 1978), namely the key role of social interaction for language development and purposeful language usage in a social environment. This preference for social learning experiences corroborates with many principles of learning, teaching, and assessment in the *Primary Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2023, p. 6), namely; partnerships; inclusive education and diversity; engagement and participation; and, relationships. Thus, *Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal*, or a programme with similar theoretical underpinnings, can help with the translation of policy to practice in ever-evolving Irish primary schools.

A final recurrent benefit for all programme stakeholders was the opportunity for exploring languages in education at a timely juncture (DE, 2019; NCCA, 2024). Children in Irish primary schools need to experience the Irish language as a living language and not a digital programme on their classroom whiteboard. The underlying theoretical principles adopted herein resulted in fun learning experiences through social encounters (Bruner, 1981; Vygotsky, 1978), interaction with concrete resources (Vygotsky, 1978) and exposure to multiple languages (Cummins, 1981) in a scaffolded way (Bruner, 1981; Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). Additionally, on the cusp of the novice introduction of MFL in senior primary classrooms (NCCA, 2024), the *Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal* programme offers a framework for integrating the instruction of a L3 in a way that supports the transfer of contextualised and consistent knowledge, concepts, and skills in English, Irish and the chosen MFL in that context.

Nonetheless, the enduring challenge of time was as prominent as any cited benefit across all three stakeholder groups. There was significant time pressure due to curriculum demands; end-of-term activities; staff timetabling; and, punctual availability of support personnel when other demands may arise incidentally within the school day. Additionally, issues with resources arose to include a desire for support personnel to be able to assist with the instruction of the Irish language in junior primary classrooms; the publication of bilingual English-Irish storybooks; and the provision of consistent visuals across both English and Irish language lessons to move from a segregated to an integrated view of teaching languages in the Irish context. Finally, the reality of school-life, and specifically the demands therein, mean that teachers will be delayed, may be redeployed, and can be absent. One obvious solution to these issues would be an increase in the allocation of teaching staff to all schools so that additional support is always available for extra-curricular activities, support staff timetabling, and instances that require incidental response. Additionally, policymakers are urged to support the publication of resources that allow for the instruction of English, Irish, and other languages in a seamlessly integrated way. Any national desire to stem the prominent tide of segregated language teaching mindsets must address the issue of the segregated language teaching programmes and resources that still exist in Irish primary schools.

Figure 13: Recommendations for EAL policy in Irish primary schools

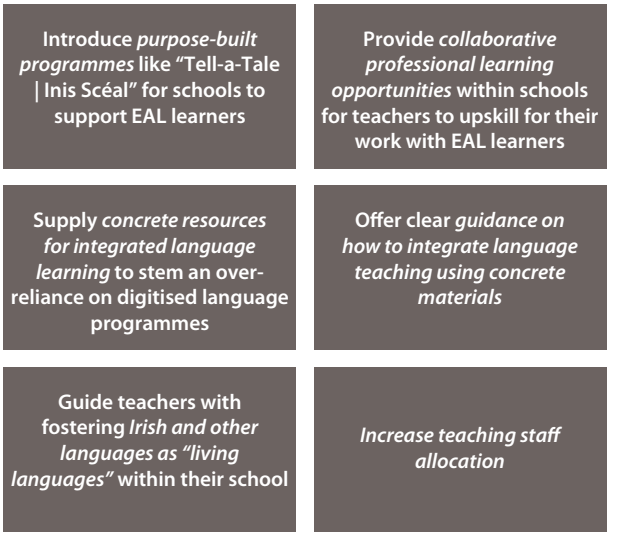


Figure 13 summarises these recommendations as considerations for future EAL policy for Irish primary schools.

Study limitations

There are three main limitations to the findings discussed. Firstly, as this was a qualitative study, there remains a gap regarding the quantifiable effectiveness of the *Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal* programme on participant children's oral narrative language skills and future iterations could consider assessments pre- and post-programme participation.

Additionally, the roles of the primary investigator as both programme creator and professional development facilitator may have had a halo effect on participants' responses pre-, during and post-programme participation. Replication of this study could employ a research assistant to conduct interviews that will better support anonymous and unbiased participant responses. Finally, data gathered and reported herein represent a mere snapshot in time during what is traditionally an exceptionally busy time of year for primary schools. This challenges the validity of these findings and endorses the implementation of the programme at a different time of year to check for the consistency of thematic outcomes.

Conclusion

As the primary education system in Ireland hurtles towards the realisation of curriculum changes, including the novel introduction of modern foreign languages (NCCA, 2024), practical resources are necessary for teachers to adapt to, and embrace, the ideals of integrated language curricula in Irish primary schools. While support materials have been published to assist teaching practitioners with enacting the integrated *Primary Language Curriculum* (DE, 2019) in their classrooms, there is an overwhelming sense from this study that time is a constant challenge for teachers to engage with such content. The provision

of concrete resources and collaborative opportunities for professional learning were paramount benefits to the teachers of the *Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal* programme. The other reported benefits of this programme for schools, teachers, and children can contribute to inclusive classroom environments where language learning is an interactive and mutually beneficial process for practitioners and pupils alike. There is scope for programmes like *Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal* to respond to growing linguistic diversity (CSO, 2024), integrated language curricula (DE, 2019; NCCA, 2024), and the need for teacher professional development opportunities for English as an additional language (EAL) (Devine, 2005; Gardiner-Hyland & Burke, 2018; Murtagh & Francis, 2012; Skinner, 2010; Travers et al., 2010). Wider contextual factors at a national level (i.e., staffing shortages, curriculum demands, lack of appropriate resources for meaningful language integration etc.) must be addressed for the reported benefits herein to be realised in school contexts that are willing to adopt an approach like *Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal* which can embrace, and expand upon, linguistically diverse capital in their school community.

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Integration, pedagogy and assessment in the redeveloped Primary School Curriculum: Innovations, issues and implications

Patrick Burke and Paula Lehane

Abstract

Intensive debate surrounds integration, pedagogy, and assessment in educational research. While these fundamental concepts have regularly been explored individually, they have rarely been considered in tandem with each other. Research (Burke & Lehane, 2023a, 2023b) to support the redevelopment of the *Primary School Curriculum* has highlighted a number of critical issues for their design and enactment, both individually and in concert. In this article, we chart the affordances and challenges of curriculum integration, highlighting principles that might inform its curricular and classroom implementation. The manifold perspectives on pedagogy are synthesised to highlight convergence and contradiction in the available literature. The crucial role of assessment in sustaining ongoing learning is outlined. In synthesising the literature from these areas, the article looks back and projects forwards, identifying meaningful innovations, potential issues and key implications for the coming period of curriculum reform.

Keywords: Curriculum integration, pedagogy, assessment, curriculum, agency

Context and background

Irish primary schools are on the cusp of significant curriculum change. Preliminary proposals (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2016, 2020) have given way to the publication of the final *Primary Curriculum Framework* (Department of Education (DE), 2023a), the foundational document for curriculum in primary and special schools. Arising from the framework, the NCCA has proposed a series of new curriculum specifications for the arts (2024a); science, technology and engineering education (2024b); social and environmental education (2024c); wellbeing (2024d); and modern foreign languages (2024e). Though there are multiple new components of the curriculum to consider, the distinct and interconnected roles of integration, pedagogy and assessment highlighted in the new framework deserve particular attention given recent advancements in educational research. In this article, we draw on two reports commissioned by the NCCA1 (Burke & Lehane, 2023a, 2023b) to explore their application in the classroom. We summarise the latest research on integration, pedagogy, and assessment presented in these reports, while also reflecting on their relevance in the context of previous curriculum

1 The views represented in this article are those of the authors alone.

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reforms in Ireland. Additionally, we identify meaningful innovations, potential issues, and key implications for integration, pedagogy and assessment in the upcoming phase of reform.

The current *Primary School Curriculum*, published in 1999, consists of a series of detailed statements of curriculum content objectives elaborated over six curriculum areas and 11 individual subjects. The updated *Primary Curriculum Framework* (DE, 2023a) consists of five broad curriculum areas for Stage 1 and Stage 2 (junior infants to second class) and 12 individual subjects in Stages 3 and 4 (third to sixth class). This redevelopment has involved extensive deliberation and research over a protracted period, in line with the consultative model to curriculum reform adopted by the NCCA. While this can be viewed as a significant change to the curriculum, it would be incorrect to conceive that this space has remained static since 1999. For example, 2007 saw the publication of guidelines for assessment in the primary curriculum (NCCA, 2007). The publication of *Aistear* in 2009 signalled the first introduction of a curriculum framework for both early childhood settings and infant primary classes (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2009). The form of the 1999 curriculum was also changed as a result of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (DES, 2011), which allocated more time to English/Gaeilge and mathematics. The strategy also led to the early introduction of a revised *Primary Language Curriculum* (DES 2015; 2019) and *Primary Mathematics Curriculum* (DE, 2023b).

One of the most significant new emphases in the *Primary Curriculum Framework* (DE, 2023a, p.5) is the vision of children and teachers as 'agentic' individuals. While definitions vary, the updated framework explains child agency as the "capacity to act independently and make choices about and in their learning" (DE, 2023a, p. 25). For teachers, agency is associated with making "professional decisions" that will allow them to enact the curriculum in a way that best supports their own school context (DE, 2023a, p. 25). The literature on teacher agency suggests that these decisions are influenced by past experiences, practical considerations in the present, and their thoughts and aspirations for the future (Priestley et al., 2015). In this way, teacher agency is considered to be an emergent phenomenon that should not be confused with teacher autonomy. While autonomy is a necessary condition for agency, it is not sufficient. Affording a high level of autonomy to teachers in how they prepare, teach and assess does not necessarily translate into agentic practice. Instead, the development of agentic professionals requires a focus on individual teachers' capacities (e.g. teacher knowledge) while also considering cultural (e.g. values in a school), structural (e.g. relationships within a school) and material (e.g. access to resources) factors (Priestley et al., 2015). For teachers to exercise agency in the classroom, they need a strong knowledge base and a range of supports within the education system. These are essential prerequisites that enable teachers to make informed and effective decisions to enhance children's learning. In the coming sections, we highlight key messages from the research on integration, pedagogy and assessment that should inform decision-making and practice at the teacher, school and system level.

Curriculum integration: harmony, disharmony and the realities of enactment

The notion that subjects should be taught in an integrated manner is a popular one that has stood the test of time in Irish primary curriculum documents:

> The young child is not conscious of subject barriers; he views knowledge as a key to life and his questions concerning the world around him range over the whole field of knowledge. (DE, 1971, p.19)

> For the young child, the distinctions between subjects are not relevant: what is more important is that he or she experiences a coherent learning process that accommodates a variety of elements.(DES, 1999, p.16)

> Children live their lives in an integrated world, and, for most real-world problems, children need to apply knowledge and skills from multiple areas. (DE, 2023a, p. 26)

Based on these statements, curriculum integration could be perceived as a self-evidently beneficial endeavour. Yet, an examination of the theoretical, empirical and practice-focussed literature on the construct paints a more contested picture. For example, the concept of curriculum integration is poorly understood and poorly defined, with confusing and inconsistent use of terminology (Badley, 2009). Most conceptualisations of curriculum integration focus on making connections – be this between the child and the curriculum (e.g. Beane, 1997; Dewey, 1900) or between different disciplines of knowledge – usually in the service of more holistic learning (e.g. Drake & Reid, 2018; Fogarty, 1991). Beyond this philosophical agreement, the exact conceptualisation and operationalisation of integration varies enormously.

Integration is often associated with a child-centred curriculum, in which a child's life is seen as a starting point for learning. This is most notably demonstrated in the progressive education movement associated with Dewey (1900) and further exemplified in the democratically-focussed negotiated integrated curriculum (Beane, 1997; Dowden, 2014; Fitzpatrick et al., 2018). In this form of curriculum, children's concerns (e.g. a question, a problem related to their everyday life) direct a unit of learning, with subject-based knowledge woven in if and when appropriate. Children are afforded a high degree of agency in determining both the what and the how of learning in these units, with teachers acting as facilitators to support learner inquiry. At its face, this form of integration would appear to be in harmony with the strong focus on child agency outlined in the *Primary Curriculum Framework*. It is worth noting, however, that although this form of integration has strong theoretical foundations, it has not been tested beyond small scale qualitative studies internationally (Brough, 2012; Calder & Brough, 2013; Dowden, 2014) and nationally (Fitzpatrick et al., 2018). Furthermore, while child-centred approaches to learning have an important role to play in primary classrooms, teachers must still ensure that children are exposed to facts, concepts and ideas outside of their day to day lives to support the development of knowledge beyond that which is immediately evident or accessible (Young & Muller, 2010).

A thorough systematic review of recent research on curriculum integration (Burke & Lehane, 2023a) indicates that, more often than not, a school subject or collection of subjects forms the starting point for integration. Within the broad disciplinary areas of language, arts, STEM, social and environmental education and wellbeing, different forms and models of integration prevail. Language and literacy has been integrated with other subjects in a variety of ways, through, for example, projects that put literacy skills to use in the service of learning about the local environment (Duke et al., 2021) or learning about the discipline-specific way that literacy is used to support learning in science (Fazio & Gallagher, 2019; Wright & Gotwals, 2017). Looking to arts education, the literature flags that integration can be carried out in a manner that is co-equal, in which arts learning receives a joint focus with the integrated subject. However, other approaches to arts integration reduce the arts to a vehicle for learning in other areas (Bresler, 1995). The literature is replete with examples of the arts being used to further learning in, for example, literacy (Peppler et al., 2014) or numeracy (An et al., 2014). Integrating science, technology, engineering and mathematics in the service of STEM learning has received significant attention in recent years, though Irish research demonstrates that there is much unpacking to be done by teachers in putting this into practice (Hourigan et al., 2021). There is a long tradition of integrating disciplines like history and geography under the curriculum area of social studies in the United States. Writing on the this subject, Hinde (2015) indicates that **healthy** integration occurs when there are meaningful connections forged, **fractured** integration occurs when social studies is linked in a shallow manner, and **stealthy** integration when it is disguised under the heading of other subjects (e.g. only encountering social studies in English reading lessons). Thus it is evident that despite the fact curriculum integration is premised on the idea of harmony between subjects, its enactment can lead to a range of dissonant notes. All subjects may not benefit equally or consistently from this approach.

Some forms of integration have been examined in robust classroom-based studies. Others have not. Approaches that integrate literacy with other curriculum areas have been tested in a range of experimental or quasi-experimental studies (e.g. Duke et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2023; Wright & Gotwals, 2017) and its apparent positive effects have been further supported in meta-analytic reviews (Hartzler, 2000; Hwang et al., 2021). Outside of literacy, the benefits of integration are on a less firm empirical footing. Individual studies included in the NCCA review of curriculum integration (Burke & Lehane, 2023b) chart benefits for domains such as motivation (e.g. Jia et al., 2021) and engagement (e.g. Sáez-López et al., 2016). However, there is a dearth of high quality evidence for integration due to inadequate study design and measurement (e.g. a reliance on researcher-designed measures, inadequate descriptions of sampling procedures; Burke & Lehane, 2023b). While many empirical studies report positive effects of curriculum integration, it is unclear if these positive effects are maintained and beneficial in the long term. It is crucial that curriculum principles that appear to make sense are matched with actual evidence from classroom-based studies. Thus, it is necessary to conduct further robust research on curriculum integration before stretching its application to all areas of learning in the curriculum.

Bearing in mind the many ways in which it can be put into practice and the patchy evidence base, how, then, should we progress with integration in a *Primary Curriculum*

Framework that advocates so strongly for its use? A number of high-level principles provide food for thought as the primary system moves forward (Burke & Lehane, 2023b):

i. Integration is not an end itself – it should only be adopted when there is a meaningful reason for doing so.
ii. Relevant conceptual connections between subjects are more important than the volume of connections.
iii. Integration works well when it responds to context, including children's interests, knowledge and experiences.
iv. There is no one way to integrate the curriculum, but a national curriculum specification or framework should go as far as possible in identifying potential connections (as a scaffold for teachers).
v. Integrated units of work can and should work alongside non-integrated teaching; a balance is needed.
vi. Different teaching and assessment approaches can be used when integrating; while there is potential for project- and inquiry-based units of work there is also the need for more explicit forms of teaching.
vii. Integration comes into its own when it is used to look at a topic in depth or from multiple angles.

As teachers review these principles, it may become clear that there is nothing particularly groundbreaking or revelatory in what the literature tells us about curriculum integration. The benefits of integration must be balanced with the challenges experienced in its implementation. Most importantly though, these principles do not advocate for an 'all or nothing' approach in relation to curriculum integration. Positioning an integrated curriculum against a subject-based curriculum is not helpful given that the reality of classroom life and current research suggests that both need to be considered when appropriate. Genuinely endorsing teacher agency must allow for decisions around curriculum integration at a local level, supported by meaningful guidance from the curriculum framework itself.

Pedagogy: the need for nuance

The *Primary Curriculum Framework* envisages that teachers will use "appropriate and evidence-based pedagogical approaches and strategies to foster children's engagement, ownership and challenge" (DE, 2023a, p.6), framing pedagogy as one of the eight principles of teaching, learning and assessment. The literature proposes a more expansive and all-encompassing view of pedagogy. Alexander (2000) conceptualises **teaching** as the instructional act, and **pedagogy** as the broader discourse that surrounds it (Alexander, 2000). Broadly speaking, it generally refers to the science, art, policies, evidence, theories and values that underpin teaching and learning. The term 'pedagogy' envisages a role for the child – not just the teacher – in how learning unfolds. Pedagogy involves decisions; it is bound up in how classroom time and space are organised (Devine et al., 2023). To think about pedagogy is to think about manifold perspectives on what teaching and learning can and should look (and feel) like. Both the richness and complexity of teaching stem from the many competing and overlapping perspectives on what should inform how it should be

carried out in classrooms. These include, but are not limited to, those outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Perspectives that influence pedagogy, drawn from Burke and Lehane (2023b)

Child-Centred	Children's interests, concerns and preferences are given nuanced attention in teaching and learning.	Dewey, 1900 Lundy, 2007
Creativity	Imaginative, innovative approaches are used to support risk-taking and the exploration of ideas.	Cremin & Chappell, 2021 Dezuanni & Jetnikoff, 2011
Criticality	Prevailing norms and wisdom are challenged; consideration is given to who is and is not represented.	Giroux, 2011 Freire, 1970
Democratic, Global and Socially Just Dialogue	Pedagogy looks outwards and is premised on a sense of equity and action - making a change in the world. Learning and thinking are advanced through purposeful and meaningful talk and discussion.	Ayers et al., 2009 Dewey, 1900 Alexander, 2018 Resnick et al., 2018
Diversity	Teaching builds on, responds to and sustains learners' knowledge and experiences e.g. culture, language.	Ladson-Billings, 1995 Moll et al., 1992
Inclusivity	Differences in learners is to be expected and learning should be made accessible to all using evidence-based approaches.	Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011 Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009
Relationships	Warm, supportive, positive relationships bolster teaching and learning.	Osher et al., 2020 Noddings, 2012
Self-Regulation	Children are supported to reflect on and manage their own thinking, behaviour, emotions and, ultimately, new learning.	Benick et al., 2021 Muijs and Bokhove, 2020

Broader debates and considerations on pedagogy are always at play, whether or not they are obvious at any given moment in the classroom. However, teaching is also very much predicated on skills like classroom management and how to explain new concepts. What the literature says on such skills should also be considered when one examines pedagogy.

