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Special Issue

Teachers as Researchers: A Cross-Border
Collaboration on the Island of Ireland

20 YEARS SCoTENS
THE STANDING CONFERENCE
ON TEACHER EDUCATION,
NORTH AND SOUTH

Foras Taighde ar
Oideachas
Educational
Research Centre

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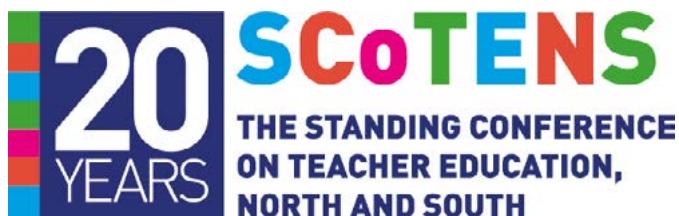
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Showcasing Collaborative Research in Education Across the Island of Ireland

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This Special Issue of the *Irish Journal of Education* (*IJE*) (Volume 47) is a landmark enterprise in at least two respects. It is only the second dedicated Special Issue in the 56-year history of the *IJE* (following Volume 37 in 2006, which focused on PISA, the Programme for International Student Assessment).[1] It also provides a platform from which to mark the 20-year anniversary of the SCoTENS (*Standing Conference on Teacher Education, North and South*) network. Campbell and Nig Uidhir's (2023) accompanying introductory editorial presents more detailed background on SCoTENS and the work of the network over the last two decades, while this introduction focuses more closely on the breadth of research described across the various contributions to this Special Issue.

The development of Volume 47 as a Special Issue was a serendipitous outcome of a webinar about the *IJE* presented at the launch of the Teaching Council's Researchers in Residence Scheme in September 2021. During the discussion that followed, it became apparent that there was some appetite for an academic outlet for the type of practitioner-linked research funded by the Teaching Council's schemes and related work, including the research coordinated by SCoTENS (of which the Teaching Council is a member). The *IJE* has always been positioned as an outlet for rigorous academic work aimed at informing not just researchers and policymakers, but also teachers and other practitioners. As such – and coinciding with the re-launch of the *IJE* as an open-access online journal in 2021 – it was felt by the editorial team that disseminating a selection of high-quality, practitioner-led research outputs from SCoTENS projects would be an appropriate enterprise in keeping with the traditions of the *IJE* and an opportunity to acknowledge practitioners' contributions, which have always informed the work of the Educational Research Centre. Following productive discussions between the *IJE* editorial team and the SCoTENS committee, a call for submissions for this Special Issue was launched in April 2022 and ran to the end of November 2022. We are delighted now, in December 2023, to present the fruits of this collaboration between the Educational Research Centre and SCoTENS in the articles that follow.

The articles in this Special Issue cover a variety of topic areas and methodologies, with some focusing on the presentation of empirical findings and others taking a more reflective approach. All of the articles in the Special Issue offer insights for readers across the island of Ireland, and beyond.

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[1]   See https://www.erc.ie/2006/01/21/vol-37-2006/.

The first article by McClelland and Purdy (2023) takes a retrospective look at the Arellian nursery, the first nursery school set up in Ireland in 1928, and considers its distinctive ethos and lessons that are still relevant in a post-COVID world. The next article by Mooney et al. (2023) moves from early childhood education to primary level, by reporting data on primary teachers' perspectives on food education and discussing healthy-eating policies in both jurisdictions on the island. Next, Concannon-Gibney and Magennis (2023) discuss early reading instruction and the role of children's literature for this purpose in primary schools, as well as professional development opportunities in this regard for teachers.

As befits a SCoTENS-themed Special Issue, the next set of articles shifts the focus more towards teachers and teacher education. The fourth article by Nig Uidhir and Ó Ceallaigh (2023) presents findings from a study focusing on the specific competencies and knowledge needed by teachers working in immersion education settings in Irish-medium schools. Fifth, Ní Dhuinn et al. (2023) reflect on, and make recommendations for, student teachers' research projects undertaken on practicum or placement experiences in schools during initial teacher education. Sixth, Flannery et al. (2023) continue on the theme of initial teacher education by presenting a study focusing particularly on outcomes associated with integrated arts education practices and by reflecting on a model for evaluating professional development. Seventh, Taggart et al. (2023) present detailed case studies of how teachers' use of digital technologies in schools relates to teacher wellbeing and pedagogical practices.

The final article, by Martin et al. (2023), brings the Special Issue to a close by broadening the perspective beyond the gates of the school. The authors provide a detailed consideration of parental engagement with schools by comparing and contrasting two schemes to promote home-school links on either side of the Border – namely, the Home-School Community Liaison (or HSCL) scheme and the Parent Officer scheme.

Readers will note some differences in the terminology used to describe the two jurisdictions on the island of Ireland (e.g., Northern Ireland, Republic of Ireland, North of Ireland, South). In the spirit of cross-border collaboration, we have taken an editorial view that consistency of terminology across articles, while often desirable, is not necessary or necessarily appropriate in this instance. Hence, the terms used throughout the articles were at the discretion of the authors.

We would like to extend our thanks to the many people whose work contributed to the production of this Special Issue, including Cian Ó Raghallaigh (Educational Research Centre) for administrative support and proof-reading; guest reviewers including (in alphabetical order) Emmet Feerick, Lorraine Gilleece, Joanne Kiniry, Lydia Mannion, Sarah McAteer, Gráinne McHugh, Adrian O'Flaherty, Sharon Nelis, Aisling Ní Dhiorbháin, and Natasha Toole; and Carmel Kearns, Gabrielle Nig Uidhir, Maria Campbell, and their colleagues on the SCoTENS committee. Finally, we thank all those who submitted articles for the Special Issue, including those whose contributions do not appear in the current volume, for their constructive engagement with the *IJE*.

We hope that you enjoy the Special Issue and that it will help to spur and inform future collaborative research work across the island of Ireland and further afield. Readers are also invited to view the new papers published in the regular 2023 volume (Volume 46) of the *IJE*, and papers from all previous volumes, on an open access basis at www.erc.ie/IJE.

SCoTENS: Two Decades of Collaborative Research and Partnerships in Professional Learning

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It is with great pleasure that members of the Standing Conference on Teacher Education, North and South (SCoTENS) welcome a Special Issue of the *Irish Journal of Education* (*IJE*) during this celebratory year, 20 years since the establishment of SCoTENS in 2003. The selection of papers published is based on collaborative research initiatives that were supported by SCoTENS. These initiatives represent examples of work from the significant corpus of cross-border research projects that have been approved and funded by SCoTENS over the past two decades. Reports from all funded research projects are available on the SCoTENS website (https://scotens.org/). However, the website and conference presentations are only the starting point for the dissemination and sharing of expertise, experiences, and learning among teacher education professionals and the wider education community, across the island of Ireland and internationally. This Special Issue of the *IJE* creates an invaluable opportunity for its readership to access findings and lessons learnt from joint research that has been supported by SCoTENS.

SCoTENS is a unique organisation in many important ways. There are three principal strands to the core services that are provided: i) seed-funding for collaborative research; ii) the Annual SCoTENS Conference on Teacher Education; and iii) the North-South Student Exchange Programme. As collaborative networks among members have strengthened and expanded, so has the range of projects further developed, such as the Research Webinar Event that is now held annually in the Spring term. All strands share a common commitment to effective partnerships among educational professionals, with a focus on teacher education and with promotion of children's learning as the ultimate objective. We hope that readers will gain some insights into that work through the papers presented in this Special Issue.

The SCoTENS organisation has grown and evolved against a backdrop of political, social, and economic unrest. During this time, it has remained steadfast to the values and principles that were espoused by founding members in 2003. We are committed to building on that early legacy of hope for a peaceful society. We continue to provide a forum where teacher educators and the wider education community across the island of Ireland can engage in open, critical, and constructive analysis of current issues in education, with a view to promoting a collaborative response to these

issues. The programme of activities provided by SCoTENS is designed to inspire and support student teachers and early career researchers as well as opening channels of communication with experienced practitioners and researchers. Positive relationships and partnerships across borders and jurisdictions are nurtured in all our endeavours, and these have proven to be sustainable and have consolidated over time.

We are very grateful to the Department of Education and more recently to the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in the Republic of Ireland, and to the Department of Education in Northern Ireland, for their funding and their positive engagement with SCoTENS over the years. Our appreciation extends to other benefactors and to the wider community of member organisations. On this occasion, we pay tribute to all the researchers who submitted papers to the *IJE* Special Issue, showcasing some of the diverse, creative, and pragmatic scholarly work that has been carried out by SCoTENS partners. Finally, we express sincere gratitude to the *IJE* editorial team for their innovative proposal and the diligent planning and review process that has resulted in the production of this Special Issue.

Back to the Future: Contemporary Lessons From a Century of Learning at Arellian, Ireland's Oldest Nursery

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Abstract

This article emerges from a SCoTENS-funded research project, Contested Childhoods Across Borders and Boundaries (2019-2021)*,* jointly conducted by Maynooth University and Stranmillis University College. It focuses on the origins, distinctiveness, and enduring relevance of the Arellian Nursery, the first nursery school in Ireland (North or South), which first opened its doors in 1928. Drawing on original sources and historical records, the article charts the establishment of Arellian as a philanthropic, privately sponsored venture in south Belfast, founded, from the outset, to address educational and social disadvantage and to promote outdoor learning, healthy lifestyles, pupil agency, and home-school links. Influenced by pioneers such as Grace Owen and Margaret McMillan, themselves disciples of Froebel, play, as a means of learning and development, was considered of great importance. While the founders and early superintendents of Arellian might have been seen as progressive, anti-establishment outliers, our contemporary context highlights the prescience and enduring relevance of the vision of Arellian almost a hundred years later. Active outdoor learning, healthy lifestyles, agentic learning, and home-school-community partnerships are becoming increasingly mainstream tenets throughout the Northern Irish education system. It is argued that, as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, important lessons can be learned for educators and teacher educators from the example of Arellian, Ireland's very first nursery school.

Keywords: early years, agency, play, outdoor learning, social disadvantage

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Interest in the unique educational approach of Arellian, Ireland's oldest nursery, began through a SCoTENS seed-funding project culminating in a report entitled, *Contested childhoods across borders and boundaries: A north-south comparative study* (O'Toole et al., 2021a). This significant cross-border research collaboration involved the authors of this article (McClelland and Purdy) from Stranmillis University College and a multi-

disciplinary team from Maynooth University (O'Toole, Forde, O'Keefe, Säfström, and Walsh). In the course of that broader study of the representation of childhood in curricular documents, North and South, during the first decade following the partition of Ireland in 1921, the case of Arellian emerged as an important "outlier" for its time. There was a strong sense that this unique nursery merited further investigation, additional historical research, and perhaps, most importantly, a site visit to explore just how the legacy of Arellian's founders might live on almost a century after it first opened. Although the story of Arellian proved to be of great interest, the public health restrictions implemented during 2020 and 2021, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, restricted face-to-face meetings of the research team, prevented documentary research at the Public Records Office (PRONI) in Belfast, and hindered any opportunity for a site visit to Arellian. This has now been remedied and, in this article, we aim to provide brief historical context, describe the establishment of Arellian, outline its unique pedagogical approach, and highlight contemporary lessons from this pioneering nursery school, which is still thriving today in inner-city Belfast.

Historical Context

Arellian was established in 1928 towards the end of a decade of political tension, schism, upheaval, and violence across the island of Ireland, which saw the creation of the new six-county jurisdiction of Northern Ireland (remaining part of the United Kingdom) in 1921, following the Government of Ireland Act the previous year. The first decade of Northern Ireland's educational history has been well documented elsewhere (see Akenson, 1973; Buckland, 1973; Farren, 1995; Purdy, 2022, for fuller accounts) and was characterised by the struggle for the consolidation of Protestant/ Unionist power through administrative structures and programmes of instruction. The first Education Minister, Lord Londonderry, had set out to unify the already divided education sectors and, through "cooperation and sympathy", to create a "system which will be the admiration of all other countries" (Northern Ireland Senate Debates, 2021, v.1, col. 24). His efforts ultimately fell victim to the competing forces of the Protestant and Catholic churches, however, whose insistence on retaining administrative and religious control over their respective schools proved insurmountable. By the time of Lord Londonderry's resignation in 1926, the notion of creating a unified education system under state control had been abandoned, and the groundwork had been laid for a century of educational division in a largely bipartite system that persists to this day.

In terms of curricular approaches in Northern Ireland, O'Toole et al. (2021b) document the process of establishing the Departmental Committee on the Educational Services in Northern Ireland, known as the Lynn Committee, (ultimately without Catholic representation) to plan out the structures and curricular approach to be adopted in the new Northern Irish education system. It is noteworthy that, while the education

system in the South turned *inward* and strove to consolidate a sense of Irish/Gaelic identity, culture, and language through its new curriculum, Northern Ireland's education system looked *eastward* towards the rest of the United Kingdom and ultimately the British Empire. The *Final report of the departmental committee on the educational services in Northern Ireland* (Ministry of Education for Northern Ireland, 1923) included, for instance, a section entitled, "Loyalty", in which it is stated that, in all state-funded schools, "the children shall be trained in habits of loyalty to the Constitution of Northern Ireland and to the British Empire" (p. 208). Books to be used in classrooms would require approval from the Ministry of Education, and the Irish language was downgraded to the status of any other "foreign" European language. The approach was also highly gendered, with boys (only) to be taught "woodwork" and girls (only) to be taught practical subjects, such as "cookery", "laundry work", and "household management". With some ironic similarities to the education system of the new Republic of Ireland, the approach was highly traditional, didactic, teacher-led and gendered, as the educational leaders of both jurisdictions sought to create loyal and obedient citizens and to protect against any form of dissension. Importantly for this discussion, there was no consideration given to the provision of state-funded nursery education in Northern Ireland or in the Republic of Ireland. Thus, the provision of care and education to children of preschool age was left to be provided for privately, generally by individuals or groups with philanthropic intentions.

Arellian: Origins, Influences, and Pedagogy

In a working-class area of Belfast, a different kind of history was being made almost a century ago in the fledgling state of Northern Ireland. A few years after partition, and with society reeling from the after-effects of the Great War, some past pupils of Richmond Lodge Girls' School ("R. L.", therefore "R. L.-ian" – "Arellian") had a desire to help working mothers and their children living in local areas of deprivation. Two of the past pupils, A. F. Purvis and K. McCormick, decided that the most effective way to channel their philanthropic intentions would be to establish a nursery school to meet the needs of working-class families in an inner-city district (McNeill, 1949).

The members of the Arellian Association were keen to set the project in motion. A native of Northern Ireland working in England and a Froebel-trained teacher, Dorothy Coates (née Moore), offered to take the first post, as superintendent, while the Arellians committed to covering expenses for the first three years of the venture (McNeill, 1949). The Arellians were influenced by pioneers across the Irish Sea, notably Margaret McMillan and Grace Owen,[1] the first President and Secretary of the Nursery School Association formed in the UK in 1923 (Jarvis & Liebovich, 2015). Margaret McMillan

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[1]   Margaret McMillan (1860–1931) came from a Christian Socialist background and was influenced by Froebel. Grace Owen (1873–1965), whose thinking was also shaped by Froebel, came from an academic and pedagogical background. A graduate of the University of Columbia (1905) and later principal of Manchester Kindergarten Training College and Secretary of Manchester and Salford Council for Day Nurseries, she opened a "demonstration nursery" in Manchester in 1920.

and her sister Rachel, both influenced by Froebel,[2] had opened the first open-air nursery in Deptford, England in 1913, known as "the school in the garden" (Ailwood, 2007). The Arellians visited Deptford alongside other nurseries in London and were impressed with the work going on: "We were thrilled with what we saw. The sight of healthy, happily employed little children… and the unbounded enthusiasm of all the workers" (McNeill, 1949, p. 1). In preparation for her role as superintendent, Dorothy Moore also volunteered for six weeks in Somerstown Nursery in London, while the Arellians oversaw the practical arrangements such as child-sized wash stands, toys, and other resources for the opening of the nursery in Elmwood Presbyterian Church Hall, which was kindly granted rent free (McNeill, 1949).

It was on November 5, 1928, "a dreary enough Monday morning" (McNeill, 1949, p. 6), that Arellian Nursery School first opened its doors to three little girls. Arellian has been serving all children in the locality ever since, with no barriers drawn in terms of gender or community background.[3] The aims of the nursery, drawn from a book by Grace Owen (1921/2018), were published in each annual report of Arellian Nursery School:

1. to provide healthy external conditions for the children – light, sunshine, space and fresh air

2. to ensure a healthy, happy, regular life for the children, as well as continuous medical supervision

3. to assist each child to form for himself [*sic*] wholesome habits

4. to give opportunity for the exercise of the imagination and the development of many interests as well as skills of various kinds

5. to give experience of community life on a small scale where children of similar as well as, varying ages work and play with one another day by day

6. to achieve a real unity with the life of the home
(Annual report of the Arellian nursery school, 1929–30, p. 2).

These aims highlighted the importance of providing happy, healthy, outdoor conditions for children, ensuring that medical attention was available, and supporting the young learners to develop agency and imaginative skills. Finally, the importance of experiencing community life and of forging links with a child's home life was made very clear (McNeill, 1930). In adhering to these aims, regular medical supervision was provided by Nurse Strain, who volunteered her services, as did local doctors and the dentist from the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children. Local volunteers also ensured

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2   Friedrich Froebel (1782–852) was a German educationalist who pioneered the kindergarten and rejected the teacher-led education of his day, instead advocating curious, creative, and autonomous play nurtured by a supportive adult.

3   As Arellian was located in a largely Protestant working-class area, it is likely that most children who attended were from this demographic, although there is no evidence in the archive to confirm the religious background of attendees. Nonetheless, Arellian provided, at the very least, a potential space for nursery education without sectarian division.

that the children attending the nursery school were well-fed with good food and could spend an abundance of time outdoors. The school was open from 9 am to 6 pm every weekday and, to create a vital link with parents, a monthly mothers' meeting was set up, which was very well received. Soon, the community became aware of the Arellian project, and numbers began to grow. As Molly McNeill, secretary to the Arellian Nursery School committee, claimed in the first annual report, "…the nursery school has won a real place in the life of the district" (McNeill, 1930, p. 6). Acutely cognisant of the needs within the community it served, Arellian Nursery levied a small charge of 2s 6d[4] per week, much lower than the 6s childminding rate of the time. Not willing to turn away any child due to poverty, it also had a Relief Fund for supplementing and supporting parents who found it difficult to cover these costs (McNeill, 1930).

After outgrowing their first premises, members of the Arellian Association searched for land and, with permission from the Belfast Corporation, purchased one-and-a-half acres (formerly the site of a graveyard for the victims of tuberculosis). The site was at the end of Utility Street and Bentham Drive, in an inner-city working-class district of Belfast. For the sum of £600 in 1931, they entered history as having built their own open-air nursery school, the first of its kind on the island of Ireland (McNeill, 1949). With great excitement, the official opening took place in May of that year with Grace Owen as guest of honour. Molly McNeill, honorary secretary to the committee, commented in her speech at the opening of the school:

> *The site itself is wonderful, we are right in the midst of our district, and yet have a lovely view of the mountains and glorious fresh air. It would be hard indeed to find a more admirable situation for a nursery school…* (McNeill, 1931, p. 1).

Everything about Arellian had the child at the centre. As detailed in its annual reports, the Arellian Nursery School claimed to provide:

> *A healthy diet of good wholesome food eaten in the company of adults and friends; plenty of exercise and fresh air in the school 'field' and garden and in the nearby park; regular medical and dental checks – the nurse attended the school daily, the doctor weekly; opportunities to wash, to play freely and to engage in useful and purposeful activities, many of a domestic nature which could be related to home….* (McCavera, 1988, p. 3).

The aims and provision of a multitude of independent play activities, unlike the traditional education system of the day, clearly anticipated the idea of the *agentic child* as described in Sorin and Galloway's "constructs of childhood" (Sorin & Galloway, 2006). Notably, too, and in contrast to elementary curricula of the day, all children in the Arellian Nursery School had the freedom to engage in all activities, without demarcation by gender. The comments of Dorothy Moore, the nursery

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4   Two shillings and six pence (2s and 6d) was equivalent to a half crown in old British currency. Until 1971, British currency was in pounds, shillings, and pence. One pound was equivalent to 20 shillings, one shilling to 12 pence, and one penny to two half pennies. In the early 1930s, the average weekly wage for a man was £1, 11s and 6d, with women earning significantly lower rates of pay (Holloway, 2017).

superintendent, point towards the equitable curricular opportunities afforded to pupils. She noted that, through the programme of varied learning activities, the child at Arellian "...will have the freedom and the possibilities for playing and developing through his play at his [*sic*] own rate, which is every child's right" (Moore, 1930, p. 4). Outdoor, playful learning was considered vitally important. In an effort to facilitate such play, the children were provided with an outdoor "jungle gym", sand pit, and pond for water play, with children spending a majority of their time outside in the fresh air (McNeill, 1949, p. 6).

By 1938, Arellian had a further extension, plans for which were drawn up by the architect of the Belfast Education Committee. A medical room, enlarged kitchen, laundry, and extendable doors onto an outdoor veranda meant that the nursery could accommodate a further 38 children from its waiting list. The extension cost £2,288, and was opened by the Duchess of Abercorn. She was accompanied by another notable figure in the world of early years' education, Dr Susan Isaacs,[5] on her one and only visit to Belfast, "[who]…filled us with fresh enthusiasm and showed us also the need for knowledge in the care of young children" (McNeill, 1949, p. 11).

Arellian led the way for many other nursery schools in Northern Ireland and, after much persuasion, in December 1936 the Ministry of Education agreed to fund the salary of a superintendent in nursery schools with attendance of forty or more children. The following January (1937), to further support nursery education, the Belfast Education Committee agreed to take responsibility for two thirds of capital expenditure, with nursery education officially receiving the "green light" nine years later in 1946 (McCavera, 1988). By 1949, six nurseries had been established, with a further 24 being built in the following two decades up to 1970, and prevalence increasing substantially between then and the present day. Just after Arellian's 21st birthday in 1949, committee members (some of whose descendants remain connected to the nursery school today) handed over management of the nursery to the Belfast Education Authority (McNeill, 1949), and so, although still supported by the Arellian Association, Arellian became a government-funded nursery school from that point on.

Contemporary Lessons

As the world realigns to meet the needs of children and young people in the aftermath of the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, a number of contemporary priorities resonate closely with the early example of Arellian. These will be outlined below.

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5   Susan Isaacs (1886–1948), atheist, socialist, and member of the Fabian Society, has been described as the most influential English-born child psychologist of her time. As Head of the Department of Child Development at the Institute of Education in London, she pioneered observational studies of children in the 1920s and authored prolific textbooks on teacher training between the 1930s and 1960s. Her work, in the fields of psychology and psychoanalysis, was considered ground breaking (see Graham, 2023).

Redirecting the Focus to Early Years

Firstly, a current focus on the importance of early years echoes the thinking of Arellian's founders. The Arellian Association recognised the importance of impacting the lives of society's youngest learners by providing for their physical, emotional, familial, and learning needs. In Northern Ireland, this need has been reiterated in a recent report entitled, *A fair start,* with an action plan to address educational underachievement (Purdy, Logue et al., 2021). It was published by an Expert Panel established as one of the commitments made by the Northern Ireland Executive in the New Decade, New Approach political settlement of January 2020 (Smith & Coveney, 2020). Launched on June 1, 2021, *A fair start* sets out a total of 47 costed actions across eight key areas, the first and most substantial of which is entitled, "Redirecting the Focus to Early Years" (containing 13 of the 47 actions). In the report, the Expert Panel refer to the importance of the Heckman Curve (Heckman Equation, 2013), highlighting the long-term value of investing in early years as a means of offsetting later expenditure, and affirm that:

> *Ensuring all children get a fair start, will lead to more equitable outcomes for all children, families and communities. The benefits of effective early intervention will be in terms of physical and mental wellbeing, educational attainment and longer term employment prospects* (Purdy, Logue et al., 2021, p. 1).

The report highlighted the importance of early childhood education and care, and underlined the need for collaboration across sectors, with a particular focus on involving health professionals and working to partner with parents and families from disadvantaged communities. It is clear that the founders of Arellian in the late 1920s and early 1930s already recognised the value of collaboration between education and health in early years' provision, an approach that policymakers are still at pains to promote almost a century later.

Playful and outdoor learning

There are deep historical roots to the view of play as crucial for children's development. Walsh has written that:

> *From as early as the eighteenth century, play has been deemed as highly serious and of deep significance for children. It has been promoted as the medium through which young children learn best and through which the whole child is fully developed* (Walsh, 2017, p. 9).

Within the context of Northern Ireland, we see the prioritisation of play in Arellian as prescient of the contemporary re-evaluation of the role of play in the early years. The importance of this has become even more accentuated in the aftermath of two extended periods of lockdown and home schooling in 2020 and 2021 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Purdy, Harris et al., 2021; Walsh et al., 2020). As these lengthy lockdowns resulted in a lack of social interaction, cognitive stimulation, and language exposure alongside other children and adults, with negative consequences (McMullen, 2021), play has been promoted as more important than ever in this post COVID-19 recovery period. When schools reopened, many teachers demonstrated creativity around providing playful opportunities for children, mostly outdoors, where the threat of infection was deemed to be lower. The success of this focus on outdoor play has subsequently led teachers to re-evaluate and perpetuate this as an invaluable part of early years' educational practice (Walsh et al., 2020). With obvious benefits for young learners, it has been shown to prepare all learners more effectively for formal schooling, regardless of background (Hunter & Walsh, 2014, as cited in Henderson et al., 2020, p. 12; McGuinness et al., 2014). Outdoor learning as a pedagogy has also built momentum and increased in popularity over recent years, with the Northern Ireland Forest School Association forming in 2008 and many schools acquiring Forest School status thereafter. Learning outside the classroom can have additional benefits for the youngest learners in the form of improved communication, concentration, social skills, stamina, and the development of fine and gross motor skills (O'Brien & Murray, 2007). Other research has found that outdoor learning improves children's self-regulation, develops their higher cognitive skills, supports creativity and resilience, and boosts academic achievement (Atchley et al., 2012). As referenced above, the COVID-19 pandemic meant that, for many, outside spaces were safest, which prompted a further surge of interest in this field. Once again, we see how the inspirational leaders of Arellian almost a century ago were ahead of their time in their pedagogical practice.

