

*Irish
Learning
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LEARN

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Journal of the
Irish Learning Support Association

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ILSA members and their lecturers/academic supervisors are invited to submit papers to be considered for inclusion in the 2019 issue of LEARN. **The final copy of papers**, accompanied by an abstract and a short biographical note about the writer(s) should be submitted as a Microsoft Word document and emailed to **ilsanationalcommittee@gmail.com** with Learn Editorial Board in the subject line, by January 31st 2019. Papers **must** conform to the guidelines detailed at the back of this journal.

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ILSA is concerned with the education of children and young people with learning difficulties. Its aims include promoting cooperation between those concerned with Learning Support and enhancing the quality of service given by Learning Support Teachers through the provision of resources, lectures and seminars and provision of opportunities for peer-support.

CONTENTS

Editorial.....	6
Psychological Capital and the Positive School Environment	9
– <i>Jacinta M. Kitt</i>	
Addressing the Wellbeing of Learners with Complex Special Educational Needs: Using Junior Cycle Level Two Learning Programmes for explicit teaching of wellbeing for wellbeing	27
– <i>Nicola Mannion and Johanna Fitzgerald</i>	
An Exploration of the Transition from Post-primary to Third Level Education Settings for Students with Special Educational Needs	41
– <i>Martha Daly and Kevin Cahill</i>	
“It’s very hard to know how much is the EAL and how much is the learning difficulty”: Challenges in organising support for EAL learners in Irish primary schools	54
– <i>Fíodhna Gardiner-Hyland and Patrick Burke</i>	
Facilitators of Change: Irish Teachers’ Perspectives and Experiences of Including Students with Special Educational Needs in the Mainstream Infant Classroom	65
– <i>Louise Curtin and Margaret Egan</i>	
Using Response Boards to Promote Active Student Responding in a Special School Class	84
– <i>David Lavin and Patricia Daly</i>	
Exploring the Social Construction of Dyslexia	97
– <i>Trevor O’Brien</i>	
Intergenerational Learning: How to Develop Civic Literacy in young children	106
– <i>Marie Hanmore-Cawley</i>	

The views expressed in the articles do not necessarily reflect those of ILSA.

Editorial

The Irish Learning Support Association (ILSA) is dedicated to supporting teachers whose days are committed to helping children with Special Educational Needs (SEN). In their capacity as Special Education Teachers (SETs) they are called on daily to solve problems, identify how particular children learn best, look for new resources and generally manage heavy demands with limited resources, including time.

The ‘New Model’ is firmly embedded in schools. In a vox-pop of their views on the New Model, SETs are happy, in general, with the flexibility accorded to them to allocate resource hours/learning support to particular children as no diagnosis is needed. It is a needs-based system. However, some teachers worry that they do not have the skill to recognise and address all the needs of children, particularly if these needs are complex. Some teachers worry about the review of the New Model, which they feel is imminent. They ask “If you are a successful teacher at addressing the needs of children with SEN, does your school lose out?”. Other teachers’ responses involve a widespread concern regarding the burden of paperwork. While the New Model is considered excellent for gathering all information in one place many teachers feel there is too much paperwork. A typical position is “My working day is mostly taken up with extra paperwork this year – all children who get support now have student support files, targets are reviewed and changed every term, twice yearly at least”. Other responses echo this; “the reviews are too frequent and parents don’t see the need to be back into the school so frequently”.

The Department of Education and Skills (DES) circulars relating to the New Model for Primary and Post-Primary Special Education Teaching Allocation (Circulars 0013/2017 and 0014/2017) explicitly state that the New Model will work best and only if Class and SETs cooperate closely. The vox-pop of teachers indicates that classroom teachers could cooperate more to put classroom support plans in place and to document the type of differentiation required for each child with SEN. A climate of cooperation between classroom and SETs is the key point here.

School effectiveness is an artefact of cooperation and many other aspects of the school environment. In the first paper in Volume 40 of LEARN, Jacinta Kitt explores the link between the quality of the school environment, school effectiveness and the wellbeing of students and staff. The positive disposition of staff members and their levels of hope, optimism, resilience and self-efficacy are explored in the role they play in the Psychological Capital (PsyCap) in schools.

The theme of explicit teaching of wellbeing for wellbeing is the theme of the second paper by Nicola Mannion and Johanna Fitzgerald. Their action research project reveals the role of explicit teaching of wellbeing in the behaviour of students with complex educational needs. It also reveals how social and emotional needs are met by embedding a wellbeing intervention in the Junior Cycle Level Two Learning Programmes (L2LPs) Priority Learning Units (PLUs).

The contribution of Martha Daly and Kevin Cahill enters the world of students with SEN as they transition from post-primary to third level education. Their challenges, in what is a turbulent time in their lives, are revealed. The research highlights the necessity of providing supports for students at this time, as their SEN impacts them at personal, academic, social and identity levels. The authors make recommendations for enhanced transition processes involving a Whole-School Approach, SEN Team collaboration with Career Guidance and the role of the DES in facilitating this.

The Gardiner-Hyland and Burke article perceives the growth in linguistic diversity in Irish Primary Schools as presenting significant opportunities. Learners for whom English is an additional language (EAL) are seen as contributing to social enrichment. However, attention is drawn to policy and practice requirements to ensure adequate effectiveness and inclusiveness. The authors outline the danger inherent in the difficulty in distinguishing between language needs relating to typical second language development and SEN. Findings from teacher interviews in diverse multi-lingual schools are discussed in relation to the complexity of working with children with SEN **in addition** to their EAL profile. The authors suggest more support is required in New Model documentation for EAL teachers in the areas of expertise, specific guidance, targeted prioritised positioning, assessment materials and accommodation of EAL learners with additional difficulties.

The paper by Louise Curtin and Margaret Egan is concerned with research to create inclusive classrooms for all early years students including those with SEN, and to inform Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) in particular. The research aims to identify approaches and resources which make for inclusivity. Approaches from the literature are discussed. The research findings offer valid, reliable data indicating such methods as whole-school collaboration, cooperative learning, group work and play are some of the inclusive approaches. Resources are also identified to aid inclusion in order to enhance engagement of all learners including those with SEN.

Enhanced student engagement is also the theme of the paper by David Lavin and Patricia Daly. These authors demonstrate the effectiveness of response boards as a resource to increase student engagement in a special school class. The authors compared active student responding using response boards to that using more traditional question-answer techniques in a special school setting for students with a mild general learning disability (MGLD). The finding of enhanced engagement and recall and reduced challenging behaviour in target students, as well as student satisfaction with response boards, makes for an attractive method for teacher students with a diagnosis of MGLD.

Trevor O'Brien's reflective article focuses on the complex nature of dyslexia and how the dyslexia label is socially constructed within the social model of disability. Citing models of dyslexia, he contrasts the aims of each. The social model accepts difference as fundamental human experience which has implications for pedagogy and assessment. Children's challenges, on a continuum of human experience, become exasperated when barriers are put in place in a literacy-based society. The social construction of dyslexia sees the

challenges as difference rather disability and has the power to change policy and practice. O'Brien discusses cultural norms in terms of literacy and how dyslexia impairments become a disability in relation to levels of production, citizenship, economic competitiveness and success in the education system. He considers acquisition of the dyslexia label and its usefulness for access to educational support. However, such support may elude those without the label due to lower parental expectations and reduced exposure to books. O'Brien considers the pros and cons in the literature for accepting or rejecting the dyslexia label and suggests that dialogue with those who have the dyslexia label may provide teachers with insights to inform practice, to the benefit of all learners including those with dyslexia.

While O'Brien's article emphasises the outside influences and the individual's educational setting, the final article in Volume 40 by Marie Hanmore-Cawley considers the potential of the process of intergenerational, reciprocal learning to develop civil literacy in children. The twin problems of weakness in the delivery of citizenship education and the widening social distance between youth and elders in Irish society are addressed in her study of participants aged 9 to 10 years on the one hand and those aged 65+ on the other. She shows how exchange of resources between the generations can engender civic literacy in the children in the form of leadership and responsibility. Older people taught and were taught; both groups benefitted – collaborative learning in society.

Volume 40 of LEARN encompasses a range of themes: psychological and social capital for wellbeing, explicit teaching of wellbeing for enhanced social and emotional life, collaborative support for students with SEN transitioning to third level, meeting the needs of all EAL learners and collaborative whole-school action for the inclusive early years classroom.

Action at the individual teacher level is considered in the Lavin and Daly article on response boards. Trevor O'Brien's wide-ranging article on models of dyslexia, the usefulness of the dyslexia label and the value of engagement with those students who have the dyslexia label is a reflective piece for teachers to consider. The value of social engagement between the generations is the theme of the final article.

Teachers are important players in the school community. Engagement and collaboration with colleagues, management, the DES, children and parents (and with research) make for enhanced outcomes.

I would like to thank the National Executive of ILSA and, in particular, the Editorial Committee who have worked hard to interact with the authors of articles in this volume. I would also like to thank the authors themselves for their understanding and generosity in this collaborative effort.

“Ar scáth a chéile a mhaireann na daoine” (We thrive in one another's care).

PAULINE COGAN
Editor of *LEARN*
August 2018

Psychological Capital and the Positive School Environment

Jacinta M. Kitt

Abstract

Increasingly there is an awareness of the links between the quality of the environment in schools, the effectiveness of the school and the wellbeing of students and staff. The quality of the school environment is largely determined by the degree of positivity exhibited by those who work there. This article focuses on the manifestations and relevance of Psychological Capital (PsyCap) in the school context. PsyCap in schools is reflective of the positive disposition of staff members and is manifested in their levels of hope, optimism, resilience and self-efficacy. Each of these components is examined in the school context.

Creating a climate of hope in schools is associated with teachers facilitating students in realising their abilities and also with acknowledging and celebrating the individual achievements of students. It is suggested that school leaders build hope in schools by clearly communicating the standards that are expected from staff members.

The manifestations of optimism in teachers and the benefits accruing to high levels of optimism are explored. Optimistic teachers are considered to be positive in their attitudes and outlook. They interpret difficulties as surmountable, behave rationally in conflict situations and use humour and laughter frequently, yet judiciously.

Resilience is viewed by the author as essential for teachers, to enable them to cope well with the challenges and pressures associated with their job. The research of Seligman, informs the focus on how interpretations of events influence individual's convictions and conclusions. It is suggested that in order to build the resilience of students, protective processes need to be put in place as resilience does not happen in a vacuum.

The work of Bandura (1997) linking self-efficacy to self-belief and confidence is highlighted and the implications of the self-efficacy and confidence of teachers, for innovative teaching and learning, are explored.

Introduction

An awareness of the environment in schools first struck me when I was working for one of the teacher training colleges more than twenty years ago. I was supervising student teachers engaged in teaching practice in various schools. Through visiting a large number of schools over a short period of time, I became aware that each and every school – irrespective of location, student

numbers, socio-economic background of the students, or physical condition of the building – had a particular and unique atmosphere, something that I sensed or felt as soon as I entered the school. Although there were, of course, nuances of similarities and differences between the quality of the atmosphere in the various schools, the general sense was that a visit to a particular school proved to be either a positive experience on the one hand, or a negative one on the other.

While initial impressions of the school can be powerful indicators of the positivity or negativity of the school environment, they are but the tip of the iceberg in terms of understanding the myriad elements and dimensions of school life that contribute to what constitutes an overall positive school environment. However, the sense that one initially gets is invariably to do with the people in the school, including adults and children, and how they treat each other, get on with each other, and how well they work with each other.

The quality of the behaviours and relationships impacts not merely on the atmosphere, but also on the quality of the teaching and learning, and the wellbeing of both staff and students. Appropriate behaviours and high quality relationships are characterised primarily by their levels of positivity. School leaders and teachers set an example through how they behave and relate to others. They also set the tone of the behaviours and relationships which, whether positive or negative, the students will emulate.

This paper will focus on Psychological Capital (PsyCap) in schools, through examining the components of PsyCap and how they impact on the quality of environment in schools.

Psychological Capital in Schools

A huge body of research has been conducted on positivity in the workplace both in the positive psychology, and the positive organisational behaviour fields of study. The objective of the pioneering work undertaken by both Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi on positive psychology was to change the focus of psychology from one of healing and repairing people, to one of building and reinforcing positive qualities and helping people to flourish in all areas of their lives including their work.

With particular reference to the value of staff who are positive in their attitudes and behaviours, Luthans *et al* (2004) built on the ideas of positive psychology and organisational behaviour, to develop the concept of positive psychological capital (PsyCap) as a resource for workplaces. Capital generally refers to the range of resources that an individual has, and can draw from as required in the workplace. There are a number of different forms of capital, which include the more familiar Human Capital and Social Capital. Human Capital is made up of an individual's knowledge, skills, and qualifications. A person's CV would usually indicate his/her level of human capital. A person high in social capital

would have the ability to work cooperatively with others to contribute to collective effectiveness. Successful school leaders, in particular, are aware of the benefits of Human and Social Capital, and look to the components of both as criteria to guide their decisions in the appointment or promotions of staff.

Psychological Capital, or PsyCap, is less well understood, and refers to an individual's positive state of mind (Luthans *et al* 2007). Someone high in PsyCap has a predominantly positive disposition. Some school leaders concentrate merely on the qualifications/experience of candidates and on their accounts of how well they work with others, when making decisions at interviews. They have often been subsequently disappointed to discover that the person they have appointed has turned out to be a negative force on the staff. When they do get it right and appoint someone who is a positive influence, they have a responsibility to ensure that he/she is facilitated and empowered to stay positive. Pryce-Jones (2010) stated that PsyCap really matters in a job that requires motivation, creative thinking, and perseverance. These are surely among the essential hall marks of good teaching. PsyCap becomes even more relevant to schools and teaching when we consider it in terms of its components, which are:

- Hope
- Optimism
- Resilience
- Self efficacy (confidence) (Luthans *et al* 2004)

These four components, are not firmly fixed personality traits, but are relatively stable states of mind, that benefit from being appreciated and managed. All three forms of Capital, Human, Social and Psychological are important and contribute positively to the effectiveness of the workplace. The latter, PsyCap, as the positive state of mind of individuals, is perhaps the most important resource in itself, and in its ability to contribute to the effectiveness of a school and the wellbeing of those in it. The positive disposition of staff also contributes to their own commitment and wellbeing through reduced anxiety and stress (Newman *et al* 2014).

Hope as a positive mind-set

In order to appreciate the importance and positive impact of PsyCap in schools, each of its components will be examined to ascertain how it relates to and manifests in everyday school life. Hope, as one of the constituent elements of PsyCap, is probably the most easily identified as absolutely essential in the teaching profession. Teaching has been variously described as the discipline of hope (Kohl 1998), the profession of hope (Perrone 1991) and as a vocation of hopefulness (Shade 2011). Some tired, cynical or generally disillusioned teachers may have abandoned hope. As a result, they may have succumbed to fatalism in their attitude and passivity in their practice. Fatalism is expressed in an unwillingness to change or improve practice and an adherence and

contentment with the *status quo*. “I have been doing it this way for the past thirty years and it has served me very well, thank you very much” or “Leave well enough alone” are examples of the fatalism heard not too infrequently in staff rooms or at staff meetings. Fatalism can stifle the hopes of others as they make suggestions for change and improvements. It is important not to allow the fatalism and negativity of others to silence the more positive members of staff, as they present suggestions for consideration.

Notwithstanding the damage that a fatalistic and dismissive attitude of teachers can cause in schools, in terms of the demoralisation of both staff and students, it has to be said that the vast majority of teachers and school leaders retain high levels of hope.

Hope constitutes not merely the ability to identify and pursue goals but also the willpower to persevere in realising them. Bashant (2016) asserted that hope is a driving force for emotions and wellbeing, both of which he describes as essential components on one’s happiness and success in life. Therefore, instilling hope in students, in other words, instilling in them a belief that something is possible, should be part of every teacher’s strategy in the classroom. Teachers who are high in hope, are usually able to articulate a variety of means for achieving this goal. They have what Shade (2001) described as practical and pragmatic hope, enabling them to facilitate students in realising their abilities. Snyder’s theory of hope consists of a number of components which include, the setting of realistic goals, having the motivation and perseverance necessary to pursue these goals, and finally the attainment of the goals (Snyder 2002). The sense of mastery that is achieved by students, through goal attainment, motivates them to repeat the cycle, leading to further successes (Bashant 2016). The classroom environment is key to providing the conditions most conducive to driving hope. In a climate of hope, teachers do not treat all students as if they were on a level playing field, through pitching them against each other for praise and recognition. The competitive practice of selecting student of the week, month, or year often assumes that all students are operating from a similar set of abilities and motivational circumstances. Even when they are doing so, the practice creates winners (temporarily) and losers and has far more disadvantages than advantages. However, when some students are at a distinct disadvantage to begin with, this competitive practice is rendered even more damaging to student motivation and hope. Covington (1992) suggested, that, with the possible exception of the student who wins the award, ranking students is more likely to diminish a student’s sense of self-worth, confidence as a learner and motivation for learning. Competitive practices are “based on a false assumption that achievement is maximised when students compete for a limited number of rewards” (Covington 2000, p.23). A sense of achievement and success is a great motivator. However, “real success comes from learning what you need to learn, not from beating other students” (Bluestein 2001, p. 230). She further asserted that it is preferable to continually challenge students by encouraging them to reach farther than they have previously done. This positive approach is reflective

of an abundance mentality where there is, as Covey (1992) suggested, “plenty out there for everybody” (p.219). It is in sharp contrast to the scarcity climate that is created through the competitive practice of selecting one winner, and making losers of everyone else, and where success is defined in terms of outperforming others (Covington 2000).

Celebrating the individual achievements of students as they occur, is much more conducive to building hope. Placing the reality of their achievements in the context of future possibilities will help the latter to sustain and increase the former (Shade 2011). The type of hope that is required in teaching does not provide instant gratification. Shade (2001) put it well when he suggested that “hope functions to energise and sustain the self, as it reconstructs itself in the teeth of trying circumstances” (p.11).

School leaders have an advantage in relation to building hope, when they practice what they preach. From two particular perspectives, the levels of hope of the school leader are pivotal to creating a community of hope in the school.

The hope that they articulate and demonstrate sets a tone and expectation that is contagious, and reinforced in both staff and students. School leaders who are high in hope, are in a more credible position to clearly communicate the performance and relationship standards that they expect from their staff. They are also much more likely to provide the encouragement and empowerment that enhances hope in others. Without this context, neither staff nor students will sustain the levels of courage and commitment required to remain hopeful for the long haul.

Optimism as a positive mind-set

Hope and optimism, despite their difference in meaning are inextricably linked, and both contribute to the levels of positivity in a school. If hope is a sense that an outcome is possible, optimism is a sense that it is probable. Averill *et al* (1990) suggested that people will hope for things that are important to them, despite a low likelihood of realising that outcome, whereas optimism is more closely attuned to the probability of an outcome occurring. Optimism is typically defined as the degree to which an individual generally expects positive experiences in the future (Scheier and Carver 1985).

Those with an optimistic attitude have a positive outlook and positive expectations. While retaining a realistic and flexible level of optimism, they generally expect good things to happen to them, and generally make the most of what does happen to them. They are also good at overcoming problems and obstacles that arise, by regarding them as manageable and/or transient (Seligman 1991). Above all else, those with a mindset of optimism have the ability to positively affect the moods and mindset of those around them.

Although optimism may not be specifically cited as a criterion in the appointment of a teacher to a school, I have no doubt that every positive school

leader would be delighted to be surrounded by staff with high levels of optimism.

Practical optimism, manifests in practical, realistic and positive actions that help to increase the likelihood of successful outcomes (Wilson and Conyers 2011). Practical optimism manifests in teachers through, for example:

- seeing the best in their colleagues and students
- giving decisions and ideas the benefit of the doubt
- facing change with energy and enthusiasm

An optimistic state of mind as an element of PsyCap is a resource that needs to be valued and supported by school leaders. It is also worth their while to work on their own levels of optimism both in terms of how it impacts on others, and how, more generally, they are perceived by others.

The mindset of optimism is a relatively stable one, as, unfortunately, is the mindset of pessimism (Seligman 1991). Optimism is regarded as an element of successful adaptation. Having optimism is not to be confused with having unrealistic expectations. Optimism entails weighing up the pros and cons of difficulties and problems, in order to seek out and find optimal solutions (Deutsch *et al* 2006). Optimists adopt a ‘can do’ attitude to problems, and persist when the going gets tough. They retain a sense of positivity and enthusiasm, when faced with challenges, and they are less likely to be fazed by the ‘bolt from the blue’ comment or intervention. Pessimists, on the other hand, are oblivious to these and other positive insights. By bemoaning and lamenting, they indulge in increasing the burden of problems rather than lessening it (Deutsch *et al* 2006). As Oscar Wilde so irreverently and accurately put it, “between optimist and pessimist the difference is droll, the optimist sees the doughnut and the pessimist sees the hole”.

A further insight into the differences between optimists and pessimists is provided by Seligman (1991). He suggested that optimists generally view difficulties as temporary, specific, and external to themselves. Seeing them as such, encourages and facilitates a positive attitude of resolvability in relation to tackling them. Whereas optimists, need fellow optimists to sustain them, pessimists need to be dissuaded from their pessimism. It is important for school leaders to be aware of the range of negative consequences associated with the pessimism of colleagues, in order to help, support, and /or challenge them as appropriate. Pessimistic teachers who consistently demonstrate a lack of confidence and belief in positive outcomes risk being adversely affected both personally and professionally. For example, there are many negative motivational implications associated with pessimism (Carver and Scheier 2014). And when pessimism becomes entrenched it can have disastrous consequences in terms of resignation, underachievement, and depression (Seligman 1995).

Encouraging those who are prone to pessimism to shift towards a more optimistic mind-set can help them to reflect and change.

Unresolved conflict is one of the biggest problems in schools. Those involved in conflicts, frequently put the behaviours of others, through the narrow filter of how those behaviours affect themselves, their feelings and their positions. Whereas those who work on seeing problems as external, rather than personal, are better able to focus outside themselves in addressing and managing conflict (Seligman 1991). Not taking things personally is important, but can be exceedingly difficult, particularly in the context of negative personal comments and criticisms. Optimists do have a better disposition for behaving rationally and, if things go awry, they are more likely to have the resilience and perseverance to get them back on track. Further good news in relation to optimism emanates from the work of Carver *et al* (2010). They stated that not only are optimists optimistic themselves, but that they reinforce optimism in others. Most of us can display optimism and pessimism as events dictate. What we need to do is to increase our optimism, so that it becomes our prevalent way of looking at events and people, particularly in problem situations and adversity.

Being able to laugh, despite being in the throes of problems, can help to put things in perspective and enable better coping and recovering. In everyday life laughter can cut through and diminish disappointments, and even failures.

Mc Donald (2010) wrote that laughter is quite unique in that it has the ability to find common ground even among disparate people. He further asserted that even in the face of seemingly insurmountable problems, laughter can become the only “transcendent positive signifier” (Mc Donald 2010, p.62). Being able to laugh at yourself however, is a real test of optimism. To see the funny side of something embarrassing that you have said or done, instead of imagining that everyone will be thinking the worst of you, and that you will never get over it, is extremely liberating. Teachers who take themselves too seriously can be skeptical and dismissive of laughter in the classroom. However, teachers who are familiar with the research and strategies associated with humour-in-the-classroom can make a valid argument for its inclusion (Lovorn 2008). Humour helps to make connections between teachers and students and can bring lesson content to life. It can also help teachers to cope with the stressors and demands of their jobs (Berk, 2007). A teacher’s sense of humour is appreciated by students and is essential in interpersonal relationships. It helps to create a warm atmosphere and has the power to transmit energy to the learner (Jeder 2014). In the context of the demands and intensity of a teacher’s job, Deiter (2000) rightly observed that humour is also one of the best survival skills that they can have. One note of caution is added in relation to the use of sarcasm in classrooms. Sarcasm can be used by teachers to focus on a student’s faults or weaknesses and can trigger shame, hurt and embarrassment. It can cause other students to laugh at the targetted student and can be extremely hurtful Lovorn

2008). Whereas laughter and humour should be part of every teacher's repertoire, there is no place for sarcasm in a caring and optimistic classroom.

Applying Wilde's description of retaining optimism in difficult situations, allows one to see the hole, but think, 'so what, it's a small hole in a much bigger doughnut'. True optimists do not ignore problems and challenges. They keep them in perspective, and look for ways to work through them. Why would teachers and school leaders not put learning/improving optimism on their 'must do' list when, in intrapersonal terms, optimists are generally healthier, happier and more successful and, in interpersonal terms, they engage better with others, maintain better relationships, and use more creative strategies for resolution of difficult situations.