Learning from effectiveness studies

Though questions remain over whether we should even attempt to summarise what 'effective pedagogy' looks like (Biesta, 2015; Bogotch et al., 2007), large scale reviews have nonetheless identified a range of observable practices that contribute to successful teaching (e.g. Coe et al., 2020; Creemers & Kyriakidēs, 2012; Ko et al., 2013; Kyriakides et al., 2013; Muijs et al., 2014; Siraj et al., 2014; see Burke & Lehane, 2023b). These reviews highlight the importance of teacher pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1987); that is a teacher's understanding of subject content, how it is presented in the curriculum, and how best to support children in developing this knowledge. Effective teachers carefully orient children to new learning, drawing on their prior knowledge and experiences to deliberately structure and sequence new learning. They are skilled in how to present and explain new concepts and successfully monitor and review children's understanding on an ongoing basis. This learning is premised on proactive classroom management, high expectations for all and the creation of a positive classroom climate. Teachers also support children's cognitive engagement with new learning, including their ability to self-regulate. Interestingly, studies conducted in the Irish context have re-iterated some of the preceding practice documented

internationally, but have tended to further emphasise the relational dimension of good teaching (Devine et al., 2013). The Children's School Lives longitudinal study – drawing on both child and teacher perspectives – has identified the need for "positive, respectful, and nurturing relationships that focus on the holistic development of children" (Devine et al., 2023, p.44). In summary, both cognitive and affective dimensions of teaching require attention in any consideration of what is meant by 'good pedagogy'.

A continuum of approaches

The preceding perspectives and fundamental teaching skills that inform pedagogy can be put into practice in different ways. A range of overarching pedagogical approaches are commonly adopted and recommended, but teacher discretion is pivotal in deciding how and when to deploy them. Examining the research evidence for a given pedagogical approach throws up opportunities and pitfalls (Burke & Lehane, 2023b):

- **Collaborative** approaches to learning in which children work together on a shared learning goal are extremely common and have been shown to be beneficial (Tenenbaum et al., 2020), yet a high level of teacher expertise is needed to ensure actual learning is occurring in this classroom configuration (van Leeuwen & Janssen, 2019).
- **Explicit teaching** is sometimes perceived as an outdated pedagogy, but research evidence suggests that it is a necessary approach, particularly in ensuring that all children in a class achieve new learning outcomes (Burke & Lehane, 2023b; Stockard et al., 2018).
- **Play-based** approaches to learning have found significant favour in recent policy and literature (Hirsh-Pasek, 2009; Mardell et al., 2023; Parker & Thomsen, 2019), yet the empirical evidence base for playful pedagogy is far from conclusive (Education Endowment Foundation, 2023; Lillard et al., 2013; Skene et al., 2022).
- **Project-, problem- and inquiry-based** learning are distinct approaches that are commonly used in integrated learning, but the research shows that teacher guidance, feedback, scaffolds and examples are crucial for their success (Alfieri et al., 2011); unassisted discovery finds less favour in the research.
- **Scaffolding** in a variety of forms is crucial across all pedagogical approaches to ensure success and development for all learners, but scaffolds need to be carefully introduced and faded (Van de pol et al., 2010).
- There has been a steep rise in the use of **technology** to support learning, yet there is no guarantee that the use of devices or other tools will actually improve learning (Lewin et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2023).

Even this brief consideration of pedagogical approaches highlights that considerable nuance is needed in deciding how to go about teaching a given concept or skill. Assessment should assist in this process. The focus on teacher agency in the new curriculum will require that teacher knowledge of the if, how and when of different approaches should be supported. Teachers will also need to be trusted to make local decisions about how best to support a particular group of children, with particular learning goals, at a particular point in time.

Assessment: central rather than additional

The *Primary Curriculum Framework* highlights that assessment is a collaborative process which involves gathering, recording, interpreting, using and reporting information about learners (DE, 2023a, p. 20). Nevertheless, it is important to recall what the desired outcome of the assessment process is. Black and Wiliam (2018) assert that assessment is a "procedure for making inferences about student learning" (p. 553). As a result, precedence should be afforded to the **inferences** that arise from assessment. These inferences could help the teacher decide about the stage of learning that a student has reached (e.g. *Mary is able to fluently read 2nd class texts with no support*) or what should be done next to advance a student's learning (e.g. *Mary now needs to learn how to read multisyllabic words*). When assessment is framed in this way, its value to a teacher's classroom practice and a student's learning is evident.

Foundations of classroom assessment

Many of the perspectives that inform contemporary pedagogy are also highly relevant to assessment, particularly as they relate to inclusion, technology and diversity (e.g. adopting culturally and linguistically responsive approaches; Herrera et al., 2013). Authentic assessment, whereby learners must apply their knowledge, skills or abilities in a way that resembles 'real-life' has also heavily influenced current writing on assessment (Gulikers et al., 2004). However, some things have remained consistent in their importance to classroom assessment: purpose, validity, fairness and reliability. While it has become common for teachers to categorise the **purpose** of a classroom assessment in line with the summative/formative classification system, this may be somewhat counterproductive as a single piece of assessment evidence could support a variety of summative and formative inferences (Lysaght et al., 2019). For example, an end-of-term assessment designed to measure operational knowledge in mathematics may have been originally conceived as a summative measure of learning. Yet it can also be used to identify areas for future learning and instruction. Therefore, instead of classifying an assessment as 'summative' or 'formative', it is more important that teachers determine from the outset what information they need to gather to support particular inferences about a student's learning.

Given that the broad purpose of classroom assessment is to support future learning, the **validity** of a classroom assessment is closely linked to the success of future instruction. Assessments that are specific enough to inform a teacher's 'next steps' can support the best inferences on student learning. These assessments should be **fair** and provide all students with an opportunity to make what they know visible to their teacher. Finally, the assessment data gathered by teachers should be **reliable**, a crucial prerequisite for validity. Within a classroom context, reliable assessments should provide sufficient evidence about a student's learning, usually in relation to a particular objective (Brookhart, 2018). This can inform a teacher's understanding of a learner, which can be refined over time with daily interactions and multiple samplings of student work (Kane & Wools, 2020).

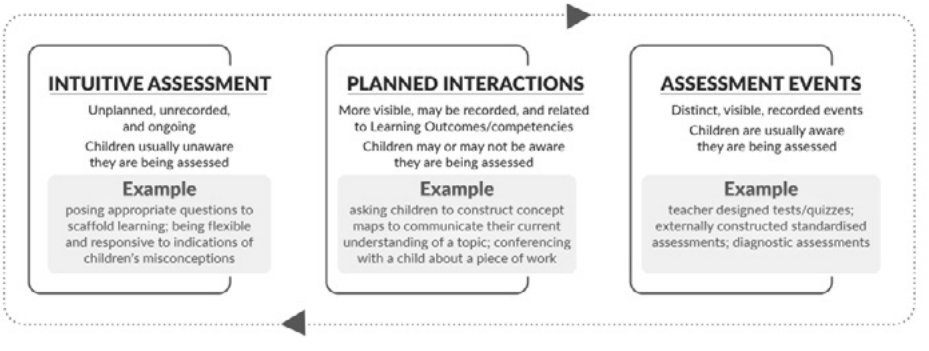
Taking these ideas into consideration, teachers' assessment practice can be distilled into three key questions to guide a teacher's approach to classroom assessment (Burke & Lehane, 2023b):

1. What do I want to know from the information I will gather?
2. Have I gathered enough information to have an accurate overview of the specific knowledge, skill or understanding of interest?
3. How well does the information that has been gathered justify my future actions?

Assessment approaches

Answering the previous questions should help teachers to design assessments that 'bridge the gap' between teaching and learning (Wiliam, 2013). Lysaght et al. (2019, p. 5) note that various types of assessment can also occur on a spectrum "ranging from 'organic' types of assessment to more 'planned' or 'visible' types of assessment". This idea, as discussed by Heritage (2007) and Shavelson et al. (2008) has also been adopted by Ireland's *Primary Curriculum Framework*, albeit with slightly different nomenclature (DE, 2023a, p. 22; see Figure 2). This representation of assessment in the *Primary Curriculum Framework* represents a significant 'shift' in how assessment is conceptualised in Irish curriculum documents and requires teachers to see assessment as something that is "contextualised, interactive and evolving" (Chen & Bonner, 2020, p. 3) rather than something that is static and divorced from pedagogy.

Figure 1: A Continuum of Assessment (DE, 2023a, p. 22)



According to this model, evidence about learning can be derived from various assessment approaches that differ in formality and frequency (but not importance). The assessment approaches currently advocated for use in Irish primary schools are outlined in the *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Schools* (NCCA, 2007) and *Aistear: Guidelines for Good Practice* (NCCA, 2009). Except for some differences in terminology, the assessment methods outlined in these documents are still broadly supported by research literature. They are briefly outlined in alphabetical order in

Table 2. It is important to acknowledge that any of these approaches can also be supported by a range of digital tools, e.g. gamification software to support classroom tests (See et al., 2022), use of Generative Artificial Intelligence to provide feedback (Steiss et al., 2024).

Table 2: Assessment approaches, drawn from Burke and Lehane (2023b)

Approach	Definition
Classroom Tests	Any written or oral assignment that consists of a series of questions/problems that must be answered by individual learners within a limited time frame in a classroom context (Brookhart, 2015)
Feedback	Any information provided to a learner (e.g. from peers, from teachers) regarding their performance or understanding (Hattie & Timperley, 2007)
Observation	The action or process of closely monitoring something or someone in a particular context (Pyle & Danniels, 2017)
Oral Questioning/ Discussion	The ways in which students' thinking can be provoked or elicited and how teachers interact with the responses to guide teaching and learning (Coe et al., 2020b)
Performance Based Assessments	The demonstration of a skill or competency to represent learning (Brookhart, 2015)
Rubrics/Shared Success Criteria	A set of descriptions indicating standards of attainment for different levels of performance, success, or competency (Brookhart, 2015)
Self-Assessment	The evaluation of one's own work and making an informed judgement about it (Andrade, 2019)
Standardised Tests	Norm- or criterion-referenced tests that assess the knowledge or abilities of learners under controlled administrative and scoring guidelines (Murchan & Shiel, 2017)

There is a significant body of research to guide teachers on the 'when, what and how' of each of these approaches (Burke & Lehane, 2023b). However, no one approach should be considered 'superior' than another as they should all inform a "set of habits" (Lysaght et al., 2019, p. 5) for teachers. For example, Sanchez et al. (2017) found that students in 3rd-12th grade classrooms who engaged in self-grading (a form of self-assessment) performed better on subsequent assessments than those who did not. Indeed, there is growing evidence to suggest that engaging in self-assessment can support motivation, learning and metacognition (Chen & Bonner, 2020; Muijs & Bokhove, 2020). Nevertheless, self-assessment is not an approach that can automatically support effective assessment practice. Keane and Griffin (2018) examined self-assessment practices with Irish primary and post-primary learners. Eighty-five children from 2nd class, 5th class and transition year wrote an English essay and later self-assessed their work using rubrics. The findings illustrated an overall weak relationship between their self-assessed performance on a rubric and the actual scores that the researchers calculated. However, learners' self-assessment of their work became more accurate as they aged. Strong correlations also emerged between higher prior literacy attainment and children's accuracy in self-assessments. The findings suggest that primary school children with low literacy attainment display difficulty making accurate self-assessments of their academic work in literacy. The authors proposed that there may be a cumulative value to the process of self-assessment, i.e. practice effects may enhance the accuracy of students' self-assessments over time. Consequently, applying this particular assessment approach (or indeed any of those outlined in Table 2) requires

teachers to consider if and when that approach is most beneficial to the process of teaching and learning. While professional learning opportunities and systemic support (e.g exemplars) would develop teachers' capacities to make such decisions, time to adapt to these practices is also needed.

From research to reality: what now for integration, pedagogy and assessment?

As we move towards the enactment of a new *Primary Curriculum Framework*, it is crucial that we build on what is known from scholarly and empirical considerations of integration, pedagogy and assessment. A number of meaningful innovations and potential issues can be charted at this juncture, which we now outline in turn. We then highlight implications for the coming period of curriculum reform and related professional learning.

Meaningful innovations

The introduction of a new curriculum is a relatively rare occurrence in Ireland. However, it should be evident from the forerunning review of the literature that many of the key tenets of the 1999 *Primary School Curriculum* have stood the test of time. Though there are unmistakable changes in the lives of children in and outside of school, many of the high level principles for pedagogy and assessment imbued in the 1999 curriculum and related documentation (e.g. NCCA *Assessment Guidelines*, 2007) remain relevant. This provides a firm foundation on which to build and extend teachers' knowledge and practice in the coming period. The underpinning focus on agency in the *Primary Curriculum Framework* is an ambitious yet justified aspiration. If supported by a shared sense of what agency actually means (and the system-level and local-level support it demands), it has the potential to provide a common vision that has meaningful import for how we view children and teachers in the classroom.

Many of the upcoming curricular changes are logical and are in alignment with current ideas about 'good practice' for primary education. For example, the new curriculum reaffirms the idea that integration is a worthy educational exercise. Many of the most pressing issues of our time – like climate breakdown – may be best addressed in a cross-curricular manner. The relatively new focus on playful pedagogy, brought to the fore in Aistear (DES, 2009) will be more firmly folded into the curriculum framework itself. Where deployed appropriately, play holds potential for rethinking how children engage with the curriculum throughout the primary school years. Consolidating the curricular guidance for the early primary years will avoid the duplication and potential divergence experienced in referring to both the 1999 curriculum and the *Aistear* framework. The inclusion of relationships as one of the principles of learning, teaching and assessment (DE, 2023a, p. 6) reflects the growing evidence that appropriate teacher-children relationships have an important impact on a range of dimensions including motivation, engagement and achievement (Wang et al., 2022). Signalling the importance of relationships in the curriculum documents provides a clear message to schools about the importance of climate and culture and the necessity to take the time necessary to develop these areas. The *Primary Curriculum Framework's* (DE, 2023) deliberate move away from the rigid dichotomisation of assessment practices into 'summative' and 'formative' is also a positive

one that represents current recommendations from the field of educational assessment (Black & Wiliam, 2018). This approach should support more flexible and appropriate assessment practices that can effectively inform a teacher's classroom practice.

Extensive reviews of the literature have been conducted to inform the new curriculum (Burke & Lehane, 2023a, 2023b; Murphy et al., 2023; Nohilly et al., 2023; O'Sullivan et al., 2023; Pike et al., 2023). These reviews provide a strong starting point for new innovations in the curriculum, as long as serious attention is given to the intricacies and nuances they outline.

Potential issues

The literature on integration, pedagogy and assessment also charts potential issues that will need concerted attention and action in the coming period.

Notwithstanding the potential benefits of a more **integrated curriculum**, proposals for its enactment must acknowledge that "cross-curricular teaching is substantively, temporally and organisationally much more complex than traditional separate-subject teaching" (Volk et al., 2017, p.5). The previous research makes clear that most instances of high quality curriculum integration have occurred in particular circumstances. It is not uncommon for integrated units of work in areas like literacy and STEM to involve significant professional learning supports for teachers, for example, in the form of partnerships with university researchers or professional development coaches (Hourigan et al., 2021; Saraniero et al., 2014). Furthermore, successful integration is often premised on the provision of extensive exemplars or instructional materials (e.g. Brugar, 2012; Duke et al., 2021; Follong et al., 2022); teachers in such studies were rarely left entirely to their own devices to generate units of work or resources to enact integrated teaching. The enactment of a newly integrated curriculum will face significant roadblocks in the absence of appropriate resourcing and exemplification. Relatedly, while integration is sometimes framed as a way of managing curriculum time pressures, the evidence would suggest that it requires greater time investment from teachers in its planning, at least in earlier stages (e.g. Bravo & Cervetti, 2014; Brugar, 2012; Casady, 2015; Gomez Zwiep, 2016; Gray et al., 2022; Hubbard et al., 2020). One of the common motives in integrating the curriculum is to avoid redundancies and overlap across curriculum subjects. The problem of curriculum overload has been well documented in the Irish context (NCCA, 2010). Though integrated curriculum areas (language, STEM, SEE, wellbeing, arts) are now in train, this, alone, is unlikely to prove a panacea on this front. There is also a risk that the ostensible aim of reducing overload through integration will lead to **additional** overload if subjects must be taught separately **and** integrated in order to fulfil curriculum learning outcomes. All involved in primary schooling should understand that integration has benefits, but that these are not universally applicable. Integration also has downsides.

Looking to research and curriculum beyond our shores provides illustrations of critical challenges that might be expected in integrating the curriculum. Some of these challenges relate to how the curriculum is presented; insufficient clarity on how connections might be made reduces the likelihood that they will be made. This issue is highlighted in the *Scottish Curriculum for Excellence* (Harvie, 2018). Challenges also exist if the connections are too

intricate and hard to navigate, as presented in the Australian national curriculum (Moss et al., 2019). There is also a particular need to ensure that focussing on integration does not undermine the clear specification of subject content knowledge. This is needed to support a shared understanding of curriculum progression in all areas. The *Scottish Curriculum for Excellence* provides a cautionary tale of the unintended consequences experienced when new knowledge is not clearly agreed and very broad learning outcomes require excessive teacher interpretation (Priestley et al., 2024; Priestley & Sinnema, 2014). The final curriculum specifications will need to very carefully outline progression in disciplinary knowledge and how cross-disciplinary connections can be made.

Turning to **pedagogy**, a number of potential obstacles present themselves at this juncture. A 'one size fits all' approach is likely to do a disservice to children. A curriculum (or policy) that does not acknowledge the need for a continuum of pedagogical approaches also does a disservice to teachers. Teaching is a complex activity. It would be unwise for overly reductive messages about pedagogy to take hold (e.g. that the new curriculum means everything is taught through play), as these would be a drastic oversimplification of what the breadth of the literature on pedagogy holds. The dichotomous positioning of a teacher as either the 'guide on the side' or the 'sage on the stage' must be avoided, as nuanced understandings of pedagogy are necessary. This requires concomitantly nuanced professional learning and development for teachers. Developing teacher agency in the context of a new curriculum will require support at macro-, meso-, and micro-levels, giving due attention to the development of teacher pedagogical knowledge (Ó Breacháin, 2022).