Parental and Community Partnership

Parental involvement in children's learning has long been associated with success (Clark, 2007). Right from the outset, Arellian involved parents and set up a regular meeting for parents (mothers) to ensure a vital link between a child's home life and

school. The founders of Arellian understood from the outset the importance of home and school working in partnership to make a difference. For instance, in her second annual secretary's report, Molly McNeill affirmed, "we realise more and more that help for and from the mothers is vital to the success of the school" (McNeill, 1932, p. 4).

The COVID-19 pandemic, and enforced homeschooling for almost all children, created an unprecedented opportunity for parental involvement in children's learning. Two recent surveys of the home-schooling experiences of parents and carers in Northern Ireland during the first and second extended periods of school closures in 2020 and 2021 (Purdy, Harris et al., 2021; Walsh et al., 2020) highlighted a number of important issues. Notably, these included the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on socially disadvantaged families, the differentiated levels of parents' confidence and competence in supporting children's learning based on social and educational background, and the burden on mothers, in particular, of attending to their children's learning in the home. Once again, the pioneering spirit of Arellian, in establishing regular meetings with parents (especially mothers), was significant in its acknowledgment of the importance of home-school partnership, the value of place-based approaches to addressing underachievement, and the fostering of a strong home-learning environment, all of which is reflected in *A Fair start*, whose authors note:

> *A substantial body of research has indicated that parenting and children's activities in the early years have a strong influence on cognitive development, and that features of an effective home-learning environment such as reading to children, using complex language, warmth in interactions and responsiveness are all associated with better developmental outcomes* (Purdy, Logue et al., 2021, p. 38).

Arellian Today

On a recent visit to Arellian Nursery, which is still housed within its original 1930s buildings, it was evident that it was not only the building that had stood the test of time. A vibrant oasis of playful and outdoor learning, with support for children and their families, was clear to see. The principal, Jenny Pogue, spoke about the kindness of the Arellian Association to her as a young principal and about how, 25 years later, many of the Association's members, now in their 70s and 80s, retain an unwavering interest in the school. For instance, the principal reported that recently the staff had noted a need for children to develop gross motor skills due to limited play areas around their home settings. The response of the Arellian Association had been to provide a beautiful outdoor playground specifically designed to assist children in developing and enhancing their gross motor skills. Furthermore, when some children had commented that they had never been to the beach, the school created a large outdoor sand pit called Sandy Cove, with boats nearby for the children to clamber around and use in imaginative play. Finally, in another part of the acre-and-a-half

grounds, plans are currently underway for a new Forest School area.

In supporting parents, the school has an open-door policy, there is an assigned home-school-liaison worker, and many valuable and informative parents' events are organised throughout the year. The school also hosts regular "parents and children" activities to enable families to work creatively together on literacy and art. The principal spoke of her high expectations for all children and reminisced with pride about those former pupils who had returned to inform staff of their subsequent academic successes.

As the old and the new met beside a beautiful floral memorial to Dorothy Coates (née Moore), Arellian's first superintendent, a squirrel scampered across the grass. In true Arellian style, the principal affirmed that, "we keep our children playing out of doors as much as possible. The children think the grounds are their park, and are delighted to play in it every day." She added, "the children are only through our doors for a year, so we have to make it count." Upon leaving this special place, we reflected that Molly McNeill's wishes from almost a century ago have surely been realised for countless children and their families. In the first annual report, she had written, "we do trust that it will be a place of great happiness" (McNeill, 1930, p. 3).

Conclusion

Arellian Nursery was undoubtedly an "outlier" at the fringes of the traditional, didactic, gendered education system of the 1920s and 1930s. Against the formal backdrop of children being seen and not heard, Arellian's approach to education, influenced by the teachings of Froebel, was ahead of its time. Almost a century later, as we tentatively re-emerge from a global pandemic that has spurred us to re-think our pedagogical approaches in so many ways, we can appreciate especially keenly the pioneering approach adopted by the founders of Arellian. The Arellian principles of fostering the development of the whole child, of encouraging agentic, playful, outdoor learning, and of building strong home-school-community partnerships are arguably more important today than ever before. As we look ahead to the centenary of this remarkable nursery school, we cannot help but feel that we are standing on the shoulders of early years' giants.

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Keeping Healthy Eating on the Menu? Primary-School Teachers' Experiences of Teaching Healthy Eating in the Classroom on the Island of Ireland

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Abstract

In primary schools throughout the island of Ireland (IoI), the study of food, nutrition and healthy eating is an obligatory part of the curriculum, albeit that, in neither jurisdiction does it occupy a discrete space. Our previously published SCoTENS-funded IoI study (Mooney et al., 2011) sought to elicit the views of primary-school teachers on the status of this area within the curriculum and their experiences of teaching the subject area. Questionnaires (n = 162) were completed by teachers and ten follow-up semi-structured teacher interviews were conducted. Results indicated that 75% of teachers rated the work on food education as very relevant to pupils' lives. Most teachers (70%) employed a variety of active learning methodologies but fewer than half (48%) undertook practical food sessions due to a lack of resources. Only 8% of schools did not have a healthy-eating policy; teachers in other schools, however, highlighted that having such a policy served to consolidate learning on healthy eating in the classroom. The current paper considers findings from this study ten years on and highlights why the results from the 2011 study are as pertinent today as they were then.

Keywords: healthy eating, food education, children's wellbeing, primary curriculum, primary-school teachers

The rapid increase in childhood obesity is one of the most serious public health obstacles of the 21st century (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2020). Jennings (2018) outlines that excess weight in childhood is associated with increased risk of developing certain health conditions, such as asthma, hypertension and blood cholesterol levels in childhood itself, but also increases the possibility of adult hypertension, type 2 diabetes,

heart disease, stroke, and a range of cancers. Smith et al. (2022) note that childhood is a crucial stage for establishing healthy-eating practices in later years.

The eating habits of children on the island of Ireland (IoI) are less than desirable, with many children not meeting the current dietary recommendations for fruit and vegetables or for saturated fat and sugar (Safefood, 2019). It is widely recognised that schools are considered the best setting for food education (Smith et al., 2022; Follong et al., 2021) partly due to the amount of time children spend there during the day. Worldwide, school-based food and nutrition education is acknowledged as a key strategy for improving the diets and wellbeing of school children (Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations [FAO], 2019). Food education in the primary-school curriculum (ages 4-12 years) is taught as an element of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) in Ireland, and as a component of Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PDMU) in Northern Ireland (NI).

Social, Personal and Health Education (Ireland)

In Ireland, the revised primary-school curriculum was published in 1999 (DoE, 1999a). SPHE is one of six curriculum areas. The SPHE curriculum document lists six aims of the SPHE programme, and two of these pertain specifically to nutrition education and healthy eating:

- To promote the personal development and wellbeing of the child

- To promote the health of the child and provide a foundation for healthy living in all its aspects (DoE, 1999b, p.9).

The curriculum aims are broken down to 15 broad objectives, and include development of "an understanding of healthy living, an ability to implement healthy behaviour and a willingness to participate in activities that promote and sustain health" (DoE, 1999b, p.10). The SPHE primary curriculum spans an eight-year period and introduces children to the principles of nutrition, food choice, healthy eating, and hygiene. The curriculum document notably specifies that learning opportunities for SPHE must not be restricted to the dedicated timetabled class period time but rather provided through a combination of three ways. The first of these refers to a "whole school" approach "in the context of a positive school climate and atmosphere"; the second specifies dedicated classroom time; while the third refers to an "integrated approach" (DoE, 1999b, p.1). For all year groups, the recommended minimum weekly time to be reserved for teaching SPHE is 30 minutes (DoE, 1999a), which could be considered insufficient given the breadth of the subject matter to be taught and the fact that food and healthy eating are only one component of SPHE. However, it is also difficult to benchmark against practice elsewhere, given the limited research on food education in the primary curriculum, as noted by Smith et al. (2022).

Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (NI)

The primary curriculum in NI was revised by the NI Council for Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) in 2007, and includes PDMU as one of six curriculum areas (CCEA, 2007).

The PDMU curriculum document specifies the overall aim for the seven-year curriculum as follows: "the Northern Ireland curriculum aims to empower young people to develop their potential and to make informed and responsible choices and decisions throughout their lives" (CCEA, 2007, p. 2). The PDMU primary curriculum deals with content pertaining to food, nutrition and healthy eating from the Foundation Stage (from age 3) through to Key Stage 2 (up to age 11). Upon reviewing both syllabi, there is noticeably less detail in the NI curriculum document than the corresponding SPHE curriculum document in Ireland. It has been noted elsewhere that the NI curriculum in general takes a less prescriptive approach in outlining content (Waldron et al., 2009). However, some commonalities exist between the two syllabi, mainly in the methodological approaches to teaching and learning detailed in both the SPHE and PDMU curriculum documents.

Study Background and Methodology

Mooney et al. (2011) published a SCoTENs-funded report that investigated primary-school teachers' experiences of teaching healthy eating within the curriculum. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Ulster Ethics Committee. A two-phase mixed-method exploratory design was utilised.

In the first phase, a quantitative non-random approach was employed, encompassing a questionnaire designed by the research team and administered to primary-school teachers (n = 162) across the IoI (n = 81 in each jurisdiction). Originally, it was planned to administer the questionnaires to primary-school teachers at in-career development cluster-group meetings. Due to low attendance at these meetings, however, an alternative method of distribution was used, whereby the questionnaires were dispersed via initial teacher-education students of Home Economics at St. Angela's College, Sligo and the University of Ulster, Coleraine during their respective teaching practice school placements. Consequently, this purposive sampling resulted in a wide geographical spread. The aim of the questionnaire was to investigate teachers' perceptions, knowledge, attitudes, and experiences of teaching of healthy eating and food education. Quantitative results were analysed using SPSS Version 17, while the open-ended questions were analysed using a qualitative thematic approach.

For the second phase, the qualitative data collection consisted of ten face-to-face interviews with primary-school teachers in NI (n = 5) and Ireland (n = 5). The aim of the interviews was to gain additional in-depth insight into the strengths and limitations of the teaching of healthy-eating curriculum material and of the school settings in which the lessons were conducted. All interview transcripts were separately read by two members

of the research team. Each transcript was read once initially to isolate emerging themes. A meeting of the research team discussed the emerging themes, and ratified a final set of complete themes, sub-themes, and associated classifications. All transcripts were then re-read and the data categorised under the agreed list of themes. Both questionnaires and transcripts of teacher interviews were coded, Ireland or NI, as appropriate, followed by a number (allocated chronologically). Similarly, in the presentation of findings that follows, quotations from teachers in each jurisdiction presented are identified as Ireland or NI, and x, xx, or xxx.

Summary of Findings

Knowledge, Attitudes, and Experiences

There were several commonalities in the reported experiences of teachers across both jurisdictions. We found that many of the teachers (41%) depended on their initial teacher education for their knowledge of nutrition and healthy eating, a finding that was of concern as nearly half of the teachers (49%) had between 11 and 35 years' teaching service and had therefore completed their initial education several years previously. The qualitative data revealed that teachers in both jurisdictions rated the work carried out on food, health, and nutrition within the curriculum as being "very relevant" to pupils' lives. They were also affirmative of the healthy-eating policy in their own schools and rated it as having an "excellent" or "very good" impact on pupils' eating behaviour and health attitudes. Regardless of their concerns about curriculum overload and time limitations, the teachers enjoyed teaching the subject matter.

Across NI and Ireland, a large majority of teachers (93%) stated that their schools employed a whole-school approach to food, health, and nutrition issues, while only 8% reported not having a healthy-eating policy. The qualitative data demonstrated that teachers viewed the policy as crucial for consolidating classroom learning on healthy eating. For example, one teacher stated:

> So we needed to get this [healthy-eating policy] written up and then we thought, hold on, that actually is a massive job…be better to get our programmes really embedded and then sit back and say…ok how do we best describe this? (NI 1).

Another teacher explained how having a formalised focus on healthy eating, health, and wellbeing within PDMU had brought a renewed emphasis on these issues throughout the school:

> I mean, when I was trained these sorts of things were called the hidden curriculum, which…and yet they were the glue which held everything together and a good primary school I feel needed to be proactive in these things, so I love the way it has brought all of that to the fore and made it curricula, and statutory, I think that's really important (NI 1).

Few of the teachers' schools (25%) had, however, received financial support for the operationalising of the policy in the school. In both jurisdictions, 98% of teachers indicated that their school had strong parental backing for the execution of the healthy-eating policy.

Food-Education Interventions

The majority of teachers (76%) had participated in a health-promotion initiative or nutrition intervention programme that was not part of the formal curriculum. The most common nutrition intervention was *Food Dudes* in Ireland and *Bright Bites* in NI. Other key initiatives outlined by teachers were *Healthy Break; Boost Better Breaks; Munch and Crunch;* and *Incredible Edibles*. Most (70%) used active-learning methodologies in implementing these initiatives.

Teachers believed *Food Dudes* to be advantageous as it "got children to eat healthily" (Ireland 42) and the "general opinion is that it was very successful" (Ireland 46). Furthermore, teachers stated that being involved allowed them to:

- put what you teach into practice (Ireland 12)

- encourage children to eat well [using a] helpful resource for lessons (NI 105)

- focus on nutrition and healthy eating which can otherwise get pushed aside in a very busy curriculum (NI 117).

One teacher (Ireland 43) identified that it is "very important [that] skills and knowledge are taught in a fun way with positive incentives", while another reported "it is an interesting subject/topic to teach, children love tasting different foods and learning about them, I enjoy teaching these topics" (Ireland 44).

Resources

A variety of approaches to conducting practical food lessons were employed by teachers, including:

- school-gardening project, growing vegetables and herbs (Ireland 2)

- cookery competitions (Ireland 7, Ireland 8)

- one day a month we make/cook something healthy, e.g., smoothie (NI 108)

- healthy-eating week – local country shop sponsors fresh fruit for all children during the week (Ireland 52)

- after school cookery club – only make healthy snacks/meals (NI 127).

A lack of facilities and equipment, both in NI and Ireland, for teachers to use when

carrying out practical food sessions was evident, however. Teachers in both jurisdictions reported that no facilities were available to them (Ireland 7, 9, 27, 31 and NI 109, 153). Teachers in Ireland stated that:

- resources are basic so the opportunities are limited (Ireland 2)

- facilities [are] a problem for 31 children and a small kitchen that can accommodate about six safely at a time (Ireland 16)

- it is difficult to get children involved when there is not enough equipment; it really is only a cookery demonstration (Ireland 25)

- [facilities are] quite unsatisfactory as cooking sessions take place in a small staffroom with a ratio of 30:1 (Ireland 14)

- [there is] no funding, it's up to the teacher (Ireland 50).

Similar sentiments were reiterated by teachers in NI:

- small room, limited equipment, health and safety issues are multiplied (NI 94)

- had to do without proper food preparation area (NI 109)

- lack of resources to allow adequate pupil participation (NI 114)

- cost of ingredients, support needed, time-consuming (NI 120)

- facilities required are not available (NI 129).

Teachers in both jurisdictions identified the necessity for extra finances to support the implementation of practical food sessions. Teachers in Ireland emphasised a need for both physical resources and finance:

- if there was a kitchen in every school it would aid the teaching – but in reality most schools don't even have a fully-equipped kitchen (Ireland 25)

- more facilities for practical tasks so that the children will be able to put theory into practice (Ireland 15)

- facilities for practical food preparation (Ireland 20)

- money and funds to promote health and nutrition (Ireland 65).

Teachers in NI also outlined a need for resources and basic facilities:

- basic food equipment for classroom such as chopping boards, safe cutlery, plates etc., and a central cooker would be beneficial (NI 90)

- a petty-cash allowance for buying ingredients for practical sessions...often I buy at my own expense (NI 142)

- cooking equipment; an area allocated within the school (NI 151)

- I supply my pupils with the utensils and equipment for cooking. I also supply the ingredients; it would be good if the school could supply these (NI 141).

The majority of teachers (76%) did not have a specific textbook, or coherent set of resources for the delivery of food, healthy eating, and nutrition material. Qualitative data in both jurisdictions identified several additional resources to support the teaching of this topic, for example:

- [a] booklet/book containing recipes that can be made within the confines of the school (Ireland 10)

- a specific textbook or teaching pack for teaching of food, healthy eating, nutrition issues (Ireland 28)

- food-based games, jigsaws, matching games, songs based on food and nutrition (Ireland 73)

- food pyramid game where children place correct food portions on each section thus making children aware of daily requirements (Ireland 58)

- any resources would be a help, ideas for lessons would be great, I tend to do the same few things each year (Ireland 26).

Teachers stressed the importance of such resources being age-appropriate:

- age-appropriate interactive games (Ireland 3)

- specific age-appropriate textbook with activities for children (Ireland 24).

Reflections on the Past Decade

Reviewing our findings ten years on, and reflecting on these in light of both contemporaneous research on food education in schools (Smith et al., 2022) and recent research on childhood obesity (WHO, 2022), serves to highlight that the issues raised by the teachers in our study are still relevant. Overweight and obesity prevalence continues to cause concern. The latest trend data regarding overweight and obesity in primary-school children in Ireland, using the *WHO Childhood Obesity Surveillance Initiative* (COSI) measuring parameters, reveal that rates are stabilising. The COSI results state that one in five children surveyed are overweight or obese, both of which are more prevalent in girls in disadvantaged schools and in older primary-school children (Mitchell et al., 2020).

The COSI results also show that almost all schools in Ireland (97%) included nutrition education in their curriculum, while nine out of ten schools had no sugar-sweetened beverages or sweet and savoury snacks available. However, children were not meeting

the recommended dietary guidelines for fruit and vegetables, with only three in five children eating fruit daily and only two in five consuming any vegetables daily. Furthermore, three-quarters of children in Ireland consumed meat on most, if not all, days of the week and fish consumption was low (Mitchell et al., 2020). In NI, the situation is very similar, with childhood obesity rates stabilising, but with higher rates evident in girls and amongst the socially disadvantaged (Safefood, 2021).

Given the fact that children, especially girls and those in disadvantaged schools, have higher rates of overweight and obesity, the argument still exists in 2023 for increasing the focus on healthy eating and food education in the curriculum and for including practical food skills in the classroom. We appreciate that obesity and overweight rates will not be resolved by food education alone, and accept that a whole-systems approach is urgently needed. It is also clear, however, that food education has an important part to play.

Ensuring that nutrition and food topics taught to children are current and evidence-based should be a priority for teachers and school leaders. It is a cause of concern to the authors that our 2011 study (Mooney et al., 2011) showed that many of the teachers relied solely on their initial teacher education to inform their teaching of this area. This, coupled with the limited resources available to schools as described above, is likely to result in discrepancies across schools in the quality of food education provided. Indeed, findings from a large-scale survey in England (Jamie Oliver Food Foundation, 2017) demonstrated significant divergence in the quality of food education among schools, with resources and lack of support cited as challenges. Additionally, Ballam (2017), in a separate large-scale survey (n = 5,040), identified that pupils struggled with basic concepts related to knowing the origins of food. For example, they found that 18% of children surveyed thought that fish fingers came from chicken, and the internet was cited as the source of most nutritional knowledge for children. Although not an Irish-based study, it does demonstrate a clear need for evidence-based food education that is accessible to all children in school.

In Ireland, Mitchell et al. (2020) state that implementation of the Department of Education and Skill's *Wellbeing policy statement and framework for practice* (2019), in all schools, offers the potential for schools to place a greater emphasis on health and wellbeing. They believe that this will provide a focus on the environmental, cultural, and curriculum elements within the school that may impact students' growth. However, we believe that having food education with practical food skills on the curriculum is a prerequisite for achieving good health, and that healthy eating should have been addressed more explicitly in the 2019 wellbeing framework.

Currently, the curricular approach employed in both Ireland and NI in addressing healthy eating and food education can be characterised as having a "health" focus rather than a "practical" focus, a distinction which Smith et al. (2022) point to as being important for achieving the learning outcomes pertaining to food and healthy-eating

curricular content. Their study highlights that both practical food skills and nutritional knowledge are required for people to eat well. However, they note that in many countries the priority is to teach knowledge-based content over practical skills such as actual food preparation, budgeting, and shopping.

Evidence-based research illustrates that the inclusion of practical food skills serves to reinforce and support the teaching of food education. Such a comprehensive approach to teaching food education, integrating both theoretical and practical food education, is considered best practice in curriculum policy (Condrasky et al., 2011; McGowan et al., 2015; Lavelle et al., 2016). The absence of any practical food preparation in the Irish primary-school curriculum was highlighted by Smith et al. (2022) as being an exception in an 11-country study (notably, NI was not part of the research study). It is welcome to see that one of the recommendations of the Safefood (2022) report *Public acceptability of policies to address obesity* is that all children should have the opportunity to develop practical food skills and knowledge on healthy eating during their education. The Safefood (2022) report clearly states that, in order to achieve this goal, the provision of the required facilities to support education on eating healthily and learning essential cooking skills should be available in all schools.

Conclusions

In 2011, we (Mooney et al., 2011) concluded that due to overweight and obesity levels of children across the IoI, it was important for the departments of education in both jurisdictions to execute periodic reviews of curricular content pertaining to food education and healthy eating in both PDMU and SPHE at primary level. In coming to this conclusion, we were mindful of the role of early intervention, regarding healthy eating in the school setting. Furthermore, we suggested that other stakeholders such as the health-promotion agencies in each jurisdiction needed to be involved in these periodic reviews in order to ensure a holistic approach to the teaching of healthy eating and food education in the classroom. At the time, we noted that it was essential that any review would consider the benefits of including practical culinary skills as a compulsory component of both curricula. As demonstrated above, these conclusions are still valid more than ten years later. We now repeat our call for the departments of education in Ireland and NI to improve and support food education and the practical teaching of healthy eating in primary schools as a matter of urgency.

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An Exploration of the Place of Children's Literature in Early Reading Policy in the North and South of Ireland

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Abstract

This article focuses on a recent SCoTENS (Standing Conference on Teacher Education in the North and South of Ireland) collaborative project on children's literature within educational policy, in both the South of Ireland and Northern Ireland. It explores the place, profile, and prevalence given to children's literature in key curriculum and policy documents on the teaching of reading in the early years. The article begins by considering the extent to which teachers in both jurisdictions are encouraged to use children's literature when teaching early reading. It then discusses the availability of Continuing Professional Development to support teachers in this task. The findings of this desk-based exploratory study revealed implicit rather than explicit support for the use of children's literature in early reading instruction at curriculum policy level in both jurisdictions, and were used to inform a cross-border teacher-education conference.

Keywords: early reading, curriculum, reading comprehension, children's literature, the simple view of reading

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The position occupied by children's literature within key educational policy documents on both sides of the Irish border is the focus of this article. Specifically, it examines the extent to which children's literature is represented in these documents as a key component in the teaching of reading for four to eight year olds, particularly with regard to the development of vocabulary and comprehension skills. As such, it interrogates the extent to which teachers in Northern Ireland and the South of Ireland are encouraged to use children's literature in the teaching of early reading. It also explores the potential of rich and varied, authentic children's literature to promote deep and meaningful literacy learning and the need for teacher professional development to realise this potential.

Exploring the place of children's literature within curricula and associated policy documents is important because if the use of children's literature is *assumed*, rather than *prioritised,* within such documents, it is likely that the breadth and depth of young children's reading experiences involving literature will depend largely on the knowledge and expertise of individual teachers. As a result, there may be variation both within and across schools in terms of subject knowledge and quality of provision (Education and Training Inspectorate [ETI], Northern Ireland, 2018).

The article begins by outlining what is intended when referring to "children's literature". It then introduces a dominant theory of literacy known as the Simple View of Reading (Gough and Tunmer, 1986) and how this is conveyed in reading curricula in both jurisdictions. Next, it considers children's literature as a modus operandi for implementing a balanced approach to literacy and the extent to which this is emphasised in curricula and other key policy documents. Finally, it discusses the need for professional development for teachers so that children's literature is used effectively in the teaching of early reading in classrooms in Northern Ireland and the South of Ireland.

Defining Children's Literature

As a first step, it is necessary to address the complex issue of what is meant by high-quality children's literature. Schneider (2016, p. 22) captures its essence succinctly by stating that it "is high art, extraordinary writing, and everything in-between". She goes on to problematise the fact that arriving at an agreed definition is difficult since this umbrella term encompasses multiple genres and modalities that fulfil a myriad of functions. According to Bearne and Styles (2010, p. 22), high-quality children's literature is "written to entertain the young", whilst "the most rewarding literature… informs, inspires, nourishes and pleases". When young children interact with such materials, their perceptions of the world, whether through lived or vicarious means, are widened and reshaped continuously (Kiefer et al., 2007).

To choose suitable top-quality literature, educators must know the hallmarks to look out for when searching for texts to populate their classrooms. The UK-based Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE) (2020) provides a helpful guide that includes the following characteristics of a well-stocked classroom library:

- a broad and diverse range of authors, illustrators, and genres that mirror children's interests and enable self-reflection and perspective-taking

- multi-modal formats that present information in a range of appealing ways, complemented by high-calibre artwork

- language-rich texts that contain rhyme, rhythm, and pattern, which in turn encourage word play and exploration

- potential to support a variety of reading (and re-reading) experiences within and beyond the curriculum, allowing for a variety of creative and bespoke responses.