Resilience as a positive mind-set

Resilience, the ability to sustain through the ups and downs of life, is a key attribute of positive Psychological Capital. It is essential for those who work in schools in order for them to make a positive contribution to the school environment, especially in tough times. It is generally associated with bouncing back from adversity. Resilience is also necessary for maintaining good physical and mental health and wellbeing.

While no-one sails through life without experiencing hard knocks, and associated consequences, those who have a mindset of resilience do not get completely bogged down in, or totally overwhelmed by them. Rather, they recover more quickly and have the ability to move on and let go. Resilience is further associated with being able to cope well, and thrive in the context of everyday and unavoidable disruptions and pressures. It is absolutely necessary for building and sustaining a high quality workplace in testing and challenging times (Day and Gu 2009).

Over the past number of years, there appears to be an ongoing attrition of teachers' autonomy, through increased levels of administration, a prevalence of a competitive focus, (e.g. league tabling), decreasing support and resources. In this context, resilience is called for in spades. It is "a quality that enables teachers to maintain their commitment to teaching and teaching practices despite challenging conditions and recurring setbacks" (Brunetti 2006, p.193).

Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory examines the links between emotions and resilience (Fredrickson 1998, 2001). The theory outlines how positive emotions, broaden one's thought-action to enable more positive responses in difficult situations, whereas negative emotions narrow one's thought-action options and provoke more negative reactions (Tugade and Fredrickson 2004). Salovey *et al* (1999) described psychologically resilient people as emotionally intelligent. This is hardly surprising in the context of those with emotional intelligence being equipped to control and manage emotions and to maximise positive emotions and minimise negative ones.

Block and Block (1980) alluded specifically to those with ego resilience as having high levels of adaptability in the context of stress and change and as being resourceful, flexible and having a range of problem solving strategies to draw on. Those who have such positive attributes make good colleagues and good leaders. Whereas they acknowledge the clouds, they generally manage to see a silver lining. They are more positive than negative in their attitude and behaviour, and they do not create an atmosphere where one has to tip-toe around them for fear of being misinterpreted or reacted to negatively.

On the contrary, those with what Block and Block (1980) labelled as “ego brittleness” lack flexibility, and have a difficulty recouping after a challenging experience. It is very frustrating working with a leader or a colleague who determinately holds on to the residue of a difficult or disappointing issue, allowing it to adversely affect their behaviours and their relationships with others. Ego resilience and ego brittleness are considered to be personality characteristics, and therefore less likely to alter or change significantly. However, the manifestations of ego resilience, as outlined above, can be developed, particularly in those actively seeking to become more resilient.

Arguably, the first and most important step in building resilience is a realisation that it involves a set of skills that can be acquired and developed. Individuals also need to have a strong belief in their ability to influence the outcome and effects of challenging situations. Seligman, has carried out extensive research, and written widely on the development of resilience. He has focused particularly on the explanatory style, which refers to the learned and habitual way that people interpret the difficult and challenging things that happen to them. Resilience is helped or hindered depending on whether interpretations are positive or negative. Lifelong habits of negatively interpreting events and situations renders it difficult, but not impossible, to alter and change our automatic convictions and conclusions.

Stressful and difficult situations are frequently interpreted from the perspectives of personalisation, permanence and pervasiveness (Seligman 2004). When we personalise or internalise a challenge or a problem we see ourselves as being the cause of it, and we apportion blame to ourselves. When we attach permanence to our interpretation of a problem, we see it, or its effects, as lasting indefinitely. When we interpret a problem in terms of its pervasiveness, we see the worse possible consequences of it, and of its effects. Bonanno (2004) proposed that we make ourselves more or less vulnerable or susceptible to stress, depending on how we think about the things that happen to us.

That is not to suggest that we can always prevent ourselves for being negatively affected by upsetting or challenging encounters. What it does suggest is that those with resilience have the ability to regain their equilibrium, and return to healthy functioning after such encounters (Bonanno 2004). Examining our own explanatory style is an important first step in maximising the positive

interpretations and minimising the negative ones, and, in the process, increasing personal resilience.

Unfortunately, there are those who perpetually interpret events negatively. They develop what Seligman (1975) called learned helplessness. Consequently, they feel that they have no control over what happens to them, have no confidence in their ability to undertake certain tasks, and are very intimidated and powerless in terms of undertaking new challenges. Learned helplessness is self-perpetuating and seriously impacts on a person's resilience in overcoming obstacles.

In school terms, the imposition of challenging changes can lead to learned helplessness where staff feel overwhelmed and disempowered in terms of complying with the expected changes. The effective management of change by school leaders, which includes adequate and open communication, meaningful consultation, and ongoing support, can empower and facilitate the change process and prevent staff members from developing a sense of helplessness and powerlessness.

School leaders, can also develop a degree of learned helplessness when the demands on them, from both internal and external sources, exceed their perceived ability to comply and cope. Many school principals accept as inevitable the levels of isolation and aloofness that are attached to their role. In that context, they may be denied the support that they need to withstand problems and challenges. The importance of having a support network inside and outside the school cannot be overstated, particularly when school leaders feel stressed and overstretched. Their resilience in the face of adversity, however, is contingent on support, which, when school based, is facilitated by a leader building positive relationships with their staff. Relationships are alluded to, not merely as being an important and necessary prerequisite for resilience, but as being at the very core of it. Jordan (2006) alluded to the engagement in mutually empathic and responsive relationships as a source of resilience.

Despite some opinions to the contrary, teaching is widely considered to be one of the most challenging and stressful jobs. Resilience, in that context, is essential for staff, to enable them to maintain high standards of commitment and enthusiasm. The consistency of the support provided to them, and the quality of their relationships with others helps to keep them going, especially when the going gets tough.

According to the work of Benard (1995), high quality relationships, among and between teachers and students, serve to create a caring ethos in the school that helps to build the resilience of all who work and study there. Benard (1995) further opined, that we are all born with an innate capacity for resilience. However, Bluestein (2001) rightly asserted that resiliency does not happen in a vacuum and that children in particular, need protective factors or processes to

help them to build their resilience. A considerable body of research in a number of disciplines would suggest, that these protective influences emanate primarily from caring and supportive relationships, positive and high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation (Benard 1995). In the school context, children who have the support of a caring teacher, who focuses on their strengths and assets rather than on their shortcomings, have a distinct advantage in terms of improving their resilience. Schools have a responsibility to ensure that all children get the care and support needed to build and sustain their resilience. The importance of talking to, and not at, children cannot be overstated in this regard (Noddings 1993). It is naive and perhaps irresponsible for schools to presume that children will automatically bounce back from setbacks. Bluestein (2001) acknowledged that of course some will, but the ability to do so is contingent on the volume and levels of challenges that they face, and on the mitigating protective processes available to them.

When school leaders understand the importance of a positive school environment, and do everything possible to create and maintain such an environment, they provide the context that is most conducive to building and sustaining the resilience of the staff and the students.

Self-efficacy (Confidence) as a positive mind-set

Self-efficacy and confidence are strong indicators of the positive disposition of school staff, and are particularly relevant to educational workplaces. Much is written about the self-efficacy of teachers and its impact on student achievement, classroom management, and relationships in the school. The concept of self-efficacy was developed by Bandura and it refers to the self-belief and self confidence that a person possesses in relation to their ability and capacity to perform effectively, and achieve desired and expected goals (Bandura 1997). Teacher self-efficacy is the belief and confidence that teachers have in relation to their effectiveness as educators. They are confident that they can influence the achievements of all students even those who are considered difficult and unmotivated (Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy 2001).

Self-efficacy is important because, as Bandura (1986) stated, “people regulate their level and distribution of effort in accordance with the effects they expect their actions to have” (p.129). In teaching terms, when teachers feel that students will engage in class and be motivated to persevere with difficult tasks as a result of their efforts, then their commitment will be consistent and high.

Confident and efficacious teachers are known to positively impact on the learning experiences of students. They are innovative and use a variety of teaching methods and approaches in order to cater for the various learning styles of their students. Despite the high volume of educational research that extols the merits and necessity of teachers employing a number of teaching methods, there are some, who remain wedded to the ‘talk and chalk’ method. This traditional method, which is formal and teacher centered, involves students

sitting quietly, paying attention and listening. Minimal opportunities are afforded to students to interact with the teacher. This teaching style suits only a small number of learners and the remainder, to varying degrees, are disengaged, bored and frustrated. The attitude, that the 'talk and chalk' approach reflects, is one of 'take it or leave it'.

The introduction of new pedagogies has contributed to making teaching and learning experiences more interesting and fulfilling. For example, Ross (1994) made the link between increased teacher efficacy and the introduction of co-operative learning. The widespread recognition of co-operative learning as a 'best practice' approach has encouraged teachers to use it. "Co-operative learning is the instructional use of small groups, so that students work together to maximise their own and each others' learning" (Johnson and Johnson 1999, p. 5). Co-operative learning is more complex than merely assigning students to group work. It involves five essential components, which include positive interdependence, promotive interaction, individual and group accountability, interpersonal and small group skills, and group processing. "Students work together to accomplish shared learning goals" (Johnson and Johnson 1999, p.1).

A teacher's decision to embrace a new teaching strategy is usually based on how effective they believe the strategy will be, and how successful they believe they will be, in implementing it (Kirik and Markic 2012). The academic and social advancements associated with co-operative learning are well documented, and can be realised relatively quickly among students engaged in the practice. Consequently, teachers' expectations in relation to their own continuing success in implementing co-operative learning, are likely to be positive, contributing to their overall sense of efficacy.

Some teachers need persuading to change their teaching methods. However, since the introduction of appropriate professional development opportunities, most of them have come around. Using innovative teaching methods and observing the benefits of them, result in a rise in teachers' confidence and self-belief and a significant increase in student participation and learning.

Efficacious teachers persist with students who are struggling, and criticise them less when they provide incorrect answers (Gibson and Dembo 1984). They set attainable goals, and willingly provide special assistance to students who require it. In general they feel confident not only about their instruction but also about their relationships with the students. Consequently, their students have higher levels of achievement and teachers have fewer behavioural problems with them. Tschannen-Moran and Woolford Hoy (2001) alluded to the enthusiasm and commitment of teachers with high self-efficacy and also suggested that they are more likely to remain in the teaching profession.

Self-efficacy presumes a certain level of self-belief that comes from childhood. It also presumes a certain level of knowledge and skills which, when built on,

impacts positively on a person's confidence at work. Bandura (1997) cited four sources of self-efficacy as mastery experience, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion and physiological cues. Mastery experience is gained through a person's accomplishments and successes, which in the aggregate boost self-belief and confidence. The more successes a person has the more confident he/she becomes. Bandura (1997), suggested that "success builds a robust belief in one's personal efficacy" (p.80). Vicarious experience is gained through watching others perform well and achieve goals. Observing the effectiveness and success of others can increase a person's belief that she/he can be successful also. Verbal persuasion is the encouragement and support that is needed to affirm a person's confidence and belief in their ability. Physiological cues are the physical signals that one experiences prior to undertaking a task. These signals can enhance or diminish self-belief. Feeling energetic, for example, can instill in a person a belief that success is likely. Whereas, feelings of nervousness or anxiety, can contribute to a belief that success is unlikely. Paying attention to the signs of anxiety, for example, can help to alleviate it and improve self-belief.

In relation to the four stated sources of efficacy, school leaders can reinforce the self-efficacy and confidence of their staff by consistently:

- acknowledging their achievements
- encouraging collegiality among staff and providing mentoring to new staff
- providing constructive feedback to staff
- offering assistance and support to those who are stressed or anxious.

Leaders will be unlikely to consistently engage in these types of behaviours unless they have a high degree of self-belief and self-confidence themselves. Self-confidence is an essential element of leader effectiveness. Confident leaders generally encourage their staff to take initiatives by facilitating their autonomy. If, as Bennis and Nanus (1997) stated, "autonomy is the sine qua non of creativity" (p.214), then micro management is the antithesis of it. "Leaders of great groups, trade the illusions of control, that micromanagement gives, for the higher satisfaction of orchestrating extraordinary achievement" (Bennis and Nanus 1997, p.214). A lofty aspiration one might think, but possible to realise, under the stewardship of leaders who are confident enough to surround themselves with excellent people and facilitate them in reaching their potential. Extending autonomy to teachers is conditional on school leaders' confidence and trust in the professional judgement of teachers (Blasé and Blasé 1998). Mc Gregor's famous theory Y (Mc Gregor 1960), is one on which many other theories and philosophies of successful and effective leadership are based. It has as its central plank the necessity for leaders to:

- outline expectations for those who work with them
- provide clarity and support in relation to what needs to be done and
- have the self-restraint and confidence to let people get on with it.

Genuine confidence helps the leader to realise that the effectiveness of their leadership is only realised when those around them are free to do exceptional work (Bennis and Nanus 1997).

Confidence is a realistic view of one's abilities that is backed up by skills and competence. Those who have genuine confidence are secure in their self-belief and are not threatened by the confidence or competence of others. They do not feel the need to let everyone know about their abilities and achievements and readily admit to mistakes and to not understanding something.

In general, self-efficacy and confidence at work are positively related to engagement and persistence with the task, positive relationships with others and high levels of energy and enthusiasm. According to Watson (1991), there is a popular misconception that equates enthusiasm with "peppy exuberance" (p.203). He suggested that there is more to it than "superficial effusiveness" (p.203) which might appear glib and shallow, and that enthusiasm comes, with sustained actions and hard work. Teachers with self-confidence are enthusiastic and persistent because they believe that they are competent and can do the job well. They are also generous, and more than willing to share their knowledge and experience with others. Supporting and helping others can be a great source of pleasure and is also a natural motivator (Deal and Key 1998).

In positive schools with positive leadership, confidence grows and staff are eager to learn new and innovative ways of doing things. They are rooting in the bags of enthusiastic, newly qualified teachers for novel and creative ideas and methodologies. A public endorsement, by a school leader, of the enthusiasm expressed by the new teacher, will help to harness and sustain it. It can also minimise the adverse effects of the occasional dismissive and negative comment, and hopefully help enthusiasm to become contagious. Self-efficacy and self-confidence are genuine reflections of abilities and competencies which, when appreciated and valued, grow and improve. However, when they are disregarded and dismissed, they can be eroded and diminished.

The efficacy and confidence of a school's staff provide a positive psychological resource to a school. When combined with hope, optimism and resilience, the resource is enhanced and multiplied. School leaders who maximise this resource, unleash high levels of positivity. Their own role becomes more manageable and enjoyable and this impacts positively on their stress levels and general wellbeing. Appreciating the power of positivity and the value of having people on the staff who are positive in their attitude and approaches, is a necessary prerequisite for school leaders in maximising the psychological capital in their schools.

Note:

In writing this article the author has used, adapted and extended a small section of her book entitled *Positive Behaviours, Relationships and Emotions ...The Heart of Leadership in a School*.

Kitt, J. (2017) *Positive Behaviours, Relationships and Emotions The heart of leadership in a school*, Dublin: NAPD.

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JACINTA M KITT M.St.

Jacinta Kitt is a lecturer/researcher and organisational advisor. She is a former primary teacher and lectures in Trinity College and Marino Institute of Education and provides guest lectures for other colleges. She also provides professional development training and presentations for schools, colleges and various public and private organisations focusing on the characteristics, skills and benefits of creating and maintaining a positive/effective work environment. Her M.St. thesis has workplace bullying in schools as its theme. She is an acknowledged expert on that subject. Jacinta conducts awareness sessions on bullying in schools focussing on prevention and minimisation of negative, inappropriate workplace behaviours and the links between organisational culture/climate and the prevalence of those behaviours. Providing strategies for improving how we communicate/interact with each other in every environment is the theme of much of her work. She works with school principals on the impact of their behaviours, relationships and emotions on school effectiveness.

Jacinta frequently speaks at conferences and seminars on workplace environment-related topics and provides expert witness reports to legal processes relating to employment law. She is the author of a recently published book entitled *Positive Behaviours, Emotions and Relationships: The Heart of Leadership in a school*.

Addressing the Wellbeing of Learners with Complex Special Educational Needs: Using Junior Cycle Level Two Learning Programmes for explicit teaching of wellbeing for wellbeing.

Nicola Mannion and Johanna Fitzgerald

Abstract

This paper explores the impact of explicit teaching of wellbeing on student behaviour, independence while engaged in self-directed learning, and participation in class-wide or group activities. It specifically reports on findings from a mixed methods action research project undertaken in a special school setting with eight adolescent students. A wellbeing intervention, embedded within Junior Cycle Level Two Learning Programmes (L2LPs) Priority Learning Units (PLUs), was undertaken over a two-month period. Data were generated through structured observations and focus group interviews and reflective diaries from the teacher and two SNA's. Findings reveal that explicit teaching of wellbeing has a significant impact on students' behaviour. Furthermore, the L2LP wellbeing curriculum supports the social and emotional needs of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN).

Introduction

One in four people will experience mental health problems at some point during their life (WHO 2003) with one in three thirteen year olds in Ireland experiencing a mental disorder (Cannon *et al* 2013). Furthermore, 25 per cent of children and young people experience mental health difficulties and of these 10 per cent experience mental illness (Dogra *et al* 2013, Green *et al* 2005). Student wellbeing not only has an immediate effect on students but also has long term effects into adulthood (Gibbons and Silva 2011, Heckman *et al* 2006). Wellbeing, although an elusive concept (Pollard and Lee 2003), is described as fundamental to the quality of life (WHO 2005). It is a 'combination of feeling good as well as having meaning or purpose, experiencing positive relationships and achieving high accomplishment' (Seligman 2012, p.16). Significantly, Irish educational policy advocates an explicit focus on, and collective responsibility for wellbeing (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) 2017; Department of Health 2013) which is evident when 'students realise their abilities, take care of their physical wellbeing, can cope with the normal stresses of life, and have a sense of purpose and belonging to a wider community' (NCCA 2017, p.9).

An estimated 86,083 children present with SEN arising from moderate or severe mental health difficulties in the Irish context (National Council for Special Education (NCSE) 2006). Given the long-term implications of wellbeing for the future of all students and particularly so for those with complex needs, an empirical investigation of a reformed Junior Cycle curriculum supporting wellbeing is both timely and relevant.

Wellbeing Curriculum

Junior Cycle Level Two Learning Programme

The Junior Cycle Level Two Learning Programme (L2LP) developed as a gap emerged in the provision of an appropriate curriculum for students with mild to moderate learning disabilities. The vision of the L2LP identifies that

‘students are at the centre of teaching and learning and will have an educational experience that addresses their individual need and enables them to live, learn, work and contribute with the greatest degree of autonomy in the communities to which they belong’ (NCCA 2014, p.12).

This vision embraces various conceptualisations of wellbeing, underpins the newly reformed junior cycle and recognises that individuals can be both supported and compromised by the wider social, economic and cultural landscape (NCCA 2017).

Wellbeing is embedded in the L2LP curriculum which has 5 Priority Learning Units (Communicating and Literacy, Numeracy, Personal Care, Living in the Community and Preparing for Work) and two short courses (2014).

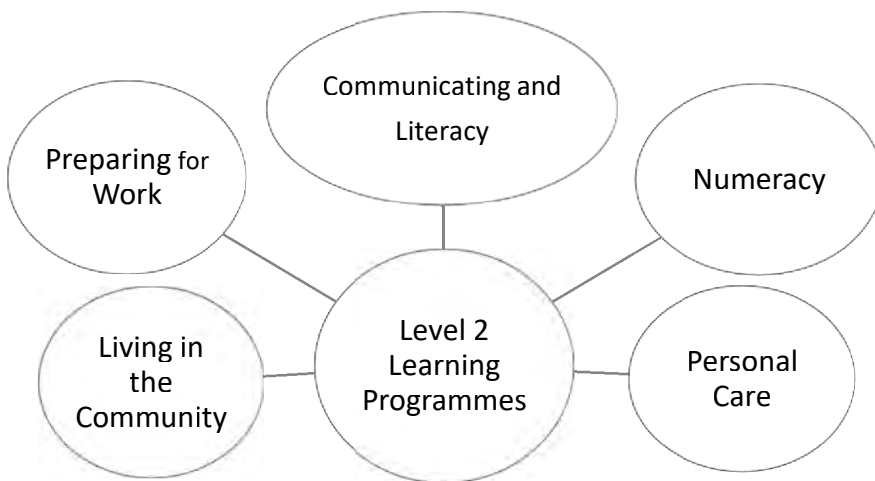


Figure 1. Level Two Learning Programme’s Priority Learning Units

The five PLU's allow students to prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult and working life and lifelong learning (NCCA 2014) and seek to promote happiness, contentment, self-development and personal growth. They achieve this through relevant, meaningful, achievable elements and learning outcomes. The PLU *Personal Care* is concerned with personal development of students and covers topics relating to health and wellbeing such as healthy eating, healthy lifestyles, recognising emotions, managing stress, and making personal decisions (NCCA 2014). It fosters independence and autonomy. The PLU *Living in the Community* supports students in developing relationship skills (NCCA 2014, p.24). It contains elements such as resolving conflict and developing good relationships. All other PLU'S, *Communicating and Literacy*, *Numeracy*, and *Preparation for Work* focus on the holistic development of students' life skills in preparation for being active citizens, with a 'sense of purpose and belonging' (NCCA 2017, p.9). Learning outcomes such as planning a personal budget in *Numeracy*, expressing personal opinions, facts and feelings appropriately in *Communicating and Literacy*, the setting of learning goals in *Preparing for Work* all promote independence and wellbeing.

Assessment in Junior Cycle Level Two Learning Programme

Student experiences of assessment can impact on wellbeing and has been linked to the promotion of stress (Denscombe 2000; NCCA 2017) which can have a negative impact on teenagers (Sung and Chao 2015). Summative assessment in particular, including high stakes exams, can increase stress (NCCA 2017; Sung and Chao 2015). L2LP assessment is formative in nature and as such may further support student wellbeing (NCCA 2017, Morris 2010; OECD/CERI 2008, Stiggins 2002). The assessment approach in the reformed Junior Cycle 'involves the use of evidence from assessment and feedback to identify where students are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there' (NCCA 2014, p.31). Portfolios provide students with tangible, concrete evidence of learning and employ multimodal approaches to assessment including written work, project work, charts, diagrams, video recordings (NCCA 2014). Students undertaking L2LPs have opportunities to demonstrate learning in a variety of ways and are encouraged to evaluate their own learning. Learning records can also be used which can include learning journals, structured log books or diaries (NCCA 2014). These approaches may support students to develop a positive sense of themselves as learners and a strong sense of their own self-efficacy and capacity to improve (NCCA 2017).

Method

Data Collection

1. Observation Schedules

Structured observations were conducted pre and post-intervention to measure student behaviour in key domains, as outlined in Table 1.

	Obscene Words	Shouting at peers	Verbal putdowns	Creating Sounds/Vocalisations	Failure to complete teacher requests	Gestures/Facial Expressions	Touching or talking	Out of seat
Child 1								
Child 2								

Table 1. Off-task Behaviour Checklist

Time interval sampling monitored individual students' behaviours throughout the day in the morning, midday and after lunch for five days pre and five days post-intervention. Time interval sampling facilitates collection of data relating to a range of observable behaviours over time and measures the extent to which particular behaviours occur (Bentley *et al* 1994) allowing for comparative analysis pre and post-intervention. Behaviours of interest (Bentley *et al* 1994) such as off-task behaviours and interruptions were identified with strict guidelines as to the criteria of behaviours being observed. Observations were taken by an independent observer who adopted a passive, non-intrusive role.

2. Semi-Structured Focus Group Interviews

Pre and post-intervention focus group interviews were undertaken to explore students' perceptions of wellbeing and the impact of the intervention on their perceived performance in class. The purpose of the pre-intervention focus group was not only to gauge student's understanding of wellbeing but also to gain insight into ways they best like to learn. This knowledge was then used to shape teaching methodologies used throughout the intervention process. The importance of student involvement in the decision-making process (Simovska and Jensen 2009) and the importance of student voice (Lloyd-Smith and Tarr 2000) are evidenced in current research on wellbeing in children (Clarke *et al* 2015).

3. Reflective Diary

Reflective diaries were used throughout the intervention by the teacher/researcher and SNAs and are useful for recording descriptions about events and the narrator's reaction to them (Kuit 2001). A number of categories of what to observe were outlined in the diaries including student responses, student engagement and the teacher's/SNAs interpretations of completed sessions. These were then used to inform reflection and action as part of the action research process (McNiff and Whitehead 2009).