The role of **assessment** when integrated learning occurs is particularly complex to consider. Curriculum integration involves multiple disciplines or subjects, each with their own unique features and conceptual progressions. While it may seem appropriate to suggest that learning in each subject should be assessed separately, it is not so straightforward. For example, in many studies examining curriculum integration, the outcome measures often pay little attention to the impact of integration on subjects other than literacy or numeracy. There is little emphasis on the impact of curriculum integration on, for example, the development of artistic skills or on historical knowledge. A 'curriculum hierarchy' exists in many subjects, something which teachers themselves acknowledge (Kneen et al., 2020). Consequently, it can be challenging to outline what core learning should be assessed to ascertain if learners have developed the requisite knowledge and competences across **multiple** disciplines. Furthermore, without any precise specifications on the meaningful cross-disciplinary/cross-curricular links that may exist in a particular integrated unit, it will be difficult for teachers to design and use assessments that assess **integrated** learning. Even if clear learning objectives and criteria for integrated contexts can be achieved, other difficulties may arise, for example how well teachers can gather and interpret the data necessary to judge how well disciplinary and cross-disciplinary learning is demonstrated. Notwithstanding the specific challenge of engaging in assessment within an integrated curriculum, the 'standard' challenges associated with classroom assessment remain. Teachers need to have access to a suite of assessment practices and methods. In line with the foundational ideas of validity, reliability and fairness, teachers should be deliberate about matching their selected assessment methods to their specific instructional goals. They should also then be able to interpret the evidence gathered to draw valid conclusions

about their learners' achievement and progress. Doing this successfully requires a high level of teacher assessment literacy and support for enactment at a school and system level (Heitink et al., 2016; Schildkamp et al., 2020).

Key implications: learning from previous curriculum reform

In moving from theory, research and curriculum documents to actual teaching and learning in classrooms, it is important to consider the broader context. We can be guided to at least some extent by our previous experience of curriculum on this front. One of the most substantial contributions to the enactment of the 1999 curriculum came in the form of curriculum seminars, which involved the closure of schools to enable teacher professional development and learning. The Murchan et al. (2005) evaluation of the Primary Curriculum Support Programme (PSCP) noted broad support for these seminars, while also noting the need for more locally contextualised forms of professional learning. An over-reliance on seminars would not find favour in the more recent literature on professional learning (Cordingley et al., 2015; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Timperley et al., 2007). The evaluation also flagged an issue that is particularly pertinent at this juncture - the need to support integration through professional development that is not subject-based alone (Murchan et al., 2005, p.9):

> Where possible, support for individual subjects in isolation from other subjects should be avoided. Instead, programmes of support should reflect the integrated nature of the Primary School Curriculum. Special training should be provided for support personnel to enable them to fulfil this role.

This, among other findings from the Murchan et al. (2005) review, must be borne in mind in the coming period (e.g. the need to balance professional development conducted during and outside school time; the need to ensure that an excessive focus on curriculum planning does not come at the expense of actual teaching and learning).

Unfortunately, no formal review has been conducted on the most recent curriculum change at primary level, the *Primary Language Curriculum* (DES, 2015; 2019), despite the fact that we are close to ten years since curriculum seminars commenced in November 2015. The available research highlights difficulties in its early enactment (Mac Domhnaill & Nic an Bhaird, 2022; McGarry, 2017), with challenges also noted by the Inspectorate (Department of Education Inspectorate, 2022). The consultation on the draft *Primary Language Curriculum* for 3rd to 6th class (NCCA, 2018) identified challenges in the use of broad learning outcomes in the 2015 version of the document (junior infants to second class), particularly for teachers' planning. Yet, a more forensic evaluation of this curriculum change has not been carried out in advance of a wholescale move to a learning outcome structure. It is crucial that the system does not experience roll-out amnesia when moving towards enactment of the new curriculum; we ignore lessons learned from the 1999 and *Primary Language Curriculum* to our detriment.

The NCCA (2022) has set forth a vision for the conducive conditions needed for systemwide curriculum change, with a focus on timing and pacing, communications,

resourcing, alignment and coherence. The need for "ongoing, flexible and sustained systemwide professional learning" (p.10) is made clear. These conditions are a necessary starting point if there is to be a shared vision from the teaching population. Buy-in is a necessary precursor to enactment. As the advisory panel for the curriculum framework outlines: "we know only too well from research and from practice that enactment is the ultimate testing ground, the reality, and the day-to-day essence of primary education." (Hayward et al., 2022, p.27). Curriculum is enacted in context. The current context for primary education must be borne in mind as we move from consultation to confirmed curriculum, and from there to the classroom. Notable pressures on the system at present include: shortages of primary school teachers (Harford & Fleming, 2023); inadequate availability of supports for children with special educational needs (Phelan, 2023; O'Brien, 2024); a wide sense of burnout amongst teachers (Irish National Teachers' Organisation, 2022); administrative burdens on school leaders (Irish Primary Principals' Network, 2022); and the possible long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's learning (e.g. Kinsella et al., 2024). The *Primary Curriculum Framework* and its associated specifications arrive to classrooms that are far busier than those that received the box of curriculum books in 1999. True engagement with teachers will need to meaningfully grapple with the prevailing conditions in classrooms.

In moving towards a new curriculum, there is a need to build responsiveness into the system. The level of 'check-in' during previous curriculum enactment has been patchy at best. The primary curriculum reviews published during the implementation of the 1999 curriculum focused on English, visual arts and mathematics (NCCA, 2005), followed by Gaeilge, science and SPHE (NCCA, 2008). Though chief inspectors' reports published during this period provide some level of insight into broader curriculum enactment, the remaining subjects of the curriculum (e.g. music, drama, geography) were never afforded the same level of evaluative attention and review. As noted, this lack of evaluation extends to the more recently published *Primary Language Curriculum* (DES, 2015; 2019). This poses challenges for the thoughtful enactment of a new curriculum. The preceding research on integration, pedagogy and assessment outlines what we know from primarily international literature on how each idea can be put into practice in a worthwhile manner. However, we have limited information to paint a picture of what is currently happening in Irish schools. Relatively limited data exists to answer questions such as: '*To what extent is the curriculum already integrated in practice?*' '*To what extent do teachers balance explicit teaching with more exploratory approaches?*' '*How do teachers deploy different assessment strategies?*' While some efforts to address this lack of data have been made thanks to the Children's Schools Lives Study (Devine et al., 2023), more is needed to ensure that we adopt a robust approach to the evaluation of our approaches in the Irish education system (see Gilleece & Clerkin, 2024). In the absence of this high level data, it is very difficult to ascertain just how far (or how short) schools will need to travel in putting the new primary curriculum into practice. This has ramifications for the prioritisation and design of professional learning at a national level.

Recommendations

It is important that the process of curriculum renewal looks backwards as well as outwards, before looking forwards. Some of the potential sticking points in the enactment of the new curriculum may be addressed by:

- Formally reviewing the enactment of the *Primary Language Curriculum* (the first learning outcomes-focused specification at primary level) and building on the successes and challenges identified therein.
- Meaningfully enacting the feedback and recommendations of teachers expressed during the consultation on draft specifications.
- Systematically piloting new curriculum specifications before expecting more widespread enactment.
- Giving serious attention to some of the difficulties experienced in other jurisdictions, e.g. challenges in identifying knowledge progression in the *Scottish Curriculum for Excellence*, another curriculum that prioritises 'interdisciplinary' learning in an outcomes-based structure (OECD, 2021).
- Ensuring that the ecological nature of teacher agency is genuinely acknowledged; broader issues in the education system will inevitably influence how a new curriculum is received and enacted.

Taking into account current research and past experiences regarding Irish curricular reform, some key actions need to be taken to support the enactment of this latest curricular evolution:

- Time and space will be crucial for a newly shared understanding of integration, pedagogy and assessment to be built; it is important that enactment in practice is not equated with enactment in planning documents.
- Professional learning for the curriculum must pay due attention to what has worked (and not worked) in previous curriculum reform; the research underpinnings for this professional learning should be made transparent.
- The fact that resourcing is a significant barrier to curriculum integration must be addressed; appropriate exemplification and instructional materials will be crucial; these can provide a starting point for teachers and schools.

The research on integration, pedagogy and assessment does not provide simple solutions. Therefore, nuanced understandings and applications should be embraced as we move forward with a new curriculum.

Conclusion

The forthcoming changes to the Irish primary school curriculum signify a landmark in the history of Irish primary education. The 2023 redevelopment of the curriculum has been guided by extensive consultation and reviews of empirical and theoretical literature. While some may think we are closing the book on the 1999 curriculum, it is more prudent to think that we are turning the page and learning from what has gone before. The success of the *Primary Curriculum Framework* will depend heavily on the extent to which teachers are

empowered to practise integration, pedagogy and assessment in a research-informed way. The system at large owes it to children, teachers and broader school communities to ensure that both the history of the old and evidence of the new is used to guide our progress.

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Inclusive practices in primary education

Sharon Grady

Abstract

This paper explores inclusive practices in primary education through the lens of special educational needs (SEN), drawing on various international models and their implications for educators. It examines the dynamic nature of inclusion, highlighting the critical importance of collaboration, professional learning, and equity in fostering inclusive environments. By identifying barriers to inclusion and proposing actionable strategies for educators, this paper aims to empower teachers to create classrooms where all learners can thrive. It emphasises the importance of ongoing and relevant teacher professional learning to meet the needs of children with SEN in our classrooms. By embracing inclusive practices, we can cultivate a supportive atmosphere that values every student's unique contributions, ensuring that all children have the opportunity to succeed.

Keywords: Inclusion, inclusion in primary education, inclusive practices, autism, neurodiversity, neurodivergence

Introduction: What is inclusive education?

Inclusion in education has evolved significantly over recent decades, driven by an increasing recognition of the rights of all students to receive an equitable and quality education. The concept of inclusion is multifaceted, encompassing various definitions and frameworks that reflect different educational philosophies and practices. Inclusion is founded on the principle that students with special or additional learning needs belong in mainstream education. A school that is inclusive is one where all students learn together, regardless of their difficulties or differences. An inclusive school, therefore, accommodates the needs of all students while embracing diversity as a means of enriching learning (NCSE, 2006).

UNESCO's interpretation of inclusive education is based on the principle of providing equal opportunities and access for all individuals, regardless of their backgrounds, in both social and educational contexts. Inclusion seeks to create a society and educational system that embraces diversity, removes barriers, and promotes equity, ensuring that every person can fully participate, learn, and thrive, regardless of their differences, abilities, or backgrounds, "Every learner matters and matters equally." (UNESCO 2017, p.12)

The implementation of inclusive education still faces many challenges, hindering its holistic integration into education systems. According to Clough and Corbett (2022), inclusive education is a debatable term, often overused by politicians, administrators, and academics. Inclusion is not one entity. It is a collection of beliefs, values, ideals, and practices.

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This paper will employ the definitions of Ainscow et al. (2013); inclusion can be understood through six interconnected perspectives: community, curriculum, culture, pedagogy, policy, and practice. This paper primarily utilises the special educational needs (SEN) perspective, which emphasises the importance of understanding the diverse needs of learners and ensuring that educational practices accommodate these differences.

Roger Slee's work provides a critical perspective on inclusive education, raising essential questions: 'Who's in?', 'who's out?', and 'who decides?' (Slee, 2011). His contributions, particularly his rethinking of inclusion and the power dynamics involved, offer educators a framework to understand and address the complexities of inclusive practices. Viewing inclusion through this lens highlights the interplay of societal, institutional, and political factors that influence who is included or excluded, from policy development to daily classroom interactions, pushing for systemic change to achieve true equity in education. Yet, persistent barriers, including systemic inequalities, cultural biases, and limited resources, continue to hinder the realisation of inclusive practices in schools worldwide.

This article embarks on an exploration of inclusive practices in primary education, guided by Slee and Ainscow et al., and informed by contemporary research and real-world experiences. The aim is to critically examine the dynamics of inclusion within primary school settings and to empower educators, with the knowledge and practical strategies to foster truly inclusive environments.

Throughout this article, understanding inclusion in primary education, embracing neurodiversity, the role of generosity of spirit, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and international models of inclusive education will be discussed, as well as practical examples that will be drawn upon to illustrate the implementation of inclusive practices in primary schools. From innovative teaching strategies to successful collaboration initiatives, these examples offer valuable insights into the transformative potential of inclusive education.

However, this exploration also shines a light on the challenges that persist in the pursuit of inclusion. Barriers are highlighted like systemic barriers, lack of resources, and time constraints that impact on fully embracing inclusion in the primary school environment.

As the complexities of inclusion are navigated, it is imperative to remain steadfast in our commitment to building a more inclusive and equitable future for generations to come.

Understanding inclusion in primary education

Inclusion in primary education goes beyond the physical presence of students in classrooms; it involves creating environments where every child feels welcomed, valued, and supported. The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in Ireland has conducted extensive research into inclusion in primary schools, addressing both the progress made and the challenges that persist.

The NCSE's research indicates that effective inclusion is not just about placing students with SEN in mainstream classrooms. It requires a comprehensive approach that includes appropriate teaching methods, curriculum modifications, and the development of a school culture that promotes support and understanding. Robert Slee's framework highlights the need to consider the various elements that influence inclusion, including policy and practice, which can affect how schools implement inclusive strategies (Slee, 2011).

Addressing these elements can help create more effective inclusion practices in schools.

Despite the progress made, challenges remain. Many teachers report feeling ill-equipped to address the diverse needs of their students, which can obstruct the implementation of inclusive practices (NCSE, 2017). This concern highlights the need for ongoing professional development and training in inclusive strategies. Research shows that equipping educators with the right skills is vital for meeting the varied requirements of all learners (Hornby, 2015). Inclusion is grounded in the principles of equity, fairness, and respect for diversity, and these should guide educational decisions.

To promote equity in education, schools must actively work to remove systemic barriers that hinder the participation of certain student groups. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds or with learning disabilities often face unique challenges requiring targeted interventions. The NCSE advocates for collaboration among teachers, parents, and support staff to ensure all students receive adequate support. This aligns with Ainscow et al.'s definition of inclusion, which emphasises the need for addressing the diverse needs of all learners (Ainscow, 2016).

In Irish primary schools, special education teachers (SETs) and special needs assistants (SNAs) play crucial roles in supporting students with SEN. SETs provide in-class support, co-teaching, and develop personalised learning strategies tailored to individual student needs. Their expertise enables them to work closely with classroom teachers to adapt curricula and teaching methods, ensuring that all students have access to learning materials in a manner that suits their abilities. The co-teaching model, where SETs and classroom teachers collaborate, allows for differentiated instruction, ensuring that diverse learning needs are met within the classroom setting.

Similarly, SNAs play a vital role in the classroom by fostering meaningful relationships with students and helping them navigate their learning environments. They support students with SEN by co-regulating emotions and behaviours, identifying areas where additional assistance may be required. The presence of SNAs enables individualised attention, facilitating greater engagement in activities and helping students to access the curriculum. This support can also promote participation in group activities, enhancing social integration and collaboration among peers, which is essential for the holistic development of all students. Together, SETs and SNAs contribute to a more inclusive environment by ensuring that students with diverse needs are supported both academically and socially.

Additionally, research by the NCSE indicates that parental involvement is crucial in fostering inclusive education. When parents are engaged in their child's learning, they can advocate for necessary supports and collaborate with educators to create effective interventions. This partnership is essential for building a cohesive support network that empowers students with SEN. Schools that emphasise communication and collaboration with parents tend to see improved outcomes, reinforcing the need for strong home-school connections (NCSE, 2019).

The NCSE also highlights the importance of inclusive policies and practices at the systemic level. The Department of Education's policy document, *Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs in Schools* (2020), outlines schools' responsibilities in promoting inclusive education. These policies offer guidance on teaching strategies, resource

allocation, and the need for ongoing professional development for teachers. Schools must adopt these policies as part of their commitment to providing equitable education for all.

The *Looking at Our Schools* framework further underscores the importance of inclusion by providing guidance on how schools can reflect on their practices regarding SEN support. It encourages schools to evaluate their effectiveness in creating an inclusive environment, focusing on areas for development that can enhance teaching and learning for all students.

In summary, inclusion in primary education is a complex process requiring a collective effort from all stakeholders. The NCSE's research underscores the importance of developing environments that support diversity and promote equity. By understanding the various factors that influence inclusion, educators can better address the challenges they face. Ultimately, creating a culture of inclusion in Irish primary schools is about more than just accommodating students with SEN; it's about improving the educational experience for all children and ensuring that every student has the opportunity to succeed.

Embracing neurodiversity: a paradigm shift

A crucial aspect of fostering inclusion in primary education is embracing the neurodiversity paradigm. Neurodiversity recognises the diverse range of neurological variations among individuals and emphasises the value of this diversity in society (Armstrong, 2010). Rather than viewing differences in cognition and behaviour as deficits to be remedied, neurodiversity celebrates them as unique expressions of human variation. This perspective not only enriches the educational experience but also promotes a more inclusive and accepting environment for all students.

Integrating the neurodiversity paradigm into inclusive practices requires a fundamental shift in mindset. Instead of focusing solely on accommodating neurodivergent students within existing frameworks, educators must strive to create environments that honour and leverage their strengths. This entails adopting flexible teaching strategies, providing tailored support, and promoting inclusive pedagogies that recognise and value diverse ways of learning (Armstrong, 2010). For instance, teachers can incorporate varied assessment methods that allow neurodivergent students to demonstrate their understanding in ways that resonate with their learning styles.

Creating a culture that acknowledges neurodiversity encourages collaboration and understanding among students. By providing opportunities for peer interactions, educators can help students develop empathy and appreciation for the differences that exist within their classrooms. This collaborative atmosphere not only benefits neurodivergent students but also enriches the learning experience for all, preparing them to thrive in an increasingly diverse world.

Embracing neurodiversity is essential for creating an inclusive educational environment that values each student's unique contributions. By adopting a strengths-based approach and fostering a growth mindset, teachers can facilitate learning experiences that empower all students to reach their full potential.

The role of generosity of spirit

Central to the ethos of inclusion in primary education is the concept of generosity of spirit. At its essence, generosity of spirit embodies empathy, compassion, and a genuine commitment to understanding and supporting others (Hornby, 2019). It transcends mere tolerance or acceptance, fostering an environment where differences are not only acknowledged but celebrated.