The Simple View of Reading Theory

Despite decades of "reading wars" promoting one or other theory of reading development, there is now a general consensus in the research literature that children's early reading instruction should involve a combination of skills-based and meaning-focused teaching in a motivating and supportive environment (Torgerson et al., 2019). The Simple View of Reading (SVR), first developed by Gough and Tunmer (1986), which has now re-emerged in current literature (see, for example, Hoover & Tunmer, 2020; Moats & Rosow, 2020; Rose, 2017), constitutes a simple, quantifiable representation of the complex act of reading. Its formula states that reading comprehension is derived from the interaction between decoding and language comprehension. If either component is low or lacking, however, overall reading comprehension is negatively affected. In concert with Gough and Tunmer's (1986) message, a report of the influential US-based National Reading Panel concurred that phonics programmes that emphasise decoding exclusively and ignore the other processes involved in learning to read will "not succeed in making every child a skilled reader" (National Reading Panel & National Institute of Child Health & Human Development, 2000, p. 113). The consensus that successful and meaningful reading comprehension depends on the robustness of both components continues to be widely endorsed. This is despite the fact that the SVR has often been analysed, expanded upon, and updated (see for example Duke & Cartwright, 2021; Moats & Rosow, 2020; Scarborough, 2001), with Hoover and Tunmer (2018, p. 311) commenting that "there is much more to understand about reading than what is represented in the SVR".

While the SVR promotes a balanced, holistic approach to reading, it has often been misinterpreted in the literature (Catts, 2018), in the media (Hanford, 2018a, 2018b; Sohn, 2020), and in the classroom as emphasising an approach to reading that is decoding-focused *only*. While phonics is a very important aspect of reading instruction, it is also limited in that it represents only one part of the reading puzzle, which alone will not transfer to comprehension achievement (Suggate, 2016). As such, it must be complemented with the unconstrained skills (Paris, 2005) of comprehension and vocabulary development, from the earliest possible juncture, to create life-long readers (Shanahan, 2019).

The Teaching of Reading as Framed in Curricula

In the South of Ireland, the primary language curriculum (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2019) replaced the previous primary-school

curriculum specifications in Irish and English (Department of Education and Science [DES], 1999). Curriculum redevelopment was a priority emerging from the *National Strategy: Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life (2011–2020)* (NSLN) (Department of Education and Skills [DES], 2011b). The primary language curriculum encourages a balanced approach to early literacy teaching as its learning outcomes incorporate both constrained and unconstrained skills. Indeed, the curriculum emphasises that "unconstrained skills, such as comprehension and vocabulary, develop across the lifespan of the child" while "constrained skills, such as letter knowledge and conventions of print, are essential because they are fundamental to children's subsequent learning and development" (p. 18). However, to prevent the potential of over-emphasising decoding to the detriment of language comprehension in the early years of schooling, a useful precaution might have been to state explicitly within the primary language curriculum (NCCA, 2019) that both sides of the SVR's equation need substantial attention. In the support materials that are available online, there is a more obvious acknowledgement of this principle. A guide for good practice published by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) to support the curriculum, on the other hand, clearly outlines the need to balance constrained and unconstrained skills (NEPS, 2015).

Direct comprehension instruction, although a vital aspect of the reading process, can often be neglected, particularly in the infant classroom where a great emphasis is placed on phonics. However, the development of comprehension skills can be comfortably integrated with oral language lessons, reading, writing, and *Aistear*[1] (NCCA, 2009), ensuring time for all curricular areas (NCCA, n.d., p. 12). While the learning outcomes outlined in the curriculum documents refer to the full range of reading skills and strategies, it may be challenging for teachers to comprehend how much attention to give to each learning outcome label to achieve a balanced approach to early reading instruction. It is worth noting that although the progression continua give further details on all of the prescribed reading skills and strategies, these are not available in the hard copy of the curriculum.

Similarly, in Northern Ireland, the primary curriculum document (Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment [CCEA], 2007) does not contain the term "balanced literacy"; neither does it suggest a combination of instructional practices that cover whole language and phonics to varying degrees (Fountas & Pinnell, 2016) nor include a reference to the SVP. However, it does cite a range of instructional approaches, along with explicit reference to increasingly complex phonic skills and comprehension strategies, as cornerstones in the literacy repertoires of early years' teachers. Specifically, in the Foundation Stage (4–6 years), it is recognised that "children should have opportunities to listen to a range of interesting and exciting fiction, non-fiction, poetry and rhymes, retell familiar stories and share a wide range of books with adults and other children" (CCEA, 2007, p. 20). This philosophy is

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1   Aistear is the early childhood curriculum framework for all children from birth to six years in the South of Ireland.

extended in the Key Stage 1 (6–8 years) section, where mention is made of the need for children to "read and be read to from a wide selection of poetry and prose" while also having the opportunity to "read, explore, understand and make use of a range of traditional and digital texts" (p. 54). The document goes on to raise the expectation of engagement with texts by stating that children should be facilitated to "explore and begin to understand how texts are structured in a range of genres". Furthermore, they are required to "begin to locate, select and use texts for specific purposes" (p. 54). However, such directives rely upon teachers' own knowledge of a broad and varied array of suitable texts – including high-quality children's literature.

Children's Literature in Curriculum and Policy Documents

Children's literature can contribute to a child's linguistic competence, which will enhance their comprehension of text, the ultimate goal of reading (the product of the SVR's equation). Studies that used dialogic reading with children's literature have reported significant, positive effects on children's language, phonological awareness, print concepts, comprehension, and vocabulary outcomes (Hall & Burns, 2018; Swanson et al., 2011). Indeed, the potential of high-quality children's literature in reading instruction may be best understood in the context of *Scarborough's reading rope* (Scarborough, 2001), which expands upon Gough and Tunmer's (1986) SVR. Within Scarborough's (2001) model, language comprehension is explained in terms of background knowledge, vocabulary, language structures, verbal reasoning, and knowledge in relation to genre and conventions of print, all of which can be taught explicitly within the context of high-quality children's literature (Cabell & Hwang, 2020).

A number of research papers underpin the primary language curriculum (NCCA, 2019) in the South of Ireland, and these consistently communicate the need to ensure that teachers use high-quality children's literature in their teaching of reading. It is deemed a powerful vehicle through which learners "encounter a standard and style of language not readily available in typical interpersonal interaction, which benefits not only first language learners but also children who are learning English as an additional language" (Cregan, 2019, p. 27). The emphasis in such papers may have emerged from concerns related to a review of the implementation of the previous English curriculum (DES, 1999). The review (DES, 2005) revealed a limited number and range of books in one fifth of classrooms, with inspectors reporting that poor provision and use of resources were hindering implementation of the English curriculum in these classrooms. Significantly, difficulties with regard to the teaching of reading were identified in one quarter of the classrooms observed. In these instances, there was evidence of mechanical reading of texts and a lack of variety in the reading material provided. In addition, there was a lack of emphasis on higher-order questioning or on the use of reading material such as children's literature as a stimulus for discussion and analysis.

Despite the prominence given to children's literature in the research reports commissioned during curriculum redevelopment, the primary language curriculum itself (NCCA, 2019) does not explicitly refer to the use of children's literature as a crucial resource in the teaching of early literacy. Instead, it refers to "texts", which are defined as "all products of language use: oral, gesture, sign, written, Braille, visual, tactile, electronic and digital" (p. 20) and to "genre", which refers to a "selection of oral and written forms in order to recount, explain, entertain, inform, give instructions, narrate, persuade and justify opinions. Oral forms include, but are not limited to, storytelling, drama, poetry, speeches, debates, film and digital media such as podcasts, videos, advertising, television and radio broadcasts" (p. 20). While the definitions of these terms are useful in terms of their holistic connotations, they may not be direct enough to ensure that children's literature is a widely used resource in Irish classrooms now and in the coming years. The context report from the National Assessments of Mathematics and English Reading (NAMER) in 2014 (Kavanagh et al., 2015) indicated that published reading schemes were used on most days to teach reading in just over three quarters of second classes, while two in five pupils were in classes in which workbooks or worksheets were used with the same frequency. Commercial reading schemes were used three times as often as children's literature in teaching reading, with almost one quarter of teachers reporting using children's literature once a month or less. Given these findings, it would have been beneficial to specify the use of high-quality children's literature in the primary language curriculum (NCCA, 2019) and in the NSLN (DES, 2011b), especially since the latter stipulates that "all learners should benefit from the opportunity to experience the joy and excitement of getting 'lost' in a book" (p. 43).

In Northern Ireland, a pilot study influential in the restructuring of the first two years of the primary curriculum grew out of concern that children in socially deprived parts of Belfast were not thriving on a formal approach to teaching in general and to reading in particular. The experts who reviewed this project, known as the Early Years Enriched Curriculum, advised the postponement of formal reading instruction and of the use of commercial reading schemes. However, while they suggested that children avail of more "oral language and emergent literacy activities" instead (Sproule et al., 2005, p. 2), there was no mention of the use of children's literature to support this goal. This pilot project informed the creation and design of the subsequent Foundation Stage when the curriculum was redeveloped in 2007. Although a variety of reading materials and experiences are prescribed within the primary curriculum, children's literature, per se, is mentioned only three times – once in Key Stage 1 (6-8 years), and twice in Key Stage 2 (7-11 years).

Several years later, a national literacy and numeracy strategy document entitled *Count, read: Succeed* was launched by the Department of Education (DE) in Northern Ireland (DE, 2011). Despite its broad and comprehensive perspective on how to raise standards in these two key areas, the promotion of literacy skills using children's

literature was expressed generically. That is to say, although pupils were expected to "use language associated with texts", "recognise some forms and features of texts", and "use evidence from texts", the authors defined "texts" as materials that "refer to ideas that are organised to communicate and present a message in written, spoken, visual, digital and symbolic forms" (p. 68). In addition, it is perhaps noteworthy that the strategy only mentions the word "enjoyment" once in the beginning (draft) levels of progression, in relation to the cross-curricular skill of communication. Interestingly, enjoyment is referred to more directly with regard to the function of school and public libraries as opposed to the use of literature in class. It is noted that library facilities can provide pupils with "free access to a wide range of high-quality information and reading resources…to improve their reading and also foster their imagination, natural curiosity and an enjoyment of reading" (p. 15). The Chief Inspector's 2016–2018 report (ETI, 2018, p. 64) cautioned that "where children's reading and writing are confined to a narrow range of texts and genres, the development of comprehension skills, including inference, is compromised and there is limited opportunity for the children to articulate, refine or justify their reasoning".

Thus far, we have discussed how curriculum and policy documents in the South of Ireland and in Northern Ireland approach the teaching of reading in the early years, and specifically how these relate children's literature to the teaching of reading more broadly. We now narrow the lens to focus on how children's literature might be used to teach different aspects of the language comprehension component of the SVR, while examining the extent to which a requirement to do so is communicated in curricular policy in both jurisdictions.

Vocabulary Development and Children's Literature

High-quality children's literature can have a significant effect on young children's vocabulary development as it exposes pupils to sophisticated and complex language, which can enhance their language comprehension (Serafini & Moses, 2014). It also presents the teacher with opportunities to enhance their pupils' vocabulary development within an engaging and meaningful context (Gamble, 2019). Cregan's (2019) report, *Promoting oral language development in the primary school*, which underpins the primary language curriculum (NCCA, 2019) in the South of Ireland, contends that book reading enhances vocabulary development. More specifically, it is argued, book reading presents opportunities to repeatedly expose children to vocabulary items, which can strengthen vocabulary learning, especially in the case of unfamiliar words that children tend not to use in their conversational speech.

Research has shown that the quality of book-reading interactions during the early school years predicts vocabulary outcomes and that these in turn can predict later reading outcomes (van Kleeck, 2008). It is critical that the book discussion is dialogic and interactive in nature, however, with feedback provided by the teacher (Reznitskaya,

2012). This form of book discussion is recommended in *Oral language development in early childhood and primary education 3–8* (Shiel et al., 2012), another document underpinning the primary language curriculum (NCCA, 2019). Analysis of the 2016 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) teacher questionnaire data for Ireland showed an increase in the amount of vocabulary instruction that pupils in fourth class in primary school receive (Delaney et al., 2022). The nature of the instruction involved is not clear, however. It is possible that the frequently used reading schemes, workbooks, and worksheets reported by Kavanagh et al. (2015) are the instructional materials in question, rather than high-quality children's literature.

In the primary language curriculum (NCCA, 2019), the learning outcome related to vocabulary is labelled with reference to the acquisition of "appropriate vocabulary to support the comprehension of text" (p. 26). Within the support materials, there is an oral language outline related to a story drawn from a children's literature text in which teachers are guided in how to use children's literature to maximise oral language development. Support material that focuses specifically on vocabulary recommends that vocabulary is best developed through interaction within meaningful contexts, such as pretend play, read aloud, guided reading, shared writing, and writing workshop (NCCA, n.d., p. 78). At the time of writing, the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) is providing a suite of webinars on a range of topics that incorporate vocabulary instruction (https://www.pdst.ie/primary/literacy/plc-webinars). Vocabulary instruction itself does not have a dedicated webinar, however, which is hardly ideal given its critical importance in reading development (Lindsey, 2022). There are some slides and one video available from 2014 (https://pdst.ie/primary/literacy/vocabulary) but further support, in the form of additional webinars and videos of good practice, would enhance the likelihood of teachers actively using children's literature as an effective tool to develop vocabulary.

In Northern Ireland, the fifth strand specifically outlined in the Talking and Listening element of the Foundation Stage literacy curriculum is entitled, An Extended Vocabulary. As well as providing opportunities to listen, respond, and interact with others using fiction and non-fiction texts, teachers are encouraged to create "focused experiences to introduce or generate vocabulary". It is anticipated that by doing so, children will "express themselves with increasing clarity and confidence, using a growing vocabulary and more complex sentence structure" (CCEA, 2007, p.19). The use of such an expanding and increasingly precise vocabulary range is also expected to spill over into their discussion and writing as they move up into Key Stage 1. Similarly, the cultivation of cross-curricular vocabulary is stipulated as part of the statutory requirements in primary school. So while there is an expectation that vocabulary is taught, there is no specific reference to the use of children's literature as a teaching resource.

Comprehension Instruction and Children's Literature

Children's literature creates authentic, engaging contexts for comprehension instruction (NEPS, 2015; Shanahan et al., 2010). The read aloud format provides a context for introducing comprehension strategies that children will later employ when reading independently. Research has established the benefits of text-based discussion for comprehension (Harvey & Goudvis, 2017) for all pupils, including those reading in a second language, as cognitively challenging discussion supports inferential thinking which is essential for text comprehension (Collins, 2016).

In the South of Ireland, PIRLS 2016 teacher questionnaire data revealed that over two thirds of fourth-class pupils listened to their teacher read aloud almost daily, which may indicate that this is a common practice in Irish primary schools at least at some class levels (Delaney et al., 2022). While this might positively influence children's comprehension development, the data also revealed that longer fiction books (such as novels) were used daily in reading instruction by only one third of teachers. This could reflect a preference for commercial reading schemes for the teaching of comprehension, especially when considered in light of the NAMER 2014 data suggesting that commercial reading schemes were widely used in Irish classrooms (Kavanagh et al., 2015). While these studies do focus on older children (and took place before the primary language curriculum was in place), their findings may contain clues to a broader leaning amongst Irish teachers towards commercial readers over children's literature when teaching comprehension.

The primary language curriculum (NCCA, 2019) states that pupils in the junior classes should be required to "draw on background knowledge as well as a range of comprehension strategies to engage and create meaning when working with a range of texts" (p. 27). However, as previously noted, the use of high-quality children's literature is not mentioned in the core policy document, so, understandably, there is a risk that only levelled texts or class readers, rather than children's literature, would be used to achieve this learning outcome. That said, the research papers supporting the curriculum do explicitly state the importance of reading children's literature aloud in developing comprehension skills and strategies (see for instance Kennedy et al., 2012). The support materials related to the primary language curriculum (NCCA, 2019) also contain some useful resources for teachers that promote the use of children's literature in the development of early reading skills. Most notably, there is a suite of videos on critical thinking and book talk, developed by Mary Roche (NCCA, 2015). There are also useful resources in relation to the use of picture books and wordless picture books when introducing and supporting new comprehension strategies (NCCA, n.d., p. 6).

Prior to the introduction of the primary language curriculum, the PDST created a series of workshops focused on comprehension based on the Building Bridges model (Gleeson & Courtney, 2010) and a video focused on effective practice for reading aloud. The PDST publication, *The reading process* (PDST, 2014), emphasised that "a

wide variety of texts…including picture books can be used for comprehension strategy instruction" (p. 12) and samples are presented of high-quality children's literature.

In Northern Ireland, the primary curriculum (CCEA, 2007) refers to the need for children at Key Stage 1 and 2 to "use a range of comprehension skills, both oral and written, to interpret and discuss texts" (p. 54). Individual strategies, namely predicting and inferring, are mentioned only in passing, however. The complexity and richness of understanding required on behalf of the reader when engaging with texts is not fully captured in the wording of this document, it seems. In terms of support materials, the CCEA website, updated and restocked in February 2020, does contain a swathe of video clips, exemplifying reciprocal reading skills in action, with teachers making use of high-quality children's literature.

From this review of children's literature in curriculum and policy documents in both Northern Ireland and the South of Ireland, it seems there is much implicit support for the idea that children's literature can enhance the teaching of early reading in many ways. However, teachers need to feel confident in choosing and using children's literature for reading instruction. This points to the importance of considering the professional development needs of primary school teachers in the early years' classroom.

Continuing Professional Development for the Teaching of Reading

Teachers need to have a comprehensive knowledge of literacy development, informed by evidence-based best practice (Morrow & Gambrell, 2011). The United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA) in its 2009 publication, *Occasional paper on literature and literacy in primary education,* proposes that teachers have an obligation to "help each other build a richer conception of literacy learning, one in which creativity and the imagination have central roles" (p. 3). The UKLA postulates that this challenge can be met through comprehensive approaches to reading that include both "efferent" and "aesthetic" goals. That is to say, by employing a wide and exciting range of high-quality children's literature, it is possible to teach children about concepts, facts, and the meaning of texts read, while also evoking in them emotional responses during the reading of such materials.

In the South of Ireland, the NSLN (DES, 2011b) emphasises the need for teacher Continuing Professional Development (CPD) to ensure that literacy is being taught effectively. The NSLN increased the number of summer professional development courses that focused on literacy. Also, specific units on the teaching of literacy were developed and included within the induction programme that is now available to all newly qualified teachers during their probationary period (DES, 2011a).

The primary language curriculum (NCCA, 2019) was initially developed for junior

classes only, with a version being released for consultation in 2014. Following this, the NCCA compiled an interim report on the issues related to its dissemination (NCCA, 2014). The most frequently suggested improvement related to effective communications about the curriculum. Many respondents to the consultation also suggested that comprehensive professional development would be required moving forward including online demonstrations, online toolkits, and online tutorials. Teachers, particularly, wanted guidance on comprehension, oral language, and phonics. No data have been gathered on whether or not the current available suite of resources is deemed adequate by teachers. To date, most resources are either in written document format or in demonstration video format, with a comparative lack of resources in presentation format to support the teaching of reading. In-service support for implementation of the primary language curriculum (2019) was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but is currently being rolled out in some schools. It consists of a series of webinars, facilitated by school-closure days for CPD, and sustained remote support by PDST advisors. The NSLN (DES, 2011b) is currently being updated and consultation with stakeholders is nearing conclusion. The emerging observations report (Government of Ireland, 2023) found that there was an almost unanimous call from stakeholders for comprehensive supports for schools and early learning and care settings to enable staff to implement the successor Literacy, Numeracy, and Digital Literacy Strategy effectively. Respondents to the consultation also highlighted the need for professional development opportunities based on evidence-informed approaches, with a focus on "just-in-time professional learning that is tailored to the specific role of staff" (p. 5).

In 2016 in Northern Ireland, *Learning leaders: A strategy for teacher professional development* was launched (DE, 2016). The out-workings of this document were halted, however, with the collapse of the Northern Executive in January 2017. The strategy was to be relaunched in 2020, but was postponed due to the restrictions necessitated by the pandemic. Currently, a conceptual framework has been issued for public consultation (see Campbell et al., 2022). The framework is based on the vision that "every teacher is a learning leader" (p. 4) and, to this end, there are 15 policy commitments. Its objective is to provide "a structured framework for teacher professional learning; [to] develop the leadership capacity of teachers; and [to] provide practice-led support within communities of effective practice" (p. 10).

In the meantime, the Northern Ireland Education Authority has sourced professional reading materials and resources along with an array of CPD online training opportunities for educators to access on their website (https://www.eani.org.uk/). That said, those related to reading tend to have a special educational needs focus or lean toward other aspects of literacy provision such as spelling instruction. Anecdotally, some schools are buying in the expertise of educational consultants to fill this gap. In the academic year 2018–2019, CCEA produced a report outlining findings from its ongoing curriculum-monitoring project. Among the report recommendations, there is a pledge to increase the quantity and accessibility of professional learning opportunities as well as to

make resources easier to navigate (CCEA, 2020). As previously mentioned, the CCEA website resource portal was upgraded in 2020 and further support is offered there.

In response to the desk-based research reported in this article, the authors organised an online teacher-education conference on September 16, 2021, entitled, An Exploration of the Use of Children's Literature in Early Reading Within a Balanced Literacy Framework in the North and South of Ireland. Discussion at the conference, attended by over 100 highly enthusiastic teachers, confirmed the critical need for professional development on the use of children's literature in early reading. Sharing their current practices in a conference survey, the majority of attendees reported using children's literature for purely motivational purposes, with very few reporting that they had used children's literature to develop comprehension strategies or vocabulary in a focused manner. A majority also reported feeling obliged to spend most of their instructional time on word recognition activities to the detriment of language comprehension and ultimately reading comprehension. For a full discussion on the findings of the survey, see Concannon-Gibney and Magennis, 2022.

Conclusion

This article sought to explore the presence of children's literature within educational policy around early years' literacy in both the South of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Analysis of key curriculum documents indicates that curricula across Ireland encourage attention to both aspects of the SVR (word recognition and language comprehension). At the same time, it must be acknowledged that there is a lack of explicit reference to how these components should be balanced and, in particular, to how high-quality children's literature might be used to teach the language comprehension aspect in a practical sense. Perhaps this is the reality of trying to corral an animal as unruly as curriculum development, despite policymakers' best efforts. What is written in the curriculum may be open to interpretation for classroom practice (Kennedy, 2014) and curriculum implementation can remain elusive. Consequently, it is possible that children's literature is not as widely used as one might hope in the early years' classroom in relation to the teaching of reading. While there are some useful support materials available to teachers in both jurisdictions, the effectiveness of these in developing reading instructional practices in line with current research is reliant on teacher time and understanding, as well as interest. Input on initial teacher education programmes will therefore have a significant impact. The availability of CPD is an ongoing challenge in Ireland (both North and South) (Government of Ireland, 2023; King 2015). Even so, it is still necessary to pursue any professional development opportunities to facilitate educators to interrogate the intentions of the curriculum in light of current research and support materials at their disposal.

As an attempt to offset what could be perceived as curricular shortcomings, a secondary aspect of this SCoTENS-funded project involved the development of a

teacher-education conference. Its purpose was to encourage teachers, both North and South, to use more children's literature in the teaching of early reading, with a view to ensuring that both aspects of the SVR equation are recognised in instruction. The conference was perceived as timely, and was well attended by teachers. Most notably, as a form of CPD, teachers commented on how the conference had enhanced their confidence to make more time for children's literature, and to use it to fulfil a wider range of learning outcomes in their classrooms than many had previously considered.

While children's literature can provide a meaningful and joyful forum for the development of language comprehension, vocabulary knowledge, background knowledge, and reading comprehension, it cannot be regarded as a silver bullet for early reading instruction. Indeed, criticism of the SVR (Gough & Tunmer, 1986) has pointed to causes of reading difficulty independent of word recognition or language comprehension, and the need to also consider the role of self-regulation and metacognition in reading (Duke & Cartwright, 2021). It seems reasonable, however, to argue that early years' classrooms that do not use children's literature to maximise children's reading growth are lacking in some respects, as every child deserves to join "the literacy club" in a joyful and meaningful manner (Smith, 1988). Reading aloud, using high-quality children's literature, has been described as "the single most important activity for building the knowledge and skills [children] will eventually require for learning to read" (Anderson et al., 1985, p. 23). Children who love having books read to them today are the children who tomorrow are engaged in lessons with books and who eventually become lifelong readers (Gamble, 2019).

The Public Library Strategy 2013–2017 (DES, 2015) in the South of Ireland, that aimed to provide a wide range of resources and activities to support primary schools in developing children's literacy, creativity, and communication skills, may have helped to support teachers in developing their knowledge and expertise in the area. Children's Books Ireland provide ongoing webinars, resource and activity packs, and helpful reading lists for teachers. The recent School Library Grant issued in 2022, which provided €20m in funding to schools to purchase books, may also help to ensure that more children's literature features in classroom instruction. This welcome development could facilitate an increase in the number of print books per child in primary classrooms above the 12:1 ratio reported in NAMER 2014 data (Kavanagh et al., 2015). In Northern Ireland, the charity BookTrust NI (https://www.booktrust.org.uk/what-we-do/booktrust-ni/) works with multiple organisations to provide children and their families with books, resources, and support in the promotion of reading in its many forms. Very little is known about the direct impact of such provision within the primary sector in Northern Ireland, however, the most recent research having been published over a decade ago (Devlin & Crossey, 2010).