Participants

Eight students agreed to participate in the intervention, four males and four females aged between 11-15 years. The students are taught in a Mild General

Learning Disability Class with one teacher and two SNAs. Students presented with varying complex needs including Down syndrome ($n=2$), ADHD ($n=3$), EBD ($n=3$) and all with MGLD. The teacher/researcher in the study had been teaching for 16 years, 2 in her current school and was teaching this class for 6 months. She completed a postgraduate diploma in SEN the previous year. The two SNAs were working with the class for 6 months and had 15 years' experience as SNAs.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved a concurrent triangulation design (Cresswell 2009). Qualitative data (focus group interviews, reflective diaries) were analysed using a thematic approach (Braun and Clarke 2006). Following full transcription of audio-recorded interviews, a process of intensive reading (Charmaz 2006) and data reduction was undertaken. Data were coded, which involved generating labels/codes (Braun and Clarke 2006). These codes were recorded in a codebook (Gibbs 2007) and merged into categories and themes and matched to relevant data extracts (Braun and Clarke 2006). Quantitative data (observation schedules) were analysed using descriptive statistics and were presented graphically in the form of tables and charts. Merging of data sets occurred at the presentation of findings (Cresswell 2009).

Intervention Design

The intervention involved the explicit teaching of wellbeing with daily forty-minute sessions Monday to Friday for a period of seven weeks. Learning outcomes were linked to elements such as *Recognising Emotions, Being Able to Manage Stress, Developing Good Relationships and Resolving Conflict* from the L2LP's PLU's; *Personal Care* and *Living in the Community*. Teaching methodologies included role play, project-based learning and group work which catered for all learner preferences. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate some of the teaching methodologies utilised throughout the intervention.

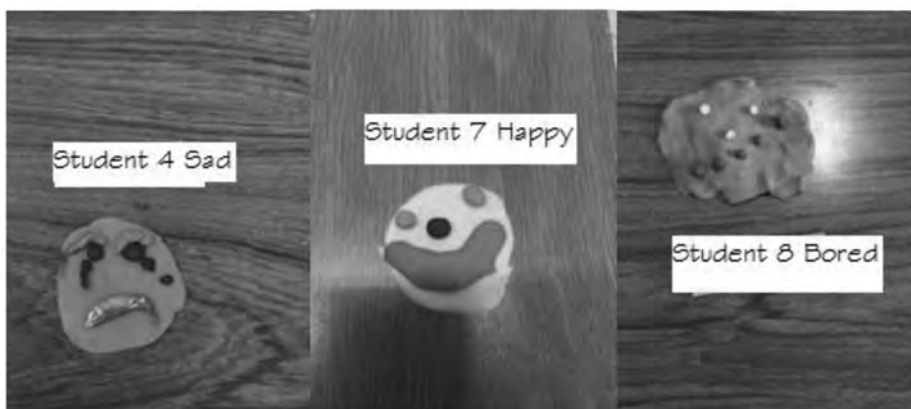


Figure 2. Active learning of emotions

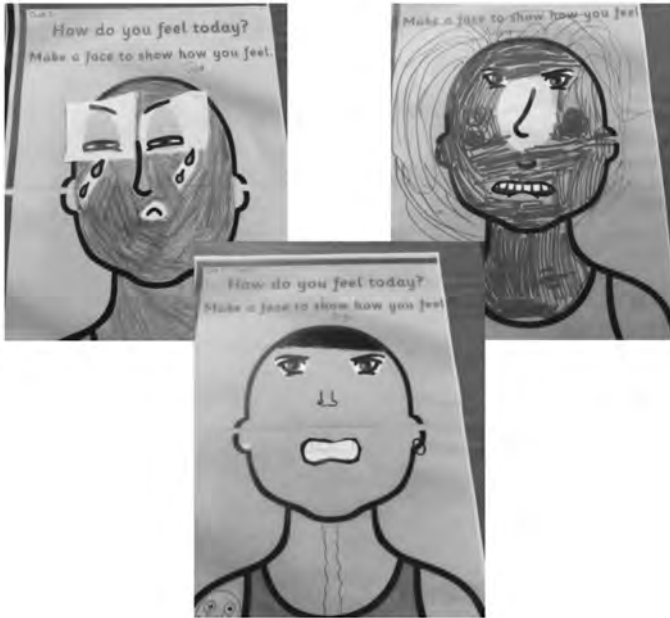


Figure 3. Active learning of emotions and body language

Weekends were used for reflection on progress using both teacher and SNA reflective logs before modification of resources and strategies for the following week. Table 2 provides a sample of the learning outcomes and strategies employed.

Findings

The importance of an explicit approach to teaching the wellbeing curriculum emerged from the data and key themes included:

- (i) The L2LP PLU's support the social and emotional needs of students with SEN.
- (ii) The L2LP develops resilience and coping skills in students with SEN when dealing with challenging situations.
- (iii) The L2LP develops student metacognition and promotes independent learning.

(i) The L2LP PLU's support the social and emotional needs of students with SEN
 The PLU's *Personal Care* and *Living in the Community* support the acquisition of social and emotional skills of students with SEN. The social and emotional needs of students in this study were evidenced by the negative responses and

	Learning Outcomes	Strategies
Week 3	<p><i>Developing Good Relationships</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognise different relationships, e.g. parent/child, student/teacher Identify situations where people speak differently depending on audience, e.g. peers, teachers, parents, other adults Describe ways of making and keeping friends. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participate in friendship week Whole school activity – get to know your school/class mates (to take place during assembly) Whole school activity- games morning all students in school involved. Make a poster illustrating different types of relationships (using newspaper and magazines) Identify qualities of a good friend (brainstorm, think, pair, share) Make a poster, match pictures to good friend not so good friends Draw picture of friend list similarities and differences. Discuss with class group.
Weeks 5 and 6	<p><i>Conflict Management</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Describe what peer pressure is, give examples of peer pressure Describe ways of handling peer pressure, e.g. role-play conflict situations Identify the steps for dealing with conflict, e.g. stop and do not react straight away, listen to advice from an adult Demonstrate an ability to negotiate with peers, e.g. in the sharing of equipment Describe the characteristics of bullying behaviour Identify the school's approach to dealing with bullying behaviour. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Brainstorm– peer pressure Video peer pressure- Finding Nemo Identify and list examples where students may experience peer pressure. Role play peer pressure situations- with script Jigsaw activity- in small pairs identify key aspects e.g. definition, positive and negative peer pressure strategies to deal with peer pressure report back to group and make poster. Brainstorm Bullying think, pair, share Video –Do you want to be on my Team (Stay Safe Programme) Class Discussion- guided questions Types of bullying Think Pair Share examples Role play bullying scenarios- link to feelings and emotions covered previously. Cyber bullying Stop, Block Tell Make Posters for School- Definition of Bullying, Types of Bullying, Strategies to deal with bullying

Table 2. Intervention Programme

reactions to a range of challenging situations which occurred in the class as indicated by one student:

'I would be angry, I would fight...you don't think when you are angry you just act... I don't believe I can control my actions' (S3).

Data reveal that student's responses to conflict resolution are limited and manifest as anger and aggression. Figure 4 illustrates the reduction in frequency and types of observed behaviours displayed by students in regulating their emotional responses during teaching and learning.

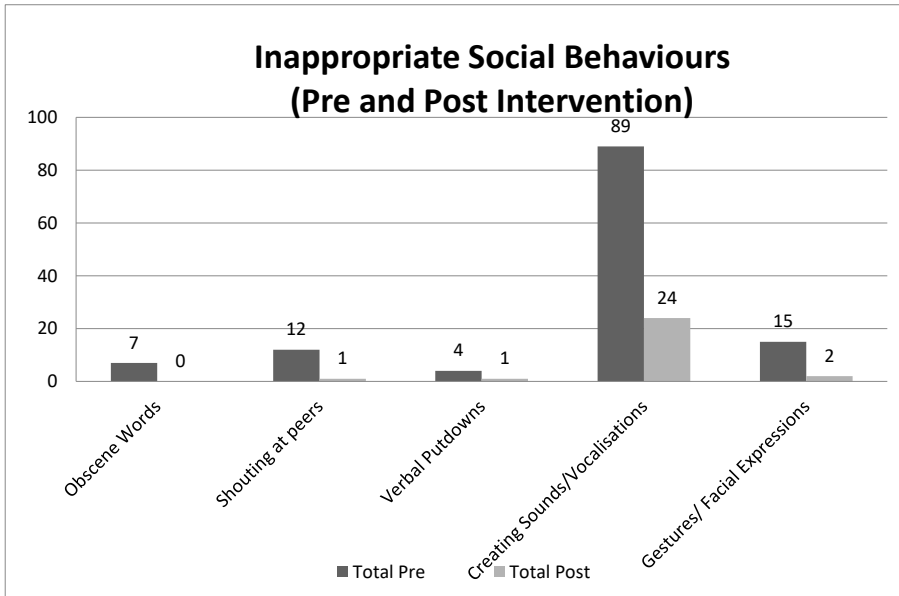


Figure 4. Types and frequency of behaviours impacting on social and emotional relationships.

Learning outcomes in the PLU's *Personal Care* and *Living in the Community* supported the social and emotional skills of students. Findings from the pre-intervention focus group interviews indicated that some students lacked awareness and understanding of bullying behaviour as illustrated by S3 when he said 'it's not bullying if you want to be with your friends and you don't want to include others' (S3) (Teacher Reflective Diary). The element *Conflict Resolution* requires students to identify the characteristics of bullying behaviour and strategies to deal with conflicts. During the intervention students sought strategies to help them avoid engaging in bullying behaviours, 'What if they are annoying, what do we do then? We don't want to include them, but we don't want to be a bully' (S3; S4).

(ii) The L2LP develops resilience and coping skills in students with SEN when dealing with challenging situations.

In the early stages of the intervention students demonstrated deficits in their ability to deal with difficult situations. Their limited responses involved aggression, as mentioned earlier and/or passive behaviours. 'I would be angry, I would fight' (S3) was how one student explained how he would respond, while another declared 'I would do nothing'. The PLU's *Living in the Community* and *Personal Care* specifically targeted skill deficits. The element *Developing Good Relationships* was particularly appropriate for S1 as maintaining positive relationships that are safe and appropriate is an area of need for her. She believed she had to give or do something to make or maintain friendships as illustrated

when she said, *'you have to give things to people for them to become your friend'* (S1). Through explicit teaching of friendship skills S1 developed skills required to develop and maintain positive relationships. Her new learning is not only documented in her L2LP learning portfolio, but also in her post-intervention focus group interview, *'I learned just say no to everything bad, like stealing something, you just have to say no'* (S1).

(iii) – The L2LP develops student metacognition and promotes independent learning.

During the intervention students became aware of their own learning process. The PLU's encouraged students to develop and think about strategies they could use to approach a learning task. Use of metacognitive strategies resulted in an increase in student independent work, awareness of their learning preferences and generalisation of learning.

Independent Work

An increase in independent work was observed through the decrease in off-task behaviours as illustrated in Figure 5. Off-task behaviours interfered with teaching and learning and reduced student opportunities to engage with independent learning. A significant reduction of 73 per cent in total off-task behaviours was observed post-intervention. Individual results for S3, S4 and S8 demonstrate a significant reduction post-intervention.

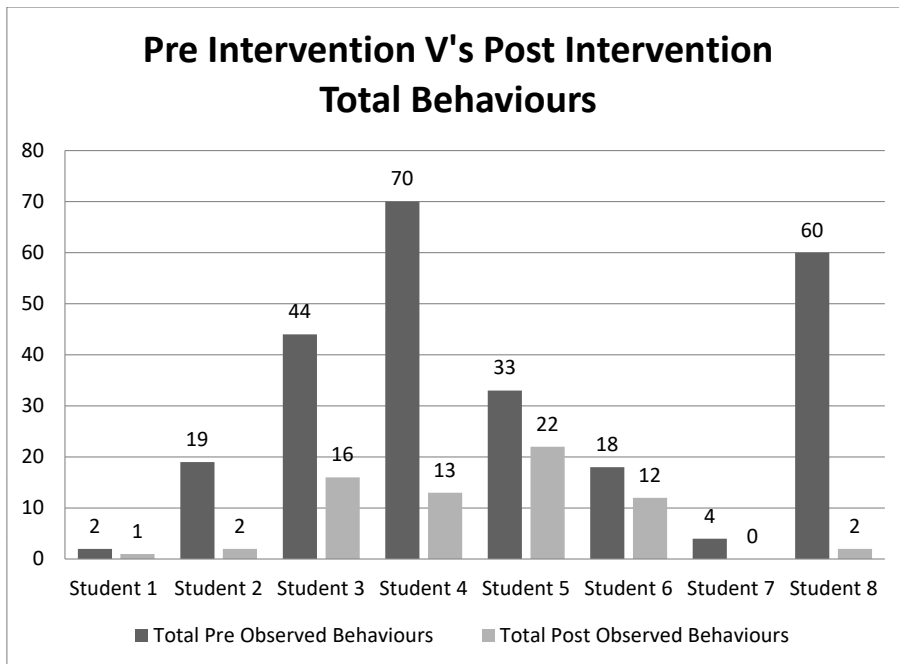


Figure 5. Total Off-task Behaviours per Student

Further evidence of the increase in independent work is reflected in the teacher's diary:

'All learning was linked to the L2LP. Their work output increased significantly. They have completed 11/11 learning outcomes in Personal Care and 13/13 learning outcomes in Living in the Community.'

Learning Preferences

To elicit the preferred learning preferences of students, responses from the pre and post focus group interviews were analysed and evaluated. Students' lack of awareness of their learning preferences was evident in the pre-intervention focus group. Students were asked *'how would you like me to teach you about wellbeing?'* Some of the pre-intervention comments include, *'learn it'* (S4), and *'I don't know'* (S2). Post-intervention students were asked *'what way did you like learning best?'* Comments included, *'projects, scenarios, and working together'* (S3), and *'I liked the group work'* (S1). Active teaching methodologies were used throughout the intervention which impacted positively on student participation.

Generalisation of learning

Findings suggest that the intervention supported students to generalise learning and apply it to real life situations. Explicit support for generalisation was provided throughout the intervention through role play, facilitated discussion and demonstration. Furthermore, the L2LPs emphasise the importance of relevance and applicability of key skills to students' lives. SNA 2 highlighted how transfer of learning impacted on behaviour and interactions with peers:

'S3 has improved in dealing with conflict and anger, he focuses on his breathing and counting to stay calm. You can even see this outside the classroom especially in P.E and at lunch time' (SNA2).

In summary findings suggest that L2LPs support the social and emotional needs of students with SEN and promote learning, independence and development of key life skills.

Discussion

Explicit teaching of wellbeing has a positive impact on students' behaviour in a special school setting, as supported by the literature (Buck *et al*, 2008 cited in Brooks 2014, Barry *et al* 2013, Weare and Nind 2011, Pyton *et al* 2008, Adi *et al* 2007). Wellbeing programmes targeting social and emotional needs equip students with skills and strategies to support behaviour and have long term implications (Gibbons and Silvia 2011, Heckman *et al* 2006). Students with SEN often demonstrate delays in the area of social competence (Hardiman *et al* 2009) which may prevent the development of social relationships (Tipton *et al* 2013). The L2LP's support social and emotional needs of students by embedding wellbeing in the curriculum and help students to cope with challenging situations. In doing so the L2LP's assist students to become

independent in their learning and conscious of themselves as learners which in turn supports wellbeing (NCCA 2017).

However, this has implications for professional practice and policy in relation to continuous professional development (CPD) in the areas of wellbeing and SEN provision. Knowledgeable and skilled teachers in SEN are recognised as being a critical factor in the establishments of inclusive learning environments (European Agency for Development of Special Needs Education (EADSNE) 2012, Kinsella and Senior 2008, Shevlin *et al* 2013). SEN specific CPD is essential, as are studies on the impact of instructional practices and pedagogy on student outcomes (Day *et al* 2007).

Circular 0014/2017 (DES 2017) and the *Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools Supporting Children with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools* (DES 2017) continue to view the class/ subject teacher as 'having primary responsibility for educating all students in his/her classroom including students with SEN' (DES Circular 0014/2017, p.17). Teachers however, often feel they lack the necessary skills, knowledge and understanding required for the provision of effective curricular access for their students with SEN (NCCA 2015). Furthermore, availability of CPD for all school staff in wellbeing must be addressed in light of teacher responsibility (NCCA 2017; Department of Health 2013) and the increase in students presenting with mental health difficulties (NCSE 2006). However, while CPD is recommended (NCCA 2017) it is not mandatory. Educating students about mental health requires specific skills and training (Power *et al* 2008). Teachers need follow up training to reinforce initial training for mental health programmes to be effective (Clarke *et al* 2012). Furthermore, at present only serving teachers can avail of CPD training from the NCSE Support Service, Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) and Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT) L2LP Team. If support for wellbeing requires a school-wide approach (NCCA 2017) then all staff, including SNAs, must avail of training in wellbeing. Furthermore, the critical role of the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) in supporting schools to develop appropriate wellbeing programmes needs to align with other service providers to provide a connected and strategic plan of CPD for schools.

In summary, findings from this study suggest that an explicit approach to the teaching of wellbeing for wellbeing provides meaningful learning opportunities for students to acquire the necessary skills in conflict resolution, emotional regulation, relationship development and stress management which have a positive impact on behaviour and learning and therefore support student wellbeing. Moreover, L2LPs deliver accredited pathways for the development of key life skills for students with complex needs and create opportunities for students to feel good, have purpose, experience positive relationships and achieve high accomplishment (Seligman 2012, p.16).

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NICOLA MANNION

Nicola Mannion is a special class teacher for students with MGLD and complex needs in a special school in Galway. She is seconded part-time to the JCT with the L2LP team. Nicola is a post-primary trained teacher with extensive experience in teaching students with special educational needs with a special focus on emotional and behavioural difficulties. Her interest in wellbeing comes from witnessing the difficulties that students with emotional and behavioural difficulties have and how this impacts on their ability to access and benefit from the curriculum and the strain these difficulties place on teaching and staffing. This article is based on a research dissertation completed as part of a Master of Education in Special Education Needs at Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick.

JOHANNA FITZGERALD

Johanna Fitzgerald is a lecturer in Inclusive and Special Education in the Department of Educational Psychology, Inclusive and Special Education, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. She contributes to a range of undergraduate and postgraduate level programmes. Johanna's research interests are in the area of leadership in inclusive special education, particularly at the post-primary level, teacher professional learning and special educational needs.

An Exploration of the Transition from Post-primary to Third Level Education Settings for Students with Special Educational Needs

Martha Daly and Kevin Cahill

Abstract

Transition from post-primary to third level education can be a complicated and confusing period for all students, but for students with special educational needs (SEN) it can be a sea of emotion as they embark on their voyage to adulthood and new identities. This research was undertaken with a view to contributing to post-school transition related research in the Irish context. It seeks to achieve this by exploring the student voice and presenting the experiences and feelings of students with SEN on their transition from post-primary to third level education.

A qualitative research orientation is used to enter the world of the participants and, through interaction with them, collect and analyse empirical data to explore and understand students with SEN perspectives on their transition. It is rooted in the constructivist paradigm, where micro-ethnographic case studies are carried out in two research sites over a short period of time (one year). Empirical data was collected using field notes, a research diary, qualitative questionnaires and semi-structured interviews.

The findings confirmed that transition for these students is not straightforward and is indeed a turbulent time in their lives. The research highlighted the necessity of providing supports for students' during this period, as they are influenced by their SEN at a personal level, impacting, not only on their academic and social lives, but also their identity. Findings also suggest that post-primary schools do not have adequate structured strategies in place to support students with SEN in their transition to third level education. Recommendations and future research directions are discussed.

Introduction

We are in an era of continuous educational change where there is a renewed and justified focus on inclusion and as a result the number of students with special educational needs (SEN) enrolling in third level institutions has increased dramatically. The introduction of the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) scheme in 2008 was established to provide equity of access to higher education for students with SEN/disabilities. Subsequently, the number of

students with SEN accessing courses at third level has increased significantly. The report of the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD) recorded that students with SEN made up 0.7% of the student body and in its corresponding report in 2016/17 the percentage has risen to 5.7% (AHEAD 2018). Transition from post-primary education for these students can be a sea of emotions as they embark on their voyage to third level education, adulthood and new identities.

To this end, this research was undertaken with a view to adding to the body of research on transition in Ireland by listening to students', parents' and teachers' voices and examining transition in a holistic way. The study aimed at exploring the students' perspectives on transition and how they give it meaning. The data reflected the perspectives of student case studies (n=3); teacher interviews (n=2); parent interview (n=1) qualitative student questionnaires (n=8); qualitative parent questionnaires (n=8) and qualitative teacher questionnaires (n=13).

The research questions that guided the study were:

Main Research Question:

What is the experience of students with SEN of transition from post-primary to third level education and how do they give transition meaning?

This question was supported by two subsidiary questions:

1. How do family and friends support students with SEN in their transition?
2. How do post-primary schools support students with SEN in their transition?

Perspectives from the literature on transition

Transition has been defined as “any event, or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions and roles” (Schlossberg *et al* 1995, p.27). Their transition theory describes education as “an anticipated transition” made up of three phases: “moving in”, “moving through” and “moving out” of transition (cited in Evans *et al* 1998, p.40). Schlossberg *et al* (1995) also devised the 4 S system: Situation, Self, Support and Strategies which acts as a means of determining how individuals cope with transition.

The importance of effective transition preparation for all students is stressed in international research “in order to ensure student retention and progression” (Tinto 1987, Edward 2003 cited in Wingate 2007, p.392). Walker *et al* (2004) highlight the importance of study skills, preparation for independent learning at university is suggested by Brown *et al* (1986), while Rhodes *et al* (2002) claim that students' lack of awareness about the difference between their own learning and what is required at university can be a barrier to their transition. But for

students with SEN, this transition “can raise a whole host of additional difficulties” (Ward *et al* 2003, p.132). Tinto (1987) indicated that students with SEN are more likely to experience difficulties during transition, while Getzel (2005) made a stronger claim, that students with disabilities often enter third level education unprepared for the educational demands at this level.

The OECD (2011) stresses that access to tertiary education for students with SEN depends on post-primary schools as they “play a critical role in preparing students with SEN for passage to adulthood and helping these young people to acquire the necessary life skills to make a successful transition” (OECD 2011, cited in McGuckin *et al* 2013, p.101). Patrick and Wessel (2013, p.105) place the responsibility for preparing students with SEN on schools, to teach them “to navigate the transition”, while Florian (2013, p.9) acknowledges the challenges faced by schools in reimagining traditional concepts of schooling and suggests “a reimagining of diversity in education”.

Internationally, the provision of “appropriate individualised support in further and higher education for students with SEN has been demonstrated to support an effective transition process and progression” (Dee 2006, OECD 2011, cited in Mc Guckin *et al* 2013, p.1). The OECD (2011) suggests early planning to help students and their parents to make informed decisions for the future. This planning should be “person-centred...with goal identification...and initiated at the conclusion of the junior cycle of post-primary education” (Doyle 2016, p.9). Developing self-advocacy skills is suggested as part of transition planning to ensure a successful transition (Joyce and Grapin 2012, Barber 2012, Novakovic and Ross 2015). Wehmeyer (2014) also claims that students with SEN foster positive transition outcomes from participating in evidence-based programmes of self-determination. Doyle (2016, p.10) likewise advises the students with SEN need “to be self-aware, self-determined and self-advocating”. Self-advocating is also a big part of disclosure of disability as students with SEN “fear the consequences of disclosure” and don’t want to be labelled “disabled” (OECD 2011, p.22). Similarly, Marriott (2008) asserts that students have a major fear of disclosing their disability.

In the US, it is mandatory for transition planning to begin in the year the child turns fourteen (IDEA 2004). In Ireland, the new guidelines for post-primary schools (DES 2017) acknowledges the importance of transition planning to prepare students for further education and for students with “enduring needs, it is essential to engage in this planning process well in advance of transfer...will usually involve consultation with the students, their parents and relevant external professionals” (pp.31-32). Nevertheless, there are still “no task or goal-orientated planning frameworks for students with SEND” (Doyle 2016, p.11). Also, while the DARE scheme has increased the number of students with SEN progressing to third level, some research has suggested that the scheme has also posed difficulties and stress for students as the application process itself has become a barrier to access (McGurkin *et al* 2013).