Inclusive practices grounded in generosity of spirit prioritise relationship-building, empathy, and mutual respect. Educators cultivate authentic connections with students, families, and communities, fostering a sense of belonging and trust within the learning environment (Hornby, 2019). This spirit of generosity extends beyond individual interactions to shape institutional policies and practices, ensuring that they are inclusive, equitable, and responsive to the diverse needs of all learners.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

UDL offers a flexible framework for curriculum design, aiming to accommodate the diverse needs of all learners. By providing multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression, UDL ensures that students can access and participate in learning activities effectively (CAST, 2018). For teachers, this approach involves creating lessons that are adaptable to various learning styles, abilities, and backgrounds. By incorporating varied instructional methods – such as visual aids, hands-on activities, and opportunities for verbal and written expression – teachers can support a more inclusive classroom environment. UDL shifts the focus from retrofitting the curriculum for specific students to designing lessons that proactively embrace student diversity from the outset (Meyer et al., 2014). This approach fosters greater student engagement and learning success, as it removes barriers to participation and promotes equity in education.

International models of inclusive education

The examination of international models of inclusive education provides valuable insights into effective practices and strategies that can be adapted to local contexts. This section will focus on the inclusive practices observed in Finland and Japan, highlighting the key elements that contribute to their success.

Finland's inclusive education system

Finland is often lauded for its inclusive education system, which prioritises equity and access for all students. One of the fundamental principles of Finnish education is the belief that every child is entitled to a high-quality education, regardless of their background or abilities. This philosophy is rooted in a commitment to individualised support and the provision of resources that cater to diverse learning needs (Rosenblum, 2016).

Central to Finland's approach is the emphasis on teacher professionalism and continuous professional development. Finnish educators are required to undergo extensive training, which equips them with the skills and knowledge to implement inclusive practices effectively. This ongoing professional development ensures that teachers are well-versed

in inclusive pedagogies, enabling them to adapt their teaching methods to accommodate different learning styles and abilities (Hornby, 2014).

Another key feature of Finland's inclusive education system is the strong focus on collaboration among educators, families, and support services. Teachers work closely with special education professionals and other specialists to develop individualised learning plans for students with special educational needs. This collaborative approach fosters a sense of shared responsibility for each student's success and ensures that all learners receive the support they need to thrive (Ainscow et al., 2013).

Furthermore, Finland's educational policies promote a culture of inclusion by addressing systemic barriers to learning. The Finnish government has implemented various initiatives aimed at reducing educational inequalities, such as equitable resource allocation and targeted support for disadvantaged students. These policies reflect a commitment to social justice and the belief that all students deserve equal opportunities to succeed (Slee, 2011).

Japan's inclusive education system

Japan's approach to inclusive education offers another compelling model for educators seeking to foster inclusive environments. Rooted in a culture that values collaboration, respect, and academic excellence, Japan's inclusive education practices provide valuable insights into promoting equity and diversity within schools.

A cornerstone of Japan's inclusive education framework is its focus on whole-child development and holistic support systems. Japan places a strong emphasis on nurturing students' social, emotional, and academic well-being, recognising that each aspect is integral to their overall growth and success. Through comprehensive support structures that encompass academic, social, and emotional needs, Japan ensures that all students receive the individualised support and resources they require to thrive in the classroom (Takahashi, 2016).

In practice, Japanese schools implement various strategies that foster inclusivity. For instance, the use of *shido shido* – an approach where teachers work in tandem with special education professionals – allows for tailored instruction that meets the needs of individual students. Regular community meetings invite input from parents and local stakeholders, promoting a shared responsibility for student success. Additionally, Japanese schools often incorporate peer support systems, where older students mentor younger or less-abled peers, cultivating an environment of empathy and collaboration.

Japan's commitment to teacher professionalism and ongoing professional development plays a crucial role in promoting inclusive practices within schools. Educators in Japan undergo rigorous training and continuous professional learning opportunities to deepen their understanding of inclusive pedagogies, differentiation strategies, and effective classroom management techniques. By investing in the professional growth of teachers, Japan equips educators with the knowledge, skills, and resources necessary to create inclusive learning environments that meet the diverse needs of all students (Shimizu, 2017).

Japan's cultural emphasis on collaboration and collective responsibility fosters a sense of community and inclusivity within schools. Educators, parents, students, and community stakeholders work collaboratively to create supportive networks that prioritise the well-

being and success of every student. Through regular communication, partnership-building initiatives, and community engagement activities, Japan fosters a culture of belonging and shared responsibility for the academic and social development of all learners (LeTendre & Shimizu, 2018).

Japan's commitment to educational equity and social justice underscores its inclusive education agenda. Japan recognises the importance of addressing systemic barriers to learning, including socio-economic disparities and cultural biases, through targeted policies and initiatives. By promoting equitable resource allocation, reducing educational inequalities, and fostering a culture of inclusivity, Japan strives to create a level playing field where every student has an equal opportunity to succeed (Shimizu & LeTendre, 2019).

Barriers to inclusion in the classroom

While inclusive education is a widely endorsed goal, several barriers continue to obstruct its full realisation within the classroom. These barriers stem from systemic issues, resource limitations, and gaps in support structures. A critical step towards creating an inclusive learning environment involves recognising and addressing these obstacles.

One of the more subtle barriers is the presence of unconscious bias or blind spots towards marginalised groups. Such attitudes, often unintentional, can perpetuate exclusionary practices that affect students' sense of belonging and participation (Slee, 2011). Social justice demands a focus on combating these biases to ensure that all students, including those from racial or ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ individuals, and those from low-income backgrounds, feel valued and supported in their academic journey.

A significant challenge is the lack of comprehensive teacher training in inclusive pedagogy. Many educators may not have the necessary tools to effectively support diverse learners. Without sufficient professional development, they may struggle to adapt their teaching strategies to accommodate different learning styles and needs (Dowdy & Furlong, 2019). Time constraints and curriculum overload exacerbate this issue, leaving teachers overwhelmed and unable to prioritise inclusive practices. As a result, some students may not receive the academic support they require.

Resource limitations also play a critical role. Students with disabilities often need assistive technologies, specialised equipment, or personalised support. However, not all schools are equipped to provide these accommodations, leading to disparities in educational access (Artiles & Kozleski, 2007). Additionally, language barriers, cultural differences, and socioeconomic challenges can further widen the gap in access to resources and support.

Addressing these barriers requires a multi-faceted approach involving policy reform, increased investment in teacher training, and collaboration among stakeholders. Schools and teacher education programmes must prioritise continuous professional development to equip educators with the skills needed for inclusive teaching (Dowdy & Furlong, 2019). Adequate funding and resources are essential to ensure all students, regardless of their background or abilities, can thrive in an inclusive setting. Furthermore, reducing curriculum overload and allowing teachers time for reflection and planning is critical to fostering inclusive practices. Ultimately, fostering a school culture that values diversity and promotes equity is key to overcoming the challenges of inclusion (Slee, 2011).

Envisioning the future of inclusive education

In envisioning the future of inclusive education, we embark on a transformative journey propelled by a vision that transcends mere technological advancements and evolving pedagogies (Booth et al., 2015). Our aspirations extend far beyond innovation; they encompass a collective commitment to equity, diversity, and social justice that permeates the very fabric of our educational landscape (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2016).

At the core of our collective aspirations lies the desire to build inclusive schools and communities where diversity is not just acknowledged but celebrated. We envision educational environments where every learner, regardless of their background, abilities, or learning differences, feels a profound sense of belonging and agency in their educational journey. In these inclusive spaces, students are not merely passive recipients of knowledge but active participants in their own learning, empowered to explore, question, and create in ways that resonate with their unique identities and aspirations.

Our aspirations for the future of inclusive education are deeply intertwined with our commitment to equity and social justice. We envision a future where educational opportunities are not dictated by socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, or any other form of systemic inequality (Pellegrino et al., 2018). Instead, we strive to create a level playing field where every student has equal access to quality education, support services, and opportunities for growth and development. In this future, educational institutions serve as engines of social mobility and catalysts for positive change, breaking down barriers and fostering a more inclusive and equitable society.

As we navigate the complexities of the future, we recognise the pivotal role that collaboration and partnership play in realising our aspirations for inclusive education. Educators, policymakers, parents, students, and community stakeholders must come together in a spirit of unity and shared purpose, pooling their collective wisdom, resources, and expertise to create meaningful and lasting change (Grigorescu & Vieru, 2020). By forging strong partnerships and fostering open dialogue, we can build consensus, drive innovation, and overcome the myriad challenges that lie ahead on our journey toward inclusive education. As we navigate the complexities of the future, let us remain guided by our steadfast commitment to equity, diversity, and social justice. Together, we can build a world where every learner has the opportunity to thrive and succeed, leaving no one behind on the path to a brighter future for all.

One size fits all

In alignment with Garry Hornby's perspectives on inclusive education, the concept of 'one size fits all' is contrasted with traditional standardised approaches to schooling. Just as Hornby critiques the limitations of the conventional model, which fails to accommodate the diverse needs of students, the notion of 'one size fits all' encapsulates the inherent drawbacks of such uniformity (Hornby, 2003, p.152-157).

The traditional education system, as explained by Hornby, often adopts a standardised approach, wherein students are expected to conform to a predetermined curriculum, pace, and assessment structure. However, this rigid model overlooks the unique

strengths, interests, and learning styles of individual students, resulting in disengagement, disconnection, and underachievement among learners.

In response to these challenges, Hornby advocates for a paradigm shift towards personalised and inclusive education. By tailoring learning experiences to the diverse needs of students, educators can foster engagement, motivation, and academic success for all learners. This involves recognising and valuing students' diverse backgrounds, experiences, and abilities, and providing them with opportunities to learn in ways that are meaningful and relevant to their lives.

Central to this personalised approach is the concept of differentiated instruction, as highlighted by Hornby, where teachers adapt their teaching methods, materials, and assessments to accommodate the varied needs and interests of students. Fostering a supportive and inclusive learning environment, as emphasised by both perspectives, is paramount for creating an atmosphere where all students feel valued, respected, and included.

In essence, the concept of 'one size fits all' serves as a poignant reminder of the shortcomings of standardised education, prompting a re-evaluation of traditional practices in favour of a more personalised and inclusive model. By aligning with Hornby's vision for transformative education, educators can create learning environments that celebrate diversity, empower learners, and cultivate a culture of inclusivity and equity.

What can teachers do?

Autism Level Up!

As educators, we hold the power to create meaningful change in our classrooms by embracing continuous growth and adapting our inclusive practices. The *Autism Level Up* programme provides a practical and progressive framework for educators to enhance their approach to supporting autistic students. The concept of "Wherever you are, level up, take the next step" (*Autism Level Up*, 2020) encourages teachers to reflect on their current practices and commit to incremental improvements, no matter where they are on their inclusive teaching journey.

This programme emphasises that fostering inclusivity is not a one-time achievement but a dynamic process of ongoing learning and adaptation. *Autism Level Up* offers educators a range of tools and resources, such as sensory and emotional regulation strategies, to better understand and meet the diverse needs of autistic students. By focusing on each student's unique strengths and challenges, the programme helps teachers create more supportive, personalised learning environments.

In addition to its focus on classroom strategies, *Autism Level Up* promotes the idea of building inclusive communities, encouraging collaboration between teachers, students, and families. This holistic approach helps bridge the gap between the school and home environments, ensuring that students receive consistent support. By integrating the principles of this programme, teachers can develop a deeper awareness of neurodiversity and become more attuned to the specific needs of autistic learners, promoting a sense of belonging and success for all students.

Ultimately, the *Autism Level Up* programme aligns with the broader philosophy of continuous professional development and social justice in education. It empowers teachers to not only take that first step but also continue evolving their practice, ensuring that inclusive education is not an ideal but a lived reality in their classrooms.

Universal Design for Learning

One effective way for teachers to begin levelling up their inclusive practices is by becoming familiar with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and applying them in teaching practice. UDL provides a proactive framework for designing instructional materials and activities that cater to the diverse needs of all learners, including students with autism and other neurodivergent conditions (*Autism Level Up*, 2020). By embracing UDL, educators can create lessons that are not only accessible but also engaging and responsive to a wide range of learning styles, preferences, and abilities.

The UDL framework is built around three core principles: providing multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression (CAST, 2018).

Multiple means of engagement focus on capturing and maintaining students' interest and motivation by providing diverse ways to interact with the material. For example, a teacher could offer students a choice between traditional reading materials, interactive games, or digital simulations to explore a topic. In a science lesson, students might engage by experimenting with hands-on science kits, participating in virtual labs, or watching a live demonstration. For students who benefit from movement, teachers can incorporate kinesthetic activities, such as turning lessons into scavenger hunts around the classroom or outdoor learning experiences. These options can help students with autism or ADHD by offering varied, stimulating ways to learn and engage based on their individual preferences and sensory needs.

Multiple means of representation involve presenting information in varied ways to accommodate different learning preferences. For instance, a teacher might explain a concept verbally while also providing visual aids, such as diagrams or videos, and written materials. This approach supports students who may struggle with processing verbal instructions, giving them alternative ways to understand the content. A practical example of this could be using visual schedules to outline daily activities, which benefits students with autism who often thrive on routine and predictability.

Multiple means of expression allow students to demonstrate their knowledge in ways that align with their strengths. Instead of a traditional written test, a teacher could allow students to complete a project, give a presentation, or create a visual representation of their learning. This is particularly beneficial for autistic students who may excel in creative or visual tasks but find conventional testing formats stressful. By incorporating UDL principles teachers ensure that every student, regardless of their abilities, can participate fully and demonstrate their understanding in ways that work best for them.

By integrating UDL into lesson planning and delivery, teachers can foster a more inclusive environment where all students are supported to succeed. This aligns with the *Autism Level Up* programme's philosophy of 'wherever you are, level up, take the next step' (*Autism Level Up*, 2020), encouraging teachers to make small but impactful changes to

improve their practice. Whether it's adjusting instructional materials, offering more flexible learning options, or rethinking assessment methods, these steps ensure that the diverse needs of all students are met. Over time, this not only enhances the learning experience for neurodivergent students but also promotes equity and inclusivity across the classroom.

Strengths-based approach

Embracing a strengths-based approach to student learning can significantly enhance educators' ability to recognise and leverage the unique strengths and abilities of each learner. This perspective shifts the focus away from only identifying deficits or challenges, allowing teachers to see the potential in every student. For example, when educators identify and build upon a student's passion for a particular subject – whether it be art, science, or technology – they can tailor lessons that incorporate those interests, thereby increasing student engagement and motivation. Research has shown that when teachers create learning experiences aligned with students' strengths, it can lead to improved academic outcomes and a more positive classroom atmosphere (Sullivan & Nussbaum, 2015).

By fostering a strengths-based mindset, teachers can cultivate a growth-oriented culture in their classrooms, where students feel valued for their unique contributions and are encouraged to take risks in their learning. This approach not only promotes self-efficacy and resilience but also helps students develop a sense of belonging and community (Gonzalez et al., 2017). For instance, a student who excels in storytelling might be encouraged to lead a group project, while another with a talent for visual arts could be given opportunities to create multimedia presentations. Ultimately, recognising and celebrating students' strengths empowers them to take ownership of their learning journey, leading to a more inclusive and dynamic educational experience.

Growth mindset

As inclusive practices are implemented in classrooms, it's essential for educators to adopt a growth mindset and remain open to feedback and reflection. Embracing a growth mindset encourages educators to view challenges as opportunities for learning and improvement rather than as obstacles (Dweck, 2006). By actively seeking input from students, colleagues, and other stakeholders, valuable insights can be gained into the effectiveness of practices and areas for growth can be identified. This collaborative approach not only enhances teaching strategies but also empowers students by valuing their perspectives and experiences. Research indicates that when teachers engage in reflective practices and solicit feedback, they are more likely to make informed adjustments that lead to improved student outcomes and a more inclusive classroom environment (Timperley et al., 2007).

Teacher professional learning (TPL)

Ongoing teacher professional learning (TPL) is important for helping educators gain the knowledge and skills needed to effectively implement inclusive practices in their classrooms. As education continues to change, it's essential for teachers to be flexible and responsive to the diverse needs of their students (Slee, 2011). Training programmes should

cover key topics like trauma-informed care, differentiated instruction, assistive technology, UDL, behaviour management, supporting students with autism, sensory processing needs, dyslexia and so on.

Teachers can also make the most of resources from the NCSE, the Middletown Centre for Autism, and training offered by education centres of Ireland. These organisations provide helpful opportunities for TPL that focus on specific needs and enhance teachers' abilities to support all students.

Overall, ongoing TPL should be seen as a journey. As the needs in classes change year on year, embracing continuous learning and collaborating with one another becomes even more crucial. By doing so, educators can build inclusive classrooms that respond to the diverse needs of all students. This commitment to growth not only improves teaching practices but also creates a welcoming environment where every student can thrive.

Conclusion

By drawing on insights from Robert Slee's framework and the contributions of Garry Hornby, Ainscow et al., teachers can foster environments where every student is valued, respected, and supported in their learning journey. Engaging in professional learning around *Autism Level Up,* UDL, employing a strengths-based approach, fostering a growth mindset, and creative thinking are essential steps in this process. Through intentional practices, collaboration, and a commitment to equity, we can create inclusive primary schools that support the diverse talents of all learners, making a meaningful difference in their educational experiences.

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Should I stay or should I go? An exploration of the experiences of career change teachers in Ireland

Annette Geoghegan

Abstract

This article is based on a research study completed as part of an Ed.D dissertation which explored the experiences of career change teachers in Irish primary and post-primary schools. This research is timely given the current teacher shortage in Ireland at present and provides an insight into what motivates career changers to choose teaching as a new career and how best they can be supported to remain in the profession and avoid their attrition. 107 teachers participated in the study to share their experience of changing career to teaching. Fifteen teachers from primary, post-primary and special education settings participated in a semi-structured interview to provide a deeper insight into their experiences of changing career to teaching, the reasons for their attrition, and the role of professional identity through all stages. The theme of identity and its role in career change teachers' motivations to change career, and subsequently leave the profession, was central to this study.

Keywords: Career change teacher, identity, motivation, attrition, retention

Introduction

Although the area of career change teachers has sparked interest among researchers internationally, it remains an area that is under-researched within the Irish context. It is agreed within the literature that career change teachers (CCTs) bring a wealth of knowledge, skills and experience to the teaching profession, and offer the possibility to improve the quality of education offered in schools (Rife, et al. 1988; Etherington, 2009; Williams and Forgasz, 2009; Wilson and Deaney, 2010; Lee and Lamport, 2011; Hunter-Johnson, 2015). Their accumulation of skills, previous training and employment, and general life experience allow CCTs to transfer with ease to a new profession such as teaching (Tigchelaar, Brouwer and Korthagen, 2008). It is also suggested that CCTs could support pupils in schools to bridge the gap between the classroom and the real world (Chambers, 2002; Lee, 2011; Green, 2015). Skills and experience gained in previous careers ensure that CCTs are active in enhancing the profession of teaching (Resta, Huling and Rainwater, 2001; Richardson and Watt, 2005). This unique group of teachers bring a different viewpoint to schools and often provide an impartial voice to those who have been immersed in only the education world since their own schooling. It is important for all parties in education to understand the motivations among CCTs for a career change (Hunter-Johnson, 2015), as a greater

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understanding of the specific motivations underpinning a CCT's decision to choose teaching as a new career could also assist in promoting the profession as a career change option and provide guidelines for recruitment strategies (Williams and Forgasz, 2009).