Teachers working in the early years' classroom can make literacy learning engaging, enjoyable, and most importantly meaningful. Louisa Moats (2020), one of the foremost

voices in the field of reading instruction in the US in the last 40 years, distils the essence of learning to read (and write) by stating that, "the common denominator… is the ability to recognise, analyse, and produce language in all of its forms". In other words, code breaking and meaning making are "reciprocal and interactive" in nature (p. 10). In what better way can teachers achieve such a fundamental and complex goal than through the use of high-quality children's literature?

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Unmasking Essential Irish-Medium Immersion-Specific Teacher Competences

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Abstract

Irish-medium education is designed to promote concurrent and systematic content and language development in the context of disciplinary instruction. Distinct from traditional content or language teaching, it requires a particular knowledge base and pedagogical skill set (Cammarata & Ó Ceallaigh, 2020; Mac Corraidh, 2008, 2021; Ó Ceallaigh & Ní Shéaghdha, 2017; Ó Duibhir, 2018). Yet, to date, few studies identify the immersion-specific competences called for in an Irish-medium (IM) educational setting. Although there is a growing recognition that IM teaching makes higher demands in terms of disciplinary expertise and knowledge (Cammarata & Ó Ceallaigh, 2020), what constitutes an ideal IM immersion knowledge base, and the values that underpin it, have yet to be well understood or clearly described (Ó Ceallaigh et al., 2019). The study described in this article set out to identify this ideal knowledge base, consisting of distinctive professional competences, considered essential to teachers in immersion education, from an IM teacher-informed perspective. Utilising an online questionnaire, a student-teacher symposium, interviews and focus-group interviews, data were collected from key stakeholders (n=78) represented among student teachers, practising teachers, principals, and initial teacher education providers across the continuum of IM education in Northern Ireland (NI) and in the Republic of Ireland (ROI). This article reports on the data generated from eight classroom teachers who took part in the larger study, identifies and considers a number of themes and associated competences that emerged from the data, and highlights implications for policy and practice.

*Keywords***:** immersion, Irish-medium education, teaching competences, initial teacher education, immersion-specific

Irish-medium (IM) education contributes to, and is inspired by, a worldwide model of immersion education, underpinned by international research and an evolving pedagogical approach that sits within a sociocultural constructivist framework (García, 2009; Mehisto & Genesee, 2015). It is just over 50 years since the first IM primary school in Northern Ireland (NI) was opened by a small community of language activists in Belfast (Mac Seáin, 2010; Nic Íomhair, 2020). In the Republic of Ireland (ROI), bilingual schooling was introduced at the start of the 20th century (De Brún, 2016), followed by a series of initiatives aimed at reviving the Irish language in the new Irish Free State (Ó Ceallaigh et al, 2018; Ó Duibhir, 2018). The network of IM schools that currently exists, however, was established in the '70s and '80s in the ROI (Ní Chlochasaigh et al., 2021) and in the '90s in NI (De Brún, 2022)

Today, the journey of immersion education in Irish schools advances along a more strategic trajectory. Some evidence of progress in policy and legislation that expresses a vision for IM education is reflected in strategic goals (Department of Education, NI, 2009; Department for Communities, NI, 2022; Department of Education and Skills, 2016; Government of Ireland, 2010). Also, the IM education community is part of a more organised infrastructure, with advocacy, support and planning roles, provided by organisations such as Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, Gaeloideachas, and An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta. Growth in the numbers of children learning through Irish is also evident. According to data for the school year 2021–22, published by Gaeloideachas, there are 374 IM schools (primary and post-primary) in Ireland and almost 67,000 children registered who are learning through the medium of Irish, either as a target language or as the language of their Gaeltacht community (https://www.Gaeloideachas.ie). These figures represent 8% (ROI) and 2.7% (NI) of all primary-school pupils, and 4% (ROI) and 1.1% (NI) of all post-primary students (https://www.Gaeloideachas.ie; Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2023). Separately, additional learners through the medium of Irish attend the network of IM preschool settings that provide an essential early immersion foundation for the IM sector (Mhic Aoidh, 2019).

Following this brief introduction to the development of IM education on the island of Ireland, the next part of the article provides a synthesis of the literature on the growing phenomenon of IM education, paying particular attention to IM teacher education. Recent policy developments are highlighted, and their IM content-adequate use explored. An outline of the research design used in the study described here follows, along with a discussion of the study findings.

IM Teacher Education on the Island of Ireland

The story of teacher education provision for the growing IM education sector is colourful and complex. Many of the major developments in IM education have been preceded by innovative initiatives. For example, the introduction of Irish-medium

post-primary education in NI is generally dated back to 1991, with the establishment of Meánscoil Feirste in Belfast; less well known is an earlier initiative in the outskirts of the city between 1978 and 1980. That remarkable community effort depended largely upon the voluntary support of local teachers and the fundraising activities of parents. It was brought to an end due to the increased strain on the community, and the need to prioritise support for the Irish-medium primary school, which was also unfunded at that time. However, the community was encouraged by their learning from this endeavour and the establishment of a funded post-primary school, at a later stage, became inevitable.

In the years that followed, teachers learned from one another, networks were established to facilitate shared practice through voluntary professional organisations like Gaeloiliúint (NI) and Gaelscoileanna (ROI), and research activity to inform immersion education began to gather momentum (Cummins, 1996; 1998). The pressure on teachers to create their own resources to support an Irish-medium curriculum, in the absence of adequate teaching materials, was evidence of the need for Irish-medium professional services (Knipe & Ó Labhraí, 2004). In 1995, the demand for teacher education in NI, as a priority area of need, led to the establishment of specialist provision for the sector (Farren, et al., 2019; Nig Uidhir, 2006). In the ROI, provision has more recently been expanded to offer undergraduate and postgraduate teacher-education programmes for IM primary and post-primary student teachers. As these programmes have evolved, the unique linguistic and pedagogical competences of teachers in IM schools have come to the fore as an area that merits more focussed research attention (Lyster & Tedick, 2014; Ní Dhiorbháin et al., 2023; Ó Duibhir, 2018; Tedick & Lyster, 2020). We can now look more closely at teacher identity and the characteristics of an effective teacher in IM schools, much of this inquiry informed by teachers themselves (De Brún, 2022; Ní Dhiorbháin et al., 2021; Ó Ceallaigh & Ó Laoire, 2021). The lens of the academic-activist hybrid, previously fixed on the emergence and early development of IM education, can shift focus to the professional needs of teachers and teacher educators. Fifty years ago, when fundraising, recruitment of pupils and teachers, and campaigning for recognition from the education authorities were the priorities, that position could only be imagined.

Irish-Medium Education in a Climate of Change

The challenge of understanding and articulating the competences required of immersion teachers becomes more complex as the network of schools expands. Many of the issues faced in all school settings assume an additional immersion-education dimension in the IM sector (Ó Ceallaigh & Ní Shéaghdha, 2017; 2021). Aspects of student diversity and inclusion present a clear example of this (Fortune, 2011; Nic Aindriú et al., 2022; Ní Chlochasaigh et al., 2021; Pobal, 2010). As the ever-accelerating changes reshape our economies and societies, IM schools must strive to keep apace

of such rapid changes and competing imperatives, while simultaneously managing innovations and developments that are specific to the immersion community. To be effective, immersion teachers need to base their practice on established theories and principles and the latest research on teaching and learning, i.e., an updated, coherent, and integrated knowledge base (Cammarata & Ó Ceallaigh, 2020). Many researchers claim that optimal language learning in immersion requires careful attention so that it occurs within a meaning-driven context of specific content instruction (e.g., Cammarata & Hayley, 2017; Cammarata & Tedick, 2012; Lyster, 2007; Morton, 2018; Ó Ceallaigh et al., 2018). But we have yet to fully understand and describe what constitutes an ideal immersion teacher knowledge base for integration (Morton, 2018). While the identification of immersion-specific competences (i.e., professional values, knowledge, understanding, skills, and practices) is essential to drive teacher professional growth and student achievement, research on the critical components of immersion teacher knowledge is still evolving (Cammarata & Cavanagh, 2018; Morton, 2018). A notable lack of research, on a wide variety of topics relating to immersion teacher preparation and development, has been observed (Cammarata & Ó Ceallaigh, 2020), a dearth that is particularly evident in the Irish context (Ó Duibhir, 2018; Ó Ceallaigh et al., 2019, 2021).

In NI, the General Teaching Council outlines 27 teaching competences in *Teaching: The reflective profession* (GTCNI, 2007), only one of which relates to the specific knowledge and skills characteristic of the IM teacher. All of the other competences are generic and not specific enough to address the significant adaptations that may be necessary in the classroom of an IM teacher. A process is currently underway to produce an updated version of the competence framework for Leadership of Learning across the profession (Department of Education, NI, 2016). This revised overview of a professional learning framework in NI is presented graphically as a lens on teacher professional learning, and identifies four broad competence areas: Applying knowledge and understanding; working with others; solving problems; and communicating effectively. Competence statements within each area are set out as essential minimum expectations and may be enhanced by teachers, depending on the specific context of their school (St. Mary's University College Belfast, 2021). The challenge for the IM sector remains in place, therefore, to identify distinctive competences that apply in its own settings and align these to the updated framework. Scholars argue (Guerrero & Lachance, 2018; Tedick & Lyster, 2020) for the importance of aligning specialist frameworks to other core professional standards and competences required for accreditation. The analysis of IM teachers' perspectives on specific immersion competencies will contribute to a similar competence model that can be further considered as a resource for the sector.

In the ROI, the Department of Education is currently formulating a policy on Irish-medium education (outside of the Gaeltacht) to support immersion teacher professional growth, immersion educational provision, and student outcomes.

This development will support other strategic documents that extend to the wider professional community. For example, in accordance with Section 38 of the Teaching Council Acts 2001–2015, the policy document, *Céim: Standards for initial teacher education* (Teaching Council, 2020), sets out the requirements which all programmes of qualification for teaching in Ireland must meet in order to gain accreditation from the Teaching Council. The integrated professional induction framework, *Droichead* (Teaching Council, 2017) aims to support the professional learning of newly qualified teachers during the induction phase. Since teacher identity and agency are viewed as core elements to be cultivated in all initial teacher education programmes, the identification of a profession-specific body of knowledge that informs practice relating to immersion-specific competences is critical to advance and complement this work.

The Current Study

The changing landscape of teacher-education provision for the IM sector, particularly in more recent times in the ROI, has sharpened the focus on the professional needs of IM professionals (Mac Corraidh, 2021; Ní Dhiorbháin & Ó Duibhir, 2016; Ó Ceallaigh & Ó Brolcháin, 2020; Ó Ceallaigh & Ó Laoire, 2021; Ó Ceallaigh & Ní Chonchúir, 2021; Ó Ceallaigh et al., 2019; Ó Duibhir, 2018). The wider educational community presents a shared view that evidence of professional competences, considered essential for practitioners in immersion education, would be a useful planning resource to inform IM teacher policy and strengthen professional exchange and knowledge-based practice in schools (De Brún, 2022; Mhic Aoidh, 2019; Nic Aindriú et al., 2022). The research described in this article was undertaken as part of a cross-border project supported by the Standing Conference for Teacher Education North and South (SCoTENS). It set out to produce an overlay of specific competences to fully reflect expectations for the IM practitioner and contribute to a comprehensive professional profile for IM teachers.

The aim of the study was to identify the IM ideal knowledge base, i.e., distinctive professional competences, for immersion-education teachers in Ireland. The principal research questions, informed by the literature review, are:

- What are the distinctive professional competences that are considered essential for IM teachers from an IM teacher-informed perspective?

- How are these immersion-specific competences manifested in practice?

Methodology

Ethical approval for the study was sought and secured from St. Mary's University College, Belfast. A mixed-methods research design was used to collect data from key stakeholders across the continuum of IM education in NI and in the ROI. Student teachers, practising teachers, principals, and initial teacher education providers (n =

78) took part in the study which combined data from an extensive online questionnaire, a student-teacher symposium, semi-structured interviews, and focus-group interviews. This article reports on the views of teachers who participated in semi-structured interviews (n = 8) and is therefore based on only one of the data sources in the larger study.

Participants

IM teachers at all career stages, North and South, were invited to contribute voluntarily to the research, by means of purposive sampling, which was used to capture the heterogeneity and typicality of this professional group. Informed consent was sought and anonymity guaranteed via the use of pseudonyms and unique participant numbers. Confidentiality and privacy were assured. Eight 40-minute semi-structured interviews were conducted online with primary and post-primary teachers from a variety of IM contexts (four from NI – two primary and two post-primary, four from the ROI – two primary and two post-primary) to gain a practising IM teacher-informed perspective. A profile of the participants is presented in Table 1. The interviews were conducted in Irish and recorded through MS teams (see Appendix A for a summary of the interview questions).

TABLE 1

Profile of IM Teachers

Participant	Area	Sector level	IM teaching experience (no. of years)	Teacher's first language (L1)	School type
1	ROI	Primary	8	English	Gaelscoil
2	ROI	Primary	19	English	Gaelscoil
3	NI	Primary	14	English	Gaelscoil
4	NI	Primary	18	English	IM unit
5	ROI (Gaeltacht)	Post-primary	30	Irish	IM Gaeltacht
6	ROI	Post-primary	34	English	Gaelcholáiste
7	NI	Post-primary	27	Irish	Gaelcholáiste
8	NI	Post-primary	14	English	Gaelcholáiste

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed and a thematic analysis of the data was undertaken by the two researchers involved in the study. Themes were identified through an

iterative, back-and-forth process of open, axial, and selective coding (Saldaña, 2014) through reading and rereading all data. Through a succession of examinations of the relationship between codes, some became subsets of others and were amalgamated (Cohen et al., 2011). The central, agreed-upon, themes in relation to immersion-specific competences were defined and labelled. In the larger study, data were analysed to allow the researchers to identify views of each participant group (for example, post-primary or primary principals, teacher educators, student teachers, post-primary or primary teachers), and highlight commonalities between groups of participants as well as issues where diverse or contrasting observations were made.

Findings and Discussion

Three broad themes emerged from the analysis – target language competence, knowledge and understanding of IM pedagogy, and vision and values, from which IM-specific competences were derived. Teachers' critical discussion of these subsets of competences had depth and substance, and spanned an extensive range of more detailed insights. Findings will now be considered with examples of views expressed to illustrate some of the key theme-related issues raised.

Target Language Competence

Teachers were aware of the importance of their own linguistic competence and their responsibility as a main role model for pupils' acquisition of Irish:

> *Ach le blianta, le taithí, thuig tú go raibh rudaí níos tábhachtaí agus níos práinní i gceist ó thaobh an chineál teanga de…..agus is dócha gur thuig mé gur mise tobar na teanga sa rang agus is dócha, an chuid is mó den am, an t-aon fhoinse amháin a bhí ag na páistí ar bhonn laethúil*

> *As you gain experience, you come to understand the importance of issues relating to the language…. and probably I understood that I was the source of language for the class, and most of the time I was the only language source for the children on a daily basis* (Primary teacher).

Seven of the eight participants made explicit references to teachers' Irish, sharing different perspectives on the importance of a high standard of proficiency. Most considered teachers' enhanced language competence as an ongoing professional objective inextricably linked to a teacher's sense of confidence. Three participants reflected specifically on the newly qualified teacher's diffidence about language competence, outlining some of the steps taken by them, or colleagues, to build language proficiency. Participants also made explicit connections between the language competence of a teacher and pupils' progression:

> *Feicim i gcónaí nach mbíonn daoine muiníneach ó thaobh Gaeilge s'acu féin nuair a thosaíonn siad agus tá sin lárnach ó thaobh an teagaisc de. Caithfidh siad a gcuid Gaeilge féin a fhorbairt ionas go bhfuil Gaeilge mhaith ag na daltaí chomh maith*

> *I always notice that people are not confident about their own Irish at the beginning of their career, and that is pivotal to teaching. They have to develop their own Irish so that the children can also acquire good Irish* (Post-primary teacher).

Participants' views reflect much of the evidence, presented in academic literature, of a connection between the immersion teacher's linguistic competence and the pupil's learning (Mac Corraidh, 2021; Mhic Aoidh, 2019; Ó Ceallaigh & Ní Shéaghdha, 2017; RSM McClure Watters et al., 2019).

Teachers' competence in the target language also encompasses teachers' metalinguistic knowledge and understanding of the structures of the language. Ó Duibhir et al. (2016) conclude their study of explicit form-based instruction of grammar to IM pupils, by highlighting the importance of teacher knowledge, including explicit knowledge of the grammar of the target language. The criticality of a high standard of teacher Irish to include the ability to manipulate the language, and to articulate a message in multiple ways, was recognised in this study. One of the participants, a modern languages teacher, noted that a linguist has an advantage in their understanding of how languages work:

> *Go bhféadfaí díriú isteach ar ghnéithe áirithe den teanga agus den struchtúr teanga*

> *A language teacher can focus on specific aspects of the language and the structure of the language* (Post-primary teacher).

Other post-primary participants from non-language teaching areas also perceived themselves as language teachers and discussed examples of manipulating the language to facilitate better comprehension of scientific concepts. A primary-school participant provided insights into the complexities inherent in language-related challenges, such as the specialist language that is required to teach the curriculum and to prepare pupils for standardised tests.

Knowledge and Understanding of Immersion Education and Pedagogy

The complexity of this theme raises multiple issues for consideration including the relationship between the two languages, pupils' home language (L1), which is usually English, and Irish as the target language of the school (L2). Teachers emphasised the need for creativity, tenacity, and strategic thinking in order to encourage pupils to

use the target language. They saw this as a constant process that can monopolise a teacher's time:

> *An rud is measa, caithim an méid ama i rith an lae ag iarraidh páistí a spreagadh Gaeilge a labhairt….Is rud ollmhór é sin. Is jab eile é*

> *The worst thing is the amount of time needed to motivate the children to speak Irish….That is a huge thing. It is another job* (Primary teacher).

At the same time, teachers considered it important to promote the use of Irish in positive ways. It is not just sociolinguistic patterns of language behaviour that are of interest, but teachers showed their commitment to creating an appreciation of Irish and nurturing a love for the language among the pupils:

> *Tá polasaí againn nach mbíonn muid ag tabhairt amach pionóis agus mar sin de, maidir le daltaí ag labhairt i mBéarla, tá tú ag iarraidh grá a chothú don Ghaeilge. Tá tú ag iarraidh go mbeidh siad ag iarraidh Gaeilge a labhairt ach caithfidh tusa bheith airdeallach air sin an t-am ar fad...iad a spreagadh i mbun comhrá i nGaeilge, iad a spreagadh i mbun freagraí a thabhairt ar ais i nGaeilge*

> *We have a policy not to penalise pupils for speaking English, but rather to nurture a love for Irish. You want the children to want to speak Irish but that requires constant attention...to motivate them to converse in Irish...to encourage them to respond to questions in Irish* (Post-primary teacher).

The pressure of time resulting from sustained intense efforts to orchestrate language use is one of the factors that differentiates the IM school from other schools, and impacts on the teacher's role. Another participant made the same observation about sustained motivating efforts required of the IM teacher, referring also to the understanding of immersion principles that underpin these efforts:

> *Tá saineolas agus scileanna ar leith ag teastáil is dócha chun tabhairt faoin ngné sin atá difriúil ón ghnáthscoil, scoil Bhéarla. Ní bhíonn ar na daoine sna gnáthscoileanna am a chaitheamh ag gríosú agus ag iarraidh páistí a mhealladh le Gaeilge a labhairt, ag déanamh na gcomórtas seo. Dom féin, tógann sé am*

> *Specialist knowledge and skills are needed to address that aspect of IM education that is distinctive from the ordinary school, the English (-speaking) school. Those (teachers) don't have to spend time coaxing and persuading children to speak Irish. For me, that takes time* (Primary teacher).

All eight teachers who took part in the study considered a teacher's understanding immersion education to be of fundamental importance:

Mar a dúirt mé, mar mhúinteoir, caithfidh tusa bheith eolach ar chúrsaí teanga agus cúrsa oideolaíochta sa tumoideachas agus taobh thiar de sin arís, go teoiriciúil, an dtuigeann achan duine a thagann isteach trí dhoirse s'againne go bhfuil difear ann, go bhfuil buntáistí ar leith ann ó thaobh foghlama trí mheán na Gaeilge agus cén dóigh a mbaineann tú úsáid as na buntáistí sin sa seomra ranga

As I said, as a teacher you must be knowledgeable about language and immersion pedagogy. So, in theory, everyone in our school understands that there is a difference, (there are) advantages associated with learning through Irish, and they know how to avail of those advantages in the classroom (Post-primary teacher).

In recent decades, research findings and academic literature have advanced our understanding of key components in essential immersion competences (Mac Corraidh, 2008; Ní Chathasaigh & Ó Ceallaigh, 2021; Ó Duibhir, 2018; Péterváry et al., 2014). This insight into the complexities inherent in the relationship between teacher knowledge and skills, characteristic of the effective immersion progamme, was evident in all interviews. In the view of a participant employed in an Irish-medium unit within an English-medium host school, the essential immersion knowledge base includes an understanding of different immersion models. Tedick and Lyster (2020) affirm the importance of this aspect of teacher knowledge, as a strand in the teacher's knowledge base. Researchers agree that specialist knowledge, strategies, and attitudes are interdependent and intersect in dynamic ways (Cammarata & Cavanagh, 2018; Cammarata & Ó Ceallaigh, 2020; Ó Ceallaigh & Ní Shéaghdha, 2017; Ó Ceallaigh et al., 2019).

Vision and Values

The vision and values discussed by the IM teachers were intrinsically interconnected with their knowledge and pedagogical skills. They demonstrated a commitment to creating a supportive Irish language environment for pupils, within and beyond the classroom. Although this responsibility was demanding, they were intolerant of missed opportunities to promote the use of Irish among pupils, such as a teacher who ignores pupils talking in English, instead of employing strategies to switch the conversation back to Irish. Four of the teachers referred to "ag cothú grá don Ghaeilge i measc na ndaltaí" (cultivating a love for Irish among the pupils) to describe aspects of their role as IM teachers. Sharing values with the pupils was a priority for those interviewed and the centrality of the pupils in their vision for IM education emerged during discussions:

B'fhéidir go mbaineann sé le fís agus b'fhéidir pearsantacht. Is dócha, má chreideann tú sa rud, má chreideann tú an luach, cé chomh luachmhar is atá sé, go mbeifeá bródúil as. Ceapaim go gcaithfidh sé a bheith i do chroí,

i do bholg, go gcreideann sibh go láidir. Creidimid mar mhúinteoirí sa tumoideachas, go gcreidimid go bhfuil luach faoi leith ag baint leis an taithí sin do na daltaí atá os ár gcomhair

Perhaps it relates to a vision or personality. Probably, if you believe in something, in its value, that it has value, then you will be proud of it. I believe it is in your heart, your gut, so you believe totally in it. As teachers, we believe in immersion education and we believe that the experience is particularly valuable for our pupils (Post-primary teacher).

The value set of the teachers included an acknowledgement of the importance of cultivating a positive relationship with parents. At times, interactions with parents and the community require sensitivity, a view that was expressed in the following comment:

Caithfidh dearcadh dearfach a bheith againn maidir leis an teanga a chothú i measc na bpáistí agus na dtuismitheoirí freisin. Caithfimid bheith báúil leis an phobal .... níl Gaeilge ag na tuismitheoirí agus caithfimid iad a mhealladh agus na páistí a mhealladh le Gaeilge a labhairt

We need to have a positive attitude towards developing the language among students and the parents also. We need to be sympathetic with the community …. parents do not have Irish and we should motivate them and the children to speak Irish (Primary teacher).

The benefit to pupils' progression was recognised by the teachers when parents are empowered to support their children's language development and learning (Kavanagh, 2013; Nig Uidhir et al., 2016):

Mothaíonn tú go bhfuil tionchar na dtuismitheoirí iontach tábhachtach fosta agus tá sé mar jab breise ag múinteoirí Gaelscoileanna mar caithfidh muid tuismitheoirí a spreagadh fosta chun tacaíocht a thabhairt do pháistí agus an teanga atá siad ag foghlaim

You feel that the influence of the parents is very important also and it is an additional task for the teachers in Gaelscoileanna because we have to motivate them to support their children as they learn the language (Primary teacher).

Teachers observed a lack of confidence among some parents when faced with the IM environment and referred to the effort that is required to overcome this barrier. The important goal of supporting parents to be active partners in their child's immersion education also presented one of the main challenges for teachers:

Níl Gaeilge ag formhór ár gcuid tuismitheoirí ach tá tú ag iarraidh iad a fháiltiú isteach agus dul amach as do bhealach le bheith fáiltiúil

Most of our parents do not have Irish but you try to welcome them in to the school. So you really go out of your way to be welcoming (Post-primary teacher).

The sensitivity to parents' needs was intuitive. Teachers described strategies for encouraging parents of young children to bring them to IM social and cultural events in the wider community, strengthening their exposure to Irish and opportunities for use. Issues around parental partnerships, raised by the teachers, reflect the complexities discussed in academic research (Kavanagh & Hickey, 2012; Mhic Mhathúna & Nic Fhionnlaoich, 2021; Nig Uidhir et al., 2016).

Early years' education in the IM sector is of strategic value as it provides the foundation for learning Irish throughout the education system. Many of the immersion-specific competences identified by teachers are considered critical to success in the early years' setting:

Sílim go bhfuil ról sa bhreis againn ag bun na scoile. Déanaimid seo tríd an súgradh ach tá jab breise againn mar tá muid ag cur eispéiris foghlama ar fáil ach tá an teanga i gcroílár mar sprioc againn. Tá sé iontach tábhachtach go bhfuil muid i gcónaí ag pleanáil don teanga, ag cur cuid mhór gníomhaíochtaí suimiúla ar fáil do na páistí le seans a thabhairt dóibh an Ghaeilge a chluinstin agus an Ghaeilge a chleachtadh

I think we have an additional job at the junior side of the school. We do this through play and we have an extra job because we are providing learning experiences with the language at the heart, as our goal. It is very important that we are always planning for the language, providing a wide range of interesting activities for children to enable them to use the Irish they hear and to practise it (Primary teacher).