Supports from parents and extended family also play “a crucial role in supporting students with SEN in decision making regarding post-school options” (Aspel *et al* 1999, Blalock and Patton 1996, Cameto *et al* 2004, cited in Mc Guckin *et al* 2013, p.103). Unfortunately, parents of students with SEN are less likely to expect their child to obtain a third level degree (Cosgrove *et al* 2014). Also, it is often harder for students with SEN to form and maintain friendships in times of transition (Cosgrove *et al* 2014). This is particularly true for students with ASD and consequently, high functioning students on the autism spectrum may be at greater risk of anxiety problems (Bellini 2006, White *et al* 2010, cited in Alexander and Inch, 2013).

International research identifies transition from post-primary to further and higher education as a serious challenge for students with SEN (Shandra and Hogan 2008, Wehman 2006, cited in Curry 2012). Karpur *et al* (2014) emphasise that an effective transition programme is essential for students with SEN, while Ward *et al* (2003) claim that’s students with SEN find decision making and planning more challenging. Furthermore, Carroll (2015) states that they experience more problems and have poorer educational outcomes than their peers. He recommends that future studies use research approaches that provide a holistic and real account of these students’ experiences. In an Irish study, Denny (2015) also suggests that there should be more research done on examining students’ views on transition and what would help prepare them for the challenges of third level education.

Research Methodology

This study was rooted in the constructivist paradigm, where “knowledge is socially constructed” (Mertens 2014, p.16) and where this knowledge is interpreted and given meaning. Bassey (1996) describes the constructivist paradigm as “a search for deep perspectives on particular events and for theoretical insights” (cited in Pollard 1996, p.38). This enabled an in-depth perspective on transition for students with SEN.

The research was carried out in two educational settings to reflect the reality of the experiences of students with SEN in their transition to third level education. The sample chosen was made up of various partners in education; teachers, management, parents and senior students with SEN. Three senior students with SEN were chosen as case studies, a design which allows a more in-depth understanding of participants’ situations and meaning (Merriam 1998). The three case studies were; two boys with SEN who were transitioning from a small town, all-boys’ post- primary school to third level education and a female student with SEN from a rural co-educational post-primary school, who was in her first year of third level education. The students were observed as part of fieldwork and they completed a qualitative questionnaire and participated in individual semi-structured interviews. They were asked to review the analysis of their data which added to the validity of the research.

Further data were generated through three semi-structured interviews; one with a parent, a career guidance teacher and a principal. They also completed a qualitative questionnaire. The questionnaire was also completed by an English teacher, a Maths teacher, eight senior students with SEN from the all-boys school and their parents. Data were also generated through administering the qualitative questionnaire to eleven SEN teachers from various types of post-primary schools within the Munster region. Ethical considerations were addressed in line with the *Code of Research Conduct*, University College Cork (2017).

Thematic analysis was employed to identify, analyse and report patterns or themes within the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). This involved a process of reading for familiarisation, reading for coding, and then developing categories and themes from across the data. Three of these thematic areas will be discussed below.

Findings and Analysis

The three significant thematic areas that emerged were: Student identity, Support from Friends and Family, and School Supports. Many findings agree with Schlossberg's 4 S system which is used to determine students' coping skills in relation to transition (Schlossberg *et al* 1995). A sociocultural lens was also placed on the findings to explore how students can be agentic in creating new identities during this period of "moving in" to transition (Schlossberg *et al* 1995, cited in Evans *et al* 1998, p.40).

Student Identity

Data analysis revealed that students experienced mixed emotions in relation to their transition. Overall, students ascribed more negative than positive feelings to transition which contrasts with McGuckin *et al* (2013) where students generally felt positively about their transition. Their negative feelings seemed to be linked to how some students viewed themselves in terms of their disability;

I see myself as being a bit slower than everyone else (Alex)

and that disclosure can be a frightening experience,

I really didn't want to tell people cause in secondary school a guy asked me how was I finding the Irish and I said I don't do Irish and I had to tell him. I hated that soo much!! (Sarah)

it's not really something you talk about but to some degree there's the fear of rejection as well (John).

Students' negative feelings were also linked with feelings of stress and anxiety about all aspects of preparing and applying for college.

On the other hand, the findings also revealed that separation from home was seen by students as liberating, allowing them independence, room to grow, to be themselves and develop new identities. Students felt positively about, and appreciated, the natural supports provided by friends and family, as was also reflected in Schlossberg *et al* (1995). The data also depicted how students gave transition meaning through their interpretation of it and how they felt it emotionally. Students looked forward to becoming independent at college and developing new identities and it is refreshing to see that students can and do develop new identities when they experience success in their lives:

I'm more independent and more confident now (Sarah).

These findings add further support to the importance of giving students voice on transition, as suggested by Denny (2015).

Support from friends and family

All three case study participants identified the importance of friendship in helping them cope with their transition: “*it’s great to have my friends*” while maternal support, “*Mom and myself*” (Sarah), and support from members of the extended family was also evident. As with previous research (Luecking and Luecking 2015, Denny 2015, Doyle 2016), family involvement and support is very important for helping students cope with their transition.

The parents’ questionnaires and interview revealed that parents have high expectations and aspirations for their children as they all assumed that their children would transition to third level education: “*of course he will be going to university*” (John’s mother). This contrasts with current Irish research that found that parents of students with SEN were less likely to expect their children to obtain a third level degree (Cosgrove *et al* 2014). This of course, may be due to the limitations of my sample as it is drawn from an all-boys school, which is predominantly middle-class and has a ninety-nine percent transfer rate to third level and further education.

Student wellbeing is obviously of paramount importance to parents and the data revealed that parents tried to support their children during transition by providing emotional support, filling DARE forms and organising accommodation. The data revealed that stress levels were increased for the students as they had to move away from home and find accommodation to attend third level institutes, “*I think the whole finding accommodation was beyond stressful!*” (Sarah). This echoes Denny (2015) that distance from college and arranging accommodation causes an extra challenge for students with SEN.

It was obvious from the data that students with SEN consider the natural supports of friends and family as a positive thing and that this support lessens their stress levels, as espoused by Schlossberg *et al* (1995).

School Supports

This research highlighted that the current provision of support for transition for students with SEN in the post-primary schools is “*informal and unstructured*” (*Principal*). As with previous research (Doyle 2016, Lopez 2016, Novakovic and Ross 2015, Luecking and Luecking 2015, Denny 2015, McCoy 2014, McGuckin *et al* 2014, Cosgrove *et al* 2014, Patrick and Wessel 2013, Joyce and Grapin 2012, Barber 2012; OECD 2011) all participants in this research agreed that students with SEN lacked preparation for third level. The findings exposed that the lack of time allocated to career guidance impacts negatively on clear communication pathways being established between schools and parents. Likewise, the lack of access to appropriate information on career choices and application processes added to the challenges of transition for students with SEN (OECD 2011).

However, the findings did reveal that these two schools had an awareness of their responsibilities. Teachers no longer felt that “*once students have finished with us, we wash our hands of them and are not responsible anymore*” (*SEN teacher questionnaire*). There was an acknowledgement by management of the need for individualised planning for students with SEN (Rose *et al* 2015, Doyle 2016, DES 2017). Also, teachers had high expectations of their students with SEN and some requested CPD in SEN. It is therefore imperative that post-primary schools introduce a range of strategies (Cosgrove *et al* 2014) at least three years before leaving school that will support and enable students with SEN to be agentic in developing new identities as they “move in” to transition.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study has shed a light on the perspectives of students with SEN as they transition from post-primary to third level education. It focused on the student voice to gain an insight into how students feel about transition. The findings confirmed that transition for students with SEN is not straightforward and is indeed a turbulent time in their lives. Findings suggest that students’ feelings about transition are a mixture of stress and confusion (negative feelings) on the one hand and excitement and anticipation (positive feelings) on the other. The research highlighted the necessity of providing supports for students’ during this period and that supports from friends and family and strategies employed by post-primary schools determine to what extent students cope with their transition, as espoused by Schlossberg *et al* (1995).

Students’ negative feelings were inextricably linked with the lack of structured support they received at post-primary school regarding their transition. Students felt stress in relation to; the lack of access to career guidance and clear information, making career choices, the DARE application procedure and the inability to manage deadlines. The findings also suggested that most of the students were unaware of the academic demands of third level education which unfortunately leaves them ill-prepared for their imminent transition. It is

evident that post-primary schools do not have adequate structured strategies in place to support students with SEN in their transition to third level education. The research also revealed that students define themselves in terms of their disability and the withdrawal of students with SEN from class inadvertently exposes students' disabilities.

Students' positive feelings were ascribed to the support provided by friends and family. The students' relied heavily upon parental support in the "moving in" to transition stage but they looked forward to their independence and separating from their parents when they leave for college. The support of friends is also important before and after leaving post-primary school as friendship is a necessary part of the figured world of college life.

Students are influenced by their SEN at a personal level, impacting not only on their academic and social lives but also their identity during this period of transition. In terms of developing practice, post-primary schools will have to identify transition and preparation for third level as a need worth addressing.

Recommendations:

The following recommendations are suggested in line with NEPS' Continuum of Support (2007):

A Whole School Approach to Transition – Support for All

Post-primary schools could:

- Reimagine and re-organise the provision of SEN to provide socially inclusive school communities.
- Put strategies in place to introduce and develop the skills required by all students for third level education. These strategies should include:
 - ✓ Developing students' self-determination and self-advocacy skills explicitly through extra-curricular and co-curricular activities. These skills should also be modelled by teachers.
 - ✓ Project work with the purpose of explicitly teaching the skills of working independently and managing deadlines.
- Establish an evidence-based transition programme as a transition year (TY) unit to help develop the academic skills required for third level education. Including; ICT skills, research skills and critical thinking skills.
- Ensure that all students are:
 - ✓ Explicitly made aware, from first year onwards, of the existing programmes, subjects, project work and extra-curricular activities that help prepare them for third level education.
 - ✓ Afforded opportunities to learn about SEN which will provide an informed understanding and awareness of disabilities.
- Provide CPD for mainstream teachers on the impact of transition with a view to providing a whole school approach to SEN. Provide CPD for SEN and Career Guidance teachers on the skills that students with SEN require for a successful transition.

Small group/Individualised Plans - Support for Some & Support for a Few
The SEN Team in collaboration with Career Guidance Teacher(s) could ensure that:

- Transition planning for small groups and individuals with SEN will commence at the end of Junior Cycle.
- Individual plans and Student Support Files for students with enduring disabilities will be goal-orientated and based on the students' individual needs. They should:
 - ✓ Incorporate life skills, vocational skills and academic skills. Social and communication skills should be part of the preparation for transition, particularly for students with ASD.
 - ✓ Be developed and managed in collaboration with students, parents and outside agencies (as required), stating clearly who has responsibility for each target. Timelines should also be established to plan for deadlines.
- Roles are defined, particularly in relation to who has responsibility for DARE applications.
- Clear pathways of communication are established between schools and parents and information be provided in a “one stop” information portal.

The DES could:

- Allocate extra student contact time for students with SEN to Career Guidance Counsellors to facilitate transition planning.
- Issue clear guidelines in relation to planning for students with SEN transition to further education.
- DARE should consider reviewing their application process and their criteria for attainment scores and align them with RACE.

Final thoughts

Further research could be carried out to investigate the student voice during the “moving through” and “moving out” stages of transition. Also, further research could identify best practice in evidence-based programmes for transition for students with SEN to third level education. Such research could then be used to provide guidelines or programmes for transition at a whole school level as well as individual and small group levels.

This research gives some insight into the difficulties experienced by students with SEN as they enter their first phase of transition to third level education. Positive transition experiences are possible for all students, including those with SEN if post-primary schools put strategies in place to support them. Post-primary schools must recognise the experience of transitioning to third level for **all** students, put strategies in place for **some** and address the specific needs of a **few**. We have a responsibility to calm the seas of student emotion through developing socially inclusive learning environments that will allow student agency, competency and diversity, while equipping them with the skills and determination to navigate towards their next educational destination.

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MARTHA DALY

Martha Daly is a SEN co-ordinator in a post-primary school in County Kerry. She graduated from UCC with a degree in English and Mathematics, a Higher Diploma in Education, a Post Graduate Diploma in SEN and a Masters in Education. She completed her research dissertation on the transition experience for post-primary students with SEN to third level education as part of her Masters in Education in 2017. She also delivered a lecture on this topic to a PDSen group in UCC. She continues to implement her findings in the work she carries out with post-primary students with SEN.

DR KEVIN CAHILL

Kevin is a lecturer in the School of Education, University College Cork. His main teaching responsibilities are on the Postgraduate Diploma in Special Educational Needs, the Professional Master of Education and the Masters in Education programmes. His main research interests are in areas relating to inclusive education and inequalities in education. Kevin also welcomes PhD and Masters students in these areas.

“It’s very hard to know how much is the EAL and how much is the learning difficulty”: Challenges in organising support for EAL learners in Irish primary schools

Fíodhna Gardiner-Hyland and Patrick Burke

Abstract

The growth in linguistic diversity in Irish primary schools presents significant opportunities. Learners for whom English is an additional language (EAL) contribute to the rich tapestry of our classrooms. However, ensuring that their achievement is adequately supported requires attention in both policy and practice. Part of a broader study of EAL in Irish primary classrooms, the present article reports on how teachers from seven schools went about organising support for EAL learners at a time of significant curriculum and policy change. Findings relating to the use of support hours, resourcing, special education needs and assessment are discussed.

Introduction

Since the turn of the millenium Irish schools have continued to grow in their cultural and linguistic diversity. When this trend first emerged relatively substantial investment was put into developing guidelines, support materials and assessments for new English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners (e.g. *Guidelines for Teachers*; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2006). However, with the closure of Integrate Ireland Language and Training (IILT) in 2008 and cutbacks in language support allocations, professional development and resources (Kitching 2006, Nowlan 2008, DES 2012), mainstream and support teachers face a number of challenges in meeting the language and literacy needs of EAL learners. The current article examines challenges relating to the organisation of support for these learners, drawing on qualitative data from sixteen teachers in seven linguistically diverse schools.

Supporting EAL Learners: Policy, research and trends

The way in which EAL learners are supported requires careful thought and attention if it is to be both effective and inclusive. Internationally, the literature has recognised the importance of building on learners’ strengths and supporting diversity. For example, de Jong (2010) argues that the following principles should be visible in support for EAL learners:

- Schooling should affirm bilingual learners' identities
- Language and literacy in the second language should build upon strengths in the first language (additive bilingualism)
- The linguistic and cultural integration of learners should be given precedence

These principles should be borne in mind when considering *how* a given system or school caters for linguistically diverse learners.

The education system in Ireland is still a relative newcomer to supporting linguistic and cultural diversity. A number of studies have pointed to challenges in providing appropriate support for our changing school population (e.g. Wallen and Holmes 2006, Lyons 2010, Smyth *et al* 2009, Murtagh and Francis 2011). For example, Nowlan (2008) and Lyons (2010) both reported a tendency for teachers to adopt monolingual, deficit approaches to EAL teaching, where the acquisition of English was given prominence, and home languages were afforded little value. A lack of awareness regarding diverse home literacy practices alongside limited teacher knowledge of EAL learners' first language proficiency can limit the potential of cross-lingual transfer in the classroom (Kitching 2006, Ó Duibhir and Cummins 2012) and influence children's perceptions of their home language (Connaughton-Crean and Ó Duibhir 2017). The *Primary School Curriculum* (Department of Education and Science [DES] 1999) was written for a system that pre-dated multilingualism, and therefore provided little support and direction for teachers in this domain. However, the recent publication of the *Primary Language Curriculum* for junior infants to second class (NCCA 2015) and the release of a draft of the language curriculum for third to sixth class (NCCA 2018) has led to a more formal curricular acknowledgment of our changed classrooms, and the linguistic potential they offer.

The way in which additional posts (beyond mainstream class teachers) have been allocated to schools has evolved substantially in recent years. Until 2012, schools were allocated specific language support teachers, based on the EAL profile of individual children in attendance. Traditionally, much of these resources were diverted to withdrawal, where small groups of children received specific language support away from their classroom (DES Inspectorate 2012, Smyth *et al* 2009). In 2012, this allocation was combined with general learning support hours to provide a "simplified allocation" to each school (GAM/EAL hours DES, 2012, p. 6). More recently, Circular 0013/2017 (DES 2017a) gave effect to a new, single allocation of support resources to a school based on its individual profile, combining hours that were previously allocated separately for low-incidence special needs with hours allocated for general learning and language support. Under this model Special Education Teachers (SETs) have responsibility for supporting, not only children with special educational needs (SEN), but also children learning English as an additional language. The rationale for the new model was to provide teaching resources on a more

equitable basis, and to provide increased autonomy for schools in deploying these resources (National Council for Special Education 2014). The option for a school to make an appeal, based on particularly high numbers of EAL learners was retained (c.f. DES 2017b).

While previous circulars (e.g. 0015/2009 DES 2009) gave quite limited guidance to schools on supporting EAL learners, comparatively speaking, circular 0013/2017 offers even less guidance. The circular does little beyond recommending that “Schools should ensure that the additional Special Educational Needs Teaching supports are used in their entirety to support pupils identified with special educational needs, learning support needs, and additional literacy needs such as English Additional Language Support” (p.21). An additional document, entitled *Guidelines for Primary Schools: Supporting Pupils with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools* (DES 2017c), was published to offer support and examples for schools in organising their newly configured support allocation. This document provides little specific direction on supporting EAL, beyond referring readers to IILT resources (dating from 2006) and mentioning both ‘small group support’ and ‘in-class support’ for a child mentioned in a worked example.

How, then, are EAL learners supported within the new allocation model? These language learners are comprehended by the three key actions for schools in deploying support (DES 2017d):

1. Identification of need
2. Meeting need
3. Monitoring and reviewing outcomes

The degree to which EAL learners are visible in the documentation supporting these actions is concerning. For example, the *identification of need* relies extensively on schools using the *Continuum of Support* (CoS). Yet the main document on which the CoS is founded, *Special Educational Needs: A Continuum of Support* (National Educational Psychological Service 2007) makes no reference to EAL learners. The *meeting needs* and *monitoring and reviewing outcomes* actions focus heavily on the types of teaching and learning that one might traditionally associate with learning support or resource hours. However, EAL and SEN should not be conflated. Evidence already exists to show that some teachers poorly distinguish the two (DES Inspectorate 2012, Nowlan 2008). Internationally, the difficulty in distinguishing between language needs relating to typical second language development and SEN has been well documented (Zetlin *et al*, 2011). Teachers working with EAL learners are likely to encounter difficulties with decision-making at many stages, including early identification, referral, and assessment (Ortiz and Artiles 2010 Zetlin *et al* 2011). For example, without adequate knowledge of both second language acquisition and the nature of language disabilities, a teacher may

identify incorrect causes for a child's perceived limited language use in the classroom. Low expectations for EAL learners, alongside culturally and linguistically unresponsive teaching, can lead to lower achievement for this group of students (Zetlin *et al* 2011).

It would appear from this brief review of the literature that provision for EAL learners could not yet be described as 'mature'. In 2006, Wallen and Holmes wrote that "the future academic and linguistic development of children attempting to learn English as an additional language in Irish primary schools depends on factors such as conditions prevailing in particular schools and luck in terms of space allocation, teacher qualifications, interest and commitment" (p.158). The current study considers if some of these factors are still at play.

Methodology

This study reports initial findings from interviews conducted with sixteen teachers working in diverse, multilingual schools in Ireland. Data were gathered by means of semi-structured interviews, which ran for an average of forty minutes. Schools that were known to the researchers in a professional capacity were purposively selected, on the basis of their high degree of linguistic diversity. A minimum of two teachers was interviewed in each of the seven schools included, in order to compare experiences and perspectives from within the same setting. Participants consisted of both classroom teachers, support teachers and one school principal, ranging from three to twenty-eight years' experience teaching. The sample consisted of both catholic and multi-denominational schools, located in cities and large urban centres in different parts of the country. All interviews were transcribed and analysed using the thematic analysis process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). It should be noted that the interviews took place before and during the period of transition to the new SET allocation model.

Findings

While a number of themes emerged from this analysis, only data relating to the organisation and provision of support for EAL, and the complexity of working with children experiencing learning difficulties *in addition to* their EAL profile are reported in the current article.

Variation in the deployment of support hours

In the context of significantly more devolved decision-making for the allocation of support resources, it is interesting to note the wide variety of in-school support models that were used across a relatively small number of schools. For example, one school had moved to a model involving predominantly in-class support for EAL learners, realised through *Aistear* (NCCA 2009) in the infant classes and team teaching for literacy and numeracy lessons in senior classes. The use of in-class support was strongly supported by one teacher in the school, who saw little value in withdrawal for EAL learners:

You might just have taught them *pencil* outside but then they went back into class and they couldn't remember what the word was. – *School 1, Teacher 2*

The difficulty of having children miss important content in their home class, during withdrawal, was also raised. However, while teachers acknowledged benefits of in-class support, they also cited challenges. These included ensuring that in-class support was targeted enough to develop children's oral language skills, rather than focusing on print-based skills alone.

Other schools continued to adopt a withdrawal approach; teachers felt that it was necessary due to the focused attention small groups afforded. Teachers reported a tendency for EAL learners in older classes to be withdrawn, rather than supported in-class. Where withdrawal did occur, it wasn't necessarily to focus on *language* alone; it was regularly combined with literacy support. Some teachers indicated that a combination of withdrawal and in-class support was in use. For example, teachers reported working with a group of children in withdrawal for part of the week and providing in-class support for them at another point in the week, to observe how well children could apply new language skills in the classroom context. This involved pre-teaching vocabulary and language in significant collaboration between the classroom teacher:

so they've gone out the week before and they've learned the vocab and they've practised ... the conversations ... with the EAL teacher in the withdrawal setting and then that same EAL teacher goes in-class during Aistear time the following week and their job is to ... support the children with EAL to use the vocabulary in the context, so I think that's really really effective. – *School 2, Teacher 2*

Another school used their support allocation to organise station teaching, in which EAL learners were afforded extra attention, in smaller groups, within the home classroom:

We'd work maybe, a small group with oral language so that's a perfect opportunity ... for EAL children when there's a small group working together with one teacher... you can really chat to them and ... really see where they are because sometimes it can be very difficult when you've a class of thirty children sitting in front of you. – *School 3, Teacher 2*

While teachers were engaging purposefully with trialling and amending approaches to support EAL learners, a degree of uncertainty existed around what might be considered good practice in this area. Some teachers pondered if a separate, immersion programme may better serve their students:

... well do we take all the children that come and give them an eight week intensive English course? Or do we keep them in their classes, do

we move them? Send them down to a lower level class to do the English?
 ... I suppose it's, it's something that we constantly have to look [at].
 – *School 2, Teacher 1*

While the nature of additional support varied substantially, and many teachers expressed uncertainty about exactly *how* they should allocate teaching resources, the work of additional teachers in supporting EAL learners was seen to be invaluable:

I would ... not have managed my few years here if it wasn't for the support that either comes into the classroom, or for the child being withdrawn - *School 3, Teacher 2*

Level of Teacher Resources for supporting EAL

Many teachers commented on the level of resourcing provided to support EAL learners in school, referring to the *number* of teachers provided, in particular. Schools reported extending support for EAL learners beyond the two years recommended in the relevant circular. While teachers expressed dissatisfaction with the idea that two years of support was sufficient, they nonetheless worked within their resources to provide complementary teaching:

In Ireland, they're only supposed to get 2 and ½ years of EAL help. But we do stretch that. Because they fall under the learning support umbrella then. – *School 5, Teacher 2*

In general, teachers felt that the level of support provided for EAL was insufficient:

[We] have a high percentage of EAL students but we're still looking at the same support network and support service and it's not really tallying with the numbers that you'd have. – *School 3, Teacher 1*

Looking ahead to the implementation of the new model, some teachers expressed concerns about how resources would be best allocated to EAL:

The difficulty will be I suppose, on how we come to that decision. What criteria we're going to use to actually decide who gets what amount of hours. And then, all the backlash of that from parents. How is that going to pan out? – *School 6, Teacher 2*

Challenges in distinguishing EAL from other special educational needs

In line with the international research, teachers in this study cited difficulties in distinguishing between challenges relating to second language acquisition and difficulties relating to SEN, or speech and language difficulties.