Having worked as a tutor with Professional Master of Education (PME) students, many of whom have changed career to teaching, I became particularly interested in what motivated career changers to choose teaching as a new career. Conversely, one particular discussion with a PME student, who expressed a desire to leave the teaching profession following qualification, also inspired me to explore attrition among CCTs. While CCTs are not strictly a marginalised group, they are a discrete cohort of teachers who are often overlooked, as they have not followed the traditional path and come to teaching as newly graduated post-primary school students. This study aims to highlight what motivates career changers to choose teaching as a new career, the factors that assist their retention in the profession, and the factors that influence their attrition.

When a 'career for life' was once a desired outcome, teaching offered a secure, pensionable job and attracted many to the profession. However, it is now suggested that career development is a life-long process and change within one's career is the norm (Ahn, Dik and Hornback, 2017). Nonetheless, a change in career requires a significant financial and human investment, and given that the attractiveness of the teaching profession has deteriorated over the last decade or more, it raises the question 'why choose teaching as a career change?' The global teaching profession is interested in mature-age career changers to alleviate teacher supply and demand issues (Bauer, Thomas and Sim, 2017). Bearing in mind the teacher supply issues in Ireland at present, the recruitment of highly qualified professionals from other fields would not only alleviate teacher shortages but also enhance diversity and innovation within the teaching profession. It is therefore important for all parties in education to understand how this group of career changers could be encouraged into the profession. The possibility of using skills from a previous career in a different setting could act as an important motivation for changing career for many CCTs (Priyadharshini and Robinson-Pant, 2003). Similarly, the need for career satisfaction and career variety also plays a role in career mobility (McGinley, 2018). A 'sense of calling' as an antecedent leading to a career change (Ahn, Dik and Hornback, 2017) also links to a person's identity, and in turn affects how a person perceives, enjoys and interacts with their occupation (Berg, Grant and Johnson, 2010). Stryker's (1968) theory of identity and the multiple identities which a person holds formed the basis for this study's theoretical framework, complemented by Holland's (1997) theory of vocational choice and Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of situated learning.

Literature review

What motivates a CCT to choose teaching?

While many authors specify intrinsic and extrinsic motivations among CCTs, it is argued that the decision to change career to teaching is influenced by several factors, which may be internal or external (Koç 2019), and depends on each individual CCT's personal circumstances. For many CCTs the long-held desire to be a teacher is a strong motivating factor, despite the fact they did not choose it as a first career (Rife, et al., 1988; Madfes,

1990; Chambers, 2002; Richardson and Watt, 2006). Following several years working in a different field, CCTs may feel their chosen career path is incompatible with their personality, beliefs and values, and that teaching would be a more suitable career. This cohort of career changers are termed the 'Homecomers' by Crow, Levine and Nager (1990), as returning to the school environment can feel like 'going home' for these CCTs.

Positive teaching and learning experiences also act as other significant motivating factors for CCTs. Many student teachers recall positive learning experiences and an inspirational teacher from their own schooling as influential in the decision to choose teaching as a career (Richards, 1960; Heinz, 2013). It is worth noting that at some point every individual has been a student, which has provided the public with an insight or perceived knowledge into the profession of teaching (Watt, et al., 2012). This may also play an influential role in choosing teaching as a career change as similar insights or perceived knowledge into other professions is often unattainable. This perceived knowledge has been termed the 'apprenticeship of observation' by Lortie (1975) and describes the phenomenon, whereby the student teachers who enrol on teacher education courses have spent thousands of hours observing and evaluating teachers in action as pupils in primary and secondary education. It is reasonable to assume that many CCTs would also have experience of teaching or instruction in their personal and professional lives. In its simplest form, this may have involved mentoring of new colleagues, or some form of training and instruction in the workplace, which would have further informed their assessment of their teaching ability and inspired the decision to choose teaching as a new career. Similarly working with young children through coaching, sport, or involvement in youth activities, as well as the experience of being a parent, can further encourage CCTs to choose teaching as a new career (Williams and Forgasz, 2009; Price, 2019).

The prospect of a more meaningful career as a teacher is another motivating factor for CCTs, and is believed to be a stronger draw to the profession than salary and job prospects (Varadharajan and Schuck, 2017), as teaching is a personal vocation in which CCTs can make a social contribution. The phrase 'wanting to make a difference' echoes through much of the research into CCTs' motivations for changing career, as CCTs believe teaching will offer them a greater feeling of fulfilment than their previous job/career (Castro and Bauml, 2009; Lee, 2011). Other strong motivating factors include extrinsic factors such as job dissatisfaction (Rife, et al., 1988; Priyadharshini and Robinson-Pant, 2003; Richardson and Watt, 2005; Varadharajan, et al., 2016), greater job stability and job security (Richardson and Watt, 2006; Watt, et al., 2012; Wagner and Imanuel-Noy, 2014), and the desire for a better work-life balance (Richardson and Watt, 2005; Watt and Richardson, 2008; Williams and Forgasz, 2009).

Teacher attrition

Although it is considered that teacher attrition rates in Ireland are low (Morgan et al. 2010), it must be noted that there is a lack of data in Ireland on teacher attrition in general. Internationally, it is suggested that teacher attrition rates vary from 15%-50% with significant teacher attrition occurring during the first five years in the profession (Ingersoll, 2003; Rinke 2008; Buchanan et al., 2013; Arnup and Bowles, 2016). The most common

reasons cited for attrition in the early years include work overload, family responsibilities, and lack of administrative support (Buchanan, 2010; Troesch and Bauer, 2020). However, Weldon (2018, p.71) suggests six areas which affect the decision to leave teaching after qualification. Although these categories of attrition refer to early career teachers – those in the first five years of teaching – they are also relevant to CCTs.

- Demand effect – teachers unable to find regular employment.
- Personal effect – leaving for personal and family reasons.
- Compatibility effect – feeling unsuitable to the role.
- Career choice effect – pursuit of an alternative career.
- Environment effect – lack of support, school and school leadership culture.
- Performance effect – teachers sacked or de-registered due to poor performance or illegal activity.

Preventing teacher attrition

The strongest factors to promote and increase teacher retention include good relationships with colleagues (Ingersoll, Merrill and May, 2016) and strong support systems (Buchanan, et al., 2013; Lindqvist, Nordänger and Carlsson, 2014). It is also argued that developing resilience (Kitching, Morgan and O'Leary, 2009; Beltman, Mansfield and Price, 2011; Lavigne, 2013; Clandinin, et al., 2015; Arnup and Bowles, 2016) and a strong sense of professional identity among early career teachers would assist in preventing early career attrition. A strong sense of identity also contributes to teacher retention as it builds confidence and resilience in beginning teachers (Wilson and Deaney, 2010; Bieler, 2013; Beutel, Crosswell and Broadley, 2019).

Developing a professional identity as a CCT

The development of a professional identity is a complex and dynamic process. Teacher identity is based on the core beliefs that an individual holds about teaching and being a teacher (Grier and Johnston, 2009), yet if the demands of the profession are incompatible with a teacher's professional identity, then the option is to reconstruct that identity or leave the profession (Lindqvist and Nordänger, 2015). Personal biographies, stories, and experiences play a vital role in shaping teachers' identities (Beijaard, Meijer and Verloop, 2004) and as no two individuals have the same life experiences, there is no uniform process to develop one's teacher identity. In considering Rodgers and Scott's (2008) definition of identity as (1) storied, (2) contextual, (3) relational and emotional, and (4) shifting and multiple, constructing a new professional identity as a CCT will be influenced by past experiences, a new work context, and other personal and professional identities. Gallant and Riley (2014) caution that a lack of support for new teachers affects the development of an identity as a teacher and contributes to a decision to leave the profession. Therefore, it is essential that an early awareness of teacher identity and its continuous development assists teacher retention within the profession.

Methodology

This research study sought to explore the motivations of CCTs in choosing teaching as a new career and the factors that influence their subsequent retention in or attrition from the profession. This research study was predominantly qualitative in nature and explored the career change experiences of primary and post-primary CCTs in Ireland. The study used a convergent parallel mixed methods design (Creswell, 2014), with a sample of 112 participants. Data was gathered in two stages; firstly, through an online survey using the JISC online survey tool completed by 107 participants; and secondly by semi-structured interviews with 15 career change teachers from both the primary and post-primary sectors. The findings from this study, which outline CCTs' motivations for changing career, the challenges of changing career to teaching, and developing a new professional identity as a teacher inform those who work with CCTs, both during their initial teacher education (ITE) and as colleagues in a school setting. These findings will provide teacher educators and school leaders and colleagues with a better understanding of the challenges faced by CCTs in their new career and in developing their teacher identity, and how CCTs can be supported to remain in their new career.

The overarching aim of this study, which sought to outline the motivations of CCTs for choosing teaching as a career change and to identify the factors that contribute to their attrition from teaching, was achieved by answering the following research questions:

- What are the main factors identified among CCTs in Ireland which influence their decision to join the teaching profession?
- What are the main challenges identified by CCTs in transitioning to a new career as a teacher?
- What factors support the development of a teacher identity among CCTs?
- What are the main personal and/or professional factors identified among CCTs in Ireland which impact their attrition from the teaching profession?
- What role does professional identity as a CCT play in the decision to leave the profession?

The use of an online questionnaire enabled the researcher to access CCTs in schools in Ireland and an email with a link to the online survey was sent to all primary, post-primary and special schools in Ireland at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in April 2020. The online survey offered participants a convenient and voluntary nature of participation (Roberts, 2007), and as a result 107 teachers completed the survey. The quantitative data gathered provided descriptive statistics of the backgrounds of participants and an overview of their routes into teaching and experience of changing career. General data such as a CCT's age, gender, qualifications, current school context, length of employment and current employment status was gathered along with details of their ITE and prior school/teaching experience. Likert scale responses were used to gather data on the reasons for leaving previous jobs/careers, reasons for selecting teaching as a career change, satisfaction with their ITE and induction process, and the decision to remain in or leave teaching. Open-ended questions also gathered data on the previous careers and skills of the participating CCTs, their motivations for choosing a teaching career, their perceptions

and views of professional identity, and their experiences of teaching in Ireland.

Semi-structured interviews were then completed with 15 teachers, five of whom had left the teaching profession. Semi-structured interviews allowed flexibility for the researcher to explore further topics which arose during the interview process alongside the planned topics and questions (Denscombe, 2003). These interviews were conducted online using Microsoft Teams due to the COVID-19 enforced lockdown, and explored the motivations for changing career, the challenges of changing career, developing a new professional identity as a teacher, and attrition from teaching. The 15 interview participants were also asked to provide an image/photo or phrase to depict an element of their journey as a CCT. Twelve interviewees supplied an image/photo, phrase or story to support their interview data and represent that which was most important to them regarding the topic of discussion (Cleland and MacLeod, 2021). This method of photo-elicitation encouraged participants to actively engage in the research process and gain a sense of ownership on the presentation of data, and allowed the researcher to gain a deeper knowledge of their lived experience as a CCT in Ireland. It was also envisaged that providing an image or phrase/saying would also share another element of the participant's identity, and in turn allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the beliefs, values and emotions that comprise their personal and professional identities.

Data analysis

The data that was collected from the 107 online survey responses and the 15 semi-structured interviews documented the journeys taken by CCTs in changing career to teaching. The data outlined the school and educational experiences of CCTs from a young age, influential people in their lives, information about their previous careers and professional identities, and the challenges faced during their ITE and teaching employment. It was important that the analysis of this data focused on the stories of CCTs and provided an insight for partners in education about the factors which motivate them to choose teaching as a new career and the factors that influence their attrition from teaching.

The bulk of the findings were compiled using the data collected from the semi-structured interviews and are complemented with the data gathered from the open-ended questions of the online survey and images/photos and phrases provided by the participants. These photos and images were examined alongside the interview transcripts. During analysis, the photos/images and phrases enabled the researcher to identify and confirm the themes. The analysis of the images and the explanations provided by participants provided a greater understanding of participants' individual identities, and a deeper value was added to the story of each participant. There is a challenge in converging or merging sets of data (Creswell, 2014) and to reduce this challenge, the data was analysed using a side-by-side comparison. The data from the online survey was analysed using deductive analysis as initial codes were drawn from the existing literature and analysis was focused on aspects of the data that related directly to the research questions (Azungah, 2018). Following this, an inductive analysis approach was employed to attain a complete understanding of what participants were saying and to ensure that all aspects of the data were carefully analysed (Gale, et al., 2013).

Guided by the literature review, the qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews was manually coded and a combination of thematic analysis and some discourse analysis was used to identify themes and highlight significant words, phrases and experiences within the qualitative data (Robson and McCartan, 2016). Five themes were derived from the data: motivations for changing career to teaching, expectations of teaching, challenges of teaching, developing a new professional identity, and attrition from the teaching profession. The qualitative data was then inputted into the MAXQDA software programme and coded descriptively. At each stage of analysis, and as each theme was identified, the influence of identity was explored and how participants' multiple identities (Stryker, 1968) play a role in each experience or stage of their career.

Findings and discussion

Motivating factors for choosing teaching as a career change

There were seven motivating factors for changing career to teaching listed by the CCTs who participated in this research study. The predominant motivating factor among interviewees was the long-held desire to be a teacher, categorising themselves as the 'Homecomers' (Crow, Levine and Nager, 1990). Interviewees recalled playing school as a child, with one participant sharing an image of homework she had written in chalk inside the wardrobe door of her childhood home. Other CCTs recalled how they had originally considered teaching as a first career but disregarded it for various reasons, including dissuasion from others, feeling too immature to commit to a teaching career, and wanting to experience life first. Financial reasons were cited as a reason to follow a different initial career path by one interviewee and this agrees with other research studies that outlines CCTs reject teaching initially, as it offers little status and financial rewards (Chambers, 2002).

Family influences played a significant role in motivating CCTs to choose teaching as a new career (Anthony and Ord, 2008), as many participants had teachers among their close family members – nine of the 15 interviewees listed family influences as a strong motivating factor. One CCT outlined that the value of education was very strong in her house as "both of my parents were teachers so we would always have had a very… I suppose an upbringing that was steeped in education. Education would have been prioritised in our house." Another interviewee outlined how the death of her father prompted her to choose teaching as a career change to gain a better understanding of his profession and forge a stronger connection with him.

Another motivating factor listed by CCTs in this research study was a 'crucial event' which caused them to re-evaluate their career choice (Kanchier and Unruh, 1989). Those that choose teaching as a career change following significant life events such as the loss of a job, the death of a family member, or the birth of a child are categorised as the 'Converted' by Crow, Levine and Nager (1990). For one interviewee, the onset of ill health prompted her career change to teaching to improve her work-life balance. Prior positive teaching experiences were listed as other motivating factors alongside a crucial event, as these experiences offered CCTs increased confidence in their abilities to work with young people in a teaching role. Several participants outlined that they had worked in a school setting in some form before deciding to choose teaching as a new career. These experiences included

working as unqualified substitute teachers or working with school pupils through different curricular programmes such as teaching music, art, science etc. One interviewee provided an image of his accordion to explain that it was through teaching traditional music in a primary school that inspired him to pursue a new career in teaching. Prior experiences of teaching act as a 'pull factor' for many CCTs (Watters and Diezmann, 2015) and previous teachers also act as influential factors in choosing teaching as a career. In fact, each of the 15 interviewees recalled a significant teacher from their own schooling, with some even choosing to study at third level the subject that this significant teacher taught them. This motivating factor was in line with other research studies citing former teachers as influential factors in the career choices of prospective teachers (Fielstra, 1955; Richards, 1960; Robertson, Keith and Page, 1983; Watt, et al., 2012; Heinz 2013).

Other motivating factors included the loss of employment, the desire for greater job satisfaction, and the desire for greater job security. Three interviewees listed the need for job security as a significant reason for choosing teaching as a new career, as they had lost their jobs during the economic recession in 2008. For CCTs in this situation, teaching offered a consistent and pensionable job with favourable work hours and holidays (Williams and Forgasz, 2009; Wilson and Deaney, 2010; Wagner and Imanuel-Noy, 2014; Watters and Diezmann, 2015).

The challenge of changing career to teaching

Changing career incurs both a financial challenge (Lee, 2011) and an emotional challenge for CCTs. Participants listed financial issues and family commitments as significant challenges in changing career to teaching. The expense of third level fees, alongside the lack of income while completing their studies, resulted in CCTs seeking support from family members. One interviewee stated that if it was not for the assistance of a return to education grant, a change in career would not have been possible for her, following a loss of income and with a family to support. Another interviewee began her ITE shortly after the birth of her son and she relied heavily on family support to complete her teacher education. The added expense of childcare on top of her third level expenses was a huge burden along with the additional challenge of a reduced salary as a teacher in comparison to her previous career. Juggling family commitments and study is very challenging for CCTs as they change career, and a great deal of support is required to achieve their goal (Lee and Lamport, 2011).

Alongside the financial challenge, many CCTs cited additional challenges in their journey to becoming a teacher. For some, this included resitting Leaving Certificate exams to achieve subject requirements for the ITE programme, as explained by one interviewee: "I didn't have honours Irish and I needed two more honours to go to third level (sic) as a mature student."

Developing a new professional identity as a CCT

In discussing the development of a new professional identity as a teacher, 94% of online survey participants and 80% of interviewees agreed that they had developed their teacher identity. Participants listed influential factors which assisted the development of their teacher identity as personal factors, school colleagues, and the school environment.

Previous career identities also emerged as strong influences in teacher identity development and several participants explained that they still retain a connection to their previous career identity as they use many of their previous career skills in teaching (Williams, 2010; Nielsen, 2016). School colleagues and pupils were highlighted as significant influential factors in teacher identity development for some interviewees. Pupil interest stimulates strong, positive attitudes among new teachers, which in turn influences their professional identity development (Timoštšuk and Ugaste, 2012).

> Interaction with the kids. I like to get things back from the kids. I like to hear what they're thinking, and I like to challenge that. When they bring their own experiences to anything we're talking about, I instantly feel I'm more engaged and they're more engaged. I suppose that's something that influences me personally as a teacher.