Another dimension to the teachers' strategic vision for Irish and IM education reflected a commitment to protect the standard and use of Irish in the Gaeltacht:

Tá na múinteoirí sa scoil Gaeltachta chomh bródúil as an Ghaeilge atá acu. Le hocht mbliana anuas – ní tréimhse fhada í sin i saol múinteora – is cuimhin liom cé chomh saibhir agus a bhí Gaeilge na ndaltaí. Ach thugas faoi deara leis an chéad bhliain i mbliana go raibh an dinimic athraithe cuid mhór….. Muna n-éiríonn linn díriú isteach air seo i gceart agus tabhairt faoi le feasacht agus le saineolas de shaghas éigin, beidh fadhbanna ann thíos an bóthar

Teachers in the Gaeltacht school are so proud of their Irish. For the past eight years, and that's a long time in a teacher's life, I remember how rich the children's Irish was. But, this year, with first year [students], I see that dynamic changing a lot…. If we don't manage to address that properly, informed by awareness and expertise, we will have problems down the road (Post-primary teacher).

Other teachers, from outside Gaeltacht areas, referred to the Gaeltacht as a resource that supported their own professional development.

During interviews, teachers discussed the importance of finding opportunities for reflection on the IM profession and on ways to improve their practice. They gave many examples of school-based initiatives to support professional learning and considered responsibility for these initiatives to lie with the individual teacher as well as with management. One teacher described research projects conducted in their school and the resulting culture of enquiry that was created to inform change:

> *Tá X againn anois agus sin ról s'aici mar Cheannaire Foghlama. Tá sise ag amharc agus ag déanamh taighde ar: "cad é an chuma atá ar theagasc atá fiúntach agus éifeachtach ó thaobh an tumoideachais de?"*

> *We now have X (on the staff) and that is her role as a Learning Leader. She is researching the question: "what does effective, meaningful immersion teaching look like?"* (Post-primary teacher).

The IM teachers who took part in this study embraced a vision that was transformative and outward looking. The breadth of that vision is reflected in the range of themes and associated teacher competences referenced in the discussion above and presented in Table 2.

TABLE 2

Essential Competences for IM teachers, by Theme

1	Target Language Competence

- Accuracy and richness of teacher's language
- Language awareness – understanding linguistic structures of Irish and having the skill to manipulate the language and simplify its form to an age-appropriate level for pupils

2	Knowledge and Understanding of Immersion Education and Pedagogy

- Understanding the principles and practices of immersion education
- Understanding the process of second-language acquisition
- Extensive range of teaching strategies that promote pupil understanding and delivery of the curriculum in a target language
- Specialist approach to content-language integrated teaching, informed by research
- Differentiated teaching that takes cognisance of pupils' diverse home language backgrounds
- Specialist approach to teaching in IM early years
- Effective collaboration with IM classroom assistants
- Negotiating the relationship between Irish and English and resourcefulness in use of pupils' full linguistic repertoire

3	Vision and Values

- Competences specific to the IM unit: maximising opportunities for shared professional learning; problem solving; administrative challenges; promoting understanding of IM education among colleagues
- Commitment to IM ethos and cultural heritage
- Recognition of the Gaeltacht as an important yet fragile resource, impacting on prioritisation of language competence among teachers
- Leadership for improvement of teaching and learning. Application of process of reflection, identifying problem, researching and planning solution. Facilitating communication between schools for shared learning
- Commitment to continuous professional learning. Understanding of importance of partnership with parents and how to inform and guide parents to support learning of IM pupils

Conclusion

The research described in this article, and in the broader literature, suggests that the nature of IM teaching is extremely complex, important to study, and yet to be fully understood (Ó Ceallaigh et al., 2019; Nic Aindriú et al., 2021; Ó Duibhir, 2011). The identification of key values, pedagogical skills, and knowledge *specific* to the IM context is necessary, however, for promoting high levels of academic achievement and bilingual/biliteracy development. Effective pedagogy depends not only on behavioural change and the acquisition of new knowledge – it is intricately shaped,

as revealed in this research study, by unique personal and professional IM values, dispositions, contextual factors, and roles and relationships in and beyond the IM classroom. The development of supportive professional cultures within which IM teachers can learn is vitally important to cultivate essential immersion-specific competences for the IM sector. Opportunities for IM and Gaeltacht teachers to engage in ongoing, in-depth, systematic, and reflective examinations of their practice are critical. Teacher professional learning experiences should involve opportunities for collaboration, professional dialogue, and analysis. Both the quality of engagement, and the data in the larger study, from which the teacher interviews analysed in this article were drawn, were enriched by the opportunities for stakeholders, principals, teachers, and students, from diverse IM settings throughout Ireland, to meet one another and participate in shared fieldwork events.

The authors acknowledge the small scale of the study presented here. There is no attempt to generalise findings. Instead, the rich data shared by eight highly experienced teachers from diverse IM settings are offered as insightful and valuable feedback that has the potential to inform important further development of the IM sector. The generous contributions of the teachers are greatly appreciated.

North-South partnerships were found to be especially valuable to share, cultivate, and learn about the context-adequate use of immersion-specific knowledge. The establishment of closer collaboration offers potential for further shared learning and shared resources. This will support IM teachers across the island of Ireland to acquire the specialised knowledge required to enact the critical content-appropriate pedagogies of the IM sector.

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Appendix A

Teacher Interview

Ceisteanna Agallaimh ar Leith
Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Próifíl an Mhúinteora
Teacher Profile

- Cé mhéad bliain atá tú ag múineadh?
- Ar mhúin tú in aon scoil eile roimhe seo? Scoil Ghaeltachta/Lán-Ghaeilge/Scoil Bhéarla?
- Cad iad na cáilíochtaí atá agat?
- An bhfuil Gaeilge agat ó dhúchas?
- Cúlra scolaíochta
- Cad iad na hábhair a mhúineann tú? (Iar-bhunscoil amháin)
- Ar ullmhaigh do chlár oideachais tosaigh tú chun ábhair a mhúineadh trí mheán na Gaeilge?
- Cad iad na freagrachtaí sa bhreis atá ort mar mhúinteoir i scoil lán-Ghaeilge/Ghaeltachta?
- Ar fhreastail tú ar fhorbairt ghairmiúil a bhaineann le d'ábhar a mhúineadh trí Ghaeilge? (Iar-bhunscoil amháin)
- Ar fhreastail tú ar fhorbairt ghairmiúil a bhaineann le do chumas teanga a chur chun cinn mar mhúinteoir ábhair i ngaelcholáiste/mhúinteoir i ngaelscoil?

Téama 1 Treoirlínte Reatha
Current Guidelines

"Teachers will have developed, in Irish medium and other bilingual contexts, sufficient linguistic and pedagogical knowledge to teach the curriculum"

- Cad atá i gceist le ráiteas mar seo, dar leat?
- An bhfuil sainscileanna eile i gceist nach bhfuil clúdaithe i ráiteas mar seo?

Téama 2 Croíchumais an Mhúinteora Tumoideachais
Immersion Teacher Core Competences

- Cad iad na sainscileanna/saineolas atá ag teastáil ó mhúinteoirí an tumoideachais chun teagasc agus foghlaim ar ardchaighdeán a chur chun cinn trí Ghaeilge?
- Cad iad na toscaí a chuireann isteach ort agus tú ag teagasc ábhar agus teanga le chéile? (tuiscint an ábhair, úsáid na teanga)
- Cad é an dúshlán is mó a bhíonn le sárú agat agus tú ag teagasc d'ábhar trí mheán na Gaeilge?

Téama 3 Sainscileanna don Oideachas Ilteangach, Ilchultúrtha
Specific Skills for Multilingual and Multicultural Education

- Cad iad sainscileanna an tumoideachais a chuireann aon chomhthéacs oideachais atá ilteangach agus ilchultúrtha chun cinn?

Téama 4   An Múinteoir Tumoideachais mar Cheannaire
The Immersion Teacher as Leader

- Cad iad na riachtanais um fhorbairt ghairmiúil atá fós agat?
- Conas a chuirfeá na sainscileanna sin chun cinn?
- Cé atá freagrach as na sainscileanna seo a fhorbairt?
- Conas a chuireann tú an fhoghlaim chun cinn i measc na foirne?

Meaningful Methodologies in Initial Teacher Education Practicum Research

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Abstract

Teacher-education programmes in Ireland and elsewhere have undergone multiple reforms in the recent past, informed by an orthodoxy that spotlights teacher-education standards, inclusion, diversity, and social justice among other priorities. The preparation of student teachers (STs) to teach within this perpetually dynamic vista is both a challenge and an opportunity. School placement or practicum experiences present opportunities to conduct research for exploring how best to prepare STs to negotiate whatever "cultural flashpoints" present. The conundrum of which research methods to use within the practicum space, that is characterised by an intricate amalgam of stakeholders, ethical requirements, and teacher-education provision requirements, does not often feature in the literature, despite its import. This article is based on an action-research project undertaken by primary teacher educators in two higher-education institutes (HEIs) in Ireland, North and South. Highlighting the value of action research in the school-placement setting, the qualitative project generated a rich data tapestry from which key findings were extrapolated. Notably, for both teacher educators and STs, these included increased knowledge of research methods, and of how these can be applied to advance social-justice principles in primary-school classrooms, and greater appreciation of the ethical considerations required for both the conduct of research and the development of teacher professionalism. The use of visual strategies, by children who took part in the project, emerged as a successful communication medium in social-justice lessons, underlining the potential to achieve a more inclusive engagement by pupils in their own learning, both within, and possibly beyond, a social-justice knowledge domain.

Keywords: action research, initial teacher education, research in school-placement settings, social justice and inclusion, pupil engagement

We, as teacher educators, in two primary initial teacher education (ITE) providers, one in the Republic of Ireland (ROI) and one in Northern Ireland (NI) were aware of the many challenges in teacher education, but also of the widely acknowledged view of strong teacher education as a transformative, broadly reflective venture. Clarke et al. (2021), among others, describe how acquiring a teacher's identity is best understood as a dynamic process not only influenced by individual capacities or abilities (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Schepens et al., 2009) but also by externally endorsed aspirations "like mutual respect, pride in shared values and the conditions that support and foster these" (p. 89). While becoming a teacher means taking on all the complexity of schools and classrooms, the teaching profession must also function in an ever-evolving societal environment where economic rather than social purposes may be prioritised, leading to higher levels of educational testing, measuring, and rankings (McNamara et al., 2022). In a contemporary and globalised society, teacher quality and teacher education continue to be the focus of intense scrutiny and review in pursuit of accountability and high standards (Cochran-Smith, 2018; 2021).

In addition to these challenges, recognition of the contribution teachers can make by teaching for social justice also shaped the aims and scope of this cross-border teacher-education project. It was accepted that, against a backdrop of ongoing societal dissonance and disorder, schools and teachers can be a stabilising force in children's lives (Alexander, 2009). It was also assumed that classroom interaction offers an important medium for the transmission of social-justice principles and values. Kokka (2020) broadly defines social- justice pedagogies as those ways of teaching that are consciousness-raising, while Ayers et al. (2009) describe three principles ascribed to social-justice education – equity, activism, and social literacy. Informed by these concerns and insights, the project, on which this article is based, had the broad aim of exploring how teacher educators can support STs to engage with social justice to the benefit of their pupils. A report of the project and its findings was completed in 2022 (Ní Dhuinn et al., 2022).

This article is a response to a call for papers based on SCoTENS-funded research projects. Noting a lack of dedicated literature on the conduct of research in school-placement settings, the authors prioritised a context-appropriate ethical research design and methodology, with a view to addressing the following research question: *How can teacher educators design and implement ethically-grounded meaningful research methodologies within the ITE practicum space?* The question emerged from a recognition of the significance of the school placement for teacher education. It also reflected a commitment to developing research skills, another key element of ITE, while retaining the focus on social justice that had featured in the original research project.

The article begins with an overview of key features of ITE, briefly outlining the regulatory framework of the teaching profession in the ROI and in NI; some of the changes in

teacher-education programmes; the role of teacher educators; and the scope of the school-placement or practicum experience for student-teacher (ST) learning. Some research methodologies, associated with teaching, are then described. This is followed by a detailed account of the project research methodology, with particular reference to the cycle of phases involved in the action research that was conducted by teacher educators and STs. Several findings and lessons learned from the project are discussed at length, before concluding with a brief summary to identify its limitations and strengths and to address the research question that inspired this article.

The Initial Teacher Education Landscape

In Ireland, teacher-education provision is regulated by the Teaching Council in the South (www.teachingcouncil.ie) and by the General Teaching Council of Northern Ireland (https://gtcni.org.uk/) in the North. Clarke and O'Doherty (2021) note that teaching is a highly valued and "highly esteemed profession" (p. 69) in both jurisdictions and attracts motivated and "highly qualified candidates who elect to teach" (p. 63).

 ITE represents the first phase of the continuum of teacher education and as such is critical and formative in preparing teachers for entry into the profession. Across the island of Ireland, reviews of teacher-education programmes have been informed by both national and global policy priorities and teacher-education reform agendas. In NI, for example, the publication of *A fair start* (Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement, 2021) set out 47 action plans under eight key areas addressing educational underachievement. The report was established under the terms of the New Decade, New Approach political settlement of 2020 and commits to a significant long-lasting impact on children's learning. In the ROI, the reaccreditation of teacher-education programmes under the Céim framework of standards (Teaching Council, 2020) now includes core elements of social justice and citizenship, presenting opportunities to embed inclusive and socially just pedagogies, along with a range of research skills at the formative stages of the continuum of teacher education.

For teacher educators, the ongoing challenge remains of how best to support STs to progress with competence and to graduate into a fast-moving and challenging teaching environment. As part of their brief, teacher educators are tasked with preparing STs to teach for social justice by foregrounding the promotion of socially just and fair norms and mores as the foundation of their pedagogy. This aligns with Kavanagh et al.'s (2021) recognition of STs as "active agents of social change...[who should be provided with essential] opportunities to critically engage in informed discussion and ... to take action to challenge inequality and promote human rights, solidarity and justice" (p. 1). Teacher educators are further tasked with embedding key research skills into ITE programmes and facilitating STs to become reflective practitioners and researchers of their own practice (Teaching Council, 2020).

School placement is considered to be the fulcrum of ITE (Teaching Council, 2020) and thus holds a centrality within a busy programme architecture, populated by a range of internal (higher-education institutes/HEIs) and external (schools, pupils, teachers) stakeholders. Hall et al., (2018) comment on how, following the Sahlberg review (2012), the nomenclature was changed from "teaching practice" to "school placement" in the ROI, "emphasising the need for the student teacher to gain an understanding and experience of the wider culture and practices in a school" (p. 21). The significance of the practicum or school-placement experience (both terms are used in this article) has been acknowledged as vital for the growth of ST professional competence and as "the most powerful site of integration for student learning" (Waldron, 2014, p. 37).

Research Methodologies Associated With Teaching

A review of literature was conducted to identify research methods that were pedagogically informed and sustainable, and which could be adapted and used by STs during and after the research project. The review also took account of the involvement of primary-school children in the project. For example, participant-generated images (described below) were used where pupils articulated their reflections/ thoughts through drawings. This method is very appropriate for children and is not constrained by age, literacy, or numeracy levels.

Action Research

Action research, described by Koshy (2010) is a well-established methodology, suitable for practitioners in professional contexts to solve problems and improve practice. Forster and Eperjesi (2021) state that action research is especially relevant and used "within the teaching profession with particular applicability" (p. 3) for STs and early career teachers. They reference McNiff (2013) who claims that, "action refers to what you do" while "research refers to how you find out about what you do" (p. 9). Action research is characterised by both reflective and developmental cycles. A practitioner identifies an area of development in their practice, considers how they could establish how well they are currently doing, gathers evidence about their practice, and, through reflection, identifies specific actions that they might take to improve their practice. Further reflection and evaluation allow for identification of possible next steps, and so the cycle(s) of action research continue(s) (Forster & Eperjesi, 2021).

Visual Methods

Banks (2001) reminds us that the production and use of visual images in empirical, field-based research needs to be understood as one of several methods that a social researcher might employ. Mitchell (2011) notes that visual images offer an opportunity

to draw in the research participants to become central in the interpretive process. Sweetman (2009) observes that using visual methods can be helpful to operationalise a concept which may be difficult to otherwise uncover or investigate, while Rose (2014), referring to Knowles and Sweetman (2004), argues that using visual methods can "reveal what is hidden…and then taken for granted" (p. 32). Barthe's (2000) theory of denotation and connotation describes how the initial denotation enumerates the content of an image and the connotation then moves to a deeper and symbolic understanding of what is represented in the image.

Prosser and Loxley (2008) suggest three main modes of visual data construction that can be blended or used separately in a single study:

- Researcher-generated – images (still, moving, graphical) specifically constructed for a particular study

- Researcher-found – images, as well as artefacts, found or 'discovered', and considered relevant to a study

- Participant-generated – images or artefacts specifically created by research participants for a study.

Focus Groups

Commonly attached to participant image generation is the use of verbal elicitation, which usually utilises semi-structured or focus-group interviews to dialogically explore meanings in the data (Loxley et al., 2011). Focus groups involve small groups of people with particular characteristics convened for discussion of a particular topic (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Hennink et al. (2020) report that "well conducted focus group discussions can uncover unique perspectives… due to the group environment" (p. 138). Based on the extent to which studies rely on focus-group data, Morgan (1997) classifies focus groups as: (1) a self-contained method that serves as the primary data source; (2) a supplementary source of data in studies that rely on some other primary method; and (3) one of a number of combined methods of gathering data in multimethod studies. The fundamental difference between a focus group and an interview is the reliance on interaction within the focus group among the participants (Morgan, 1997). Furthermore, Hennink et al. (2020) discuss how using activities in a focus group, for example, drawing or sketching, can be an effective approach "to promote discussion, develop rapport and generate additional data" (p. 161).

Reflection and Reflective Practices

The use of reflective practice in teacher education has been explicated as a core element of the learning journey on which STs embark. It is frequently positioned within the plan-teach-reflect cycle. Brookfield (2017) emphasises the necessity of moving reflection beyond the focus on the "nuts and bolts" of teaching. He argues that without high levels of criticality, which unearth assumptions and encourage ideological critique, reflective practice can in fact become a platform to reinforce a set of beliefs and values rather than fully interrogate them (Liston et al., 2021). Within ITE, the value of reflective practice is not limited to STs. For teacher educators, embedded critical reflection within their own practice can aid the difficult task of teaching STs to be truly reflective practitioners, by moving beyond the question of how we "teach reflective practice to STs" (Liston et al., 2021) to guiding STs to a value-based reflective mind set.

Methods

Participants

The project research team (the authors of this article) consisted of three teacher educators and a research assistant who were advised and guided by an international research advisory team. The advisory team comprised six teacher-education experts, two of whom had coordinated and worked on SCoTENS projects previously and four others whose international experience in other jurisdictions was a significant advantage. All of the research was conducted within the practicum domains of the undergraduate ITE programmes.

The research participants included STs undertaking graded school-placement assessment, and primary pupils geographically located in different types of schools, North and South. To select the sample of participants, STs across Year 1, 2, and 3 undergraduate cohorts in both HEIs were provided with online information sessions and invited to enrol in the project. Final-year students were not invited to participate. There were no restrictions placed on enrolment of Year 1, 2, and 3 STs, and this led to a variety of schools and pupils being represented (e.g., primary, nursery, Irish-medium), depending on where STs were completing their school placement. In total, 43 STs expressed an initial interest, of whom 13 [NI, 5 (2 male, 3 female) ROI, 8 (all female)] went on to participate fully. All 43 STs were accepted onto the project, however 30 of these withdrew as the project progressed. All STs had responsibility for full-class teaching across the full spectrum of primary classes. Class sizes ranged from 22 to 30 pupils. More than 500 visual artefacts were generated by 347 pupil participants, North and South.

Ethical Considerations
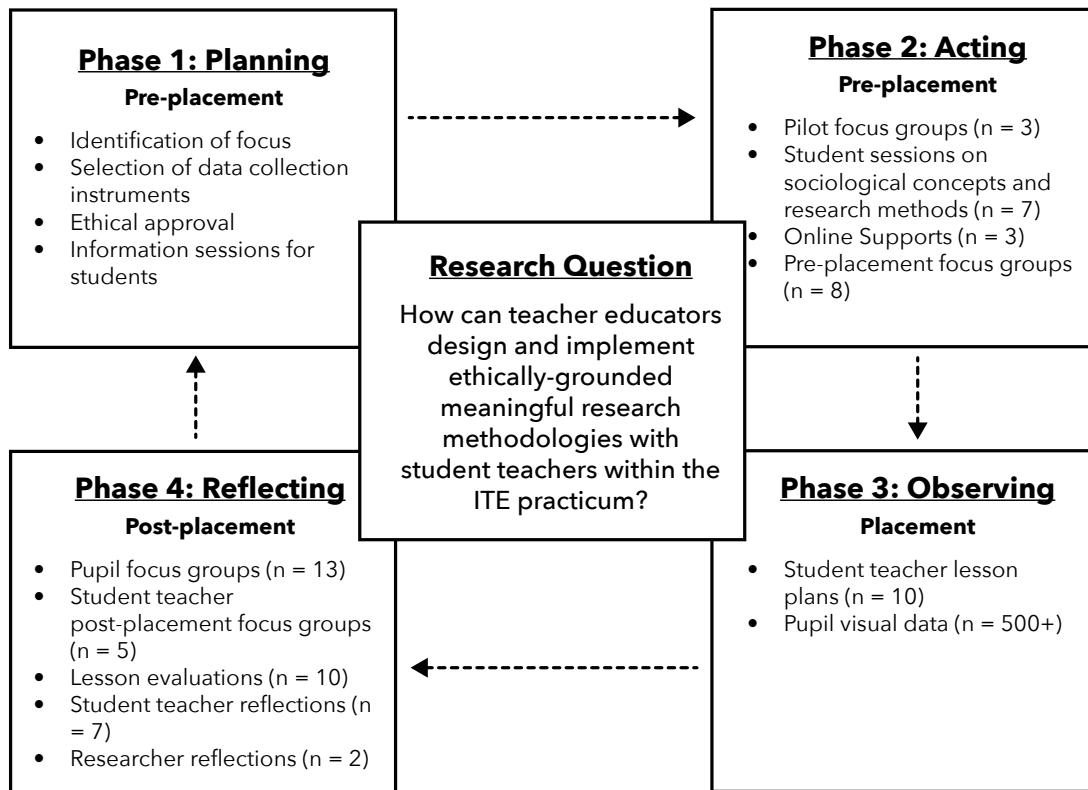
Ethical approval for the project was granted by ethics committees in both HEIs: Marino Institute of Education, Dublin, and St. Mary's University College, Belfast. The project was ethically challenging because of the nature of the participant groups. STs volunteered to participate in the project without incentives to do so. They were informed that their decision to take part, or not, would not impact on their school-placement grade and that they could withdraw at any time without giving reasons to do so. None of the research team acted as school-placement tutors or had any role in grading the ST participants. STs were not required to complete additional planning work for the project but instead used their day-to-day planning for lessons on school placement.

Informed consent was central to the involvement of the participants. Separate consent forms were issued to STs, pupils, and parents of pupils. Informed consent was sought from parents initially for their children to participate in the focus groups and subsequently from the children/pupils themselves.

At all stages of the research process, the researchers were aware of the need to ensure that the project should never harm anyone, intentionally or otherwise, and maintained an open and transparent modus operandi throughout. The research advisory team provided useful and supportive advice to the researchers about how best to work with STs and primary-age pupils.

Research Design

Ways to create an appropriate and workable research design and methodology for ITE research within the practicum domain were explored using an approach based on Zuber-Skeritt et al.'s (2015) "spiral of action research cycles (plan-act-observe-reflect)" (p.106). Figure 1 illustrates the broad range of project activities that were undertaken within each of the four phases of the action-research model.

FIGURE 1

Project Activities Associated With Each Action-Research Phase

Phase 1: Planning
Pre-placement

- Identification of focus
- Selection of data collection instruments
- Ethical approval
- Information sessions for students

Phase 2: Acting
Pre-placement

- Pilot focus groups (n = 3)
- Student sessions on sociological concepts and research methods (n = 7)
- Online Supports (n = 3)
- Pre-placement focus groups (n = 8)

Research Question
How can teacher educators design and implement ethically-grounded meaningful research methodologies with student teachers within the ITE practicum?

Phase 4: Reflecting
Post-placement

- Pupil focus groups (n = 13)
- Student teacher post-placement focus groups (n = 5)
- Lesson evaluations (n = 10)
- Student teacher reflections (n = 7)
- Researcher reflections (n = 2)

Phase 3: Observing
Placement

- Student teacher lesson plans (n = 10)
- Pupil visual data (n = 500+)

Phase 1: Planning

Phase 1 began with the identification of the topic of interest: the preparation of STs to teach social-justice concepts while on school placement. As detailed above, this stems from both a view of STs as agents of social change (Kavanagh et al., 2021), as well as a recognition of the duty of teacher educators to effectively prepare STs for this task.

Work on data-collection instruments was completed during Phase 1. The research team aimed to minimise errors by developing data-collection protocols that were clear, repeatable, and accurate. The selected research instruments (focus groups, reflections, lesson evaluations) were tested and re-tested by the researchers before they were satisfied that each instrument was relatively free from error. Several iterations of the focus-group schedules were developed, based on feedback from the pilot phases, before the final versions were agreed.