Some teachers identified the significance of first language learning for second language learning, and how this may inform their assessment:

And if they're not good at their own language it's not a good sign.
– *School 5, Teacher 2*

Yet linguistic diversity also caused confusion for some teachers. For example, the types of utterances that one might expect from a beginning language learner raised questions:

...was speaking to a parent today who's concerned about her child and how he's doing in school, and we were having a conversation on whether we think he has a learning need or is it that he has severe EAL needs because he's speaking three languages at home and she says that a lot of the time he will come out with all three languages in one sentence.
– *School 1, Teacher 1*

Teachers acknowledged that their own level of expertise and knowledge of language acquisition often made it difficult for them to accurately pinpoint the nature of a child's difficulties:

I don't have specialist training enough to, to be able to know what to do. Like it's very hard to know how much is the EAL and how much is the learning difficulty, like what is actually causing the... the greatest difficulty for the child. – *School 2, Teacher 2*

When teachers, based on concerns about a EAL learner's progress, sought a referral for external support, they encountered further perceived challenges:

And we would come across a lot of issues trying to get children assessed who we feel there would be, it's more than EAL, but the psychologists won't diagnose anything. – *School 2, Teacher 1*

Use of assessment data

The new support allocation model places emphasis on the use of appropriate assessment information to inform decision-making. However, participants expressed significant concerns about how the primary assessment tool for EAL in Irish schools, the Primary School Assessment Kit (PSAK IILT 2007) could be used to inform teaching and learning:

We use the PSAKs which are extremely out-dated. When you've a test that shows a pinafore and a chalk board, when they are not in existence any more in a school. – *School 2, Teacher 1*

One teacher indicated that class teachers, receiving the results of the PSAK conducted by support teachers, would not necessarily understand what the

scores meant, or how it might inform their instruction. Teachers also expressed significant concern about the amount of time it took to conduct the assessments; time which, they felt, would be better spent on *teaching* children English.

Teachers expressed concerns about the validity of the standardised tests available for literacy and numeracy in Irish schools, as they relate to EAL learners:

because those tests that we have are not designed for the EAL child. And so you're trying to put them into a, something that is not truly reflective of where they're at. – *School 6, Teacher 2*

While teachers' concerns about the nature of standardised tests were notable, they also drew extensively on other assessment measures, including tools like checklists and teacher observation.

Conclusion

While this study is based on a relatively small sample, nonetheless, the findings raise questions about the support available to teachers of EAL learners when implementing the new allocation model. In addition, many of the concerns and challenges reported in previous studies were re-stated by participants.

Participant teachers adopted a variety of approaches to support EAL learners in their school, prior to and during the advent of the new allocation model. While this tallies with the vision for local decision-making on how best to support children's needs, it must be noted that teachers felt, at times, unsure of how best to support EAL learners in their school. A 'trial and error' appeared to be in place, with teachers amending their approaches in response to their successes and failures. However, while the teachers' commitment to trying out and evaluating different approaches is commendable, there is no doubt but that more up-to-date and specific guidance on deploying support hours for EAL would be welcomed by schools. Supporting EALs seems to be an 'add-on' in the new support model documentation and runs the risk of language learners being de-prioritised during in-school decision making.

Teachers in this study expressed concern about the expertise available to support children who experienced delays or difficulties that were not exclusively related to their status as an English language learner. The perceived lack of support, specific to EALs, from external services, along with a lack of EAL training, led to concerns that intervention for children with additional needs was being delayed. There is a need for more specific, published guidance for both teachers and other professionals, on how EAL learners with *additional difficulties* can be accommodated within schools through the continuum of support. Professional development is needed on 'regular' second language acquisition, so that teachers can be confident in their observations of, and interactions with, EAL learners, and understand what may be considered typical or atypical.

In deploying support teachers and navigating children through the continuum of support, schools require access to appropriate assessment tools¹. Teachers in Ireland regularly rely on scores from standardised tests as one of the key sources of information in decision-making around support allocations. Teachers in this study acknowledged their misgivings about using these tests with EAL learners. In order to be useful and trustworthy, assessments must be both valid and reliable. Teachers in this study expressed dissatisfaction with the PSAK, which continues to be used to screen EAL learners in primary schools. If schools are to make fully-informed decisions about how resources are allocated at school level, the assessment measures available to them need to be both up-to-date and sensitive to the strengths and needs of EAL learners.

Future guidance on the SET allocation model needs to go beyond token references to EAL learners. Guidance produced to assist schools in appropriately deploying their support allocation needs to make more explicit reference to *how* EAL learners can be accommodated. The new allocation model offers enormous potential for offering tailored and context-specific support to our linguistically diverse school population. However, professional development and appropriate policy guidance must compliment this provision if the aims of the new model are to be realised.

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¹ Schools in the UK choose from a range of assessment tools e.g. Cambridge's starters, movers and flyers programme and assessments.

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DR FÍODHNA GARDINER-HYLAND

Fíodhna is a lecturer in the Department of Language and Literacy Education, Mary Immaculate College. She worked internationally as a primary teacher, lecturer and ELL consultant across the Middle East with universities, ministries and organizations such as the World Learning Organization and the Oxford University Press. With a PhD in Teacher Education Pedagogy for EFL Literacy Teaching, Fíodhna received the inaugural Sheikh Nahayan doctoral fellowship award in association with 'The International Research Foundation' (TIRF), Monterey, California, U.S.A. She was subsequently invited to chair TESOL Arabia's Young Learner's Special Interest Group of 2,000 members across the Middle East. Having returned to Ireland in 2012, she continues to present and research in the field of English Language Learning and has recently written materials for the 'Starlight' Online Interactive Primary English Programme with Folens publishers, to support the Primary Language Curriculum (2015).

PATRICK BURKE

Patrick is a Lecturer in the Department of Language and Literacy Education, Mary Immaculate College. His background and research interests are in the general areas of education, psychology and literacy. Prior to joining the faculty at MIC, he worked as a primary school teacher in a diverse primary school in Dublin, as an International Fellow at the Children's Literature Centre, Frostburg State University, Maryland, and as an advisor for the DES Professional Development Service for Teachers. He is a co-opted member of the NCCA Primary Language Development Group.

Facilitators of Change: Irish Teachers' Perspectives and Experiences of Including Students with Special Educational Needs in the Mainstream Infant Classroom.

Louise Curtin and Margaret Egan

Abstract

This paper presents the findings of a study, carried out by a final year Bachelor of Education student who was about to become a newly qualified teacher (NQT). The study was designed to explore teachers' perspectives and experiences on how best to create an inclusive classroom and to identify the pedagogical approaches teachers use in inclusive Infant classrooms in Ireland. The study is timely, given the increasing diversity in mainstream classrooms today, which reflects the international and national movement towards inclusion over the past decade (Griffin and Shevlin 2011).

A constructivist, qualitative research design was adopted for this study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to investigate what 'inclusion' meant to mainstream teachers of Infant classes (n=6) in primary schools and what is considered best practice to facilitate inclusion. The study examined effective methodologies and resources used by teacher participants to facilitate inclusion.

This paper focuses on two prevalent themes; the importance of inclusive pedagogical approaches and the use of key resources to enhance inclusion, which were derived from inductive analysis of the raw data and use of thematic coding analysis.

Findings concluded that pedagogical approaches to differentiate the curriculum and enhance social interaction, such as station-teaching, engaging in the Aistear Framework (2009b) and use of key visual supports and manipulative resources are vital to create and enhance the inclusive Infant classroom.

INTRODUCTION

This study set out to explore how teachers create inclusive classrooms for all students, including those with Special Educational Needs (SEN), in Infant Classes in Irish mainstream schools. As a student in my final year of initial teacher education (ITE), undertaking a Specialism in SEN, I wanted to problematise the inclusive classroom and learn from experienced practitioners in

the field to inform practice for newly qualified teachers (NQTs), in particular.

Firstly, the article considers the varying definitions associated with inclusion. It can be conceptualised in many different ways and so, does not have a single, agreed definition (Power-deFur and Orelove 1997, Ainscow 2005, NCSE 2015, Westwood 2015). In the past, a narrow and contrived, yet widespread view of inclusion involved the placement and education of students with and without disabilities in the same learning environment (Voltz *et al* 2001). This perception of inclusion as the presence (Hodkinson 2011) or physical placement of students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms, rather than segregating them into special classrooms (Giffen 2011, Allday *et al* 2013), reflects the earlier inclusive education movements (Westwood 2015). A contrary, broader and more practical view of inclusion is put forward by Odom *et al* (2011, p.345) stating that student placement in the least restrictive environment (LRE) (Education for All Handicapped Children Act EHA 1975) is ‘not sufficient to meet the intent of inclusion’ but rather teachers need to have common goals for all students in terms of participation, social relationships and learning outcomes. Similarly, Topping and Maloney (2005) believe that inclusion should mean much more than the mere physical presence of students with SEN in mainstream classrooms. Some poignant definitions of inclusion which have largely influenced the current Irish stance on such are briefly noted in the figure below.

Figure 1: International and National Definitions of Inclusion



For the purpose of this study, the researcher considered SEN in accordance with the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (2004):

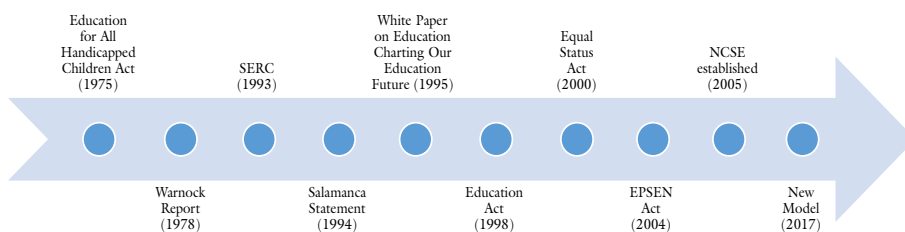
‘A restriction in the capacity of the person to participate in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability, or any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without the condition’.

(Government of Ireland 2004, p.6)

This definition was chosen as it accurately represents the perspective of SEN in an Irish context and so provides a relevant basis for inclusion and the concurring pedagogical approaches within mainstream Infant classrooms. Following this, inclusion within this study is defined as an on-going process of pedagogical approaches used to attend to each child’s progress (Brown 2016, European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education EASNIE 2017), in order to accommodate and appreciate the diverse and special needs of *all* students, to ensure effective and appropriate learning takes place (Farley 2011 cited in Westwood 2015).

This study aimed to explore what teacher participants consider to be effective pedagogical approaches to facilitate inclusion and so the findings of such are presented in this paper. The study is timely, given the increasing diversity in mainstream classrooms today, which reflects the international and national movement towards inclusion over the past decade (Griffin and Shevlin 2011). The current, withstanding views towards inclusion have been largely influenced by many international and national bodies and policies, which are briefly noted in the figure below.

Figure 2: Policy Timeline



The Irish education system’s stance on inclusion was framed by each of the aforementioned policies represented on the timeline and as such, inclusion has become a vital and necessary aspect of today’s classrooms. A New Model of human resourcing to support inclusion has recently been published by Government (DES 2017), and so, this study is timely and can contribute to current scholarly research. However, it is widely agreed that inclusion is a complex concept and process (Ainscow 2005, Drudy 2009, NCSE 2010,

Mastropieri and Scruggs 2012), therefore, the aim of the researcher was to identify the approaches which better enable teachers to create inclusive classrooms. Key resources were also examined throughout the literature to inform this study, which was submitted as a final year project (FYP), in part fulfilment for Bachelor of Education degree with a SEN Specialism. This paper presents pedagogical approaches that Irish teachers found effective to include students with SEN in mainstream Infant classrooms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

An extensive review of the literature surrounding inclusion for students with SEN in the mainstream classroom examined practices around the implementation and effectiveness of teachers' approaches to inclusivity. As inclusive education is policy (UNESCO 2000, EPSEN 2004, DES 2017) and inclusive practice is considered good practice (NCSE 2011, DES 2017), the approaches used to achieve such classrooms were reviewed in this study and presented in this paper.

Inclusive Pedagogical Approaches

The prevailing pocket of thinking across the literature is that pedagogical approaches such as; differentiation and selecting playful tasks that are meaningful for learners (Nind *et al* 2004, Rix *et al* 2006 cited in Trussler and Robinson 2015) have positive influences on the academic and social inclusion of students with SEN.

Differentiation

According to Moll (2003) the essence of differentiation is to provide all students with access to appropriate education by creating a barrier-free learning environment. Current policies and curricula, such as the new language curriculum² supports inclusion as it 'reflects the reality that children...develop at different rates' and provides guidelines for teachers on how to differentiate effectively (NCCA 2015, p.12). Trussler and Robinson (2015) discuss the use of differentiated instruction to cater for unique learning styles. As students with SEN are often visual learners (Grandin 2006, Doherty *et al* 2011) it is important that teachers adapt their instruction to facilitate this learning style. Elements of co-teaching, in particular station-teaching, are useful in-class teaching and learning arrangements that facilitate differentiation. During station-teaching, groupings can be ability-focused and tasks set can be appropriately to ensure that instruction is within the students' zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky 1978). According to Berry (2006), grouped seating, during station-teaching, facilitates peer interaction and collaboration as the students work and play together in inclusive settings. Groups can also be of

² This new integrated language curriculum is available for teachers of Junior Infants – second class. The Oral Language strand was fully implemented as of September 2017/2018, while teachers are currently undertaking CPD in the Reading and Writing strands. It is proposed that from September 2018, there will be full implementation of all strands from infants to second class (Naughton 2016).

arranged to host a mixed-ability dynamic, encouraging peer-tutoring (Dash 2006), which according to Garner (2009), is hugely beneficial for students with SEN. In addition, ability-based groupings can also promote inclusion and encourage cooperative learning leading to ‘significant improvements in student achievement, behaviour and self-esteem’ (Professional Development Services for Teachers PDST 2009). According to Anderson *et al* (2007), the most prominent social gain for students with SEN was achieved through observation of social-modelling of classmates, which often takes place during group work. Opportunities for modelling and interactions between all students are also provided during *Aistear* activities (NCCA 2009b).

Aistear Framework

Teachers of Infant Classes in Ireland engage in initiatives such as the *Aistear* Framework (NCCA 2009a) to implement inclusive classrooms. The key principles and themes of the *Aistear* Framework (NCCA 2009a) reflect one of the central aims of inclusive education – developing a sense of belonging for all learners. Through *Aistear* (NCCA 2009b) activities, the student engages in playful activities which are meaningful and relevant (Moloney and McCarthy 2010) with optimal opportunity for social development and inclusion. When practitioners ensure that student-centred and student-directed play in the early years is purposeful with desired learning outcomes (Wood 2013), it can lead to improved language and social skills, and cognitive growth (Stanton-Chapman and Brown 2015). Inclusion is enhanced as *Aistear* (NCCA 2009b) activities, along with effective resources, promote collaboration and facilitate interactions.

Key Resources to Enhance Inclusion

A variety of key resources can be used to successfully include students with SEN into the mainstream classroom. These include visual supports to encourage communication and social skills (Hayes *et al* 2010). Visual timetables and cue cards can facilitate the structure and routine of the school day, which is sometimes essential for students with SEN.

According to Garland (2014) students with SEN frequently have sensory-modulation issues and so manipulative resources such as Thera-putty and sensory cushions are resources which provide ‘calming and alerting sensory input’ (p.51) for these students. Interspersing movement-breaks and activities that include proprioceptive, deep pressure and visual input throughout the day are also used to ‘increase alertness and to produce a calm state, supporting the student’s ability to attend and learn’ (Anderson 2016). Further resources include the use of information communications technology (ICT) and assistive technology. Visual learners (Grandin 2006; Doherty *et al* 2011), generally, enjoy working with and benefit from ICT tools (Townsend 2005). The introduction of interactive whiteboards (IWB) and iPads in many Irish classrooms has proved to stimulate interest and maintain the attention of all students, including those with SEN. Use of such resources contributes to inclusivity in classroom-based learning, which has been recently acknowledged

by the Special Education Support Service (SESS) (2018) who articulate on their website that technology can be ‘enormously advantageous for the pupil by liberating them to achieve their optimum potential’.

While such approaches are well documented in the literature, as a student who was about to become a newly qualified teacher (NQT), I wanted to experience the voice of the key stakeholders in this process, those who ‘constructed’ such teaching and learning, inclusive environments. Therefore, I designed a research project to explore the pedagogical approaches teachers use in inclusive Infant classrooms in Ireland.

METHODOLOGY

Paradigm

Throughout this study the researcher adopted a constructivist approach. Mertens (2015) maintains that the constructivist paradigm is underpinned by the theoretical domain of ontology in that reality is ‘socially constructed’. In this study, teachers’ perspectives constructed a reality in time in relation to inclusive pedagogical approaches. As stated in the literature reviewed above, inclusion means ‘different things to different people’ (Mertens 2015, p.14), thus all teachers interpret inclusion, and ultimately use inclusive practices, in different ways. This study sought to identify what inclusive pedagogical practices teachers cited as effective for the inclusion of children with SEN in Infant Classrooms.

The ontological and epistemological stance adopted informed the research design and a qualitative research technique was adhered to for the purpose of this study as participants contributed their perspectives³ during semi-structured interviews in a natural setting of their own classrooms. According to Creswell (2007), such an approach offers the researcher an insight into the deeper thoughts and contexts that directed participant responses. Gibbs (2002) claims that the researcher gains meaning and interpretation from these responses by examining and understanding participant experiences and approaches.

Data Collection Instruments

Semi-structured interviews were utilised as the primary data collection method to collect data on the participants’ knowledge and experience of inclusive pedagogical approaches for students with SEN in the Infant Classes. A specific set of questions were asked throughout these interviews which ensured that the data was comparable and could later be coded and triangulated (McIntosh and Morse 2015). Interviews were later transcribed which facilitated inductive thematic coding analysis.

³ Through adopting this constructivist paradigm, the values and beliefs of the participants were openly acknowledged by the researcher and recognised as an influence and an integral part of the study (Dills and Romiszowski 1997; Lincoln and Guba 2013).

Sample

A total of six interviews were conducted with teachers of infant classes in mainstream primary schools in the South of Ireland (n=6). The sample consisted of two Junior Infant Class teachers, two Senior Infant Class teachers and two Junior/Senior Infant Class teachers who taught in a multi-grade class in schools which identified themselves as practising inclusive education and abided by an SEN policy.

The table below provides a description of participants included in the sample of this study.

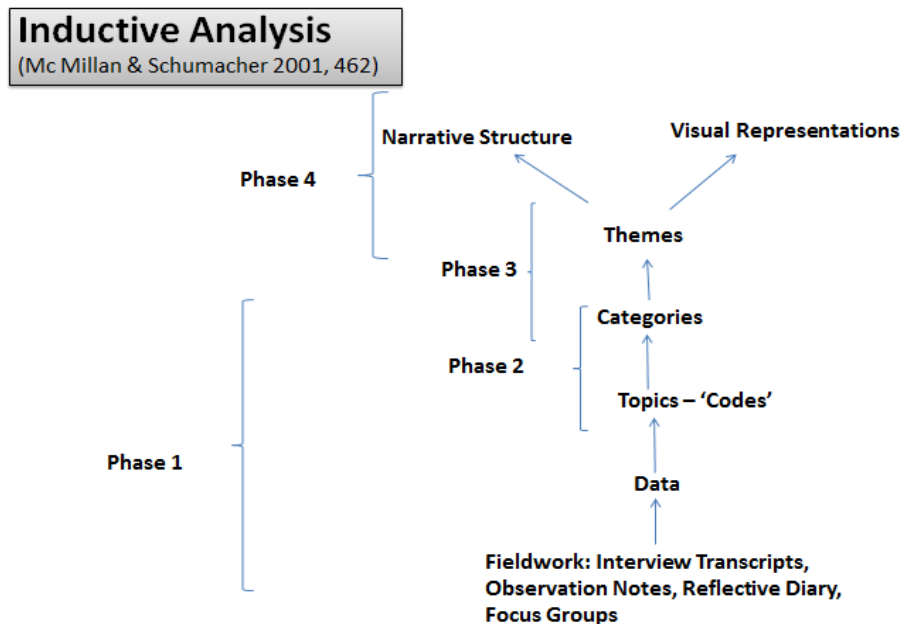
Table 1: Sample (Teacher Profile)

Interview	Teacher Name (Pseudonym)	School	Class	Years of Experience	Number of Students in Class
1	Anne	Rural (Mixed)	Junior/Senior Infants	18	22
2	Moira	Rural (Mixed)	Junior/Senior Infants	20	27
3	Helen	Urban (Mixed) *Infant school only	Senior Infants	17	26
4	Mary	Rural (Mixed)	Senior Infants	10	24
5	Noreen	Urban (Mixed) *Infant school only	Junior Infants	11	28
6	Brenda	Rural (Boys only)	Junior Infants	11	22

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis is a systematic procedure of selecting, categorising and interpreting data which is often ‘equated with text analysis’ (Williams and Shepard 2015, p.2). Throughout this study, analysis was deductive, in the sense that the review of literature, consciously or subconsciously, influenced the researcher’s interview schedule. Apart from this, an inductive approach was predominantly used (Figure 3) in order to establish the inclusive pedagogies that teachers found most effective for students with SEN. _

Figure 3: Inductive Analysis (McMillan and Schumacher 2001)



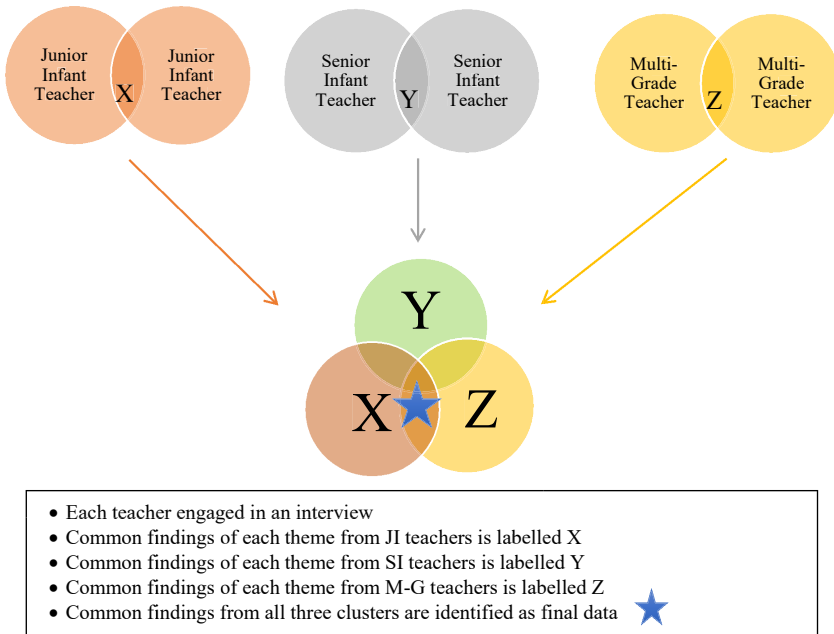
In order to analyse the collected data the researcher adopted thematic coding analysis (Robson 2011) while also engaging with the grounded theory approach, in line with the constructivist paradigm which underpinned this study⁴. A variety of data sources⁵ were interviewed and each cohort’s data surrounding inclusive pedagogical approaches and effective resources was triangulated separately. This ensured the data collected on each theme would

⁴ Although the themes discussed in the findings emerged from the data and so support the grounded theory approach, the researcher adopted a more flexible approach as she acknowledged that she brought prior knowledge of inclusion to the study (Charmaz 2006 cited in Egan 2013).

⁵ Data sources included teachers of Junior Infants, senior infants and multi-grade classes (Junior and Senior Infants) in mainstream schools. Each participant has a minimum of 10 years teaching experience.

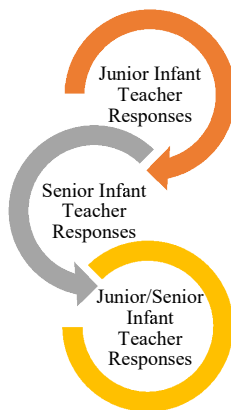
‘accurately represent the social phenomena to which it refers’ (Silverman 2006, p.404).

Figure 4: Data Triangulation



Analytical and triangulation opportunities arose during this study as common data from each cohort were identified. The researcher then clustered this information to ascertain the final data collected on each theme (Figure 5). In addition to this, all pivotal data was triangulated between cohorts, as illustrated in Figure 6 below.