The influences of colleagues and cultures in the school, particularly in the first few years of a new teacher's career, are crucial to how they learn to behave and to be as professionals (Day and Gu, 2007). Participating in the school environment, interacting with pupils and colleagues promotes legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991), and assists in developing a teacher identity as a long-term, living relationship between the person and their participation in the community of practice.

CCTs' reasons for attrition from the teaching profession

Five of the 15 interviewees had left the teaching profession following their change of career to teaching. Five of the six categories of attrition presented by Weldon (2018) were represented in participants' stories. The compatibility effect (Weldon 2018) was cited by one participant who decided not to seek a teaching job following qualification. Máire felt she was unsuited to the role of teacher and financially it made more sense to return to her previous career than accept the lower paid salary of a teacher. The choice effect (Weldon 2018) was the reason for another interviewee who opted to leave teaching due to the difficulty in securing a permanent second level teaching job. Deirdre struggled to establish her teacher identity working predominantly as a substitute teacher, and found the lack of support and induction in the school context quite challenging as a new teacher. She now works in the further education sector.

The third interviewee, Eibhlin, had qualified abroad as a French and English subject teacher but struggled to secure employment when she moved to Ireland, as the Teaching Council did not recognise her French teaching qualifications. To achieve recognition, Eibhlin would have been required to enrol in an undergraduate degree programme to achieve her teaching qualification in French, so she opted to retrain in a different field and now works in a third level teacher education institute. To avoid this demand effect of attrition (Weldon, 2018), it is essential that CCTs are aware of employment possibilities before embarking on a career change (Bauer, Thomas and Sim, 2017). The environment effect (Weldon, 2018) was cited by Cáit as her reason for attrition, as the lack of promotion opportunities in her school influenced her decision to leave teaching. The personal

effect (Weldon, 2018) was Maebh's reason for leaving teaching ,as her husband is semi-retired, and her decision was influenced by a desire to spend more time with her family and grandchildren (Borman and Dowling, 2008). She now works part-time in a special education setting and has completed a course in restorative justice with a view to moving into a different career field again.

Conclusion

It became evident from this study that there were several motivating factors for choosing teaching as a career change among CCTs. A long-held desire to become a teacher and family influences played a strong role in encouraging CCTs to change career to teaching. Growing up in a family where parents, older siblings or other significant adults such as aunts, uncles, or grandparents worked as teachers, immersed CCTs in the profession of teaching and familiarised them with the environment of teaching before ever setting foot in a classroom. Therefore, when choosing a new career path, teaching was an option that CCTs understood and were somewhat confident that they had good knowledge of the job in advance.

One of the main challenges identified by CCTs in this research study in changing career to teaching was the challenge of financial issues and family commitments. Changing career imposed a financial burden on many CCTs. Participants in this study highlighted the financial challenge of completing an ITE programme without a source of income, significantly more difficult if they had dependent family members. There were no provisions made for the fact that they were mature students with family, travel, and financial commitments.

Most participants in this study believed that they had developed a new professional identity as a teacher and cited many influential factors in supporting its development, namely personal factors and their professional relationships with colleagues and pupils. Many CCTs also highlighted that they retained a connection to their previous career identity and that this assisted their teacher identity development as they transferred many of the skills of their previous career to teaching. It does not appear that retaining a connection to their previous career identity hinders a CCT's development of a new teacher identity.

Finally, this study highlighted the reasons for attrition from the teaching profession among CCTs. Personal factors such as caring for a sick parent and re-location to another country were cited among survey respondents, while other personal factors outlined during the interview process included the desire to spend more time with family. Professional factors such as the lack of permanent teaching contracts and issues around school culture were discussed. Difficulties experienced within the school environment around promotion opportunities were also cited as a primary factor in the decision to leave teaching.

Based on the findings of this study the following recommendations are suggested:

- Prospective CCTs should acquire a realistic knowledge of the role of teaching and the long-term employment opportunities in the primary and post-primary sectors prior to enrolling on an initial teacher education programme.

- Acknowledgement by ITE providers of CCTs' backgrounds, life commitments, financial issues, and the sacrifices undertaken to pursue a teacher education programme, alongside the provision of supports such as flexibility around timetabling and class attendance would encourage and facilitate CCTs in their career change.
- A continuation of mentorship beyond the first year, post-qualification, would assist the retention of CCTs in the profession.
- Opportunities for peer support meetings or a buddy system to assist CCTs during the initial stages of their teaching career would further encourage the development of their teacher identity, confidence and competence.
- To combat the insecurity around job prospects and teaching contracts for post-primary CCTs, a collaborative needs analysis should be conducted every 3-5 years to highlight the subject areas in post-primary where there is presently, or will be, a projected shortage of teachers. An analysis of this nature would avoid an oversupply of certain subject teachers and an undersupply of others in the post-primary sector.
- An incentive for those choosing to change career would assist any CCT that may have to give up their job to undertake an ITE programme. Some form of grant would assist CCTs in making the career transition to teaching and provide an incentive to attract potential CCTs into the subject areas of most need.

CCTs in Irish primary and post-primary schools are a unique cohort of teachers. They bring a wealth of skills, life and employment experience to the profession, and offer a distinct perspective and diversity to the field of education in Ireland. It is essential that all parties in education gain an understanding of this cohort of teachers to encourage them in their change of career to teaching, which may assist in alleviating the teacher supply issues in Ireland at present. Furthermore, a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by CCTs would enable ITE providers and school leaders to best support them in their career change, and encourage their retention in the profession.

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Silver linings for educators and education following the COVID-19 pandemic

Margaret Nohilly, Bernie Collins and Veronica O'Toole

Abstract

In March 2020, as case numbers of the coronavirus began to accelerate in Ireland, and influenced by the actions of countries across Europe and the world, a number of drastic measures were taken in an effort to control the spread of the virus. Among these measures were the closures of schools on March 12. While initial indications were that schools would re-open after the Easter break, it was September 2020 when schools re-opened their doors. The return to school was impacted by the virus, and school communities put many measures in place in an effort to adhere to the guidance issued by the Department of Education to contain the potential spread of the virus. This paper reports on the 'silver linings' for schools during this challenging time. Findings from a mixed-methods study undertaken with primary school teachers and principals indicate that some of the measures put in place by schools are those that they intend to carry forward, given their positive impact. The findings from the interviews also revealed that the limitations around visitors and outside coaches to schools really enabled school to focus on their core business of teaching the curriculum.

Keywords: **Pandemic, silver linings, education, learning**

Introduction

While many adults who reflect on their experience of learning history in school will remember learning about the impact of World War I and World War II in Ireland and beyond, there is no doubt that in years to come children will be reading about the impact of coronavirus or the COVID-19 pandemic on social and economic disruption around the world. As of the time of writing, the number of reported deaths from the virus total 6,985,278 which ranks it fifth in terms of the deadliest pandemics in history (Ritchie et al. 2023). In addition to the historical accounts documenting travel restrictions, lockdowns, the closure of schools and businesses, and the new mechanisms that enabled working and schooling from home, the personal accounts we have to tell our children and grandchildren will make for fascinating tales. There are so many stories to tell relating to births, deaths and marriages, how communities and families came together by staying apart, and how as the world stood still, our carbon footprint decreased rapidly. With an abrupt end to sporting activities and children's after-school activities, many families found that they enjoyed the less hectic pace of life and relished the quality time together.

Schools also have their own stories to tell. While much of the research undertaken in relation to education during COVID-19 has focused on the impact of the pandemic

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on teaching and learning (Chadwick & McLoughlin, 2021; Flynn et al. 2021) and the use of technology across the pandemic (Winter et. al. 2021, Ní Uigín & Ó Cofaigh, 2021; Burke & Dempsey, 2020), the research story which is the focus of this article relates to the 'silver linings' for schools resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of school teachers and leaders. A research study undertaken with a number of primary school teachers enabled an opportunity for them to reflect on aspects of school life they felt improved or were met with renewed appreciation following an extended period of school closures. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 20 participants, nine of whom were principals, as part of a mixed-methods study. There were two separate interviews conducted with participants during the study – the first in the aftermath of school closures in March 2020 and the second interview in the period following the re-opening of schools in September 2020.The research findings relate to the renewed appreciation both parents and pupils had for the significance of the role of a school. There was a humanity that revealed itself in bringing students and staff back to the school building, resulting in a renewed sense of belonging, connectedness and confidence. The pandemic led to new practices relating to homework, parent-teacher meetings and use of digital technology that schools continue to adopt post-pandemic. Despite the challenges of the pandemic, as with much adversity in life, there is good and bad learning that emerges.

To set the context for the study findings, this paper considers some relevant literature and school practices which influence the holistic experience of a child's education in primary school, including a sense of belonging and the competing demands on teaching and learning time in school. The role of the teaching principal and the administration time available to them is also considered, given its focus in the research findings of the study presented.

A sense of belonging and welcome at school

Every child's experience of primary school is unique. This unique experience relates to the child's interest in and enjoyment of education, the level of interest in education in the home, the children's experience of welcome and belonging in school, the ethos and size of school the child is attending alongside the relationship the child has with their teacher to name but a few influencing factors. Indeed, it has been argued in literature that the closure of school buildings during COVID-19 very likely marginalised those pupils who may already experience inequality due to unequal home learning environments (Mohan et al., 2021). Findings from a study conducted with post-primary school teachers report that the most significant barriers relate to lack of interest and support in the home and lack of access to devices (Devitt et al., 2020).

In a recently completed systematic literature review commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) to support curriculum specification development for the area of wellbeing at primary level, the findings of numerous studies support the context of a positive school culture and climate as central to the implementation of wellbeing as an area of learning (Nohilly et al. 2023). A positive school culture and climate enables a sense of belonging for children which is fundamental to their overall experience of school life. A sense of belonging can lead to fewer behavioural issues, less

aggression and a decrease in bullying and victimisation. Children are likely to experience better social interactions, be more self-efficacious and enjoy school when they experience a sense of belonging in a positive school climate. Strong peer relationships were deemed to be a protective factor when transitioning from primary to post-primary school (ibid). A further significant finding from the literature review was the significance of the pupil-teacher relationship. The study findings highlight that "the establishment of positive and supportive relationships is clearly an investment with enormous return" (Nohilly et al., 2023, pxxi). It impacts positively on all pupils, but particularly those that are deemed to be 'at risk'. Research undertaken by Bray et al. (2021) during the COVID-19 pandemic highlights that meaningful relationships and connections between teachers and students matter for student engagement in remote learning. The findings report that in an online environment, when student-teacher relationships are meaningful and positive, this will support student engagement.

While a sense of belonging may be an individual experience for a pupil, there are many experiences of education that are common across schools, given that there is legislation that underpins how schools operate and a curriculum that frames the teaching and learning experience for pupils. The next section presents elements of school experience that are often common for pupils across a variety of school types.

The school experience

As prescribed by the Education Act of 1998, "a recognised school shall ensure that the education provided by it meets the requirements of education policy… including requirements as to the provision of a curriculum as prescribed by the Minister" (Government of Ireland, 1998, p.13). In addition to the competing demands on curriculum time, many outside organisations make requests of schools to work with children during the school day. The Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) works closely with primary schools across the island of Ireland. Gaelic games are considered an innate part of the Irish culture, to the extent that this is acknowledged in the current primary school PE curriculum: "Gaelic games should be given particular consideration as part of the games programme" (Government of Ireland, 1999a, p.4). Indeed, the website of the GAA highlights that over 90% of schools avail of GAA coaching (https://www.gaa.ie/my-gaa/getting-involved/primary-schools). It also outlines that the playing and development of Gaelic games in and through the primary school has been a 'traditional' and 'vital' custom over many years. The philosophy for gaelic games in the primary school is one of participation, through introducing children to the games and offering children an opportunity to play them. The GAA have developed a pathway for their work in schools which includes:

- a nursery programme in the infant years designed to develop the basic movement and co-ordination skills required to play gaelic games;
- Go Games, which is stage two of the framework, are small-sided versions of hurling and football devised for children up to and including 11 years of age;
- Stage 3 is the inter-schools competitions – Cumann na mBunscoil competitions organised at fifth and sixth class level on a match or blitz basis.

Camogie, handball, rounders and athletics are also organised through this competition and primary school teachers are integral to the organisation of this competition. This is a service that is provided free of charge to schools.

Indeed, many other national governing bodies offer sporting opportunities to schools. This would include opportunities in relation to soccer, basketball, rugby and a range of other sports. In addition to these organisations making contact with schools, the Local Sports Partnerships liaises with local schools to let them know of opportunities that may be available in relation to different sports. However, schools may be requested to make a nominal contribution in order to facilitate the experience for children. The primary school *PE Teacher Guidelines* outline that: "national and local sports organisations may offer to provide coaching of particular sports on a voluntary basis as part of the physical education programme" (Government of Ireland, 1999b, p 27). While there is no doubt that for many children who enjoy the games strand of the PE curriculum and achieve success through games, and that there are many educational, emotional and social benefits to these opportunities, it does raise questions in relation to how schools enable all of these experiences for pupils. Does the games strand of the curriculum receive more attention than the other strands, regardless of the aim of the PE curriculum to provide a broad and balanced experience for children, inclusive of a wide variety of activities? (Government of Ireland, 1999a) Is children's experience of PE one where much of their experience is provided by outside coaches as opposed to their class teacher?

While schools may receive many requests from sporting organisations to work with pupils, this is not limited to the subject area of PE alone. Schools do receive similar requests in relation to other curricular areas such as music, visual arts and science to name but a few areas. Initiatives may be organised through the local education centre of the school or through programmes and organisations, all of whom reach out to schools. There is no question of the potential of these opportunities to enhance a child's experience of a curricular area while supporting the development of a teacher's knowledge, skill and competence but given all of the people knocking on the door of the school, it does require schools to take stock in terms of what they need to say 'no' to. Furthermore, when they are saying yes – is this an initiative that is in line with curriculum strands, strand units and content objectives that will support and enable teachers to implement the curriculum as is their duty in line with the *Education Act*?

Outside of the formal teaching of the curriculum, many schools and teachers are also dedicated to giving children a range of experiences that contributes to their overall experience of curriculum and of school. Experiences include sports day, school tours, graduation ceremonies, christmas shows, school concerts, and preparation for religious ceremonies depending on the denomination of the school, to name but a few. The enormous workload that goes into preparing for these events from an administrative and organisational perspective is so often unseen and unaccounted for. Teachers and schools give hours of their time to ensure that these events are memorable school occasions that their pupils will remember for years to come. While these occasions bring school communities together in a spirit of celebration and achievement and the literature highlights that they support the development of wellbeing (Nohilly et al. 2023), it is not without a huge ask of teachers and of the wider school staff.

As the research findings will highlight, practices in relation to homework and use of digital technology were a focal point for schools when they re-opened their doors in September 2020 and beyond.

Established practices in schools

Most schools have homework policies in place outlining general guidelines and timelines in relation to homework. The Department of Education does not issue any official guidelines in relation to homework, rather this is left to the discretion of schools. Following the return to schools in September 2020, many schools suspended homework for the initial weeks, in an effort to minimise the amount of materials being transferred to and from school. As the findings of the research will indicate, schools began to re-consider their practices around homework, including its correction.

Undoubtedly, the practices in relation to information and communication technologies (ICT) were a focal point in schools during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The case for most schools was that they were catapulted into a situation where they had to put measures in place to enable online teaching and learning to happen. A report on COVID-19 practice in primary schools in Ireland (Burke & Dempsey, 2020) highlighted the findings of a survey completed with school leaders exploring how they were adapting to the new world of teaching and learning. The report highlighted that while the pandemic was re-shaping education, its impact was not equal for all participants. The findings from the survey they completed with schools highlighted a clear digital divide in terms of hardware, software and technological skills across schools in Ireland. At the time when the first report was published in April 2020, within weeks of the announcement of the school closures, the most prevalent methods reported of engaging pupils in distance learning activities were via alternative online activities such as reading, baking or writing, followed by the completion of classroom worksbooks/textbooks, online-based activities, project-based learning, play-based learning, inquiry-based learning, and other (Burke & Dempsey, 2020). Two months later, in June 2020, Dempsey and Burke completed a follow-up study with schools. The follow-up study reported how well school leaders and communities had adapted to the changes forced by the pandemic. The report in June 2020 stated that over 70% of schools had arranged to contact their pupils daily, or every other day. By comparison two weeks after the closure, only 30% of schools contacted schools every day or other day. This report once more highlighted that the access to and ability to afford key technological supports had a significant impact on distance teaching for many schools and their pupils (Dempsey & Burke, 2020).

In terms of requirements in the area of ICT, schools are expected to use the *Digital Learning Framework* and have a digital learning plan in place. Kilcoyne (2021) notes that the broad spectrum of responses from schools in Ireland to the pandemic has placed the strategy firmly under the spotlight. The requirements of the of the school digital learning plan are in line with the school self-evaluation process, with which schools are familiar. Undoubtedly, schools' practices and the school digital learning plan was a core area that evolved across the COVID 19 pandemic, given that it had to.

The teaching principal in Irish primary schools

One particular positive emerging from the pandemic as the research findings will highlight is the additional administrative time afforded to teaching principals on re-opening schools in September 2020. According to the statistics provided by the DE for the 2022/2023 school year, there are 3,094 mainstream primary schools and 135 special schools. While the authors were unable to locate the exact number of teaching and administrative principals in primary schools, the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) outline that 60% of principals are teaching principals (IPPN, 2015). The DE published a statistical bulletin in July 2022, but the number of teaching principals is not included in the data. The bulletin outlines that the number of 'small schools' in the country is 41.8% of all schools. A 'small school' is defined as a school with four mainstream class teachers or fewer (DE, 2022). The DE Circular Letter 0011/2024 outlines the staffing arrangements for the 2024/2025 school year. The enrolment thresholds for administrative principals are included in the circular. For schools classified as 'ordinary', 'Gaelscoileanna' or 'Gaeltacht' a principal will have administrative or non-teaching status once there are 169 pupils or more pupils enrolled by the date of 30 September. This requirement, although not specified, is less if the school is operating two or more special classes. The numbers are lower for schools classified as having Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) status, where there is tailored support given to schools who have high levels of disadvantage (DE, 2017). The minimum enrolment for administrative principal status in such schools is 113 for schools categorised in Band One and 136 for schools categorised in Band Two (DE, 2024). To support a teaching principal in undertaking their managerial duties, the DE have sanctioned release time from teaching for teaching principals. In a circular letter published in 2019, and prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, teaching principals in schools with up to two additional teachers were entitled to 18 days, principals with three and four teachers were entitled to 24 days, and teachers with five and seven teachers were entitled to 30 days. Any school, regardless of size, that had special classes entitled the teaching principal to an additional four administration days. Since the return to school from the COVID-19 pandemic at the outset of the 2020/2021 school year, all teaching principals were entitled to one administrative day per week and this arrangement continues. *Circular Letter 0011/2024* outlines that all teaching principals are entitled to 37 administrative days for the 2024/2025 school year, while schools with a special class will entitle the principal to four additional administrative days (DE, 2024). This is a welcome departure for teaching principals given the multiple demands of the role and was a request that union and principal bodies had lobbied for over a number of years.