Phase 2: Acting

In the second phase of the action-research cycle, also led by the teacher educators, STs engaged in an online pre-placement preparatory programme. A number of pilot focus groups (n=3), both with STs and pupils (outside of the project) were conducted. Feedback from the pilots was used to inform the design and structure of the final drafts of focus-group schedules. Similarly, reflection templates were piloted with STs and pupils, and feedback was used to finalise the reflection sessions.

The sessions were both synchronous (live) (n=4) and asynchronous (pre-recorded) (n=3) to introduce STs to sociological and social-justice concepts (related to family and family influence on engagement in education, community, culture, identity, inclusion, diversity, and equity), and to research methods (focus groups and visual methods). The synchronous sessions also addressed how STs might take a topic/lesson in their existing schemes of work and teach it using a social-justice lens. Additionally, STs were provided with links to online supports (n=3) and with Zoom access to the research team for mentoring and support.

Following these preparatory sessions, pre-placement focus groups (n=8) were conducted with STs, focusing on teacher agency and educational achievement. These topics were chosen in order to explore and develop STs' understanding of themselves as agentic professionals, able to affect pupil outcomes and effect social change.

Phase 3: Observing

In the third phase of action research, the STs became the researchers as they taught their chosen social-justice lessons, and generated data (audio and visual) with their pupils[1]. STs were asked to pick two curriculum lessons from their school-placement teaching experience for the purpose of teaching through a social-justice lens. STs were permitted to choose the lessons from any primary curriculum area – thereby ensuring that no extra placement work was required for project participation, and helping STs see social-justice concerns as embedded in day-to-day teaching, rather than as add-ons. Examples of topics chosen by STs are: ambition, identity, gender roles, and "people who help". They were also asked to conduct two focus groups with their pupils using schedule templates provided by the research team. These focus groups explored social-justice concepts such as "fair" and "unfair", and used pupil-generated drawings as a basis for discussion. This allowed for data (visuals from both taught lessons and focus groups along with audio recordings of the focus groups) to be collected by the STs when working with their pupils as participants.

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1   Copies of the focus-group schedules for STs and pupils are available to view at:
     https://scotens.org/site/wp-content/uploads/SHARED-Research-Report.pdf

Phase 4: Reflecting

The fourth and final phase allowed STs and teacher educators to reflect on their experiences from the project, and to analyse the data collected. First, the research team conducted post-placement focus groups with the STs, exploring their experiences of, and reflections on, participation. These focus groups explored their beliefs and their understanding of social-justice concepts; if/how these had changed over the course of the project; and their reflections on the experience of teaching with a social-justice lens. Online collaborative whiteboards (jamboards) were used to capture some of the ideas from the focus groups. Separately, STs were also asked to provide written reflections on the lessons they had taught.

In addition, STs submitted their lesson plans for analysis, along with pupil visual and audio data from their taught lessons and pupil focus groups. ST focus groups (n=5) were analysed separately to pupil focus groups (n=13). Finally, the teacher educators captured their experiences of the project as written reflections that were analysed by the project research assistant.

This phase involved the analysis of data generated through:

- ST focus groups (n = 8)

- ST lesson plans submitted for topics taught through a social-justice lens (n = 10)

- Pupil focus groups (n =13) conducted by STs

- Pupil visual data (n = 500+) submitted by STs

- ST post-placement focus groups (n = 5)

- Lesson evaluations (n = 10)

- STs' written reflections (n = 7)

- Teacher educators' reflections (n = 2).

A Braun and Clarke's (2021) approach of reflexive reading and review cycles was used to analyse the data with the aid of MAXQDA software. Sets of initial codes were created to identify and make sense of emerging patterns. Similar codes were then combined to generate themes to present the narrative from the data.

Initial data cleaning revealed that some pupil focus-group data had to be excluded from analysis due to poor audio quality. Where possible, pupil visual data were supported by pupil audio data recordings.

Findings and Discussion

The Benefits of Action Research

Zuber-Skeritt et al.'s. (2015, p.105) description of "using a spiral of action research cycles (plan-act-observe-reflect)" reflects not only how action research looks in practice but also its potential use to describe how STs conduct their professional practice and immerse themselves into the role of teacher whilst on practicum experiences. Action research integrates research and action, theory and practice, research and development, creating knowledge and improving practice (Bradbury, 2015; McNiff, 2013). This aligns with the reflective process of becoming a teacher, and developing teacher agency and identity, while learning to teach on the school placement. It can therefore be argued that a symbiotic relationship exists between action research and the practicum experience.

An action-research methodology for the project described in this article not only presented as a "good fit", but also offered multiple learning opportunities particularly for the research team and the STs. These opportunities included the space to introduce STs to qualitative research skills on how to: plan to teach, conduct focus groups using visual stimuli, differentiate and assess using a social-justice lens, reflect on their own practice while managing multiple integrities (Drake & Heath, 2008), and challenge underlying philosophical and practitioner assumptions (Brookfield, 2017). In the same way that Brookfield advises moving beyond the "nuts and bolts" of teaching to embrace becoming a reflective practitioner, a further extension of this might include becoming a reflective researcher/practitioner to encapsulate the totality of becoming a *reflective teacher as researcher*.

The Development of Teacher Agency

The authors argue that extended and differentiated school-placement opportunities, as required within the Céim framework (Teaching Council, 2020), offer teacher educators and STs the freedom to think differently about how best to maximise and optimise the STs' overall experience on the practicum within the totality of the development of (student) teacher agency. Within the four-year undergraduate ITE programmes, there is significant opportunity to progress STs' professional learning incrementally and iteratively. Practicum experiences focused on pedagogically-informed research and reflective skills can provide opportunities to build agency and develop STs' professional identities. Teacher agency is recognised as a crucial element in shaping teachers' professional identities (Eteläpelto et al., 2013) and decision-making skills (Sannino, 2010). Teacher motivation and sustainability in the profession are enhanced by reflection on one's own professional identity (Wang & Zhang, 2021). Goodwin

(2020) reminds us that the collective agency and communal power of teachers can have a strong impact on teaching and learning. This collective efficacy is realised through multiple levels of agency, from that of individual teachers, driven by their own mind set and values, to that of the system in which they work (Correll, 2017).

The Social-Justice Lens

In terms of teaching for social justice, a collective agency and communal power are to be welcomed and encouraged as a driving force of change (Williams, 2018). This contrasts starkly with what Reay (2022) describes as a "growing mistrust and ignorance of those who are different from ourselves" (p. 429). STs in this research project described how focus groups allowed a safe environment for pupils to share their experiences and opinions. They learned to listen to each other and to understand differences and similarities around them: "I learnt how to create an open and safe environment with the children in the focus group especially with my tone of voice and presence in the room". STs also reported that, in the lessons and class discussions, most pupils were willing to open up and talk about their experiences: "The responses and examples given by the pupils exceeded my expectations, as I didn't think seven to eight year olds would be able to understand the terms and principles surrounding social justice such as equality, identity, and society". The findings point to the powerful impact of pedagogic approaches "underpinned by a social justice lens that accentuates care, wellbeing, sense of belonging and life satisfaction" (Reay, 2022, p. 426). The use of innovative and research-informed pedagogies enabled STs to address the issues of difference and diversity in contemporary society with their pupils who also benefitted from participation in this project.

Impact of Methodology on Pedagogy

The STs involved in this project identified and implemented social justice-based pedagogies while teaching the national curriculum on their school placements and, in so doing, demonstrated professional learning and growth. The plan-act-observe-reflect cycles afforded them opportunities to use and reflect on social-justice pedagogies that were consciousness-raising (Kokka, 2020) for both themselves and their pupils. The preparatory programmes on research methods, sociological concepts, and social-justice lesson planning enabled the STs to engage with the three knowledge domains of social-justice teaching – knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and content knowledge (Dyches & Boyd, 2017). Mayne (2019) reflects that this focus on social-justice knowledge domains allows STs to illuminate their voices inside and outside of the classroom. The feedback from STs shows that the project had a transformative impact on STs' confidence, on their mind sets about teaching, and on their understanding of home-school connections. The preparatory programmes enabled STs to see things

differently in relation to how they used a social-justice (equity) mind set in their pedagogy. One stand-out example is where an infant-class ST provided an option to paint through fingers, rather than draw using a pencil, to children who might not have advanced motor skills, thereby ensuring an inclusive approach in her teaching.

Findings from the action-research project give encouragement for future research projects and/or ST research activities at various stages of the ITE practicum experience. Wherever possible, therefore, the authors advocate that Foundation and Curriculum Studies[2] be integrated across preparation activities and practicum experiences, rather than taught as niche discrete modules delivered through campus-based settings.

Visuals

STs utilised visual strategies both in the lessons they taught and during the focus groups. Figure 2 illustrates some examples of visuals produced by pupils in a focus-group discussion on gender, ability, and disability in the workplace. The objective of using visuals was to enhance pupils' engagement and to offer an inclusive methodology to pupils of all ages to participate in the project activities. STs reported that pupils were excited about drawing pictures, preferred drawings over discussion, and focused on tiny details in their drawings to portray their views and experiences. In focus-group discussions, pupils were asked to create drawings and respond to verbal questioning about their work and the work of their peers. STs felt that the focus groups allowed pupils to think-pair-share their opinions and ideas on social justice. From a methodological perspective, the use of visuals as stimuli for the focus groups was highly successful and, when coupled with appropriate questioning techniques, enabled children to articulate both the connotation (the content) and denotation (the representation) (Barthes, 2000) of the images they had created. The context of the children's participant-generated images gave the images meaning and added a sociological text, which the STs and the research team further analysed to establish meaning and understand the children's inputs. Using focus groups, and visual and audio stimuli in this way, offered STs and researchers an opportunity to explore concepts with children that may not have been otherwise possible. Based on this experience, the authors recommend the use of visual stimuli, followed by structured conversations guided by an ST, in future practicum research projects. The option to draw and/or paint their message offered children an inclusive and level playing field from which to participate, articulate their viewpoints, and develop their own agency and belief system.

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2   Foundation and Curriculum Studies included sociology of education, educational psychology, philosophy of education, history of education, and theories of curriculum and assessment

FIGURE 2

Pupil Visual Data Exemplars

Pupil Participation
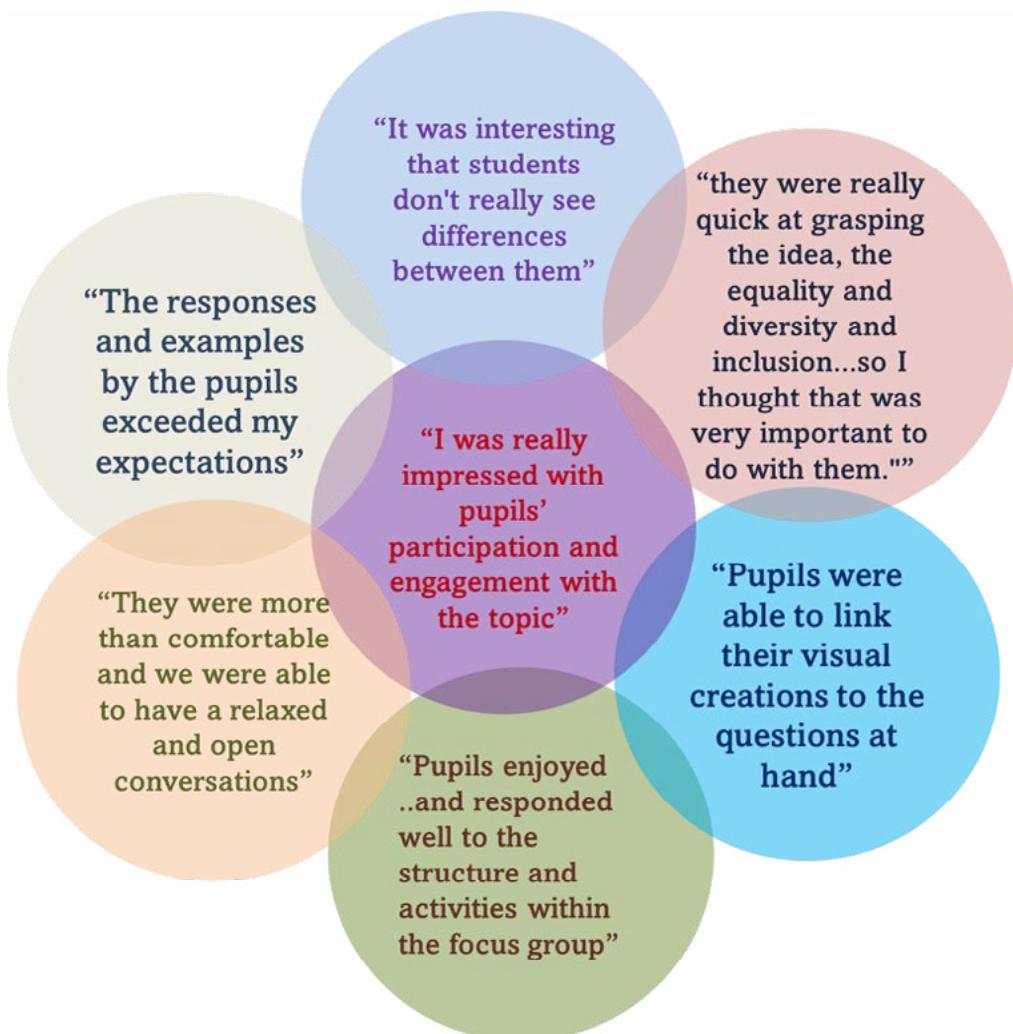
It can be challenging to include children (pupils) and vulnerable adults in research projects. Issues of consent, availability, literacy, numeracy and language can exclude them from research opportunities, and deny their voice in the research domain. O'Toole et al. (2019), drawing on the work of Alanen et al. (2015), underscore the importance of educational research in "understanding children's learning as embedded in the social, cultural and family contexts in which it occurs" (p. 3). The authors make a strong case for the inclusion of children and young people in primary and post-primary schools in research that concerns them and that relates to them.

The pupil responses obtained in this project highlight the need to encourage pupils to engage with social-justice principles and to become active citizens as they learn to negotiate various global and local issues through appropriate pedagogies and experiences. The objective of promoting pupil advocacy of social justice, by generating a "proactive stance of addressing social inequity" (Phillips, 2010, p. 2), is a powerful mechanism to promote the development of "sympathetic imagination"

(Nussbaum, 1997, p. 3). This enables pupils to think and act with empathy, and with care and compassion for others, respecting difference and embracing diversity. STs reported how their pupils viewed complex concepts in a more straightforward and simple way, demonstrating a readiness to embrace difference and diversity. Teacher educators and STs should be encouraged therefore to embrace opportunities to work with and listen to children and adolescents, and to value their contribution to research on issues that affect them. Figure 3 includes a selection of STs' views regarding their pupils' engagement. The STs' reflections evidence how primary pupils became active participants in a cross-border research project, engaged with complex sociological concepts, and contributed to the discourse of teaching for and learning about social-justice knowledge. The promotion of similar research approaches could enhance pupil voice and agency within our education system and, more broadly, within society.

FIGURE 3

Student Teachers' Reflections on Pupils' Engagement

Ethical Considerations

Reflecting on the project findings, the authors advocate that all STs should be guided and supported to make ethical decisions in relation to their planning, teaching, assessing, differentiation, and research activities, so that links are made between ethical decision-making and the development of professionalism as teachers. STs who took part in the project showed care and compassion when working with pupils and they demonstrated a strong commitment to their own professional development in how they acted with integrity and respect, particularly during the focus-group aspects of the research. The ethical management of the project required a high level of rigour and scrutiny by the research team and by the STs in their dual role of teacher and researcher. Clear ethical guidelines for STs, informed by HEI ethics committees' decisions, are essential to safeguarding STs and pupils involved in research on the practicum. A concern for teacher educators is how best to equip STs to be ethical researchers and to avoid ethical errors, while encouraging them to participate and engage in research activities. There is, therefore, a "thin line" and occasionally a "disorienting dilemma" (Mezirow, 1978) between, on the one hand, cautioning STs when initiating a research project with children and/or vulnerable adults and, on the other, encouraging STs to become active researchers of their own practice. It is, however, important that STs are given opportunities to learn to deal with, and negotiate their way through, professional and ethical dilemmas within the practicum.

Conclusion

This article set out to explore the question of how teacher educators can design and implement socially-just, ethically-grounded, and meaningful research methodologies within the ITE practicum, a contested and busy space with a crowded architecture and many layers of assessment. Based on an action-research cross-border project undertaken by primary teacher educators in two HEIs in Ireland, North and South, the action and research involved STs on school placement and their pupils. The findings of the project underline the scope that exists within the practicum space for teacher educators and STs to enhance and progress their own learning in a way that engages and ultimately benefits pupils. In conclusion, the authors/ teacher educators argue for the pursuit of research activities and research-informed and -influenced methodologies across the full extent of the ITE school-placement experience.

A limitation of the project that should be acknowledged is the fact that it was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, which resulted in a different school-placement experience overall. Not all of the participating STs managed to teach all of the social-justice lessons while in school, for example, given the unpredictability of school circumstances at the time. A further limitation to note relates to the busyness of school placement for STs and consequent levels of recruitment, participation, and

participant attrition, all of which contributed to reducing the size of the project.

Positives to take away from the experience include the fact that STs are motivated to teach for social justice and expressed a desire to engage in conversations about social justice. In answer to the question that inspired this article, it is clear that, by using an action-research methodology, teacher educators can support STs to teach through a social-justice lens within current ITE structures. That this may be further enhanced through new regulatory requirements is to be welcomed.

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Evaluating Professional Learning From Integrated Arts Education Practices in Initial Teacher Education

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Abstract

Four teacher educators working in two higher-education institutes conducted a SCoTENS-funded self-study of possibilities and pitfalls of integrated arts practices in initial teacher education. Issues examined include most effective interdisciplinary methods, resolutions to issues encountered, professional development, and lived experiences. Using Guskey's five levels of professional development evaluation model as a lens for critique, and the SCoTENS research report as a data source, this article describes the nature and quality of professional learning stemming from integrated arts education practices. Findings indicate that all five levels of professional development had progressed. De-privatisation of practice, reciprocal exchange, and shared knowledge co-creation resulted in enjoyable and fulfilling differences to practice regarding methodologies, collaboration, and reflexivity. Benefits to students included a superior learning experience, increased theoretical insight, a better learner-teacher relationship, and increased modelling of practice. Guskey's model, though adequate in many respects, needed extending to account for the professional transformation experienced through engagement with integrated arts education practices and which encompassed other ways of perceiving, working, and being.

Keywords: integrated arts teacher education, interdisciplinarity, professional learning evaluation, self-study

Developing an arts education practice in initial teacher education is an ongoing process that needs to be sustained with continuous professional learning. The opportunity to open and de-privatise practice with other teacher arts educators is, however, more

difficult to accommodate in smaller higher-education institutes with single-person departments. Research indicates that professional learning communities have considerable potential for continuing professional development (CPD) as they foster collaborative learning among colleagues (Grennan, 2017). As four teacher educators in the arts, we conducted a SCoTENS-funded self-study of teacher-education practices regarding the Possibilities and Pitfalls of Arts INTegration (acronymised as PAINT) in initial teacher education. Its focus on interdisciplinarity was timely considering recent primary curriculum change and teacher-education programme developments to promote increased connectivism in learning (NCCA, 2020; Teaching Council, 2020). Using our report of the study (Flannery et al., 2021) as the key data source, this article examines and re-presents the types and quality of our professional learning from integrated arts education practices, drawing on Guskey's five critical levels of professional development evaluation.

Integrated Arts Education Practices

Cross-curricular learning is a longstanding practice in education that has well-documented benefits from both a teaching and learning perspective (Barnes, 2015, 2011; Moore, 2009; Pritchard, 2013). Transcending traditional subject divides, this approach is more holistic, comprehensive, effective, inclusive, creative, and memorable (Barnes, 2015; Moore, 2009; Pritchard, 2013; Sousa & Pilecki, 2013). As cross-curricular learning is less linear in design and more immersive in approach, it reflects how children naturally play and learn (Burnaford et al., 2007).

Integrated arts education practices (IAEP) comprise teaching and learning in addition to assessment and research practices that involve the integration of the arts disciplines alone. Many artists express themselves through multimodal work, whereby they explore, express and engage in a multisensory manner by visual, aural, oral, and kinaesthetic means. IAEP in primary schools comprise the cross-curricular integration of any arts discipline such as dance, drama, music, and the visual arts. As artistic expression is often a response to artists' observations, experiences, and questions about the world, artworks lend themselves as effective stimuli and starting points for cross-curricular connections.

Creative Habits of Mind

A key rationale for arts integration with non-arts disciplines is the transferability of studio habits (Hogan, et al., 2018) identified as:

- developing craft from technique and studio practice

- engaging and persisting from finding passion

- envisioning from imagining and planning

- expressing oneself through finding and showing meaning

- observing through looking closely

- reflecting through questioning, explaining, and evaluating

- stretching and exploring through play and using mistakes and discovery

- understanding art worlds.

These eight studio habits echo many of the skills and dispositions underpinning the so-called habits of mind (Costa & Kallick, 2008), and creative habits of mind (Lucas, 2016; Lucas et al., 2012). For example, the studio habit of *engaging and persisting* entails sticking with difficulty, daring to be different, and tolerating uncertainty. The studio habit of *reflecting* entails wondering and thinking about your thinking. The studio habit of *stretching and exploring* entails investigating, playing with possibilities, making connections, and remaining open to continuous learning.

Types of Arts Integration

Notwithstanding the benefits, the arts do not always fare well from cross-curricular integration. Bresler (1995) describes four arts integration relationships that pervade education. These include subservient, affective, social, and co-equal arts integration. The first three types do not value the arts as disciplines. Subservient arts integration inadvertently reduces the arts to methodologies for learning, and little learning in, or about, the arts occurs. Often, the quality of artistic expression is recipe-orientated, overly prescriptive, and somewhat contrived. Affective arts integration utilises the arts mainly in terms of evoking feelings and nurturing self-expression. Social arts integration integrates the arts with non-arts disciplines for the purpose of developing learners' communication and interpersonal skills.

It is only through the fourth type of co-equal arts integration relationship that both the arts and non-arts disciplines are valued equally (Bresler, 1995). This latter integrated arrangement ensures that the arts retain their subject integrity and that there is development of knowledge, concepts, skills, and values in the arts disciplines involved. To achieve a balance between interconnected and discipline-specific learning, Barnes (2015) encourages a double-focused approach that permits time for discrete subject teaching as well as integrated sessions. This aligns with Bresler's co-equal arts integration scenario. Barnes advises that newly qualified teachers should integrate no more than three subjects, since it takes a highly experienced practitioner to orchestrate learning with a greater number of curriculum areas. From a learner voice and choice perspective, he encourages opportunistic integration whereby learning

can digress off the planned track to pursue new questions arising from recent learning and adventure into the unknown. He recommends that any arts integration should culminate in a *performance of understanding* that illustrates students' learning by any means or mode.

Professional Learning

In Ireland, teachers' experiences of professional learning are characterised by performative and transformative learning (Sugrue, 2011). The former focuses on equipping teachers with measurable knowledge and skills and compliance with departmental expectations and standards, whereas the latter comprises critical thinking, collaboration, and creation. Groups of professionals who critically reflect upon their practice in a sustained, inclusive, and collaborative manner, with the shared aim of improving personal efficacy, can be described as a professional learning community (Grennan, 2017; Stoll et al., 2006). While some CPD can be removed from practice, limited by insufficient time or lack of follow-up supports, or have a focus more so on compliance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Kennedy, 2005; Sugrue, 2011), CPD from a professional learning community has the potential to be more practice-focused, prolonged, and participative (Thompson & Wiliam, 2007).

This kind of interactive exchange embodies "critical process elements needed for professional development to result in actual changes in teacher practice" (Thompson & Wiliam, 2007, p. 15) and holds "real promise for improving the learning of both students and educators, and for encouraging continued innovation and improvement" (Kaagan & Headley, 2010, p. xiii). Participants share norms and values, de-privatise their practice, and have a collective focus on pupils' learning that is explored through reflective dialogue and collaboration (Kruse et al., 1994). The exchanging of stories, challenges, and resolutions from practice develops meaningful interpersonal relationships in the professional learning community, which are considered critical for shared problem solving and knowledge construction (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Grennan 2017). This article evaluates the type and quality of CPD within a professional learning community comprising four teacher arts educators engaged in IAEP-focused self-study research.

Guskey's Levels of Professional Learning

Guskey's five levels of professional learning evaluation model was adopted because of its prior application to physical, interdisciplinary, multiliteracy and higher-education contexts (Dauenhauer et al., 2022; Garone et al., 2022; Visser et al., 2013). Guskey (1999, 2002, 2016) posits that effective professional learning evaluation requires consideration of five critical stages or levels of information. Based on an adaption of Kirkpatrick's (1998) model for judging the effectiveness of CPD programmes in

industry, Guskey's five-level model is hierarchically arranged. Success at higher levels is usually dependent on progress made at lower levels.

The first (most common) level of evaluation examines participants' reactions to the professional learning experience. Questions focus on whether participants liked the experience and whether they felt their time was well spent. The second level focuses on determining any new knowledge, skills, and perhaps attitudes or dispositions that participants gain (Guskey, 2002). At the third level, the focus shifts from participants to organisational dimensions that may be critical to the success of the professional learning experience. Questions at this level ask whether the professional learning promoted changes that align with the mission of the programme/organisation and if sufficient resources had been made available, including time for sharing and reflection. Issues such as these often play a large part in determining the success of any professional learning (Guskey, 2016). At level four, the key question asks whether the new knowledge and skills that participants learned had made a difference in their professional practice. To answer this question, Guskey advises that sufficient time must pass after the learning experience to allow participants to adapt the new ideas and practices to their settings. Level five concerns evaluation of the impact of professional learning on students; key questions focus on the benefits of professional learning – attainment, progress, attitudinal or behavioural – and how these are evaluated and measured. In this article, the PAINT self-study research report is re-examined (Flannery et al., 2021), focusing on teacher arts educators' professional learning from IAEP in initial teacher education through the lens of Guskey.