Figure 5: Triangulation of Common Data between Cohorts



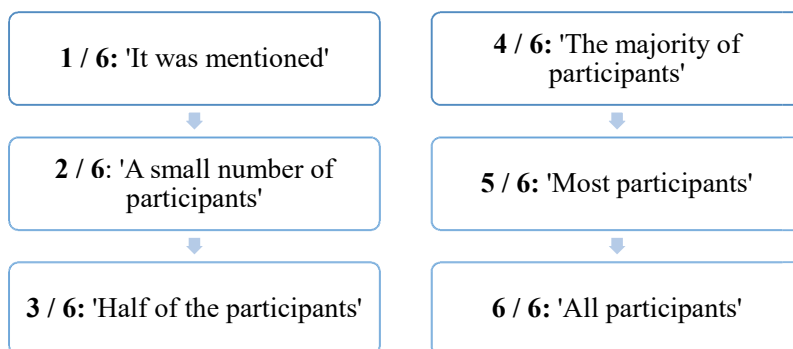
Through conducting this triangulation the researcher ensured all final data was accurate, producing valid and reliable results.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

An over-riding theme of the findings based on the views of participants in relation to inclusion for students with SEN in the Infant Classes was that *“you can’t tar everyone with the same brush”* (Anne). As inclusion is ‘context dependent’ (Loreman *et al* 2005, p.18), one of the most reoccurring answers to questions asked was that when it comes to inclusion or SEN in general *“it all depends on the need”*. It quickly became apparent that although the participants were confident in their answers, they all strongly believed that the pedagogical approaches and resources used for students with SEN change depending on the specific needs of the student in question. This mirrors the work of Rose and Howley (2007, p.4) as there is often an ‘overgeneralisation’ of needs based on the SEN label who may not ‘learn, behave or react’ in the same way.

The following key is provided as a quantitative indicator of participant’s viewpoints.._

Figure 6: Key - Descriptor of Participant Responses



The phrases shown above can be used to highlight the breath of agreement between participants throughout this findings and discussion chapter.

The Importance of Inclusive Pedagogical Approaches

All participants of this study recognised the importance of an inclusive education and so they consciously plan for the inclusion of students with SEN. Teachers facilitate this through a range of pedagogical approaches, some of which will be discussed below.

Differentiation

Differentiated instruction involves specific planning of the curriculum to ensure students ‘compete against themselves as they grow and develop more than they

compete against one another' (Tomlinson 2014, p.4). Through analysis of the data it emerged that differentiation in practice is most successfully facilitated through collaborative teaching. It quickly became apparent that the majority of participants' viewed *"people-power"* (Brenda) as the greatest resource when including students with SEN in the mainstream classroom which will be further discussed below.

Whole-School Collaboration

In order to differentiate within an inclusive classroom, all of the teachers agreed that collaboration is an effective approach. The support and assistance of other school-staff within the classroom lends itself to differentiation as a smaller teacher-pupil ratio facilitates individualised scaffolding (Scruggs *et al* 2007). This often occurs through station-teaching, as discussed within the literature review (Berry 2006), which emerged as the most beneficial form of differentiation as;

"instead of one class-teacher teaching a whole class of children at one level and then trying to differentiate through little activities that really don't ever hit the mark, now you could have three or four grown-ups that come into the classroom and they assist me teaching at four or five different stations. Those activities are suited to the needs of a particular level" (Helen).

One participant noted that station-teaching is especially effective for a child in her class, who characteristically requires activity breaks, stating that *"it's great for him to be able to move around in between each station as he gets restless and needs that movement break"* (Brenda). This practice is supported by Anderson (2016) as she states that movement throughout the day can have a positive effect on work completion and ease of learning. Most of the participants also noted that inclusion is facilitated through a station-teaching approach as the need for withdrawal is minimised and students are fully engaged in classroom-based activity. By organising literacy and numeracy activities into *"ability-based"* (Noreen) groups, students who have particular learning needs can remain in the classroom and they can *"cope with what's expected of them"* (Mary). This cooperative learning (PDST 2009) is very inclusive in the sense that students with SEN are *"taking part in all of those stations or groups"* (Noreen) and also *"feel part of it [the station] and they love being one of the gang"* (Anne).

Facilitating Interactions

Facilitating interactions for students with SEN is central to their contribution and participation in education and so is an integral aspect of creating an inclusive classroom. Anne stated that *"group-work is a great way to facilitate peer/peer interactions"*. Similarly, all other participants listed grouped seating (Berry 2006) as an effective approach to promote such interactions as students have an opportunity *"discuss together and come up with different things"* (Helen) throughout the day, which enhances the inclusive atmosphere of the classroom.

“I think group seating is the best way. In an infant classroom could you really go back to rows? I don’t think you could”. (Brenda)

Inclusion involves equality for all students by providing each with an appropriate education, opportunities to participate in all aspects of school life and benefit from their education (Education Act 1998). Most participants identified that adapting the seating arrangement of the infant classroom ensures this active participation for students with SEN as they can mix with their peers and become involved in all tasks. Moira stated that *“groups are very important as it adds that social element to the classroom and it creates a friendly environment”*. The majority of participants concurred with Moira’s stance that groups provide social opportunities for students with SEN and recognised the importance of *“swapping seats”* (Anne) to facilitate this.

Along with the social opportunities involved, teachers highlighted that grouped seating lends itself to peer/peer interactions and collaborative learning (PDST 2009) through group-work, paired activities and peer-tutoring as *“having a very-able kid sitting beside kids with a lower ability seems to work very well because they will help the other kid out”* (Mary) (Dash 2006). Teachers agreed with Anderson *et al* (2007) and Garner (2009) that peer-tutoring and peer-modelling during group-work is of benefit to students with SEN. Students firstly *“see the activity being done a number of times and so they can see the way it works before they carry it out”* (Moira).

Aistear Framework

The *Aistear* Framework (NCCA 2009a) was listed by most of the participants as one of the most beneficial inclusive pedagogical approaches in the Infant Classes. Brenda strongly stated that *“play, of course, is the obvious way to facilitate interactions and include students with SEN”*. Engaging in *Aistear* (NCCA 2009b) encompasses inclusion through social interactions and facilitates a sense of belonging for those with SEN, as they are *“part of something where they’re not under pressure”* (Helen). These findings concur with research which posited that the *Aistear* Framework (NCCA 2009b) supports social development through meaningful, playful-tasks (Moloney and McCarthy 2010). Teachers cited *Aistear* (NCCA 2009b) as an advantageous approach as student-directed play informally teaches social skills. This concurs with Wood (2013) and Stanton-Chapman and Brown’s (2015) viewpoint that *Aistear* (NCCA 2009b) prepares young students for social encounters they may have in the future, as the following quote exemplifies:

“There are a lot of things that can be learned through play, things like rules and regulations, turn-taking, etc.; it helps them through sticky-situations they might find themselves in”. (Moira)

It could be concluded that *Aistear* is a fundamental and beneficial approach to facilitate interactions for *all* students in the Infant Classes as, according to most

of the teacher participants, effective and appropriate social opportunities arise during these structured, collaborative play sessions.

Key Resources to Enhance Inclusion

As mentioned within the literature review, the use of effective resources is essential to aid the teaching and learning of students with SEN. A variety of manipulative resources were highlighted as being critical to the successful implementation of an inclusive classroom. Such include the use of Thera-putty to “*occupy the hands*” (Helen) and to provide sensory-input “*so that they’re not getting frustrated and refusing to do work*” (Mary). This, along with “*sensory-cushions*” and “*writing slopes*” (Noreen) emerged as some of the most frequently used resources, which mirrors the work of Garland (2014) regarding effective resources for students with sensory-modulation concerns.

Research suggests that students with SEN are strong visual learners (Grandin 2006, Doherty *et al* 2011) and so teachers use a variety of resources to cater for this learning style. The majority of participants highlighted the importance of visual supports (Hayes *et al* 2010) by discussing the use of visual schedules and cue cards to facilitate routine and teacher/student interactions. Moira noted that the use of “*anything visual, anything of a technological nature*” is both effective and “*enjoyable*” for students with SEN. Noreen highlighted that use of the IWB is essential when including students with SEN as their interest is stimulated and their attention is maintained:

“I notice that their attention is so much greater and they are so much more motivated if it’s something that’s on the board and it’s not just me talking”.

These findings reflect the benefit of ICT and assistive technology as key resources to enhance inclusion when used effectively (Townsend 2005, SESS 2018). Responses given by participants suggest that a variety of resources are used and adapted to cater for specific needs and so, contribute greatly to creating an inclusive classroom environment.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to establish how teachers can create effective inclusive classrooms, specifically focusing on the pedagogical approaches which facilitate this. Interesting data emerged from the analysis of semi-structured interviews which is presented in the above findings. A number of conclusions were drawn from these findings and are presented in this paper under the following three headings;

Differentiation Enhances Inclusive Classrooms:

It is evident from the findings that differentiated instruction enhances inclusion as it caters for a variety of learning styles (Trussler and Robinson 2015). It emerged that differentiation works best when students are divided into same-ability groups and it is most effective when collaboration between teachers occur

in the form of station-teaching. Instruction and content which focuses on the specific needs of the student during station-teaching ensures students with SEN can learn alongside their peers within the classroom, fostering an inclusive environment.

Interactions are Facilitated through the *Aistear* Framework:

It can be established that engaging in the *Aistear* Framework (NCCA 2009b) facilitates social development through peer-interactions. Play carried out in grouped arrangements (Berry 2006) ensures students are communicating and interacting with one another. According to participants, a sense of belonging for students with SEN is also created as they are included in an informal learning environment where their needs are not magnified. The *Aistear* (NCCA 2009b) initiative develops social skills which better equips students for future interactions with others (Wood 2013).

Key Resources Support the Inclusion of Students with SEN:

The findings informed the researcher of the most effective resources used when including students with SEN. Visual tools were said to be very helpful when adapting to the learning style of students with SEN (Grandin 2006, Doherty *et al* 2011) and in turn facilitated communication and structure. Thera-putty, sensory cushions and writing slopes were listed as the most commonly used manipulative resources which respond to the needs of students with sensory-modulation issues (Garland 2014). ICT and assistive technology such as iPads and the IWB also enable the successful inclusion of students with SEN as they not only cater for the visual need of these learners but are also enjoyable and engaging for all learners (Anderson 2016).

As outlined by Griffin and Shevlin (2011), this research illustrates the continuous move towards inclusive education. The examination of pedagogical approaches and key resources used by teachers to facilitate inclusion was relevant as the ‘implementation of effective inclusive practice’ still remains a huge challenge for schools (Day and Prunty 2015, p.237). This conveys that inclusion is an on-going process, which educators continuously strive to achieve. It is hoped that the findings of this research suggest some practical ways to enhance inclusion, particularly for NQTs in the field. Finally, NQTs and educators alike are encouraged to remember that we are the facilitators of change, it is our responsibility to include those who are ‘different, not less’ (Grandin 2012). The closing words of this paper are ones which my understanding of SEN are rooted in, and words which I believe are essential for all practitioners to consider in current and future inclusive practice;

*Is páiste gach páiste i dtús báire.
Every child is first and foremost a child.
(O’ Byrne 2014)*

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LOUISE CURTIN

Louise Curtin is a newly qualified teacher (NQT) from Doneraile, Co. Cork. Louise was presented with the College Gold Medal for achieving first place in the Bachelor of Education (Primary Teaching) programme at Mary Immaculate College in 2017. Louise was also the recipient of the Peadar Cremin Fellowship, which is presented to the Graduate who achieved first place in Educational Research and the Dissertation on the Bachelor of Education Programme. Her supervisor was Dr. Margaret Egan.

DR MARGARET EGAN

Margaret Egan is a lecturer in the Dept. Educational Psychology, Inclusive and Special Education at Mary Immaculate College.

Using Response Boards to Promote Active Student Responding in a Special School Class

David Lavin and Patricia Daly

Abstract

This study investigated the effectiveness of active learning using response boards for developing and improving student participation and recall. Twelve students in a special school (MGLD) participated. Response board effects were compared to those using Question and Answer (Q&A). Response boards were more effective than Q&A in improving participation and recall for all participants. Students also recalled additional material only in the response board condition. All but one student preferred using response boards to participating in Q&A sessions.

The term ‘engaged time’ has been used in the literature on effective teaching and consequently student learning with the publication of a classic article by Rosenshine and Berliner (1978) titled: Academic Engaged Time, Content Covered, and Direct Instruction. Engaged time was conceptualised as a portion of class time in which students were actively engaged in a task with success. This tended to comprise a very small portion of most whole lessons – sometimes as little as three minutes. Engaged time directly related to increased content covered and learned by students (Rosenshine 1978). Walker and Severson (1992) defined the following as components of engaged time: attending to task, involvement in some motor activity related to the task (writing, showing), and seeking assistance appropriately. Research has since supported the use of particular pedagogies to increase engaged time in schools and thereby learning.

These pedagogies include Class-wide Peer Tutoring (Greenwood 1997), Choral Responding (Skinner *et al* 1996), Guided Notes (Sweeney *et al* 1999), Digital Response Systems (Keough 2012), and low-tech Response Boards (Heward *et al* 1996). As is evident from the reference dates above these methodologies have been in use for many years. The focus of this study was on the use of Response Boards.

Response Boards are a low-tech version of Clickers (digital response systems). They are boards or cards held up simultaneously by students showing their response to a question by the teacher. The teacher then gives class-wide feedback on the dominant response. Response boards may be of two types: write-on or pre-printed. Write-on boards are mini individual white boards on which students write responses using an erasable pen. Pre-printed response

boards can be of many types including Yes/No, True/False, Fact/Fiction, Fact/Opinion, or the names of planets, colours, parts of speech, items of science equipment, home economics equipment and so on. For the pre-printed boards the students select the correct board to show the teacher in response to his/her question. Response boards for instructional use were first described by Heward *et al* (1996) where specific guidelines for their effective use were outlined. Not only have response boards led to higher response rates by students (Gardner *et al* 1994, Christle and Schuster 2003, Lambert *et al* 2006), but there is some evidence that students who are typically low-achieving may be more willing to participate using them as individual student responses are not singled out (Davey 1989). Some literature also identifies reductions in challenging behaviour and increased recall of content by students engaged through the use of response boards compared to during other pedagogical approaches (Stichter *et al* 2009). A recent study by Bondy and Tincani (2018) examined the effects of using pre-printed response cards on the participation and correct responding of three children with additional needs, two with Autism Spectrum Differences and one with Intellectual Disability. They found large increases in both participation and correct responding for all three children. The term ‘Active Student Responding’ or ASR is used to describe the behaviour of students during response board sections of lessons.

In Ireland, the current impetus to provide inclusive learning environments renews the focus on teaching pedagogies that promote active successful engagement by all students – including those with special educational needs. Recent increases in numbers of students with MGLD in special schools, coupled with their concomitant reluctance to actively engage when publically made ‘wrong answers’ may lead to embarrassment, highlights the importance of using pedagogies that engage in those environments also. Bellert (2009, p. 181) noted key instructional elements for teachers of students with MGLD which included the need for increased participation, active engagement and guided practice with feedback and regular assessments. As there is a paucity of published research evaluating the use of low-tech response boards for improving the learning of students with MGLD in Ireland, the current study aimed to examine the effectiveness of incorporating response boards during instruction of students with MGLD in a special school. The study compares students’ learning using response boards (high levels of ASR) to that during the more traditional question-answer techniques (low ASR). The study also investigated whether students would recall additional information differently under the two conditions, and finally assessed the social validity (Cooper *et al* 2007) or the extent to which the students liked or didn’t like using response boards.

Research Questions

Research questions that formed the basis and rationale of the study:

1. Do response boards improve student participation and recall (academic performance) and is additional new information recalled?

2. How do students rate response board use compared to traditional question and answer method)?

Project Methodology

Action research was the methodology chosen for this study. This model is not only valued in the literature in improving teaching and learning (Hitchcock & Hughes 1995), but it is also the current policy of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA 2012) that educators employ action research in devising school improvement plans (SIP), to enhance the teaching and learning of literacy and numeracy.

Participants and Setting

The project was undertaken in a special school setting designated for students with a mild general learning disability (MGLD). A sample was used consisting of 12 first year students aged 12/13 years old. The sample was heterogeneous with seven boys and five girls in the class. The intervention was carried out during class time, in the researcher's classroom as part of the Social Environmental and Scientific Education (S.E.S.E) curriculum. All participants were assessed, prior to the study, using the Neale Analysis of Reading Ability (NARA). Reading ages for all participants ranged from 7 years and 5 months to 9 years and 4 months, while, comprehension ages for all participants ranged from 7 years to 9 years and 10 months.

Training

The week prior to data collection, the researcher demonstrated the use of response boards and a question and answer method was modelled to the target class.

Intervention 1: Response Board Condition

During the response board condition each student had an individual double sided whiteboard (A4 size), marker and eraser. When the teacher asked a question students had to write an answer on their whiteboards. Students were given 'thinking time' of between eight and ten seconds after each question (Rowe 1986). The teacher counted down the time by saying "3-2-1 boards up, please". Students then raised their boards to show their answers. After viewing the boards, the teacher asked the students to put their boards down and erase them. The teacher provided positive verbal feedback after the boards were raised. If the majority of answers given were wrong, then the teacher gave the correct answer. The same question was asked again at another point during the class to reinforce the learning.

Intervention 2: Question-and-Answer Condition

The teacher asked a question, repeated it and invited students to raise their hands to answer the question posed. The teacher then called upon one student with a raised hand to respond. If the answer was correct, the teacher restated the correct answer and provided feedback to that student (i.e. well done).

_____ is the correct answer). In the event that the answer was incorrect, the teacher provided feedback to the student (i.e. that answer is not quite right) and invited another student who had a hand raised to answer. If the second answer was correct, the answer was restated and feedback was given to that student. If the second answer was incorrect, the teacher provided the correct answer to the question (Christle and Schuster 2003, Godfrey *et al* 2003, Randolph 2007).

Procedure

The response board condition was randomly alternated with the traditional question-and-answer condition. In this way sequence effects that could arise with non-random selection were avoided. Once data were collected for each student in each condition, data paths were constructed connecting data points per condition. The vertical distance between data paths is used as evidence of the superior effectiveness of one intervention above the other. The classroom teacher implemented the measures of this study with the support of a qualified special needs assistant (SNA), who acted as the primary observer.

Data Collection

Three dependent variables were the subject of focus during this study: (1) student participation, (2) student recall and additional student recall. Participants' preference and opinion was solicited through the use of a student survey at the close of the intervention.

Participation

Participation was defined as the ratio of opportunities to respond to the number of times students actually responded in either condition. Students were deemed to have participated when their hand was raised (during single student responding) or when they wrote down an answer and raised their response board (during active responding). Participants used only hand raising or exclusively used response boards depending on the session that was being taught. The class SNA was trained in the procedure and counted the number of hands or boards raised depending on the lesson.

Student Recall and Additional Recall

Student Recall was assessed on six occasions, three times for each condition, through a test that had eight teacher written questions. The content of the test directly related to the questions that were being asked during the review of instruction. Additional recall was assessed by placing two further questions on the test. The content of these questions was not covered during the lesson, but the students were given the information. For example, the researcher asked a direct question during the session (i.e. Do you know the name of a German plane used during World War 2?), provided the correct answer (i.e. Well done. Heinkel is correct) and then provided an additional correct answer (i.e. and of course the Messerschmitt was also a plane used during World War 2). A question was asked on both during lesson review.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using an Alternating Treatments Design (Barlow and Hayes 1979, Alberto and Troutman 2013). This is a single-subject research design which compares performance data by participants using different interventions. The interventions compared using this design, in this study, were Response Board versus Question-and-Answer method. Horner *et al* (2005) states that single subject research is a “rigorous, scientific methodology used to define basic principles of behaviour and establish evidence-based practices” (p. 165).

Presentation and Analysis of Findings

Student participation

Data was collected for thirty sessions during the study. This totals fifteen lessons for each intervention. Students answered eight questions during lesson closure in each format. Results for each participant were presented in table format. Two students were chosen as they are seen as representative of the class.

Figure 1 shows the number of responses that were recorded for *Student One* throughout the study. Student One never raised a hand during the question and answer intervention but responded an average of 14.2 times during the response board intervention.

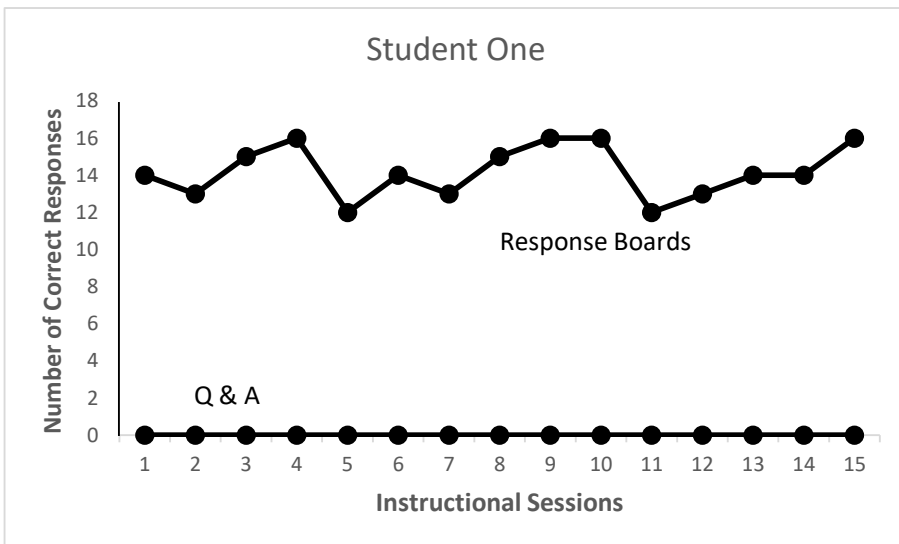


Figure 1: Number of Responses by Student One using RB compared to during Q/A

Figure 2 shows the total response in both conditions for Student Five. Student Five raised a hand an average of 3.4 times in question-and-answer

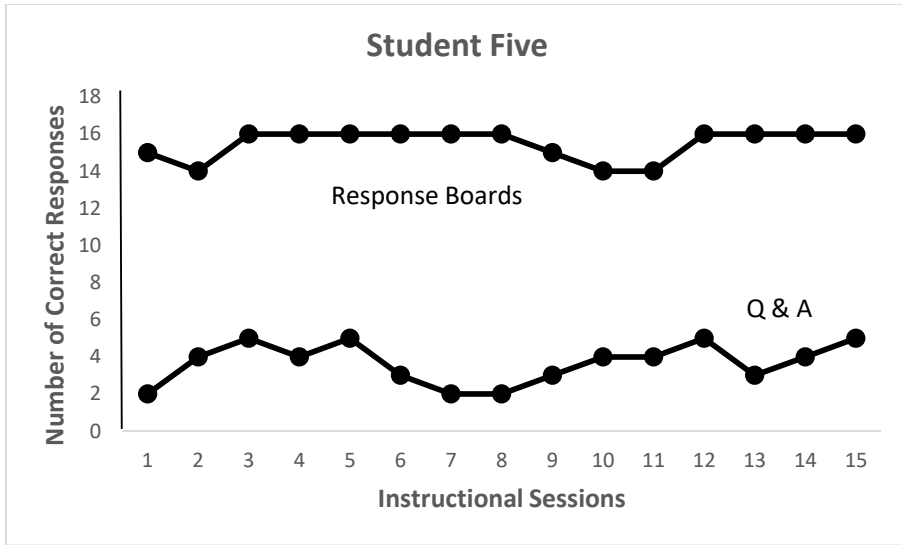


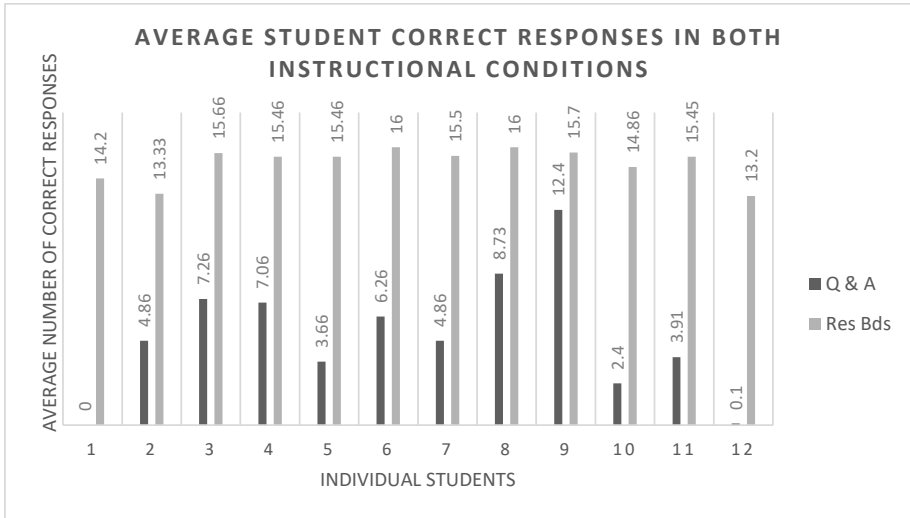
Figure 2: Number of Responses by Student Five using RB compared to during Q/A

Table 1 summarises the results for the group across both intervention conditions. The total number of response opportunities, total responses recorded, mean number of responses and the range of responses by each participant are outlined. The data collected indicates higher levels of classroom participation for all the target students during response board versus question and answer conditions.