The next section of this work outlines the study undertaken with a number of primary school principals and teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic and the silver linings that schools reflected upon amongst the challenges of surviving the school closures.

The study

Methodology

This paper reports on findings from phase two of a two phase mixed-methods study undertaken with primary school principals and teachers. The purpose of the study was to provide an opportunity for both principals and teachers to reflect on how the pandemic

has impacted on their wellbeing. During the second phase of the data collection, the participants were asked to reflect on any advantages or 'silver linings' that emerged in schools as a result of the pandemic. The latter findings are the focus of this paper.

A two-phase mixed-methods longitudinal research study with a qualitative focus was undertaken: phase one was undertaken in June and July 2020, while phase two was undertaken in December 2020 and January 2021. In phase one, primary school principals and teachers were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview to reflect on their experiences of education and schooling since schools were closed on 12 March 2020. The interviews were conducted via Zoom and recorded on this platform as well as on a recording device used by the researcher. In advance of completing the interviews, the participants were asked to complete two short questionnaires: The *Emotional Regulation Questionnaire* (Gross & John, 2003) and the *Copenhagen Burnout Inventory* (Milfont et al. 2008).These measures were intended to assess the impact of the pandemic on the teachers' and principals' perceptions of burnout and emotional regulation.

Phase two of the study was completed in December 2020 and early January 2021. During this phase, the same participants were once more invited to participate in an interview to reflect on their experiences of returning to school since September 2020. Once again, the participants were invited to complete the two questionnaires so the results could be compared across phase one and two of data collection. The interviews were once again conducted via Zoom and recorded. There were two researchers involved in the interview stage of data collection; one researcher interviewed the participating teachers in both phases of the study while the other researcher interviewed the participating school principals. Ethical clearance to undertake the study was obtained from the university in which the lead researcher was working and the particpants received all of the required information about the study via email in advance of the interview.

Tables one and two present demographic details of the teachers and principals involved in phase two of the study. In total 12 teachers and 10 principals participated in phase one of the study. In phase two of data collection, 11 teachers and nine principals from phase one participated in the study. One principal was on sick leave from school, while one teacher had not returned to school due to an underlying health condition. Five men and 15 women participated in phase two. Their ages ranged from 22 to 60 years. Invitations to participate in the study were issued to principals and teachers that were known to the researchers and fitted the criteria for the study. Teachers participating in the study also supported the recruitment of other teachers. Finally, an education centre director issued an invitation to participate to schools in a particular catchment area. Of the total 20 participants in phase two, four principals and two teachers were employed in rural schools, including two multi-denominational schools, while the remainder were employed in urban schools, including two that were non-denominational. The majority of the participants (17/20) were employed in schools under the management of the Catholic Primary School Management Association (CPSMA). A range of both male and female teachers and principals, with varying years of experience in teaching and leading, in a variety of school types, engaged in the study. There were no significant differences associated with any of these demographic variables.

Table 1: Demographic details of teachers involved in phase two of the study

Name	Sex	Role	Years of experience	School Type
Teacher 1 (T1)	Female	SET*	10	Large Roman Catholic urban school
Teacher 2 (T2)	Female	SET	20	Large Roman Catholic urban school
Teacher 3 (T3)	Female	SET	20	Large Roman Catholic urban DEIS school
Teacher 4 (T4)	Male	Mainstream class teacher	8	Large Roman Catholic urban DEIS school
Teacher 5 (T5)	Female	Mainstream class teacher	20 years +	Small multi denominational school
Teacher 6 (T6)	Male	Mainstream class teacher	10 years +	Large Roman Catholic rural school
Teacher 7 (T7)	Female	Mainstream class teacher	20 years +	Large Roman Catholic rural school
Teacher 8 (T8)	Female	Mainstream class teacher	1 year	Large All Girls Roman Catholic urban school
Teacher 9 (T9)	Female	Mainstream class teacher and deputy principal	25 years	Large Roman Catholic rural school
Teacher 10 (T10)	Female	Mainstream class teacher	25 years	Urban Gaelscoil
Teacher 11 (T11)	Female	Mainstream class teacher	15 years	Large Roman Catholic rural school

*Special Education Teacher (SET)

Table 2: Demographic details of principals involved in the study

Name	Sex	Years of experience as principal	School Type
Principal 1(P1)	Male	3 years	Church of Ireland rural school
Principal 2 (P2)	Female	5 years	Small co-educational Catholic rural school
Principal 3 (P3)	Female	9 years	Large urban co-educational Catholic school
Principal 4 (P4)	Female	4 years	Developing Gaelscoil with pupils up to second class
Principal 5 (P5)	Female	7 years	Large urban Educate Together school
Principal 6 (P6)	Male	9 years	Small co-educational Catholic rural school
Principal 7 (P7)	Male	16 years	Large urban co-educational Catholic school
Principal 8 (P8)	Female	15 years	Small rural co-educational Catholic school
Principal 9 (P9)	Female	5 years, plus 7 years in another school	Catholic urban co-educational senior school

Findings

This paper presents findings in relation to both the qualitative data from phase two only, in the context of related literature on aspects of a child's experience of school and the established practices and procedures which were outlined in the previous section. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to analyse the qualitative interview data. This allowed the 'lived experience' of the participants to be the focus of the data gathered. Following the five-step IPA process as detailed by Smith and Osborne (2003), three themes and related sub-themes emerged from the findings which are outlined in table three below. The sub-theme of 'silver linings' is detailed below and is followed with an overall discussion and implications for future research and practice.

Table 3: Themes and sub-themes from phase two of the study

Theme	Sub-Themes
The Return	• Preparation for the Return • Feelings and Emotions
Wellbeing	• Subjective Wellbeing • Institutional Wellbeing
Emerging Issues in the School Community	• Relationships • Priorities • Silver Linings

Silver linings

The participants in the research study outlined a number of silver linings following the return to school after the prolonged closure from March to September 2020 These included the enhanced sense of wellbeing for the whole school community on being together in person once again, adapted practices in relation to homework and parent teacher meetings that worked well, the increased administrative time for the teaching principal and the ability of schools to engage fully in teaching and learning without the demands from outside organisations on school time.

All of the principal and teacher participants in the study commented on the renewed sense of joy and appreciation felt by the whole school community on being able to return to school in person in September 2020 and the sense of joy and excitement which resulted in such a feel-good factor in schools as is evidence in a sample of the responses:

> I think we all did. I think everyone really enjoyed to be back and appreciated things that they hadn't realised, you know, that they hadn't realised about the whole school community. (T6).

> What happened that was unexpected was how everything worked so well and actually because we didn't know what way it was going to go. And even more so, how wonderful the children were. How delighted they were to be back, absolutely delighted! And they just co-operated with everything brilliantly. It was so smooth. (P2)

> Well, first of all, it was great to see the children delighted to come back to school. Running in the door, running away from their parents! They didn't even look back. They were just- They just wanted that time to be themselves and that was lovely and I think that's what kept us all going is that the children are so happy to come back to school. (P4).

> It was a lovely, almost an occasion, a lovely thing to have the gates open, the doors open, that first morning… .So all the staff were out. Children arrived and there was a bit of a feel-good factor, you know? (laughs) To have the school open and buzzing. That did last. (T7)

> There was this nice community spirit. Parents were definitely thrilled to have them back. And on the whole, parents were very co-operative about regulations of not coming into the school and just sending us an email or giving us a call if they needed us rather than coming to the door. (P9).

The findings from the data certainly highlight that there was a renewed appreciation for the place of school in the lives of all of those who inhabit it; teachers and staff, pupils and parents. As the literature has highlighted, the sense of belonging experienced by pupils in school is such an important contribution to a child's overall experience of school (Nohilly et al. 2023) and this sense of welcome and warmth was certainly evident and appreciated after a prolonged school closure. Staff also appreciated being back and having some experience of the social elements of school life and the sense of comradery. Parents too were delighted to see their children return to some degree of normality and meet their friends. The sense of joy and delight really did make the return to school in challenging circumstances more manageable and very pleasant.

In July 2020, the DE issued guidelines to schools to support them in re-opening – *Reopening Our Schools: The Roadmap for the Full Return to School* (DE, 2020). Given that particular guidance was issued in relation to hygiene, cleaning regimes and maintaining physical distancing in schools, some schools adapted practices in an effort to contain the spread of COVID-19 and ensure the guidance was adhered to. Many schools had staggered opening times for children, staggered break times to maintain physical distancing between pupils, a no or adapted homework policy in the initial return to schools and parent-teacher meetings were conducted online. The participants in the study commented on a number of positives they experienced as a result of changes to practices:

> Not having the homework, I think the children loved it. The parents were- Like I asked them at the parent-teacher meetings and they all went, "Don't go back!". Sometimes I think we underestimate how stressful homework can be in a house. Parents are working. It's grand for the bright ones, we all know that! They'll just sit down and do it. But the ones that are finding it difficult! Do you know what? I can't see any difference in the kids. I don't think it's been anyway bad for them not having it (P3).

> I think I hadn't thought through the idea of parent-teacher meetings on Zoom but we did them and they were hugely successful. And the teachers were delighted. They said they were much easier that face-to-face. And they said, "Oh they had it down to a fine art!" In the waiting room, the parent in the meeting could hear when a parent came into the waiting room so then they'd go, they'd be gone! (P1).

> We give homework through Seesaw now. They don't bring any books home, so all the homework they submit is on Seesaw. The homework is corrected before they walk in the door the next day which is great. So there's no spending the first half an hour, well 45 minutes going over homework. You are just getting into the work for the day so we're getting more work done in school and the kids are being very productive. (T6).

> And even little things like, we don't line up in the yard anymore. The children come straight in in the mornings and sit in their places. And do you know what? Silver linings! There's no messing out in the yard and people come in an awful lot more settled. (P1).

When schools returned in September 2020, they had to change established practices in an effort to adhere to the *Reopening Our Schools: The Roadmap for the Full Return to School* (DE, 2020). While there is no doubt that the preparation for the return to schools was an enormous organisational and administrative task in the lead into the re-opening of schools, the participants in the study realised, almost to their surprise that some of the established practices were ones they would like to maintain. Homework has become an established practice in schools, with many educational benefits including the establishment of a partnership between school and home and allowing a child to practice and reinforce work covered in class (National Parents Council). The alteration in practice both in terms of how much homework is set and how it is corrected found both teachers and principals questioning the amount of homework to give and the amount of teaching time it takes to correct across a school day and week. It is not to devalue its importance but schools should feel empowered to review their homework policy and procedures and determine what works best for the needs of their school and the individual needs of pupils and families therein.

It was noted by a number of the participants that parent-teacher meetings via Zoom were very successful. The data highlighted that the online forum enabled the meetings to run in a timelier fashion. Undoubtedly, parent-teacher meetings provide a meaningful opportunity for parents who may not drop or collect their children to school to meet with the class teacher and nurture the relationship between home and school. However, given the number of meetings that are taking place in a short time-frame, online meetings may be the more efficient way to host these meetings. While the parent's voice was not included in data collection, there may be parents who find it easier to attend the meetings online given the multiple demands on their time and the fact that most meetings take place during the working day. Some schools have continued to host their meetings via an online forum since the pandemic, again an indication of practices that evolved from the pandemic that have proven suitable in a post-pandemic world.

Similar to the practice of not lining up in the yard on a school morning, the pandemic inadvertently forced schools to change established practices that have had liberating results for schools. This should give schools courage to look at their established practices and procedures and should they feel they can be done differently or better, to establish what best suits the needs of the individual school.

The silver lining for the teaching principal as a result of COVID-19 is the fact that they were granted additional administration time, of one day per week which has been the most welcome departure from established practice as indicated by the participants who were teaching principals:

> The admin day per week is one there can be no going back from. While the teaching principal role is unmanageable, this has offered some welcome reprieve. (P6).

> Silver Lining… Admin day every week… and it really has made my life much easier. For instance, when I said I did the survey with the parents, I probably wouldn't have had time to do that. But I had that day a week and I went, Okay this would be a good thing to do, let's do it!(P1).

As Burke and Dempsey (2021, p.9) have highlighted, pre-pandemic the primary school leaders' role was "already complex, messy and demanding" and the pandemic exacerbated the complexity of their role (Burke & Dempsey, 2020). The demands were of course more complex from the perspective of the teaching principal, with the added responsibility of teaching. The findings from the study undertaken in 2021 by Burke and Dempsey noted that teaching principals reported lower levels of personal wellbeing than administrative principals, which is unsurprising. It is essential that the additional administrative support is maintained to enable teaching principals to manage the competing demands of a complex role.

One final 'silver lining' that both school principals and teachers reported on returning to school post-pandemic was the relief from the disruptions to teaching time from outside organisations and agencies which allowed teachers time to teach! Although there was an acknowledgement that children did 'miss out' to some degree, teachers felt they had time to teach the curriculum and were less concerned about overload:

> From a teaching perspective it was brilliant. It was totally scraped back and the focus was on teaching and me doing the job I am supposed to do and we all loved it. (T9)

> I felt I could do more teaching, more specific teaching as opposed to going here and there and being called upon for this and that. I was able just to get down to the nitty-gritty. So that was really good. (T4)

> I think as the senior class teacher, the fifth and sixth class, I felt a lot of the fun was gone. We had no matches, but on the flip side – I didn't feel as overwhelmed at all at all about trying to get everything done and being here, there and everywhere and being a nodding dog and a yes person to all of the people knocking on our door looking to take the children for this, that and the other. (P8)

As the literature has highlighted from the GAA and beyond, schools are the source of contact to access pupils. While there are no doubts that there are enormous rewards for pupils and schools socially, emotionally, spiritually and academically – it comes with a price and a price that teachers pay in terms of the erosion of teaching time. Schools need to be able to say 'no' and to manage the expectations of outside organisations so that the time for teaching and learning, the core business of school, does not suffer.

Concluding remarks

It has often been said that a school is the heart of a community and this study confirms that. More so than ever, the pandemic portrayed just how much school life means to pupils, teachers and staff and to parents. This was exemplified through the palpable sense of joy that was infectious when schools re-opened their doors in September 2020. There was a renewed appreciation for school from pupils and parents and a renewed appreciation for staff teaching their pupils face to face and with the support of colleagues in the same location! The culture and climate of a school is underestimated for its potential and ability to support the wellbeing of all members of the community.

There has been much discourse about the pandemic serving as a lever for change and opening up new possibilities for teaching and learning (Byrne et al. 2021). Appreciating that this is a small-scale study, the findings are indicative that the pandemic has opened up new possibilities for primary schools – in terms of enabling change in how they undertake established practices. The pandemic and the return to school mid-pandemic proved to be a welcome catalyst for change in some instances, and the proof of this is that the reimagined practices are continuing – examples of these practices relate to homework, the use of online platforms for engagement with parents, and the support of digital technologies to address homework.

However, perhaps schools also need to press pause and take stock. Despite all of the learnings proclaimed from the pandemic in relation to the pace at which we live life and the erosion this causes on the school day, has this learning been forgotten as life returns to 'normal'? In an effort to ensure their pupils are not 'missing out' have schools returned to taking on board multiple initiatives, offering their pupils multiple sporting and other opportunities without consideration of how they address the learning objectives of the curriculum and the cost to teachers in terms of erosion of teaching and learning time, and the additional administrative responsibilities that inevitably underpin these activities? The balance needs to be struck to ensure that the curriculum as published directs teaching and learning, and teachers are selfish in protecting the time allocated to them to carry out their work. Otherwise, the 'silver linings' from the pandemic will be lost in a clouded sky!

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Barriers to teaching and learning in a time of pandemic

Patrick MacAogain

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound effect on the education of children, particularly children within the primary school system. Online learning is still a new model of learning at this level of education. The transition from classroom learning to online learning was not as simple as it appeared as most of the challenges were unforeseen, and solutions had not yet been developed. The aim of this paper is to examine the transformation of the educational landscape for teachers of children within the primary school setting and to discuss the challenges of online teaching during this period. This research aims to assess teachers' satisfaction levels on utilised online methods and approaches during the pandemic. The study was undertaken using a qualitative approach utilising purposeful sampling and semi-structured interviews to yield rich data of results. The primary aim of this paper was to determine: 1. To what extent are teachers satisfied with online teaching and learning approaches utilised during COVID-19?; and 2. What are the barriers to online learning as identified by primary teachers in Ireland?

Keywords: **COVID-19, pandemic, education, online learning, primary school**

Introduction

The role played by historical events, including economic crises, wars, natural disasters, and famines, in civilisation in general, and human behaviour, in particular, has long been acknowledged by scholars (Bilginsoy, 2014). Often, such events facilitate the transformation of human society at a much quicker pace compared to most of human history. The coronavirus pandemic is one such event, which marked the beginning of another transformation, after which the world cannot be the same (Alonso et al., 2020). In January 2020, after multiple cases of COVID-19 were reported outside China, this virus was declared an emergency of international concern. Only two months later, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared a pandemic, which evolved into the biggest state of emergency the world had witnessed in a century (WHO, 2021).

As a response to the pandemic, many countries introduced unprecedented lockdown measures to contain the spread of the virus and minimise its negative impact on their social and economic development, as well as to reduce the burden on the healthcare system (Alonso et al., 2020). The Irish government, for example, closed local amenities, including leisure centres, parks, and public places that attracted large gatherings of people. These actions are expected to have a strong impact on children, especially those of primary school going age. Similarly to many other public places, schools were closed

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to ensure children's safety during the pandemic. Nonetheless, educators still had to focus on supporting children, as well as their families, to make sure their academic success and progress were not compromised.

According to the Department of Health's recommendations, any gatherings with more than ten people were to be avoided, which implied that teachers could not follow traditional teaching practices and communicate with students face-to-face (Nidirect, 2021). In turn, the Department of Education considered the impact of large gatherings on children and how it was possible for teachers to ensure social distancing, and introduced additional safety measures, including the wearing of masks while communicating with children in the classroom (Government, 2021). Still, given the lockdown measures, educational establishments and teachers had to devote their attention to a virtual classroom environment as a means of teaching.

Literature review

The terms 'distance learning', 'e-learning', 'virtual schools', 'online learning', and 'web-based instruction' were all used interchangeably to describe this constantly changing and somewhat confusing field of instruction (Rice, 2006). For the purpose of this study, distance learning is defined as formal, institution-based education where the teacher and the student are physically separated and where information technology (IT) is used to connect them (Jacob and Radhai, 2016). Even though research in the area of IT and the use of the Internet in the context of educational establishments is fairly abundant, a scarcity of research exists when it comes to examining school students enrolled in e-learning (Tess, 2013). Nonetheless, the recent coronavirus pandemic and its impact on virtually all aspects of people's social life have sparked academic interest in distance education and how it affects the performance of both teachers and students (Alonso et al., 2020; Qazi et al., 2021).