Criticisms of Guskey's Model

Coldwell and Simkins (2010) assert that Guskey's model does not address the complexity of professional learning, is overly focused on teacher change as the outcome of professional development, and overlooks the ways in which this can be situated within broader social and cultural contexts. They propose further exploration of professional development within these contexts that include institutional cultures, power dynamics, and social identities. Compen et al. (2019) posit that Guskey's model has limitations in capturing the dynamic and complex nature of teacher professional development. They think it is too focused on a single point in time, rather than factoring in its ongoing and iterative nature. While Guskey's model recognises the importance of organisational support and change, Coldwell and Simkins (2010) believe it downplays other features of this level, such as organisational culture, social norms, and power dynamics.

Merchie et al. (2016) contend that Guskey's model is overly simplistic compared to one that accounts for the diversity of teachers and the varied social and cultural contexts in which they work. Savva (2019), who opted for a multiliteracies professional development model characterised by multiliteracy approaches, creative use of

technologies, and multimodal experiences, argues that Guskey's model does not tailor professional learning to meet the specific needs of teachers in diverse educational contexts. Notwithstanding those methodological limitations, Guskey's model was retained in this study because it offered an initial, straightforward, framework for analysis. Yet, it had to be extended to account for the different contexts and identities experienced as arts educators, discussed further in the findings.

Reflexivity, Professional Learning, and Qualitative Research

Reflexivity can be described as finding ways to self-question attitudes, values, thoughts, assumptions, prejudices and habitual actions to understand our roles in relation to those of others (Bolton, 2009; Bolton & Delderfield, 2018). A critical developmental process for any educator/researcher, it involves becoming aware of the way one is experienced and perceived by others and of the limits of one's knowledge and related practice. The role of a trusted other is vital. It enables researchers to recognise how their experiences, viewpoints, and backgrounds can skew or impact research findings (Tufford & Newman, 2012). Sharing one's positionality about a topic helps the reader glean the truths from one's research (Holmes, 2020). The reflective process afforded by Guskey's model enabled self-evaluation of research and arts educator practices in the wake of the PAINT project.

The PAINT Self-Study Project

The PAINT self-study project involved four teacher arts educators/researchers. Two of the four were teaching music and visual arts at Marino Institute of Education (MIE), Dublin; the other two were teaching music and art and design at Stranmillis University College (SUC), Belfast. The project proposal was drafted at MIE and advertised via the SCoTENS website. Following a response from SUC to a call for partnership, the four teacher arts educators/researchers co-designed a two-phased study of teacher-education practices project comprising two distinct self-study cases.

In line with self-study research practice, the importance of "dialogic" self-reflexivity was recognised in the project (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2015). Phase 1 of PAINT was characterised by an iterative process of self-study practice and methods, and colleague conversations within and across each case. This further intensified in Phase 2 when the researchers came together as a group to share and analyse the emerging findings from each case. These collaborative moments held them accountable for systematic and careful data collection, helped them "to consider alternative perspectives", and resulted in a deeper process of shared meaning-making (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2015, p.181).

Phase 1

Phase one of PAINT was conducted separately in each higher-education institute. This was important as there were distinct differences between the two sets of partners regarding IAEP. The MIE researchers had been exploring different IAEP iterations for a decade through arts education curriculum studies with whole-year groups of B.Ed. students (n = 115). It became a formal compulsory module component of the B.Ed. programme assessed by collaborative integrated arts performance and individual written reflection. In contrast, the SUC researchers were exploring non-assessed IAEP for one year with a smaller group of music/art and design specialist B.Ed. students (n = 19).

Framed by a joint literature review on arts education, interdisciplinarity, creativity and collaborative learning, each set of researchers composed discrete research questions concerning IAEP at their institute (Table 1), before formulating joint research questions designed to investigate differences and similarities between teacher arts educators' lived experiences of IAEP. The joint questions also sought to identify the most effective interdisciplinary methods, any successful resolutions to challenges encountered, and the ways in which teacher arts educators develop professionally because of IAEP. The researchers submitted their project design to SCoTENS, and were successful in their application for funding.

TABLE 1

Phase 1 Research Questions, by Self-Study Case

SUC self-study case: 1 year of IAEP	MIE self-study case: 10 years of IAEP
1. How can we develop students' confidence and subject-specific skills to lead arts in the primary school?	1. Is there added value in having an integrated arts component in pre-service teacher education?
2. What can initial teacher educators in the arts learn from each other, in terms of their students' engagement with the creative process?	2. How do we overcome the challenges of collaborative integrated arts approaches?
3. Is it valuable to establish more collaboration and communication between art and music students in future courses?	3. How does the utilisation of different analogue and digital technologies enhance interdisciplinary arts?
3a. If so, what forms may that take?	
	4. How have we developed professionally through interdisciplinary arts?

In addition to the two concurrent self-study cases at MIE and SUC, informed by questions in Table 1, the MIE researchers engaged in critical collaborative inquiry conversations that looked back over a decade of IAEP programme developments at their institute (Table 2). The reflective framework for MIE meetings was based on Gibbs' six-stage Reflective Cycle comprising description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion, and action plan. This framework facilitated systematic structured debriefing and analysis of a repeated experience, while ensuring that the content of each meeting remained relevant and to the point (Gibbs, 1988; Wain, 2017). Meanwhile, the SUC researchers co-reflected on recently introduced IAEP initiatives with a focus on looking forward to future development. They engaged in three online critical conversations on IAEP that utilised a reflective framework based on Brookfield's (2017) four lenses of critical reflection relating to theory, colleagues, self, and students (Table 2).

TABLE 2

Phase 1 Conversations/Meetings, by Self-Study Case

Focus of SUC conversations	Focus of MIE meetings
Conversation 1: Starting points. Our artistic and teaching identities: Who are we and what do we want to achieve? September 2020	Meeting 1: Reviewing IAEP in 2010 and 2011 comprising collaborative visual artwork as a stimulus for composing
Conversation 2: Sharing teaching evaluations. What is happening? November 2020 mid-teaching phase	Meeting 2: Reviewing IAEP in 2012 and 2013 comprising music composing and responding with shadow puppetry performance
Conversation 3: Reflection on students' work and reflections. Action planning. December 2020 post-teaching and assessment evaluation	Meeting 3: Reviewing IAEP in 2014, 2015, and 2016 comprising music composing and responding with overhead project performance
	Meeting 4: Reviewing IAEP in 2017, 2018, and 2019 comprising music composing and crankie performance
	Meeting 5: Reviewing IAEP in 2020 comprising music composing-led IAEP with digital technology

Note: A crankie is a moving illustrated scroll for storytelling performance.

Phase 2

Having completed the site-specific cases, all four researchers came together for Phase 2 of PAINT and engaged in further critical collaborative inquiry to analyse and extract meta-themes from their case findings. Data gleaned from both self-study cases were coded using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic coding strategy entailing familiarisation with data, generation of initial codes, combining codes into themes, reviewing potential themes, defining and naming themes and, finally, producing a report. The meta-themes were presented via an adaption of Brookfield's (2017) four lenses: theory, students, and teacher educator, the latter being combined from self and colleagues.

Ten meta-themes emerged from examining discrete findings and identifying commonality between the two cases in relation to the project's shared research questions. These are listed in Table 3. Findings showed that IAEP in primary teacher education triggered a move from compartmentalised to more holistic thinking. Teacher arts educators acquired a greater understanding and appreciation for multimodal and holistic processes, methodologies, and performances, enabling them to think about what they valued in their respective practices, and how IAEP was impacting course content and approaches. They found that, because of their engagement with IAEP, they had become more attuned to their students' varying dispositions towards the arts and creativity.

TABLE 3

Phase 2 Shared Research Questions and Meta-Themes

Shared research questions	Emergent themes
What are the similarities between our lived experiences of orchestrating IAEP with pre-service primary school teachers?	1. Holism (activating intellect, emotions, imagination, and body) and multi-modality (visual, aural, oral, kinaesthetic responses) 2. Creative habits of mind development
What are the differences between our lived experiences of orchestrating IAEP with pre-service primary school teachers?	1. Reflexivity: Looking back and looking forward 2. Process, performance, and programme
How can we resolve the issues we encounter when engaging pre-service primary school teachers in IAEP?	1. Preliminary and responsive planning, communication, and organisation 2. Introducing relevant theory to student teachers
What are the most effective methods to improve the quality of IAEP with pre-service teachers?	1. Hands-on experiential learning 2. Performing and reflecting understanding
How have we professionally developed as teacher educators because of this collaborative research?	1. Conceptual, theoretical, and methodological reciprocity 2. Re-evaluation of teacher-educator role

A final PAINT report (Flannery et al., 2021) was co-written by the full research team, in which two key messages were identified in relation to the teacher arts educators' own professional development: 1) the reciprocal, conceptual, theoretical, and methodological exchange regarding music and visual arts/art and design education; and 2) the re-evaluation of their teacher-educator role because of IAEP.

Phase 3

Two of the four teacher arts educators moved to other higher-education institutes during the report-writing process. As group members were now affiliated to four higher-education institutes, motivation grew to undertake a Phase 3 of collaborative research. Additionally, the programmes in two of these institutes were undergoing a Teaching Council re-accreditation and quality review. Other important happenings regarding the professional development of teachers included the recent publication of an evaluation framework for teachers' professional learning in Ireland (Gilleece et al., 2023) and the national professional development framework for those who teach in higher education (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning

in Higher Education, 2016). In the midst of these developments, teacher arts educator professional learning seemed a relevant and worthwhile topic to explore.

Phase 3 of the PAINT project consisted of a thematic analysis of the final PAINT report (Flannery et al., 2021). Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that can promote reflexivity, provide a deeper understanding of one's professional development, and identify areas for improvement. A deductive approach was adopted using Guskey's five levels of professional learning as a priori codes. Before examining the data, these were identified as: enjoyment, fulfilment, new knowledge, new skills, new dispositions, organisational accommodations, organisational supports, differences to teacher arts educator practice, and benefits to students. The coding process was informed by Braun and Clarke's steps in thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2016; Clarke & Braun, 2016). This entailed reading, highlighting, coding, extracting, and categorising data. Semantic and latent coding were utilised so that coding the report involved looking at what was written, and beyond what was written (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A codebook approach was adopted, whereby the researchers shared a digital codebook created in Excel. A codebook is a tool to aid the analysis of large qualitative datasets. It helps define the codes and themes, by giving detailed descriptions and restrictions on what can be included within a given code. It also provides concrete examples. One researcher led the coding process while the other three also analysed data and contributed as appropriate. All four researchers discussed the coding process and agreed the emergent themes derived from the data. Table 4 shows excerpts from the shared codebook.

TABLE 4

Codebook Excerpts Applied to Guskey's Five-Level Professional Learning Model

Level	Code	Description	Reference
1. Participants' reactions	Enjoyment Fulfilment	Enjoying the visual effects using overhead projector	Students enjoyed discovering different visual effects projected onto the screen using their hands, two dimensional cut-outs and three dimensional objects
	Enjoyment Fulfilment	Enjoyment from the performative dimension	What is unique about the IAEP assessment is that it is social, theatrical, spectacular, and celebratory. It triggered feelings of excitement, anticipation, and showmanship among the "performers" and of empathy and encouragement from the "audience"
2. Participants' learning	New Knowledge Skills, Attitudes Dispositions	Process was collaborative, involving communication and exchange	Unlike other examination atmospheres, this performance-based assessment was social, exciting and enjoyable and we enjoyed the collaborative journey of continual communication with one another about the process; the exchange of ideas; the co-designing of rubrics and tweaking project foci from year to year
	New Knowledge Skills, Attitudes Dispositions	Pre-empting and resolving factors that can negatively affect group	We learned how to pre-empt factors that can negatively affect group dynamics and how to address the occasional issue of "individual loafing" in a manner that is fair to all students
3. Organisational supports and change	Time, Space	Negotiating time and space for rehearsals and performance; venue booking	The "performance of practice" aspect of the project involved a degree of stress, its performative nature meant working within a tight timeframe, while ensuring digital equipment was working and assessment records were maintained

	Resources	Managing equipment; availability of and access to resources	A particular challenge concerned the concluding "performance of understanding" as, in initial iterations, both visual and musical elements were jointly performed. This approach necessitated transporting either musical instruments or visual art products to the performance venue
4. Participants' use of new knowledge and skills	Methods	Practice is more inclusive, collaborative/ performative learning	A key added value of the IAEP was the opportunity for student teachers of differing arts backgrounds and self-efficacy levels to explore performance first hand
	Communication Collaboration Co-creation	Co-designing rubrics and tweaking project foci from year to year	We enjoyed the collaborative journey of continual communication with one another about project foci; the exchange of ideas, the co-creation of rubrics
5. Student learning outcomes	Student-teacher relationship	Being more attuned to students' creative dispositions and artistic engagement	We are more attuned to considering students' dispositions to creativity rather than focusing on practical skill-level and outcome, identifying two main actions to further increase meaningful engagement with arts practices
	Inclusive and relevant practice	Differentiating, scaffolding, sequencing content and connecting with school placement	We exchanged and appraised methods and content, group arrangements, school placement challenges, subject integrity and assessment emphases

Note. Two examples of references are shown for each level of professional learning. Further details and examples are available from michael.flannery@dcu.ie

Discussion of Findings

All five levels of Guskey's model of professional learning were represented to varying degrees in the feedback from teacher art educators. All reported deriving enjoyment and fulfilment (level one) from the performative, communicative, collaborative, and reflexive nature of IAEP. Secondly, both sets of teacher arts educators acquired new knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions (level two) relating to the methodological, technological, and conceptual dimensions of teaching and learning as well as creative

habits of mind. Thirdly, the programmatic and organisational accommodation and support associated with professional learning in Guskey's model (level three), which in this study mainly involved rescheduling and practical space-management supports, were negotiated within a programme consisting of many modules, professional placements, and assessment components. Fourthly, through a process of reflection, a number of key differences were identified following IAEP (level four), reflecting a move from a "mine" to an "ours" arts education practice. The differences observed relate to the assimilation of information, perspectives, and ideas from the "other's" practice, increased collaborative and critical friendship, and more holistic, integrated, and reflective methods. Four key benefits for student teachers from IAEP (level five) were also observed: increased theoretical insight, a more impactful learning experience, and the opportunity to observe and model practice. Findings relating to each of Guskey's five levels are discussed in further detail below.

Increased Enjoyment and Fulfilment

The four teacher arts educators involved in PAINT derived enjoyment and fulfilment from the performative, communicative, collaborative, and reflexive opportunities that IAEP presented. Sharing and collaboration created new understandings in performative and visual practices, leading to a valuable and enjoyable teacher-educator experience for all partners. In the SUC self-study case, the re-visioning of the learning space, and consequently of assessment, stimulated an environment where risk-taking, awareness, and openness to the creative self could flourish, leading to innovative and changing modes of assessment. In the case of MIE, "each IAEP iteration produced little innovations regarding what and how we teach and helped us formulate new modes of assessments" (Flannery, et al., 2021, p. 37). IAEP instigated ten iterations of collaborative performance-based arts assessments, which were more enjoyable and fulfilling than the discrete arts assessments previously conducted:

> *Unlike other programme assessments, the performative arts assessment was enjoyable to orchestrate and experience. We enjoyed being part of the audience to experience and critique student group performances. Unlike other examination atmospheres, this performance-based assessment was social, exciting and enjoyable* (Flannery et al., 2021, p.36).

Equally, IAEP at SUC presented an opportunity for the teacher arts educators to "engage in dialogue and hold up their work to increased scrutiny" (Flannery et al., 2021, p. 50). This functioned as a first step on a more enjoyable and fulfilling longer-range journey to more sustained integration across the arts – starting with conversations, then building collaborative relationships, and finally creating collaboratively (Flannery et al., 2021). Looking forward, their shared IAEP teaching and learning would:

bring the music and art and design cohorts together to discuss creative theories; mapping musical and artistic concepts as they are implied in the primary curriculum...sharing and developing their creative identities…using digital media to create a total artwork, "gesamtkunstwerk" with sound and image (Flannery et al., 2021, p. 50).

In both self-study contexts, IAEP was perceived to be a more enjoyable and fulfilling teacher arts education paradigm because both students and teacher arts educators had opportunities to communicate, collaborate, and be reflexive together. Conversations comparing their learning experiences of IAEP allowed personal and collaborative reflection on their own creativity and their roles as facilitators of little 'c' creativity (Craft, 2008; Flannery et al., 2021; Kaufman & Beghetto, 2009). This manifested in collaborative interdisciplinary arts performances and in emergent identities as artist and teacher of the arts. "In terms of our own professional understanding, [IAEP] provided a concrete opportunity to share good practice in the arts, through ongoing discussion and reflection" (Flannery et al., 2021, p. 50).

New Knowledge, Skills, and Dispositions

Re-examination of the PAINT report revealed how teacher arts educators acquired new knowledge, skills, and dispositions from IAEP. These concerned the pedagogical, the conceptual, the technological, and creative habits of mind. From a pedagogical CPD perspective, IAEP motivated, permitted, and obligated the teacher arts educators to seek and exchange knowledge for integrated module, rubric, and mark sheet design, and refinement. They learned new strategies from one another regarding differentiation and inclusion in the arts to support students with varying artistic/creative self-efficacy levels. They exchanged and strategised ways to manage different group dynamics for collaborative creative processes, or addressed occasional challenges such as individual social loafing:

Together, we refined skills related to module, rubric and mark sheet design. We learned how to pre-empt factors that can negatively affect group dynamics and how to address the occasional issue of individual "social loafing" in a manner that was fair to all students (Flannery et al., 2021, p. 37).

IAEP also extended theoretical knowledge about creativity, collaborative, and cross-curricular learning types and taxonomies. From a CPD perspective, teacher arts educators generated an integrated lexicon concerning the arts elements and introduced new conceptual criteria for multimodal arts performance into their practice, such as synchronicity and complementarity between the arts modes. From a technological perspective, they exchanged and acquired new skills relating to analogue and digital technologies. For example, they learned how to construct and perform a crankie, an old storytelling art form comprising a long illustrated scroll

that is wound onto two spools. They also benefitted from incidental skills exchange relating to navigating college systems and procedures including the virtual learning environment:

> *There was ongoing incidental skills exchange such as how to operate a crankie or soundscape as a precursor to composing; how to differentiate for students with low artistic self-efficacy; how to deal with poor attendees* (Flannery et al., 2021, p. 37).

From a creative habits of mind development perspective, teacher arts educators extended several creative sub-habits of mind relating to collaboration, imagination, discipline, inquisitiveness, and persistence (Lucas, 2016; Lucas et al., 2012). Through the de-privatisation of their arts practice, they shared what and how they taught, and gave and received feedback about what they observed. Through collaborative co-planning, teaching and evaluation, they began making connections between their arts disciplines and teaching. They also had to trust their intuition and tolerate uncertainty more when experimenting with visual arts responses to music and using different visual arts modes as a stimulus for composing or exploring new models for reflection. Lastly, IAEP challenged their individual or joint assumptions about interdisciplinary arts and interdisciplinarity:

> *[IAEP] challenged us to think about what we value as teacher educators and how it impacts on content, teaching, and assessment…we acquired greater understanding and appreciation for multimodal and holistic processes, methodologies and performances* (Flannery et al., 2021, p. 51).

Programmatic and Organisational Accommodations

Programmatic and organisational considerations can be vital to the success of any professional learning experience. Elements such as alignment with programme mission, organisational grading policies, and availability of sufficient resources, including time and space, can hinder or prevent success (Guskey, 2016). In this case, IAEP proved to be effectively aligned with both the mission and requirements of the programme so that key programmatic accommodations such as timetable rescheduling and practical assistance were supported. Integrated approaches to music, art, and design/visual arts required some additional accommodations for students' interconnected learning journey. Time had to be scheduled for music rehearsals, to arrange studio space, and to enable access to musical instruments/visual arts material. Procedures were put in place to ensure equity and access for all. Additional time also had to be found for sharing and reflection to enable successful implementation of IAEP.

Practical issues relating to IAEP performance-based assessment did involve some degree of stress. Staging a performance often meant working within a tight timeframe

and dealing with associated timetabling and practical challenges. These included transporting instruments and art equipment, and ensuring that digital equipment was working while maintaining assessment records during live performances (Flannery et al., 2021). The absence of sufficient time to collaborate to bring all these elements together was not ideal. One regret in the MIE self-study case was the lack of opportunity:

> To have students perform for a larger audience in a hall. 'It would be lovely [to have the] performance… in the Amharclann (Hall) [with] the lights down… an audience would love that!' Too many practical impediments prevented it from happening despite our best intentions (Flannery et al., 2021, p. 31).

Differences in Teacher Arts Educators' Professional Practice

Through the process of reflection, differences identified in teacher arts educator practices concerned methodology, collaborative and critical friendship, assimilation from the other arts education practice, and increased reflexivity. New pedagogical knowledge and understandings developed in the collaborative IAEP led to refinements of content and methodology. Methodologies exemplified increased multimodal processes in content delivery, such as "hearing" images and "visualising" sound, as well as interdisciplinary assessment in the form of a "performance of practice" (Barnes, 2015). In different performance iterations, artworks were animated and performed synchronously with music compositions. Various animation techniques were explored: shadow puppetry, overhead projector art animations, and crankie creations (Flannery et al., 2021). Foundational to these new developments were:

> conceptual criteria…such as synchronicity, complementarity, opacity and staticity. Prior to IA[EP], the visual arts education explored concretised art works mainly, but, with the integration of music, that canon was expanded to include kinetic, multimodal and time-based works (Flannery et al., 2021, pp. 36–37).

Such innovations and differences were possible because of increased collaboration and co-planning, and cross-pollination of ideas, strategies, and methods. Through cross-curricular exchange and appraisal, the teacher arts educators became critical friends for one another and, over time, assimilated concepts and techniques from the other arts education practice, facilitating integration that was double-focused and co-equal (Barnes 2015; Bresler 1995). Discrete knowledge and skills in different arts disciplines were consciously developed in tandem with integrated approaches, the totality of which seemed "greater than the sum of the parts" (Carlile & Jordan, 2013, p. 126).

Practice was also enhanced by increased reflexivity. New perspectives, ideas,

and thinking developed regarding the teacher arts educators' role and its impact beyond primary teacher education. There began a shared evaluation of practice which challenged and expanded what were regarded as essential qualities and characteristics in teacher and primary arts education. In both of the self-study cases, greater theoretical insight on creativity and collaborative learning was evident in ideas that developed beyond compartmentalised thinking. Seeing a bigger picture resulted in a number of core actions:

> *[Firstly], a re-visioning of the learning space, where creative learning experiences must provide an environment for confidence and risk-taking to flourish. Secondly, this has encouraged a re-visioning of assessment as a process that stimulates awareness and openness to the creative self throughout the course* (Flannery et al., 2021, p. 49).

Benefits to Pre-Service Teachers

Results of analysis suggest four key benefits for student teachers:

- an improved learning experience

- increased understanding of the conceptual similarity and interchange within the arts and the creative process

- the opportunity to model and explore practices based on creative habits of mind and IAEP theory in a critical "safe-space"

- a more open, and equitable, relationship between the arts educator and pre-service teacher.

These benefits were noted by students throughout their engagement with IAEP, a process in which students were encouraged to "let go" of deep-seated identities, and, in some cases, pre-conceptions of limited ability within both music and visual arts domains. Students expressed the value of a collaborative workspace to think differently, to share and reflect, and to make connections between the arts:

> *I feel significantly inadequate…I often feel overwhelmed by the total autonomy to independently make decisions…However, using a piece of visual art as a stimulus acted as a catalyst, inspiring and assisting…when creativity began to diminish* (Flannery et al., 2021, p. 45).

With educators' critical adaptation of projects over time, students moved from the illustrative and literal aspects of IAEP (e.g., using illustration and narrative devices) to a more interpretive level of thought, and the depth and quality of their work improved. Teacher arts educators became more adept at helping students to make deeper conceptual connections between the arts. Students reported deeper awareness and engagement in the creative process because such connections were made visible in

teaching sessions and in interactions with their groups and tutors.

The final *performance of understanding* provided opportunities and benefits. The event was an enjoyable form of assessment for students as it "triggered the excitement of a social, theatrical, spectacular, and celebratory event" (Flannery et al., 2021, p. 29). The intertwined performance of art and music in real time brought in a deeper synesthetic experience, as visual art "danced" with music. One student noted the value of this shared seeing and hearing for personal reflection and as an opportunity to consider the relevance of the project for the primary classroom:

> *It was interesting to see everyone's different interpretation of the task. It made me think that, if children were given a similar task, with the correct guidance, stimulus and assistance, they could write creative compositions of their own* (Flannery et al., 2021, p. 43).

IAEP projects enabled teacher arts educators to model roles and relationships that fostered creative habits in the primary classroom. The dialogue between students and with their arts tutors, as they negotiated different skill sets and engaged in collective problem solving, was valued both in terms of the project outcomes and their own professional learning, as one student reported:

> *I can take risks, and experiment with different media to be more creative. This benefits my teaching as I can …encourage children to be more creative by experimenting, by taking risks, knowing that it is not about this perfect piece of art, it can be about the process and techniques learnt through completing a piece of art* (Flannery et al., 2021, p. 47).