	Response Board Intervention				Question-and-Answer Intervention			
	Response Opportunities	Total Response	Average No. of Responses	Response Range (Low to High)	Response Opportunities	Total Responses	Average Number of Responses	Response Range (Low to High)
Student 1	240	213	14.2	(12-16)	240	0	0	(0-0)
Student 2	240	200	13.33	(11-16)	240	73	4.86	(3-6)
Student 3	240	235	15.66	(15-16)	240	109	7.26	(4-9)
Student 4	240	232	15.46	(14-16)	240	106	7.06	(5-9)
Student 5	240	232	15.46	(14-16)	240	55	3.66	(2-5)
Student 6	240	240	16	(16-16)	240	94	6.26	(4-8)
Student 7	240	233	15.5	(14-16)	240	73	4.86	(4-6)
Student 8	240	240	16	(16-16)	240	131	8.73	(8-11)
Student 9	240	236	15.7	(15-16)	240	186	12.4	(10-14)
Student 10	240	223	14.86	(12-16)	240	36	2.4	(0-4)
Student 11	176	170	15.45	(14-16)	192	47	3.91	(2-6)
Student 12	160	132	13.2	(11-16)	160	1	0.1	(0-1)

Table 1: Summary results for all participants in both research conditions. The total average responses in each condition can be seen in Figure 3. In the case of each participant, response boards proved to be a more effective teaching methodology when it came to assessing the participation levels among students.

Figure 3: Total Average Responses per Session during RB and Q/A conditions



Student Recall

Student recall was assessed on six occasions throughout the study. The results for Students One and Five are laid in Table 2 and Table 3 respectively.

	Question-and-Answer Recall			
	Responses Opportunities	No. of Responses	Correct Responses	Accuracy (%)
Quiz 1	16	0	5/8	62.5%
Quiz 2	16	0	5/8	62.5%
Quiz 3	16	0	6/8	75%
	Response Board Recall			
	Responses Opportunities	No. of Responses	Correct Responses	Accuracy (%)
Quiz 1	16	13	8/8	100%
Quiz 2	16	16	8/8	100%
Quiz 3	16	14	8/8	100%

Table 2: Recall results for Student One in RB and Q/A conditions

	Question-and-Answer Recall			
	Responses Opportunities	No. of Responses	Correct Responses	Accuracy (%)
Quiz 1	16	4	7/8	87.5%
Quiz 2	16	4	7/8	87.5%
Quiz 3	16	3	6/8	75%
	Response Board Recall			
	Responses Opportunities	No. of Responses	Correct Responses	Accuracy (%)
Quiz 1	16	14	8/8	100%
Quiz 2	16	16	7/8	87.5%
Quiz 3	16	16	8/8	100%

Table 3: Recall results for Student Five in RB and Q/A conditions

Additional recall was assessed on the same quiz that evaluated student recall. Two additional questions, numbered nine and ten, were placed on the quiz sheet. These questions were not covered during the lesson review but the students were given the information in the course of the lesson in the form of additional feedback. All participants improved the accuracy of their responses in the response board condition.

Student	Response Board Intervention		Question-and-Answer Intervention	
	Correct Responses	Accuracy (%)	Correct Responses	Accuracy (%)
Student 1	5/6	83.3%	2/6	33.3%
Student 2	5/6	83.3%	3/6	50%
Student 3	6/6	100%	4/6	66.6%
Student 4	6/6	100%	4/6	66.6%
Student 5	5/6	83.3%	2/6	33.3%
Student 6	6/6	100%	4/6	66.6%
Student 7	6/6	100%	5/6	83.3%
Student 8	6/6	100%	3/6	50%
Student 9	6/6	100%	5/6	83.3%
Student 10	6/6	100%	5/6	83.3%
Student 11	5/6	83.3%	1/6	16.6%
Student 12	6/6	100%	2/6	33.3%

Table 4: Additional Recall Results

Social Validity

Students were asked to respond to nine questions in total. Pupils were positive towards the use of response boards with 91.6% of participants indicating that they participated and remembered more when using them.

Questions	Yes	No	Maybe
1. I liked using response boards to answer questions	<u>10</u> 83.3%	<u>2</u> 16.6%	<u>0</u> 0%
2. I participated more in class when I was using a response board	<u>11</u> 91.6%	<u>0</u> 0%	<u>1</u> 8.3%
3. I like raising my hand rather than response boards to answer questions in class	<u>1</u> 8.3%	<u>10</u> 83.3%	<u>1</u> 8.3%
4. I felt more focused in class when using a response board	<u>10</u> 83.3%	<u>1</u> 8.3%	<u>1</u> 8.3%
5. I remember more information after a response board lesson	<u>11</u> 91.6%	<u>1</u> 8.3%	<u>0</u> 0%
6. I like using response boards more that raising my hand to answer questions	<u>11</u> 91.6%	<u>1</u> 8.3%	<u>0</u> 0%
7. I would like to use response boards in other classes	<u>5</u> 41.6%	<u>4</u> 33.3%	<u>3</u> 25%

Table 5: Breakdown of questionnaire result

Two additional questions were included on the questionnaire. Students were asked to comment on what they liked best and liked least when using the response boards. These answers are displayed in Table 8.

<u>Liked Best</u>	<u>Liked Least</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • it was easier to use response boards than raising your hand • answering more questions • playing games in lessons • being able to write and draw • remembering more • learning more • answering more questions - - 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rubbing things out all the time • Messing with the marker • Writing and rubbing and writing • Rubbing out stuff • You have to erase things • Some of the words (answers) are too long • You have to look for more answers

Table 6: Student Feedback

Discussion and Findings

During the active responding condition, the level of participation in the class increased substantially, recall of information during lesson recall increased substantially and behaviour of target students also decreased substantially. These are three key findings arising out of this study that have implications for

students. While other studies have declared similarly positive results regarding improved participation, this is one of the first studies to focus on recall and additional recall. Results of the study indicate that the average quiz scores were higher for all participants, except for one whose results didn't display a preference for either condition. It should be noted that differences in responding and in information recalled was consistent across all lessons using response boards. This allows the researcher to claim more strongly that that condition was more effective as a teaching methodology as novelty effects would certainly have worn off by then. The additional recall element of this study fills a void in the existing literature. The comparison of additional recall in both conditions reveals that response boards resulted in over a thirty percent improvement in the number of correct answers. When considering that the recall element was assessed through two questions, both two-way multiple-choice, this level of improvement represents a noteworthy development. It can therefore be argued that active responding, using response boards, is an initiative that can increase learning in the classroom.

The time sampling data collected throughout this study, relating to student time on-task and behaviour, revealed that the target students designated for this section of the study, both improved their time-on task by over fifty percent over the course of the response board condition compared to the question-and-answer intervention. Incidences of on-task behaviour such as writing, asking or answering a question, attending to the teacher or an object directed by the teacher and gathering materials relating to a task were more prominent during the active responding condition. Perhaps most significantly, this improvement compares very favourably and consistently with the differences in responding and information recalled. Given this information it can therefore be argued that the active responding condition was more effective as a teaching methodology.

The social validity questionnaire data was very positive towards the response boards. Eleven out of twelve participants indicated that they remembered more, were more focused and participated more when using the response boards. Additional questions asked what participants liked best and least about using response boards. Interestingly, three participants indicated there was nothing they disliked and a number of 'positive negative' comments were also given. Participants felt that having to repeatedly rub out the answers on the boards and writing more answers were issues, while one participant indicated that their least favourite part of a response board lesson was looking for more answers to questions. In effect, students participated more in class and so by extension had to look for more answers. Although this aspect of using the response boards was demanding, it also required the students to be more attentive, apply themselves more and stay focused on the task at hand.

Limitations of this study

It must be acknowledged that the research cohort was small and therefore generalisations cannot be made based on findings. The position of the

researcher as both investigator and teacher can be viewed as both a strength and a limitation. As class teacher, having full and unlimited access to the class was a key feature in the success of this study. Robson (2002) refers to researcher bias as a limitation in any study, but also a realistic part of the research process (Cohen *et al* 2013). Despite these limitations, the findings are nevertheless useful and worth considering when dealing with students who have a diagnosis of MGLD.

Implications for Teachers

Active responding using response boards is a low tech initiative that can boost participation, improve time on-task and recall of information, but the procedure does require a degree of preparation and effort. Teachers should take time to become familiar with using the response boards. It is also prudent to give students time to get used to using the boards.

It is important to stress to participants that spelling does not matter when writing answers. The researcher found this aspect is a vital and inclusive element of using response boards.

The ability of the teacher to immediately assess the understanding of all students when response boards were being used is seen as another key point. When each student was engaged in the lesson, by holding up their board, it was a simple matter for the teacher to consider the boards to assess the understanding of the group. Results are immediate and easy to analyse.

When we consider that in the current educational climate teachers are facing the pressure of curriculum overload (NCCA 2010), then response boards are a cost effective solution that could play a key role in facilitating assessment of learning and assessment for learning.

As with any teaching methodology, educators must ultimately decide what benefit it will be to students and on whether to implement it or not.

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DAVID LAVIN

David Lavin is a teacher in a special school in Limerick. He has a master's degree in special education from Mary Immaculate College where he also completed the Post-Graduate Diploma in Special Education.

DR PATRICIA DALY

Dr. Patricia Daly is the Head of the Department of Educational Psychology, Inclusive & Special Education at Mary Immaculate College.

Exploring the Social Construction of Dyslexia

Trevor O'Brien

Abstract

This article examines how dyslexia has emerged and evolved as a learning disability. It contends that, in order to understand the difficulties associated with dyslexia, one must first examine social influences such as the political and cultural contexts in which it is embedded. These forces have, to a large degree, shaped how disability and labels are constructed in a society where being literate is associated with productivity and success. While labelling is critiqued and deconstructed, it is argued that there is merit in retaining the label as it may offer children a way to understand the specific challenges they encounter in and outside of school.

In recent times there has been much debate surrounding the labelling of children with disabilities, including dyslexia (Cameron and Billington 2015 Elliott and Gigorenko 2015). While the New Model's focus on need, not disability, is welcomed (NCSE 2017), it is important to consider the complex nature of dyslexia and indeed its very existence. For this reason, this article focuses on the dyslexia debate and how it has evolved over time. While it is maintained that it does indeed exist, it is contended that dyslexia is largely socially constructed. To this end, the social model of disability is discussed in detail, with external variables such as class, political influences and cultural biases highlighted in order to appreciate the complex nature of the term. The contentious area of labelling is critiqued, and while various perspectives are presented, the overall argument is in support of maintaining the label as a positive entity for those with the associated challenges.

The Dyslexia Debate

While controversies surround the term, it is argued that dyslexia exists as a result of powerful social forces. However, it is not simply a case of simply abandoning the word as some would suggest (Elliott 2006, Elliott and Gibbs 2008, Elliott and Gigorenko 2015), but understanding the social constructs which translate specific impairments into disabilities (MacDonald 2009, Oliver 1996). Many definitions of dyslexia highlight the cognitive deficits regarding literacy along with the mismatch between IQ and achievement (BDA 2017, DES 2001, IDA 2013). The Department of Education and Science (DES) Report of the Task Force on Dyslexia (2001), notes that

Dyslexia is manifested in a continuum of learning difficulties related to the acquisition of basic skills in reading, spelling and/or writing, such difficulties being unexpected in relation to an individual's other abilities and educational experiences(DES 2001, p. xii).

While these definitions often point to the discrepancy between intelligence and achievement, "it is now well established that dyslexia is a neurological disorder with a genetic origin" (Ramus *et al* 2003, p. 841). The Report of The Task Force on Dyslexia also states that dyslexia is controversial as "several studies have failed to find differences between dyslexic students and other poor readers" (DES 2001, p.23) and this is supported by Elliott and Gibbs (2008) who argue the very existence of dyslexia. They cite "that many signs of dyslexia are no less characteristic of non-dyslexic people with reading skills deficits. In our present state of knowledge, it does not seem helpful for teachers to think of some literacy learners as dyslexics and others as ordinary poor readers"(p.482). This argument is also advocated by Elliott and Grigorenko (2015) who assert that it is not meaningful to conceive of a subgroup within a larger group of weak readers who all find accuracy and fluency difficult. However, to ignore learner differences and assume that all poor readers are the same and would benefit from the same intervention is both premature and inaccurate (Ramus 2014). Elliott and Grigorenko (2015) contend that the concept of dyslexia is futile and that the use of the word should be discontinued as the uncertainties and inconsistencies between definitions serve to increase rather than reduce the difficulties experienced by children. This may be a simplistic and reductive approach to an important debate and perhaps what should be considered instead is more research on the specific types of dyslexia and other causes of poor reading (Ramus 2014). While it is acknowledged that more resources should be targeted at the majority of poor readers, the specific impairments associated with dyslexia may require further consideration (Ramus 2014).

It is true to state that many of the challenges encountered by children with dyslexia, such as memory, processing and verbal fluency, may be common to other non-dyslexic children (Elliott 2006, Elliott and Grigorenko 2015). However, to use this position to assert that all poor readers benefit from the same interventions is premature and exaggerated as "in fact there is always a substantial minority of children who do not seem to benefit much"(Ramus 2014, p.3373). Frith (2002) argues "that the single most important factor in the remediation of dyslexia is, without doubt, the protective influence of culture (p.64)". In other words, how dyslexia is perceived and addressed is largely determined by social forces (Reid and Valle 2004). While children with dyslexia may have specific impairments, the concept of disability emanates from negative attitudes towards the impairment (Armstrong and Squires 2015, Barnes 1991, Oliver 1996, Riddick 2011). However to argue that dyslexia does not exist and that the term has "outgrown its conceptual usefulness" (Elliott and Grigorenko 2015, p.177) does little to support children who may have specific difficulties or differences.

Models of Disability

The first models of dyslexia were firmly medical, highlighting literacy deficits as the basis for the condition (Riddick 2010). The difficulty rested within the child and it was the school's responsibility to remediate or fix these difficulties. The medical model aimed to correct the child's inadequacies in order to fit into the existing system (Riddick 2010). This model, highlighting individual failure, contrasts with the social model, which emphasises that disability arises when impairments are viewed as the person's deficit (Armstrong and Squires 2015, McDonald 2009, Oliver 1996). It espouses a more holistic approach which identifies disability as a result of societal constructs of what it means to be different (Hughes 2010). The social model aims to separate disability from impairment, which may be considered "a functional limitation within an individual whereas disability refers to the loss of opportunities to participate in life on an equal basis to others as a result of physical or social barriers" (Barnes 1991 in Glazzard and Dale 2012 p.27). Impairment may be also described as a characteristic which affects an individual's mind, body or senses (Hughes 2010, Reid and Valle 2004) whereas a disability is a result of the barriers which society has put in place (Oliver 1996, Reid and Valle 2004). The social model appreciates diversity in all its form, recognising that disability is a construct emanating from society's difficulty in accommodating differences (O' Gorman and Drudy 2010).

According to McDonald (2009) "dyslexia is created by institutional and environmental processes similar to that of physical disabilities. Under this approach, disabling barriers are constructed for people with dyslexia by the rise of a text based information society" (p.349). The medical model views impairment as the core problem and it is therefore the individual's responsibility to change and to fit in (Hughes 2010). It fails to recognise the person as a whole and merely focuses on the difficulties encountered. On the other hand, the social model accepts people's differences as fundamental human experiences, which has implications for changes in teaching approaches and assessment (Armstrong and Squires 2015). Moreover, the medical model locates the problems in the heads of those who experience such differences, which leads to the view that the problem rests with disabled people, not society (Goodley 2011). If it is society's responsibility to view the range of different human experience as normal, then one could derive "that there is no such thing as disability, only disabling environments" (Riddick 2010, p.9). These disabling environments may be created by attitudes or a lack of access to support (McDonald 2009).

Armstrong and Squires (2015) noting the social construction of dyslexia, assert that it only exists as a disability as it relates to how one functions in life. The social model transcends the notion that intelligence and dyslexia are linked; rather it focuses on the child's potential to access, participate and benefit from everyday experiences (Armstrong and Squires 2015). Children's different challenges may be viewed on a continuum of human experience. However, these

challenges become exasperated when barriers are put in place in the form of a literacy-based society (McDonald 2009).

While there may be strong evidence for the cognitive basis of dyslexia (Reid 2009), Riddick argues that

a phonological impairment could lead to a disability because of society and particularly schools attitudes to literacy. A particular dilemma for non-evident disabilities (such as dyslexia) is that individuals often have to fight hard to have them recognised before they are in a position to challenge the society that has helped to produce them (p.226).

Understanding how dyslexia has been socially constructed may help one to view the associated challenges as differences rather than disability. Furthermore, instead of viewing dyslexia as a disability, the social model could be used to understand these differences in order to change policies and practices (Armstrong and Squires 2015).

Cultural norms in terms of literacy largely determine how specific impairments associated with dyslexia become a disability (Frith 2002, Riddick 2010). Interestingly, in the sixteenth century, there was a more flexible approach to spelling and it was acceptable to use different spellings for the same words (Riddick 2011). Over time, the focus on literacy skills became closely associated with being a productive citizen, capable of having control over one's environment (Pumfrey and Reason 1991). In recent times, there "has been the recognition that good literacy skills underpin economic competitiveness" (Armstrong and Squires 2015, p.23). Perhaps there is a need to re-examine approaches to literacy if the goal is to improve *all* children's outcomes and view learner differences as opportunities (Riddick, 2010). Furthermore, is it reasonable to expect that all children should be able to read and spell perfectly? (Riddick 2010 p.226). If dyslexia is socially constructed and learner differences are at the core, maybe the solution is to develop effective evidence based strategies tailored to a variety of differences? Herein lies the challenge for teachers to accommodate all learners irrespective of differences (Reid 2009). Schools need to resist the temptation to pathologise these differences (Reid and Valle 2004); rather they should embrace these as an opportunity to understand and address the variety of human experiences in order to develop inclusive policies and practices (Nutbrown and Clough 2013).

Political, Cultural and Economic Factors

Mass literacy is a relatively recent concept and has been historically associated with the powerful who maintained this power through literacy (Elliott and Gibbs 2015). Comber and Hill (2000) cite that "literacy, along with numeracy, is often understood as the fundamental "basic skill" that is fundamental to educational, social and economic success" (p.79). In the late 19th century there was a view that there was a social and political danger in having illiteracy in the general population. This view saw a drive in the political system to ensure that

as many as possible became proficiently literate (Elliott and Gibbs 2008). Literacy became closely connected to economic success and standards were put in place for citizens to obtain them. As a result, those who did not acquire the skills as competently as others in the mainstream were perceived as unsuccessful or different (Armstrong and Squires 2015). Consequently, modern culture became shaped by books and other forms of print (Reid 2009) and those “different” individuals unable to access this culture as a result of impairment became regarded as disabled (Pumfrey and Reason 1991). These impairments have proven to be a “major difficulty because of the move towards mass literacy and the consequent negative connotations attached to being illiterate”(Riddick 2011, p.224). Being literate has become, in many ways, “a measure of success in our present education systems” (McDonald 2009, p.354) and to be illiterate is, on the other hand, viewed as being unsuccessful. As the targets for literacy success are largely politically driven, they are a response to industry which relies heavily on written communication skills (Armstrong and Squires 2015). If it is acknowledged that all children are different, what is needed is a recognition of a pluralist society, with different ways of acquiring skills in different forms of literacy (Pumfrey and Reason 1991). With an emphasis on social collaboration and individual strengths and needs, schools could move towards a more equitable system where impairments do not equate to disability, but may be regarded as an opportunity to celebrate learner differences (Riddick 2010). This calls for a broader definition of literacy, embracing “cultural and linguistic diversity” in the classrooms meeting the needs of all children, including those with dyslexia (Reid 2009). Finally, schools should be welcoming, inviting environments for all and should push against uniformity which “drives the sorting, labelling and construing of difference as a deficit that lies within the student”(Reid and Valle 2004, p.474).

Social Class

Socio-economic factors regarding the diagnosis of dyslexia along with access to support is a fundamental consideration (Elliott and Grigorenko 2015). For many, to obtain the label is indeed a way to access such support, which may explain the over representation of middle class children assessed and diagnosed with dyslexia (Elliott and Gibbs 2008). Children from poorer backgrounds with low levels of parental participation may be less likely to benefit from specialist teaching compared with their middle-class counterparts (McDonald 2009) which is hardly surprising when one considers the financial advantages possessed by the middle classes, who may use their wealth to seek diagnosis as a way of accessing specialist support (Hartas 2010). This has fortunately been addressed by the New Model with the focus on the social context of the school (NCSE 2017).

The measurement of literacy, as a consequence of political decisions, has become a large industry with many organisations capitalising on the desire of middle class parents to support their children’s standards of literacy (Comber and Hill 2010). This industry has benefitted many private organisations, who have profited from

the deficit model, largely supported by the middle classes with access to financial resources (Elliott and Grigorenko 2015). The attitudes of middle class parents towards specialist support for dyslexia may be notably higher than working class parents (McDonald 2009). This is understandable when working class parents may lack the means to access private specialist provision, resulting in disillusionment with the education system (McDonald 2009). Furthermore, a lack of exposure to books along with lower parental expectations could negatively impact on children's literacy skills. However, they may not receive access to the specialist support afforded to those with the label as their failure may be understood as circumstantial (Elliott and Grigorenko 2015).

The Label of Dyslexia

The area of labelling for students with dyslexia continues to be controversial. Arguing against the label, Elliott and Gibbs (2008) cite that its advocates "will readily agree that the nature of the underlying difficulties experienced by dyslexics can be highly diverse" (p.477), indicating a lack of uniformity and commonality. It continues to be a contentious topic as some research in the area has concluded that students with dyslexia value the dyslexic label (Cameron and Billington 2015, Riddick 1995). Riddick (2010) though citing that it is a complex issue, maintains "that at least having the label dyslexia challenges people's incorrect assumptions about them and for example, stops teachers calling them lazy or stupid"(p.7). In this research conducted by Riddick (2010) where children were asked what they thought of being called dyslexic, some of the answers included "I'm not branded as thick now", "I quite like it. I used to wonder why I couldn't keep up" and "I'd rather know I've got dyslexia than think I was an idiot" (p.83). However, "critical literature on labelling has highlighted how the process of labelling demonstrates an unequal power relationship between those who label and those who are labelled" (Thomas and Loxley 2007 in Glazzard and Dale 2012, p.27). According to Reid (2013), a label is "disadvantageous and may lead to a resignation that dyslexia can only be dealt with by experts. This is a misguided assumption and may lead teachers to feel they possess neither the skills nor the training to deal with dyslexia in the classroom" (p.11). This idea is supported by Elliott and Gibbs (2015) whose study with primary teachers pointed to the fact that, as a result of lower teacher expectations, children with the label were less inclined to benefit from reading intervention than those without such a label (p.323). Such an effect of labelling on teachers' expectations is noteworthy (Armstrong and Squires 2015, Elliott and Grigorenko 2015, Madriaga 2007, Ramus 2014). Furthermore, the label may serve to exclude those, who for social or economic reasons, fail to acquire the label (Elliott and Grigorenko 2015). Also, the remit may be so broad that resources may be poorly utilised and spent on assessments which may not inform best practice (Elliott and Grigorenko 2015).

However, while labels may be socially constructed and emanate from political contexts, it does not mean that labels are "redundant" (Cameron and Billington 2015, p.1226). While Elliott and Grigorenko (2015) favour abandoning the

label, they fail to include a discussion on what having a label means for those who receive it (Cameron and Billington 2015). That is, of course, if they choose to disclose it. Many older students at university remain reluctant to do so, citing a lack of understanding in the wider community as the main reason (Evans 2013, Madriaga 2007). In order to understand the label and its relevance, there needs to be a genuine engagement with people who have obtained the label (Cameron and Billington 2015).