The explosion of social media within the past decade has had an increasing impact on education, and more recent research indicates trends for the importance of incorporating social media into the classroom (Evans, 2014; Junco et al., 2010; Junco et al., 2013; Tess, 2013). Even though online learning is a relatively new approach to learning, it has already gained sufficient interest from both education scholars and practitioners (Jacob and Radhai, 2016). However, the transition from traditional classroom learning to online learning may not be as simple as it seems at first glance, since there are numerous challenges and factors that still need to be addressed. Some research suggests that certain cohorts of students, including younger, male, and Black students, may be at a disadvantage in their ability to adapt to online courses (Xu and Smith Jaggars, 2013). Furthermore, students may need additional motivation, organisation, and self-discipline to be successful in their online learning endeavours (Jacob and Radhai, 2016).

The role of social media in online learning has recently received close consideration by education scholars and researchers due to the enormous popularity of social networking services with students (Tess, 2013). For example, Evans (2014) examined how Twitter (now known as 'X'), one of the most popular social media platforms, could be used to enhance the process of learning in the online environment. To achieve this aim, the researcher

obtained primary data from more than 250 students during a 12-week course. Evans (2014) discovered that there was a positive correlation between the amount of Twitter usage and student engagement in education and learning activities. Similar outcomes were produced by Junco et al. (2013) who concluded that Twitter usage positively affected the perceived credibility of the tutor, resulting in more effective communication with students. Junco et al. (2010) also found that Twitter use positively affected student grades and engagement.

Considering the empirical findings above, one could argue that the use of social media is indeed positively associated with the degree to which students are engaged in social exchange, sharing information, and other course-related activities. At the same time, Evans (2014), Junco et al. (2010), and Junco et al. (2013) were focused on university students, indicating that their empirical findings may not necessarily be applicable to school students. Finally, social media platforms are not limited to Twitter, which implies that the correlation between social media and student performance might not be positive in the context of other social networking services, such as Facebook, YouTube, or Instagram. Hence, further research in this field is required to identify whether social media enhances the process of learning for school students. A critical question associated with the situation is to what extent teachers perceive online learning as an effective platform in their students' learning progress?

Methodology

This study adopted the qualitative paradigm to develop rich and in-depth data with regards to the views and lived experiences of teachers at the coalface of teaching online during the lockdown. This approach is considered to help develop a more thematic line of findings that sees elements being grouped together as a process for gathering additional insights into the phenomenon in hand (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Cohen, Mannion, Morrison, 2013).

Study ethics

The research adhered to Hibernia College ethical approval and the British Educational Research Association's (BERA) code (2011) addressing informed consent, confidentiality, and secure data storage. The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) (2019, p.12) notes that the anonymisation of personal data, as is the case here, lies outside of GDPR and data protection systems. Nevertheless, this study has undertaken to build upon regulations and apply BERA code requirements which, ostensibly, are stronger than that offered by current legal restrictions and regulations. As such, BERA (2011) is the governing system for this work and, following approval from the school's board of management, written informed consent was acquired from teachers who partook in this research.

Sample selection

Sampling is viewed by Anderson (2004) as a deliberate process that sees a number of people being used as representative of a greater population, and, with this a more purposive sampling system was used to recruit participants to the study. Yet, although the generalisation of samples is not a priority within purely qualitative research, the

prevailing ratio of male to female teachers in primary schools was considered; this led to the recruitment of n = 20 teachers, of whom n = 4 were male and n = 16 were female. Recruitment took place from a variety of rural schools throughout the Republic of Ireland.

Data collection

Employing interviews using Google Meets and adopting a qualitative research strategy allowed the researcher to understand perceptions of the views around us. Purposeful sampling and semi-structured interviews determined the quality of the data (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). Participants were interviewed by the study researcher under Marton's phenomenographic approach to identifying the perceptions of participants' lived experiences (Marton, 1988a). Interviews were recorded using video files and were transferred into play-script transcripts. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes.

Data analysis

Following transcription of the video files, full data analysis, following Marton's (1988b) method of phenomenographic analysis was conducted. This involved a series of steps in which the data was categorised and sub-categorised into codes and themes. Cohen, Mannion, & Morrison (2013) argue that this approach also sees a need to undertake analysis of the themes because it is this which ultimately informs knowledge. This process began with the researcher familiarising themselves with the data – a process that began during the transcription of the audio files, and subsequent read-throughs of the play-script output – during which initial ideas about lower level codes were developed. The next phase sought to hone and refine these lower-level codes, and additionally saw similar codes be organised into thematic clusters. From these clusters, themes began to develop, during which point reference was made back to the original raw data to ensure fidelity between the themes and the actual accounts of participants. At this stage, any themes that did not match the data to a satisfactory level were discarded, whilst remaining themes were further refined and developed.

Results

Following analysis of the interview data, there were three core themes which developed surrounding the interviews. The first of these referred to the tension that teachers felt while trying to be perfect while teaching online. The second referred to the lack of support teachers felt while undertaking online learning. The third tension was the time it took to prepare and deliver online. These will be discussed in further detail in the following sub-sections, and where appropriate these themes will be highlighted utilising extracts of the verbatim accounts of study participants.

Barriers to online learning

Theme 1 – Teacher perfectionism

During the course of the interview, the participants were asked to consider what barriers they perceived to hamper the implementation and use of virtual learning. One of the most

prevalent answers that stemmed from this line of questioning related to the teachers' own sense of having to be perfect. The participants also reported that being able to tolerate perceived failure was another key barrier to their ability to implement new teaching strategies for online learning. For example, one teacher replied that their own attitudes formed the most significant challenge limiting their self-efficacy. By analysing the interview transcripts, it was revealed that each teacher compared their practices against a specific idealistic concept of how online teaching should be taught. Perfectionism meant that the results of these comparisons were unfavourable towards the participants of the study.

The produced outcomes add to the existing body of literature, since, to the researcher's knowledge, a willingness to achieve perfection was not explicitly mentioned by other scholars on the subject of online training in the educational sector. For example, Epstein and Willhite (2017) reported that student engagement, staff collaboration, and consistent opportunities to participate in the decision-making process were among the main factors that contributed to teacher self-efficacy. At the same time, a teacher's concern with striving for perfection and flawlessness in their approach to teaching was overlooked by Epstein and Willhite (2017). One potential explanation is that the participants of the researchers' study viewed themselves as highly skilled and effective academic instructors. Although perfectionism is often associated with positive outcomes (e.g., increased chances of success), it can also lead to self-defeating behaviours and thoughts, causing stress, depression, and anxiety (Gnilka and Broda, 2019). These negative outcomes, in turn, could damage the quality of teaching.

Other participants also tended to view their presentation of virtual topics through a dichotomous success/failure lens. They revealed that they had little tolerance for what they viewed to be a failure on their part to successfully engage their pupils with the topic at hand. As one of the participants argued:

> My concern really was that I at times think I can't do the topic justice you know? I feel that when I was doing a class online, I couldn't use resources or anything like that. I teach a higher class in the school and so the content can be slightly more advanced and it's like I just felt a bit stupid doing it on a screen at times – was I explaining this right, did they understand, and if not, that reflects on me. I was also conscious that parents were watching/listening to me as I teach.

As the quote above indicates, some teachers were unsure of the success and effectiveness of their online lessons. They felt that some of their online lessons were a failure because they were unsure about whether they could involve and engage their students. This undoubtedly held the teachers back from trying out new strategies to teach the curriculum online to their pupils. These findings to a certain extent are in keeping with those produced by Xu and Smith Jaggars (2013). Although the researchers examined students' perceptions of online learning, they found that there was a significant difference between online courses and face-to-face courses. This difference, in turn, translated into negative learning outcomes, since students engaged in online learning were less academically successful as compared to their peers who communicated with a teacher face-to-face (Xu and Smith Jaggars, 2013). That being said, teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of their online lessons and students'

performance may depend on different factors. This assumption substantiates the need for further research in this area to identify whether teachers' intention to achieve perfection negatively affects students' performance and academic success in the online environment.

It was noted by the participants that at least some of them were aware of the fact that their perfectionism was not justified. While allowing for mistakes in class, the teachers were unable to overcome their own shortcomings while teaching online. Teachers have a strong intrinsic motivation that often results in the establishment of an idealistic mindset. As noted by Gnilka and Broda (2019), teachers tend to have very high expectations for themselves, which could be impossible to meet due to various factors. For example, poor quality bandwidth can become a serious challenge for a teacher to demonstrate their best during an online class (Jacob and Radhai, 2016). From the basis of this sub-theme of perfectionism, it is relevant to assume that teachers in this area would benefit from additional support, so they could take chances and accept that mistakes or underwhelming responses from their class are not something to shy away from. In this case, it would be possible to reduce teachers' stress and anxiety, which, in turn, could add to the quality of the teaching process (Gnilka and Broda, 2019).

Theme 2 – Lack of support

Another theme that was developed during the data analysis process is lack of support. The participants did not just identify their own personal failings and concerns when it came to identifying potential barriers to implementing online teaching. Although fewer participants brought it up, there were, nevertheless, several teachers who perceived a lack of professional support from their school/principal teacher and ICT coordinator as a formidable barrier to their development and self-actualisation as a teacher. In their study, Tehseen and Hadi (2015) identified that administrative support was an important factor that produced a strong impact on teachers' motivation and retention. These outcomes suggest that favourable working conditions in general, and professional support from school management, in particular, determine the extent to which the participants accept and use virtual training. For example, the following quote states:

> Change takes time, you know? This is a busy job and there are so many different balls in the air at any one time and especially during COVID time. I think what we've learned is through trial and error, but like, I feel like there needs to be further training down the line somewhere so that we can prepare for further use of online learning in case we need to resort to it once again. Otherwise, it runs the risk of getting lost along the way. (Teacher 1)

Based on the quote above, one could argue that the lack of support the teachers felt regarding online training sessions was perceived as an important factor that prevented them from using online learning. The participants also felt that training should have been made available for online/virtual teaching in the first place. Recent studies in this field have demonstrated that more often than not online teachers receive basic training while teaching online, whereas the extent to which they get advanced and comprehensive

training is very limited (Zweig and Stafford, 2016). Teachers do not receive the necessary training in relation to online learning practice areas, such as appropriate communication and timely feedback, teamwork facilitation, facilitated discussions, and the adaptation of online instruments to support instruction (Cochran-Smith et al., 2015). This lack of attention to online education from school management can be partly explained by the insufficient and limited understanding of how further training is important to teachers and their ability to effectively use online learning as a teaching method, especially during the coronavirus pandemic. Several participants supported this notion and argued that they did not receive sufficient training in online instruction, which limited their ability to support online student success. For instance, as one teacher said:

> I guess my main concern was whether we get the support from above? There was an implication that 'well you've done this already, why would you need an update' which can put a barrier up straightaway as to whether you can access further sessions you know? For me there should be follow up sessions or refreshers or whatever because well, that's what continued professional development should be about you! But things like money and time and resources tend to get in the way of all that. (Teacher 2)

Finally, there was an overall feeling about how professional development programmes were generally viewed by principals, budget holders, and other teachers alike. These concepts of professional development programmes were likely to represent a considerable barrier to those willing to develop their skills over a longer period of time. These empirical findings are supported by those produced by Gleeson et al. (2017) who revealed that the external resource constraints and poor management in rural Irish education were crucial obstacles limiting the effectiveness of training programmes. A noticeable trend that was identified while analysing the interview transcripts was that the teachers felt frustrated with how their efforts were treated by the educational authorities. A lack of support produced a negative impact on the participants' self-efficacy with many of them reporting that this barrier strongly lowered their job satisfaction. Combined with what was stated by Gleeson et al. (2017), this study suggests that continued support is needed for training interventions to be effective.

Theme 3 – Time constraints

The final sub-theme that has been identified within the theme of 'barriers to change' reverts back to a more individual issue, which is time constraints. At the same time, the analysis outcomes indicate that this issue also reflects the professional and organisational issues faced by many teachers in these settings. For example, some participants argued that their workload was very heavy, as they had to develop new resources or new lesson plans in conjunction with the new strategies they were keen to incorporate into their lessons. As a result, because of all these tasks, they were unable to further develop their online teaching skills. For others, the lack of time was a personal issue, based upon their own traits as individuals. As one participant stated:

> I think – and this sounds bad I know, and it is – I think that sometimes I can be a bit lazy and will struggle to put huge amounts of effort into sourcing loads of new resources and the like, particularly if it's been a hard week or I'm busy with other stuff, so this can be a real issue which leads me back to relying on my old handouts and plans? (Teacher 6)

Based on the above, it could be argued that this study supports the work of Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2015) who also signified the impacts of time constraints on the effectiveness of training interventions. According to the researchers, time pressure, the lack of support, and discipline problems were among the key reasons that negatively affected teachers' job satisfaction, as well as their motivation to stay in the profession (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2015). Although this study does not directly approach the concept of motivation or employee retention, it is still relevant to argue that the lack of time, which is a source of stress and burnout, could become a reason why teachers fail to source new resources or develop new lesson plans.

High stress levels caused by the aforementioned factors, which prevent teachers from learning new materials, indicate that there is a need for an overhaul of work planning at rural Irish schools (Gnilka and Broda, 2019). It is apparent from this study that such situations seem to be commonplace within the participants' experiences. Perhaps due to this, they had a number of means they identified to address this issue. One such approach involved being allocated more time and resources by the school management to build upon the professional learning the teachers had conducted as part of the professional development programme that they had been a part of:

> It seems obvious to me, that if you're going to spend the time, effort, and resources on attending a course like this, why would you then not allow us the necessary space to build upon this? For me the school needs to put in place mechanisms that allow us the time to build our resources from scratch based upon the learning that we have undertaken, otherwise it seems like just another paper exercise! (Teacher 11)

Whilst not all teachers shared this opinion, it was still apparent that the participants viewed professional development programmes as a way for them to further develop their online teaching skills. Hence, Irish teachers should be provided with robust and comprehensive resources or links to resources, so they do not have to expend the energy on doing this themselves. Aligned with the outcomes reported by Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2015), this study has illustrated the significance of external support for ensuring positive long-term educational outcomes.

Discussion on findings

Following the review of the findings it is clear that the development of IT has provided a solid basis for the emergence of online learning platforms. Today, almost everyone has a smartphone, computer, and social media accounts, which allow for communicating

with peers, colleagues, and family members and discuss various subjects and topics. One of the main benefits that online learning provides is the removal of restrictions of time and location, allowing students and teachers located in different geographical spaces to effectively learn and teach, respectively (Qazi et al., 2021). Moreover, online learning offers a cheaper and faster way of learning, since there is no need to spend time commuting.

Even though the issue of distance education has recently gained close academic attention, most of the research on this topic is conducted in the context of higher education, whereas online learning in the school sector remains an under-researched issue (Junco et al., 2013). According to Cavanaugh et al. (2004), the effectiveness of distance education at the primary and secondary education levels is determined by how well it assists younger students with developing their skills and competencies to become self-regulating and autonomous learners. At the K-12 level, students need to develop the self-discipline necessary for later learning, which is characterised by a lower level of teacher involvement in the learning process (Cavanaugh et al., 2004). In turn, younger students need a greater presence of a teacher. The purpose of this paper was to examine how the education landscape for children has been transforming and to discuss the opportunities and challenges of online education during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although the relevance of online learning significantly increased with the COVID-19 pandemic, the shift to online instruction is hampered by numerous barriers and challenges that prevent both students and teachers from engaging in online learning (Government of Ireland, 2021). One of the first studies on this topic was conducted by Schrum and Hong (2002) who focused on the dimensions of successful online learners and what factors prevented them from achieving this goal. By obtaining primary data from both online learners and experienced online educators, Schrum and Hong (2002) concluded that access to technology experience, study habits and skills, learning preferences, and personal traits and characteristics were the most significant dimensions of successful online learners. For example, as noted by Jacob and Radhai (2016), the lack of skills, knowledge, and experience might become the reason why both students and teachers fail to effectively use e-learning as a means of learning and teaching, respectively.

Training is commonly viewed as one of the ways through which an individual can further improve their skills, knowledge, and competencies (Gleeson et al., 2017). Online learning training is not the exception to this rule, as recent studies have demonstrated that online teachers lag behind their offline colleagues in terms of using their appropriate learning instruments and practices (Cochran-Smith et al., 2015). In other words, online teachers are often less skilled in how to teach classes effectively. Although this skill gap could be narrowed down through training and development, the existing literature suggests that school management gives very limited attention to online teachers' training and development (Zweig and Stafford, 2016).

The lack of support could be viewed as another potential barrier to virtual learning. According to motivation theories, an employee should feel valued and supported to demonstrate a high level of motivation, commitment, and loyalty to their employer (Tehseen and Hadi, 2015). However, those teachers who do not feel they are supported by their managers are likely to lose motivation or even quit their job (Zweig and Stafford, 2016). This issue is of crucial importance when it comes to virtual learning, since, as it

has been mentioned, online teachers often lag behind their offline colleagues in terms of teaching skills and practices. Moreover, the lack of support can become a source of stress and anxiety, which can also produce a strong negative impact on teachers' motivation and engagement, posing a threat to their ability to effectively use online learning instruments and platforms (Gnilka and Broda, 2019).

Although there are different theories of perfectionism, the existing literature suggests that there are two dimensions of perfectionism, namely perfectionistic concerns, and perfectionistic strivings (Gnilka and Broda, 2019). The former refers to one's self-criticalness about performance, whereas the latter refers to setting high-performance standards (Ashby and Gnilka, 2017). It is commonly assumed that perfectionism is a characteristic that helps individuals achieve their goals and become more productive. That being said, research suggests that the correlation between perfectionism and individual performance is not necessarily positive. For example, self-criticalness about performance often leads to increased depression levels, anxiety, and perceived stress (Smith et al., 2018). Nonetheless, some studies suggest that setting high-performance standards is associated with lower levels of anxiety and depression (Ashby and Gnilka, 2017).

Conclusion

It is clear that instructional technology, as a research field with several sub-divisions, has played a major role in cushioning the effect of this pandemic on educational activities by serving as the only platform for instructional design, delivery and teaching. Despite the sudden nature of the transition to online teaching and learning by schools, it is evident that the online model will continue to be progressed and developed for future use. Given the many barriers to successful engagement with online teaching and learning, which include those identified by teachers in this study – teacher perfectionism, lack of support and time constraints – it is now a challenge for the Department of Education and the relevant stakeholders to address those barriers, which also warrant attention as areas for future research.

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