In spite of being socially and politically laden, a label may also serve to “mediate between the individual and their cultural context and explain certain difficulties that they have and thus help to prevent inaccurate or negative attributions” (Riddick 2010, p.231). Also, though generalisations about a disability are unhelpful, this should not be a reason to avoid naming the difference (Kauffman *et al* 2016, p.6) as “labelling merely implies having a word or words to describe the differences or categories” (Kauffman *et al* 2016, p.4). Having a word or category may be also be helpful to caution against the “dogma that all poor readers are alike”(Ramus 2014, p.3374). Though the term dyslexia has indeed been socially constructed over time and may be considered “the artefact of social processes” (Elliott and Gibbs 2015, p.324), in practice having the dyslexia label may also be perceived as advantageous for some who may otherwise be accused of being intellectually inferior as a result of challenges with culturally valued skills such as literacy (Cameron and Billington 2015).

Conclusion

In this article, the dyslexia debate is critiqued and the various arguments are presented. In order to understand the multi-faceted nature of the word, it may be important to consider how it has emerged and developed over time. The social variables such as class and political bias are central here. Once these factors are appreciated, it may become apparent how dyslexia does exist, albeit as a result of such external influences. One can then move to examining the merit, or not, of the label and whether such a label should exist. While the various arguments pertaining to labelling have been presented, perhaps what is required is further engagement with those with the label? How do *they* feel about having the label and do *they* think it is helpful (or not!) ? This may provide teachers with valuable insights which could inform practice, ultimately benefitting all children, including those with dyslexia.

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DR. TREVOR O’BRIEN EdD.

Dr. Trevor O’ Brien is a faculty member of the Department of Educational Psychology, Inclusive and Special Education at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. Prior to joining the Department, he spent many years working as a classroom teacher and as a learning support/resource teacher. His doctoral thesis focused on the perspectives of children with dyslexia who attended a special reading school. Trevor lectures to undergraduate and post graduate students and supervises dissertations at pre-service, Master’s and Doctoral level.

Intergenerational Learning: How to Develop Civic Literacy in Young Children

Marie Hanmore-Cawley, PhD

Abstract

This paper, based on empirical research, addresses the potential of intergenerational learning to develop civic literacy in young children in Irish primary school. Measured against a control group, the study used mixed-methods embedded design. Across a range of curriculum-related collaborations student self-reported civic literacy ratings, supported by teacher checklists, showed significant improvement ($p < 0.01$) in student scores over an academic year. Qualitative findings explained how intergenerational learning contributed to desired outcomes for student civic literacy.

KEYWORDS: *Intergenerational learning, civic literacy, social learning.*

INTRODUCTION

Drawn from empirical research (Hanmore-Cawley 2015), this paper asks: *How can intergenerational learning develop civic literacy in young children?*

A two-dimensional problem was identified: weaknesses in the delivery of citizenship education in Irish primary school, and widening social distance between young/youth and old/elders, in Irish society. Firstly, evaluation of Social Political and Health Education (SPHE) by the inspectorate (<https://www.curriculumonline.ie/Primary/.../Social-Personal-and-Health-Education>) reveals that many pupils do not receive active learning opportunities to acquire values, attitudes and skills of citizenship. Indeed, some schools do not address citizenship at all, although active learning approaches are advised. Secondly, some children are growing up with fewer opportunities to connect with older people, generally due to increasing urbanisation, migration, family breakdown and spreading networks of families across communities and continents (Ageing Well Network 2012 IN: Hanmore-Cawley, 2015). Consequently, generations tend to mix with contemporaries missing out on opportunities for intergenerational engagement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Intergenerational learning

Based on the Latin term *inter* ('between'), intergenerational learning infers purposeful and ongoing exchange of resources among older and younger generations for individual and social benefits (Hatton-Yeo 2007). Based on

values of equity, reciprocity and inclusiveness (United Nations 2002 IN: Hanmore-Cawley 2015), intergenerational engagement can engender more inclusive and cohesive societies.

Widely reported outcomes for intergenerational learning (e.g., Martin *et al* 2010, Sánchez *et al* 2009 IN: Hanmore-Cawley 2015, Hanmore-Cawley and Scharf, 2018), include: greater civic engagement, social inclusion and community cohesion; improved personal well-being and changed negative stereotyping. Such outcomes were found to be generally anecdotal. Randomized controlled trials could deliver evidence for intervention effectiveness but present ethical difficulties for school settings. Nonetheless, desired outcomes for civic engagement were achievable where interventions were curriculum-focussed.

Older people's interest in intergenerational learning is greatly, but not exclusively, motivated by generativity and volunteering needs. Erikson (1963) theorised the eight stage life-cycle: Stage-4 (middle childhood) and Stage-7 (later adulthood) could be regarded as twin-tracks where young and old journey together. At Stage-4 (Industry vs. Inferiority), children sense mastery in success or inferiority in failure; at Stage-7 (Generativity vs. Stagnation), older people want to guide the next generation. Success leads to a sense of accomplishment driven by 'the need to be needed' (p.267), but failure leads to stagnation. Newman and Smith (1997) theorise 'reciprocal intergenerational needs' (p.18): children need to be nurtured, taught, want to learn from the past, have a cultural identity, have positive role models, and be connected to preceding generations. Equally, older people need to nurture, teach, have successful life reviews, share cultural mores, communicate positive values: this 'unique synergy between the two age groups enables growth and provides the kind of purposeful existence that is important to human development' (p.19). Snyder and Omoto 2009 IN: Hanmore-Cawley 2015) add that people volunteer to help others in community, thus enhancing personal growth and experiencing meaningful belonging. Bearing such needs in mind, the author developed intergenerational learning interventions to mediate the civic literacy concept to young children in Irish primary school.

The civic literacy concept

Civic literacy infers knowing about components of personal responsibility, caring for others and for community, and leadership to take positive actions (Chi *et al* 2006 IN: Hanmore-Cawley 2015). The civic literacy concept was informed through key discourses on youth participation: positive youth development; social capital, social support and resilience; and social justice youth development. Positive youth development (Lerner *et al* 2005) builds on five criteria – the '5C's' of competence, confidence, connection, caring and character. Competence derives from preparing and performing tasks responsive to identified community needs. Confidence derives from competence, which forges connection to wider community. Caring, or demonstrating empathetic

understanding of another's perspective, leads to character-building wherefrom social conscience emanates. When exercised, these attributes build social capital, namely: people's sense of community, their sense of belonging to a neighbourhood, caring about the people who live there, and believing that the people who live there care about them (Portney and Berry 2001 IN: Hanmore-Cawley 2015). Social support and resilience are strengthened when people discover reciprocally supportive relationships from which they learn to belong to something bigger than themselves (Dolan 2011 IN: Hanmore-Cawley 2015). Social justice youth development encourages youth as active agents of change in their own environment based on understanding of socio-political conditions and injustice (Ginwright and Cammarota 2002). As change agents, youth needs actual opportunities to practice team-collaboration, problem-solving and decision-making, all of which can be taught (Hanmore-Cawley 2015). Through these opportunities, elders can offer social support and resilience-building strategies, while reciprocally, youth learn to help, support and protect them.

Taken together, intergenerational learning offers possibilities whereby children can actively learn about taking personal responsibility, caring for others and for community, as well as learning about positive leadership activity. Dewey (1916, p. 338) argues that 'if the living, experiencing being is an intimate participant in the activities of the world to which it belongs, then knowledge is a mode of participation...'. To facilitate knowledge acquisition, the civic literacy concept was informed by social learning principles.

Social Learning

Learning largely depends on learners' socio-cultural backgrounds and levels of social interaction. Vygotsky (1978) theorised that what learners can do with the assistance of more capable others is 'more indicative of their mental development than what they can do alone' (p.85). Bruner (1996) added the idea of 'scaffolding' the child, then 'pulling back and handing the role to the child as he becomes skilled enough to manage it' (p.60). Lave and Wenger (1991) further added zones of 'legitimate peripheral participation': 'newcomers' learn a skill from 'old-timers'; role models ('old-timers') represent forms of practice which combine knowledge, skills, values and attitudes of successful performance; learning becomes evident when learners ('newcomers') can perform tasks with mastery. Bronfenbrenner (1978) emphasises the importance of placing the child at the centre of learning relationships: at the *microsystemic* level of family, extending through *mesosystemic* levels of school to *exosystemic* levels of neighbourhood/community, to the wider world at *macrosystemic* levels. Differentiated teaching strategies can be mapped onto diverse learning styles (Gardner *et al* 1996 IN: Hanmore-Cawley 2015) to better match teaching and learning styles. In the author's study, such procedures included: narrational (storytelling), aesthetic (arts/crafts), logical-mathematical (problem-solving), experiential (activities-based workshops), and interpersonal (group collaborations). Thence, workshops incorporated: music and dance; arts and crafts;

European languages; local history; creative writing/storytelling; environmental awareness; and information technology.

METHODOLOGY

Following ethical approval, 34 older volunteers, aged 65 years and over, were recruited from a small community in the West of Ireland. Children, in third- and fourth-class, aged 9-10 years, were recruited through the participation of five primary schools: a control (n=30) and an intervention group (n=73). Combined third- and fourth-class was the analytical unit representing at least 30 students per unit. Embedded mixed-methods design (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011 IN: Hanmore-Cawley 2015) suited collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data which, combined with the intervention, created quasi-experimental conditions. Interventions were informed by living theory (Whitehead and McNiff 2006 IN: Hanmore-Cawley 2015): research-practitioners investigate their own practice to produce their own living theories for what they are doing and why. Epistemological standards of judgement for knowledge claims were examined through declared educational values of dialogue, connectedness and practice (Hanmore-Cawley 2015). Quantitative tools, to measure the civic literacy concept, included self-reporting validated student questionnaires, and corresponding checklists completed by class teachers. Civic literacy scores were based on criteria for:

Personal Responsibility: student would accept responsibility for his/her own behaviour and demonstrate responsible work habits, e.g., staying on task, working independently and showing best effort.

Civic Responsibility: student would demonstrate care for others, for community and environment; value group collaboration; and appreciate diversity.

Leadership: pupil would take initiative and act as role model to help group, class or school to make a positive difference through dispositions of leadership efficacy; critical thinking; and civic participation.

Questionnaires and checklists were administered at beginning (Time-1) and end (Time-2) of school year. Paired-samples t-tests measured individual and group scores; and independent-samples t-tests measured mean differences between intervention (i.e., boys and girls combined classes) and control group scores. Data were analysed using SPSS (Version 20). In minimising error, statistical significance was reduced from p 0.05 to p 0.01. Cohen's (1988) formula (small=.01; moderate=.06; large=.14) was used to measure effect size. Submissions from participants, parents/guardians, class-teachers and lead-researcher were transcribed verbatim.

Winter's (1989 IN: Hanmore-Cawley 2015) criteria of rigour informed reflexive and dialectical critique. Habermas (1987 IN: Hanmore-Cawley 2015)

informed validity wherein communicative action must be truthful, understandable, sincere and appropriate. Potential bias was minimised by reflective journaling.

Quantitative Results

The question, *To what extent can participation in intergenerational learning develop skills and dispositions of civic literacy in young children?* was measured.

Results are presented in Tables 1-2.

Table 1: Student self-reported scores of civic literacy:

Theme 1: Personal Responsibility: self-reported scores					
Group	Time-1 \pm SEM1	Time-2 \pm SEM2	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Intervention (n=73)	3.08 \pm .06	3.55 \pm .03	-8.59	72	<i>p</i> <.01
Control (n=30)	3.37 \pm .08	3.26 \pm .09	+1.79	29	<i>p</i> =.084
Theme 2: Civic Responsibility					
Group	Time-1 \pm SEM1	Time-2 \pm SEM2	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Intervention (n=73)	2.57 \pm .05	3.61 \pm .03	-22.16	72	<i>p</i> <.01
Control (n=30)	3.26 \pm .07	3.31 \pm .08	-0.39	29	<i>p</i> =.697
Theme 3: Leadership					
Group	Time-1 \pm SEM1	Time-2 \pm SEM2	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Intervention (n=73)	2.62 \pm .06	3.32 \pm .03	-11.55	72	<i>p</i> <.01
Control (n=30)	3.24 \pm .07	3.27 \pm .08	-0.64	29	<i>p</i> =.53

Note on Table 1:

1. Time-1: year-beginning; Time-2: year-end
2. Intervention group: Third- and fourth-class boys and girls
3. SEM: standard error of the mean at Time-1/2
- 4: A Likert scale (1 to 4) was used to measure civic literacy

Table 2: Teachers' reports by gender for student civic literacy scores:

Theme 1: Personal Responsibility: Teachers' checklist scores					
Intervention Group	Time-1 \pm SEM1	Time-2 \pm SEM2	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Girls (n=41)	2.89 \pm .09	3.65 \pm .08	-14.31	40	<i>p</i> <.01
Boys (n=32)	2.09 \pm .13	3.6 \pm .13	-13.9	31	<i>p</i> <.01
Theme 2: Civic Responsibility					
Intervention Group	Time-1 \pm SEM1	Time-2 \pm SEM2	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Girls (n=41)	2.92 \pm .08	3.74 \pm .07	-14.8	40	<i>p</i> <.01
Boys (n=32)	2.2 \pm .12	3.59 \pm .12	-13.96	31	<i>p</i> <.01
Theme 3: Leadership					
Intervention Group	Time-1 \pm SEM1	Time-2 \pm SEM2	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Girls (n=41)	2.54 \pm .07	3.57 \pm .09	-13.42	40	<i>p</i> <.01
Boys (n=32)	3.28 \pm .11	3.44 \pm .11	-15.93	31	<i>p</i> <.01

Note on Table 2:

1. Time-1: year-beginning; Time-2: year-end
2. Intervention group: Third- and fourth-class boys and girls
3. SEM: standard error of the mean at Time-1/2
- 4: A Likert scale (1 to 4) was used to measure civic literacy

Overall scores for civic literacy by group					
Reporting Group	Time-1 \pm SEM1	Time-2 \pm SEM2	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Intervention (n=73)	2.76 \pm .05	3.49 \pm .02	-16.43	72	<i>p</i> <.01
Teachers (n=73)	2.49 \pm .07	3.6 \pm .06	-19.87	72	<i>p</i> <.01
Control (n=30)	3.3 \pm .06	3.28 \pm .07	+0.23	29	<i>p</i> =.82

Overview

Civic literacy themes were aggregated to give an overview. Paired-samples t-tests confirm that the Intervention Group (n=73) improved their civic literacy concept from Time-1 ($m=2.76\pm 0.05$) to Time-2 ($m=3.49\pm 0.02$, $t(72)=-16.43$, $p<0.01$) as corroborated by class-teachers from Time-1 ($m=2.49\pm 0.07$) to Time-2 ($m=3.6\pm 0.06$, $t(72)=-19.87$, $p<0.01$). By comparison, the Control

Group without an intervention, fell back from Time-1 ($m=3.3\pm 0.06$) to Time-2 ($m=3.28\pm 0.07$, $t(29)=.23$, $p=.82$).

Independent-samples t-tests further confirm significance when comparing the Intervention Group and Control Group for civic literacy scores. Levene's test for equality of variance was assumed ($F=1.52$, $\text{Sig}=.22$) and thence, the mean difference for aggregated themes between Time-1 and Time-2 was greater for the Intervention Group ($m=0.73\pm 0.04$, $\text{SD}=0.38$; $t(101)=9.68$, $p < .01$) than for the Control Group ($m= 0.01\pm 0.05$, $\text{SD}=0.27$). The magnitude of difference in the means (mean diff.=.74, 99% *CI*: .54 to .94) contributes to the effect size of .48 which is extremely large according to Cohen's (1988) formula (.14=large). This statistic suggests that mean difference of the average pupil in the intervention group is approximately .48 standard deviations above mean difference for the average pupil in the control group. In the absence of other explanations, this variance suggests that the Intervention Group gained significantly from exposure to intergenerational learning compared to a Control Group who did not experience such exposure.

While results cannot be generalised due to non-probability sampling, the study showed that pupils who participate in intergenerational learning score more positively on measures of civic literacy than do pupils who do not participate in such learning.

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative findings explain how intergenerational learning developed civic literacy in young children. Key themes of *Responsibility* (personal and social) and *Leadership* were considered. Weaver-Hightower's (2014 IN: Hanmore-Cawley 2015) approach was applied: context elucidating thesis statements, supported by oral/written submissions, and data tied back to thesis statements supported by the literature.

Responsibility

During interventions/workshops, pupils practised taking responsibility for their actions, and care for others and community including the environment. Through helping others, students learned to become more personally responsible. For instance, on *LáGaeilge*/Irish day, young taught old how to read modern Irish. Children who prepared their work reported increased confidence from the experience, as one boy reports:

Our table helped [elder]. He's deaf. We had to say it into his ear with [flash]-cards. Then he read a whole page with his finger under it...said 'so now'. We knew he could read then. We clapped...he said we were powerful... 'cos we teached him good. Gaeilge showed me how to care about them.

However, not all pupils realised why homework and responsibility are interconnected, at least not until after the event, as one boy discovered:

We were supposed to know our Irish reading. I didn't...so I couldn't help ...I just sat there watching [elder] learning...If I knew it I'd have helped him surely...He thanked the boys at our table...even me. Now I know it from being pure embarrassed.

The pupils discovered that by developing competence they derived confidence to deliver any task, not just *Gaeilge*. Accordingly, the '5C's' of positive youth development (Lerner *et al* 2005) were derived through good preparation and delivery of the specified task. That way, young and old forged connections through many examples of written Irish words, sung music words, spoken German/French/Spanish/Italian words, typed computer words, or woven embroidery words. That way also, they contributed to solving the aforementioned twin-problem: deficit citizenship skills in youth; and disconnection between young and old. Overall, they learned to give social support and learn resilience from observing older adults. They gained insights into elders' lives and learned from how people face adversity: a key aspect of civic literacy and by extension good citizenship.

To derive successful outcomes, elders worked with pupils in the ratio of either one-to-one or with groups of four/five. A teacher's observation following a knitting project:

These kids show huge ability with one-to-one...everyone can knit/sew now. What would take a year took a month...it just wouldn't have happened otherwise!

An elder explains this learning phenomenon:

I held [the pupil's] needles in her hands until she made that first stitch. Then she screeched 'I can knit'. She believed that. She didn't mind making mistakes with this 'granny', as she called me.

The entire class soared onto new learning plateaux due to individual attention, echoing Vygotsky (1978), in that what children could do with support from more capable others might more accurately reflect their mental development than what they might do alone; and Bruner's (1996) 'scaffolding' idea whereby the elders provided support which was gradually withdrawn as pupils gained competence, and Lave and Wenger's (1991) notion that learning processes which connect the production of 'old-timers' to 'newcomers' engenders communities of practice. Such elder support occurred in similar fashion across other workshops. Thus, by achieving mastery in any skill, pupils were thriving during middle childhood, like Lerner *et al.* (2005) saw youth 'thriving during adolescence'.

Leadership

Interventions aimed at developing leadership addressed leadership efficacy, critical thinking and civic participation.

Leadership efficacy was developed through, for instance, vocabulary workshops: young and old shared reading, selecting words for classroom presentation. Pupils, with elder support, constructed sentences from new words before making word-presentations. Then, each word-presenter presented, took questions, consulted the team, and responded with sentence-examples. One girl described how she gained self-belief from the experience:

You picked your word...and [elder] helped you understand it...She wouldn't let you up until you could make different sentences of it... I could do it again now 'cos once you did it, you knew how...we all could...we did it.

Pupils were scaffolded (Bruner 1996) by their elders, thus developing their self-belief that they could succeed together as a learning community.

Critical thinking was developed using mathematics as the tool of critical thought. For example, when pupils interviewed elders for life histories, they asked, *Why did the banks collapse [in 2008]?* Rather than give them ready answers, pupils had to calculate, with elder support, weekly mortgage costs and the consequences of payment default. One pupil's response illuminates their understanding of financial ruin:

'Cos people lost their jobs...and they could not pay €365 every week [mortgage]...They had to buy food...and when all the money was gone the banks got in trouble.

Again, echoing social learning theory, students were supported by more capable others to derive mathematical explanations from their own questions. Then, they could better identify problems, construct knowledge around them, and propose solutions: key elements of civic literacy.

Civic participation is best illustrated by the class-response to an elder's 'eco-talk'. On hearing about destructive practices perpetrated by local authorities, pupils wrote protest letters from which one was selected, countersigned by the class, and posted to the perpetrators, outlining damage done to the eco-system by prematurely cutting roadside verges.

In a pupil's words:

I got annoyed with what they [perpetrators] do to orchids that take 12 years to bloom. It was good we all signed it.

A parent corroborates the evidence:

I believe his character grew as a result of his contact with [elder]...he organised himself and his class in being pro-active on an issue that he felt strongly about... Informed by the senior citizen he became an active and informed citizen himself.

Such engagement illustrates how agents can become active when informed about socio-political conditions and injustices (Ginwright and Cammarota 2002) thus gaining a deeper understanding of the civic literacy concept.

The intergenerational lens

Pupils learned the civic literacy concept chiefly through collaborative intergenerational learning. Elders and youth felt they made reciprocally worthwhile contributions. In an elder's words:

They wanted to repay us. We wanted to learn 21st century skills. We planned it, did it, discussed it. You'd participate when you've something to teach or learn. My thing was gardening and I wanted iPad. They called me 'grandpa'!

Or the lady:

Every morning I'm up I've two choices: be useful or useless...and isn't it great to be useful and help a child...A little girl said 'You're like my granny'. I felt I belonged that day.

A former French teacher recognised that intergenerational learning has wider repercussions:

From one little classroom...the interaction extends...to the home...into the community, and then further into the wider world.

By being placed at the centre (Bronfenbrenner 1979) of learning, children's internal developmental capacities became connected to the wider community through active learning partnerships. Instead of learning civic literacy from a textbook, children better understood good citizenship practice when the learning was driven by values of dialogue, connectedness and practice. Through dialogue, they became aware of another's learning needs; they connected through sharing learning; and they were enabled to practise skills and dispositions of civic literacy through intergenerational workshops.

Young and old shared their knowledge and skills as equals. As one lady mentioned:

Nobody was any different in there today...It was nice to feel I could do the same thing as the children...Then when we taught them something that we knew, that made them and us equal...and we belonged'.

Such reflection suggests criteria for 'intergenerational solidarity' (UN 2002 IN: Hanmore-Cawley 2015): a relationship between equals based on principles of equity, reciprocity and inclusiveness. Children bonded easily with elders (e.g., 'grandpa'/'granny') from the outset, making learning more accessible. As Newman and Smith (1997) saw it: a 'unique synergy' enabled growth and

provided the kind of purposeful existence that is important to human development.

Elders were positive role models for the young. For example, an 89-year-old stroke survivor wanted to improve her speech through speaking Irish. A younger elder (mid-60s) taught the pupils how to mind her, seat her, walk her, and help her with her speech. Afterwards she reflected:

That day they changed. They were less about showing themselves off...more about showing off what they could do for [89-year-old]. We taught them that.

Such assistance, learned from positive role models, resonates with Dolan's (2011 IN: Hanmore-Cawley 2015) notion of social support and resilience-building as fundamental qualities for being civically engaged.

The principal's overview:

All age groups, both young and not so young, benefitted from the weekly interactions which help[ed] all progress and develop in different ways...This project has brought much joy to all who invested their time and hard work in giving so much to the pupils.

All told, Erikson's (1963) life stages theory resonates in participant submissions throughout the study. Stage-4 (middle childhood) and Stage-7 (later adulthood) being natural twin-tracks for intergenerational learning satisfied 'reciprocal intergenerational needs' (Newman and Smith 1997). Thence, learning outcomes for the civic literacy concept were enriched because young and old became mutual teachers and learners.

DISCUSSION

Older people participated in this project because they wanted to teach and learn from children. The twin-problems: weaknesses in delivery of citizenship education in Irish primary school; and perceived widening social distance between young and old, became reciprocal solutions. All told, young and old alike enjoyed loving and being loved; nurturing and being nurtured; teaching and being taught; and exchanging socio-cultural identities. Elders felt valued, appreciated and needed by the school community. Children testified that they would never miss Tuesdays. Why? Because on Tuesdays they were learning, in a fun-loving intergenerational environment, how to become more civically literate.

Recommendations

As a next step, longitudinal and/or comparative studies might be undertaken to determine if multigenerational groups, or other forms of community initiative, might enhance the civic literacy concept in young children in significantly different ways.

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DR MARIE HANMORE-CAWLEY

Marie Hanmore-Cawley is an intergenerational practitioner and part time lecturer in the School of Political Science and Sociology, National University of Ireland, Galway, Ireland.

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