Extending Guskey's Model to Teacher Arts Education

While Guskey's model served well in relation to summarising five levels of professional learning from IAEP, it did not fully capture the transformative learning resulting from critical collegial exchange (Sugrue, 2011). For example, there was a significant engagement with transformative "identity work and reflection on our personal creativity and our role as facilitators of 'little c' creativity" (Flannery, et al, 2021, p. 45). In addition, the teacher arts educators compared, contrasted, and critiqued their respective practices and curricular provision at primary-school level enabling them to challenge assumptions and cultivate awareness of other ways of working.

The collective participation facilitated by the PAINT project provided opportunities to discuss, share, and learn with each other as fellow teacher arts educators in an interdisciplinary context (Teaching Council, 2016 as cited in Gilleece et al., 2023). The aim of Guskey's model is the evaluation of improvement of participants' and students' learning, crucially at levels four and five. When applied to an artistic, reflective, and collaborative process, however, experience from the PAINT project suggests that

deeper thinking might take place through students' prolonged engagement with interdisciplinarity, particularly in a community of teaching practice. Developing deeper thinking through sustained collaborative arts is as, if not more, important than the mere adaption of practices suggested by Guskey: "time needs to be given to allow students to adapt new practices to their setting" (2016, p. 35).

Extending Guskey's model facilitated description of the transformative learning, (Savva, 2019) concerning multimodality, multiliteracy, and multiplicity of new approaches, that was achieved across our teacher arts education practices. For example, music is received aurally, is mostly expressed through sound, and mainly experienced in a time-based spectacular manner. Visual arts/art and design are predominantly expressed through silence and experienced in a time-concretised spectacular way. IAEP enabled engagement in reciprocal, critical, collegial exchange, resulting in assimilation of the arts elements, a shared language, and practical pedagogical approaches into the combined practice of teacher arts educators. It lent itself to new aural, kinaesthetic, musical, oral, visual and written teaching, learning and assessment experiences; encouraged development of critical, cultural, digital, and social literacy elements; and extended the arts canon to include multimodal, kinetic, and time-based works (Flannery, et al., 2021).

Extending the model prompted consideration of the potential of IAEP for initial teacher education and its reach into broader social and cultural contexts (Coldwell & Simkins, 2010), such as students' arts education practices in the classroom. "While open-ended artistic experiences are exemplified and promoted, we found that many student teachers still teach in an overly prescriptive manner that is partly attributed to low student teacher creative self-efficacy" (Flannery, et al. 2021, p. 15). While this study cannot measure the degree of impact of professional learning from IAEP on students' classroom teaching, the observed benefits to students include increased enjoyment, fulfilment, understanding, and skills that develop creative self-efficacy, all of which can positively impact their teaching experience.

Conclusion

Using Guskey's professional development evaluation as a lens for critique, this article examined the nature and quality of professional learning from IAEP among four teacher arts educators in a cross-border collaboration project. Using the PAINT project report as the data source, findings indicate that all five levels of professional development progressed to varying degrees. Any variance may be attributed to the provenance and nature of the IAEP in each higher-education setting, our own prior knowledge, or previous teaching experience, of the other arts disciplines, and the degree of de-privatisation of our practice before the introduction of IAEP. Engagement in the collaboration exercise proved to be a productive and enjoyable experience for both teacher arts educators and student teachers and one that is

worthy of recommendation to teacher arts educators in other higher-education institutions. The reciprocal exchange that characterised the collaboration resulted in shared knowledge creation and transformed ways of perceiving, working, and being. Guskey's model, though adequate in many respects, needed extending to capture the extent of professional transformation experienced from the de-privatisation and cross-pollination of practice. Despite a number of potential obstacles – the varying artistic self-efficacy levels of pre-service teachers, the related challenges of implementing IAEP, and knowing that the arts do not always fare well from cross-curricular learning – we must conclude that IAEP in pre-service teacher education is an enriching, enlightening, and rewarding experience. It is an effective means of teacher arts educator professional development resulting from the de-privatisation of practice, reciprocal exchange, shared reflexivity, and knowledge co-creation.

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Teacher Wellbeing From Engaging With Educational Technologies (TWEET): Case Studies From Across the Island of Ireland

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Abstract

Post COVID-19, the role of educational technologies continues to challenge many educators. There is a lacuna of evidence considering the potentially positive contribution to teacher wellbeing that may be made through effective management of digital technologies in schools by school principals and teachers. This research explores and develops the link between educational technologies and teacher wellbeing to test Passey's (2021) conceptual framework and proposition, that effective or specific digital technological adoption in schools may benefit the wellbeing of teachers in a wide variety of educational contexts. Three post-primary schools (two in Northern Ireland and one in the Republic of Ireland) and three primary schools (one in Northern Ireland and two in the Republic of Ireland) were engaged to provide a study basis for critical in-depth case studies focused on teacher wellbeing and digital technology adoption and use. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with senior- and middle-school leaders and classroom teachers. Evidence from these case studies extends the research framework proposed by Passey (2021) by identifying additional circumstances and ways in which teachers perceive digital technologies as benefitting their wellbeing and pedagogical practices. Results suggest that teachers speak, with great readiness, on matters associated with the administrative aspects of their role, and with teaching or learning activities and outcomes, yet are considerably less likely to reflect upon and discuss matters linked to their physical, social, and emotional wellbeing.

Keywords: teacher wellbeing, digital technologies, benefits of technologies in schools

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Teacher wellbeing, an important concept in schooling internationally, has been receiving attention within the literature since the 1930s (Orsila et al., 2011). Low levels of positive teacher wellbeing are typified throughout the literature as psychological conditions detracting from a teacher's performance through, for example, feelings of burnout and of being overloaded and under stress (Briner & Dewberry, 2007; Ross et al., 2012). McLeod and Wright (2016) assert that there is significant variation in how wellbeing is defined throughout the education literature. It is oftentimes described in deficit terms (Roffey, 2012) such as those pertaining to stress, depression, workload, burnout, and low retention rates. Initial attempts to define the term, synthesised by McLellan and Steward (2015), focused on the absence of negativity, where teacher wellbeing is reported in stress- or depression-related terms. Such simplistic definitions have evolved within the literature to provide consideration and recognition of wellbeing as part of a process of self-realisation (McLellan & Steward, 2015), "within a context of interacting factors rather than the presence or absence of subjectively quantified emotions" (Brady & Wilson, 2021, p. 46).

The hiatus of normal schooling and education due to the impact of COVID-19 has generated a marked surge in digital technology adoption within schools. Work on how this recent uptake in digital technologies might be associated with teacher wellbeing is therefore both timely and imperative for teaching and its stakeholders. Research has rarely considered how constructive, productive applications of digital technologies, when effectively managed by leaders and teachers in schools, may benefit them in a variety of ways and be advantageous to their wellbeing. Passey (2021) indicates a scarcity of such research, while De Pablos et al. (2011) provide a study that has offered a specific focus in this field.

The study forming the focus of this paper was set in the context of uses of educational technology applications that seek to ensure or enhance educational practices in primary and post-primary schools on the island of Ireland. These applications, which are important elements of initial and continuing teacher education, include the use of a broad variety of software and hardware tools and resources to support, augment, and transform planning, communication, learning, teaching, and assessment. This study tested the existing findings and proposition proposed by Passey (2021), that specific technological adoption for educational purposes in schools may benefit the wellbeing of teachers across a wide variety of educational contexts, uses, and purposes. It is anticipated that the study will help support researchers and educators in their understanding of how teachers and schools can recognise, adopt, and use digital technologies in ways that can have a positive impact on teachers' wellbeing as they emerge and move forward from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The current study is also set in a wider context arising from the work of Ryan and Deci (2000), who identified three important needs – competence, relatedness, and autonomy – that "appear to be essential for facilitating optimal functioning of the

natural propensities for growth and integration, as well as for constructive social development and personal well-being" (p. 68). More recently, Acton and Glasgow (2015) distilled a considered definition of teacher wellbeing, reflecting the personal-professional (Jeffrey & Woods, 1996) and interpersonal (Holmes, 2005) nature of teaching. They concluded that teacher wellbeing may be defined as "an individual sense of personal professional fulfilment, satisfaction, purposefulness and happiness, constructed in a collaborative process with colleagues and students" (p. 102). This process is supported or constrained by contextual factors that enable teachers to realise their purpose and goals in teaching; provide realistic and manageable work demands to allow for autonomy; and value, respect, and celebrate teachers' professional expertise and work practice.

The Conceptual Framework – Teacher Wellbeing and the Use of Digital Technologies

Passey (2021) provides a conceptual framework and research instrument to consider a broad range of features and factors relating to whether and how digital technologies may influence teacher wellbeing. Foundational to Passey's (2021) conceptual framework is Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory based on the three needs previously outlined.. The work of Dodge et al. (2012) and Longo et al. (2017) also informed the creation of Passey's original research instrument. Dodge et al. (2012) examined the relationship between an individual's resource pool and the challenges they face, while Longo et al. (2017) compiled a measurement instrument for wellbeing, consisting of 14 constructs: happiness, vitality, calmness, optimism, involvement, self-awareness, self-acceptance, self-worth, competence, development, purpose, significance, self-congruence, and connection.

Subsequently, Passey (2021) developed a proposition linking five key features affecting teacher wellbeing when using digital technologies. The features relate to digital literacy, digital agency, digital wellbeing, activities and outcomes, as well as effects on physical, social, and psychological wellbeing. The complexities of the interconnectivity in this conceptual model are shown in Figure 1, which is not intended to offer a view of interdependency on a quantitative basis. As digital technologies are evolving, and not static, it should be recognised that this diagrammatic representation can be detailed to a greater extent through focused study and should be reviewed at periodic intervals.

FIGURE 1

Conceptual Model of Features Affecting Teacher Wellbeing When Using Digital Technologies
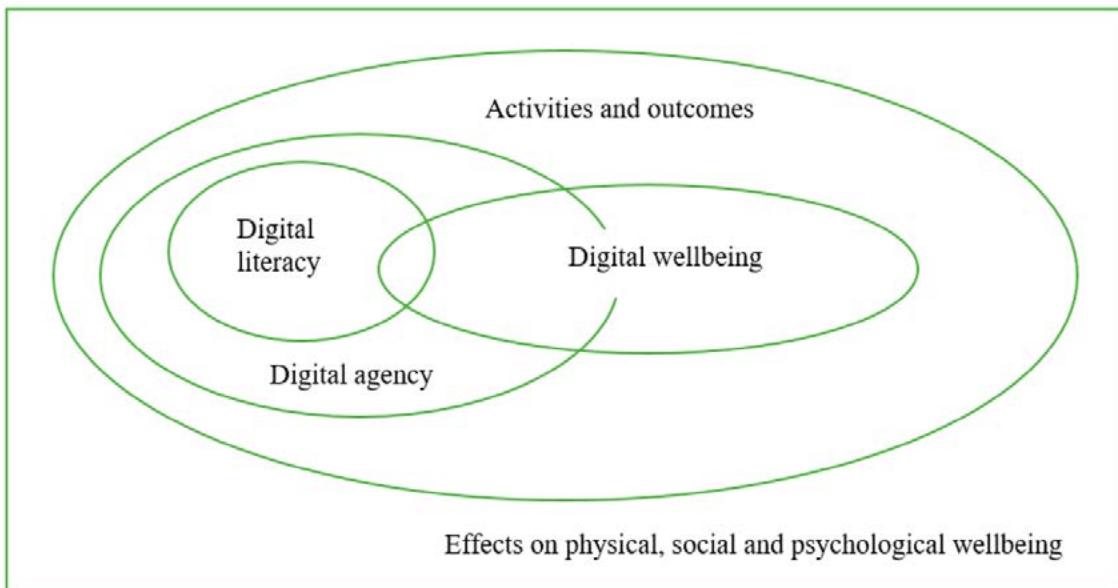
Note. From "Digital Technologies – and Teacher Wellbeing," by D. Passey, 2021, *Education Sciences*, *11*(3), p. 9. Reprinted with permission.

To investigate aspects relating to these five features likely to affect teacher wellbeing, Passey (2021) used data from an evaluation of practices in classrooms in Northern Ireland and Germany to develop an approach that allows for structured identification of the specific factors, or components, of these features, and which tests the efficacy of the conceptual framework. Table 1 shows the factors and features identified by Passey from his evaluation of classroom practices. Where factors are prevalent in all of the cases within his study, these are marked in the final column as "Yes". Where "No" is used, this indicates that the factor was identified in some, but not all, of the cases that contribute to Passey's framework. The factors identified to be common to all cases form the basis of the research instruments used within this study.

TABLE 1

Conceptual Framework of Factors Influencing Positive Teacher Wellbeing When Using Digital Technologies

Features concerned with teacher wellbeing	Factors influencing teacher wellbeing	Code	Identified by Passey (2021) to be common to all case studies used to derive the framework
Digital literacy	Having choice of digital technologies	A1	Yes
	Having skills to deploy and use the digital technologies	A2	Yes
	Supporting information and data literacy	A3	Yes
	Supporting communication and collaborations	A4	Yes
	Supporting digital content creation	A5	Yes
	Supporting safety	A6	Yes
	Supporting problem solving	A7	Yes
Digital agency	Supporting interactions with parents and guardians	B1	Yes
	Feeling more responsible for one's actions	B2	Yes
	Feeling security and privacy are ensured	B3	Yes
	Feeling that there has been a positive impact on learning	B4	Yes
Digital wellbeing	Feeling motivated from digital technology use	C1	Yes
	Feeling the use has value for learning	C2	Yes
	Feeling the school culture and climate is positive to the use	C3	Yes
	Feeling personal satisfaction	C4	Yes
	Feeling professional satisfaction	C5	Yes
	Feeling positive emotionally	C6	Yes
	Supporting collaboration	C7	Yes
	Supporting recording of evidence	C8	Yes

Features concerned with teacher wellbeing	Factors influencing teacher wellbeing	Code	Identified by Passey (2021) to be common to all case studies used to derive the framework
Activities and outcomes	Support for planning	D1	Yes
	Support for professional learning	D2	Yes
	Feeling safe and responsible	D3	Yes
	Feeling access is easily feasible	D4	Yes
	Having access to digital technologies to support interactions in class or beyond	D5	Yes
	Having ideas of how positive impact will arise	D6	Yes
	Supporting explanations and modelling	D7	Yes
	Supporting pupil practice	D8	Yes
	Improving assessment and feedback	D9	Yes
Effects on physical, social, and psychological wellbeing	Feeling more able to switch off and relax	E1	No
	Reducing long weekday hours	E2	No
	Finding more time to be with family and friends	E3	No
	Reducing weekend working	E4	No
	Reducing holiday working	E5	No
	Reducing anxiety	E6	No
	Reducing depression	E7	No
	Reducing exhaustion	E8	Yes
	Reducing stress	E9	Yes
	Reducing workload	E10	No
	Offering a better work/life balance	E11	No
	Improving pupil/student behaviour	E12	Yes
	Reducing unreasonable manager demands	E13	No
	More positively handling rapid change	E14	Yes
	Reducing problems with parents or guardians	E15	Yes
	Reducing colleague bullying	E16	No
	Offering more opportunity to work independently	E17	No
	Gaining more trust from managers	E18	Yes
	Reducing discrimination	E19	No
	Enabling more physical exercise	E20	No
	Reducing reliance on ways to alleviate stress	E21	No
	Reducing reliance on tools considered unhealthy	E22	Yes

Note. From "Digital Technologies – and Teacher Wellbeing," by D. Passey, 2021, *Education Sciences*, *11*(3), p. 10. Adapted with permission.

It is important to emphasise that the role and purpose of this framework is to display a range of ways in which technologies have been shown to influence teachers positively in their wellbeing, so that these could be illustrated and better understood. It was neither intended by Passey, nor designed within this study, to be used as a checklist to rate effective teacher wellbeing when using digital technologies or as a means of indicating weaknesses that need to be improved. Application in specific study instances will indicate those factors/elements that are of importance to teachers regarding their individual wellbeing. This can then be used to inform and broaden understanding of what comprises the professional and personal wellbeing of teachers more generally.

The Current Study

This research study recruited three post-primary and three primary schools in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland as the basis for critical, in-depth case studies focused on teacher wellbeing and digital technology adoption and use.

The aims of the research were to:

- test the existing findings and conceptual framework proposed by Passey (2021) that considers how specific or effective technological adoption/use in schools may benefit the wellbeing of teachers in a variety of educational contexts, uses, and purposes

- test how Passey's (2021) framework may assist understanding of the characteristics of technology adoption/use where there has been a beneficial impact on teacher wellbeing

- evaluate the research framework and instrument proposed by Passey (2021), through validation and possible extension, with a range of stakeholders, in schools and in initial and career-long teacher education, who are engaged in educational transformation, innovative teacher education, school improvement, ameliorating teacher workload (and associated stress), and in promoting the wellbeing of teachers.

Method

A case-study approach was adopted and data were collected from each of the six schools involved through semi-structured interviews with school leaders, classroom teachers, and those responsible for leading and shaping digital technology. This approach enabled both the in-depth study of this "real-life phenomenon" and the gathering of contextual information for each case (Yin, 2003, p. 18). Each school was a single case, a "bounded system", "a single entity, a unit around which there are

boundaries" (Merriam, 1998, p. 27). Basing the study on six schools enabled evidence to be gathered "across sites and scales" (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 15) to produce "a single set of 'cross-case'" conclusions (Yin, 2003, p. 20). Semi-structured interviews supported the case-study approach, granting researchers flexibility to react to participants' responses and allowing for a more conversational interview style (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, 2012).

Interviews were held via Microsoft Teams. These took place individually, or in small groups, in each of the schools recruited. Two interview protocols were engaged, one for school leaders and the other for teachers. Both featured open-ended questions to ask participants about their perceptions of digital technologies and matters associated with wellbeing. The questions were designed to elicit information on:

- those features/factors that were found to be common to all case studies in Passey's (2021) study (Table 1)

- the digital technologies teachers and leaders had used and why

- the intentions (e.g., are digital technologies used to support interactions with parents and guardians?), outcomes (e.g., do you feel more able to positively handle rapid change when using digital technology?), and effects of digital technologies on wellbeing (e.g., do digital technologies reduce anxiety, depression, exhaustion or stress?).

Information about school demographics was collected via a questionnaire completed by each school principal, and all participants completed a brief questionnaire to ascertain their teaching experience and roles within the school in advance of the interviews.

Ethical approval complying with the British Educational Research Association's (BERA) (2018) guidelines was sought through, and granted by, Ulster University and was formally agreed by Dublin City University. Informed consent was obtained digitally from the principal of each school and from each participant.

Participants

Three post-primary and three primary schools were recruited for the study – three in Northern Ireland and three in the Republic of Ireland (Table 2). A purposive sampling strategy was used, within which researchers approached schools known to demonstrate the following sampling criteria:

- a strong positive wellbeing culture for staff

- a strong sense of leadership and innovation in the use of digital technologies

- an openness to the use of digital technologies to support teacher practice and potential wellbeing

- strong home-school partnerships.

To do so, researchers applied their knowledge gained through involvement in digital technology support throughout Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in collaboration with members of a regional forum of school practitioners and those who support schools to evaluate and promote innovation in the use of digital technologies in schools – The Education Network (Northern Ireland) Innovation Forum.

Once schools were recruited, individual school principals and, in one case, a deputising senior school leader, purposefully identified teachers to participate in the study, based on their role and involvement with digital technologies, and represent senior- and middle- leadership levels as well as classroom practitioners. In total, 23 participants engaged with the researchers, comprising five school principals, three senior leaders, and 15 teachers; 13 of the participants identified as females and ten as males. The objectives of the study necessitated discussion with those in senior-, middle-, and classroom-leadership roles. In the case of the smallest school, a single individual occupied both a middle- and a senior-leadership position due to small staffing numbers. The data collected reflect the dual nature of their role.

TABLE 2

Details of Participating Schools

School number	Jurisdiction	School type	Enrolment
1	Northern Ireland	Post-primary	≈1200
2	Northern Ireland	Post-primary	≈500
3	Republic of Ireland	Post-primary	≈1100
4	Republic of Ireland	Primary	≈70
5	Northern Ireland	Primary	≈400
6	Republic of Ireland	Primary	≈1000

Analysis

Data were analysed separately for each school using Passey's (2021) framework to identify and record how participating teachers were thinking about the ways digital technologies might be advantageous to their wellbeing. The focus of the analysis was not to draw comparisons, but rather to test the validity of the research framework and, where relevant, to extend the identification of ways in which technology might benefit the wellbeing of teachers.

A rigorous method was employed to ensure inter-operator reliability during the analysis of interview transcriptions. Initially, multiple interviewers were tasked with independently codifying the transcribed data, by assigning codes to significant factors and features that emerged from the interviews. Following this individual coding process, the interviewers convened to engage in a comparative analysis of their conclusions, to discuss any discrepancies, and to reach a consensus on the most appropriate code for each of the factors. This collaborative process not only improved the consistency of the coding but also facilitated a richer understanding of the data. To further verify inter-operator reliability, an additional member of the research team, blinded to the initial coders' process, was enlisted to review and assess the finalised codes. This additional evaluation provided an unbiased perspective on the reliability of the findings, ensuring that the conclusions drawn from the data were robust and credible.

Results

Data from the interviews were used to identify key characteristics, strategies, or approaches involved in effectively embedding technology in education in ways that might benefit the wellbeing of teachers within each of the schools. In School 1, there was a deliberate strategic and organic plan to embed the use of digital technologies progressively across the school, initially for the purpose of easing the administrative workload of teachers. The main characteristic that emerged in School 2 was the theme of "Resilient Teaching for Blended Learning" supported by a practical approach of "Invest to Save" which referred to the time and effort saved as a result of the initial effort required to post content online. In School 3, a strongly collaborative corporate culture was evident, enabled through reliable technology used in safe, secure, and professional ways. In School 4, the technology focus was on a pedagogy-led innovative and impactful practice across the breadth of the curriculum. School 5 was focused on the theme of changing leadership from a recently appointed principal. School 6 was undergoing transition with respect to embedding technology in practice, under the direction of a new principal leading improved digital technology resourcing in parallel with initiating developments in pedagogy, through a STEM-led approach. The identification of these key characteristics, as an outcome of the semi-structured interviews, emphasised the individual circumstances of each school and the breadth of means by which schools could seek to improve the wellbeing of teachers through utilising digital technology.

The unique characteristics of each school were recorded, mapped against the framework, tabularised, and summarised to reflect the frequency of each factor and feature noted by Passey (2021). Table 3 shows the elements of the framework, identified throughout the six case studies, indicating how teachers perceived their wellbeing to be benefitting from the use of digital technology.

The results, outlined in Table 3, illustrate how the most popular factors identified as beneficial for teachers' wellbeing can be mapped against the activities and outcomes feature of Passey's framework. Regarding the effects on physical, social, and psychological wellbeing, it is apparent that, compared to other aspects of the framework, teachers speak to a lesser degree about such factors. There is, for example, an apparent potential reticence amongst teachers to reflect and speak overtly about matters relating to exhaustion, trust, and health. Similarly, more personal factors relating to digital wellbeing, such as personal satisfaction and emotional positivity, are reported with less frequency.

TABLE 3

Factors Influencing Teacher Wellbeing Based on Self-Reports and Listed by Frequency

| Features concerned with teacher wellbeing	Factors influencing teacher wellbeing	Number of schools where factor was recorded at least once (max. 6)
Activities and outcomes	Support for planning	6
Activities and outcomes	Feeling access is easily feasible	6
Activities and outcomes	Improving assessment and feedback	6
Activities and outcomes	Having ideas of how positive impact will arise	6
Activities and outcomes	Support for professional learning	6
Digital agency	Feeling that there has been a positive impact on learning	6
Digital literacy	Having choice of digital technologies	6
Digital literacy	Having skills to deploy and use the digital technologies	6
Digital literacy	Supporting communication and collaborations	6
Digital literacy	Supporting digital content creation	6
Digital wellbeing	Feeling the use has value for learning	6
Digital wellbeing	Feeling the school culture and climate is positive to the use	6
Digital wellbeing	Supporting recording of evidence	6
Digital wellbeing	Supporting collaboration	6
Activities and outcomes	Feeling safe and responsible	5

Features concerned with teacher wellbeing	Factors influencing teacher wellbeing	Number of schools where factor was recorded at least once (max. 6)
Activities and outcomes	Having access to digital technologies to support interactions in class or beyond	5
Activities and outcomes	Supporting pupil practice	5
Digital agency	Feeling more responsible for one's actions	5
Digital agency	Supporting interactions with parents and guardians	5
Digital wellbeing	Feeling motivated from digital technology use	5
Digital wellbeing	Feeling professional satisfaction	5
Effects on physical, social, and psychological wellbeing	More positively handling rapid change	5
Effects on physical, social, and psychological wellbeing	Reducing stress	5
Effects on physical, social, and psychological wellbeing	Reducing problems with parents or guardians	5
Activities and outcomes	Supporting explanations and modelling	4
Digital agency	Feeling security and privacy are ensured	4
Digital literacy	Supporting information and data literacy	4
Digital literacy	Supporting problem solving	4
Digital wellbeing	Feeling personal satisfaction	4
Digital wellbeing	Feeling positive emotionally	4
Effects on physical, social, and psychological wellbeing	Improving pupil/student behaviour	4
Digital literacy	Supporting safety	3
Effects on physical, social, and psychological wellbeing	Gaining more trust from managers	3
Effects on physical, social, and psychological wellbeing	Reducing exhaustion	1
Effects on physical, social, and psychological wellbeing	Reducing reliance on tools considered unhealthy	1

Note. Colour used to show distribution by feature throughout the table.

To assist visualisation of the framework and the aspects of it that reflected the views of those interviewed, each case study was summarised in a star-type figure. The recorded frequencies of factors per feature were mapped against the maximum number of factors per feature. Figure 2 shows an overlaid star-type diagram for all six schools. Data were standardised as percentages to enable visual comparisons across each of the features. For example, participants from School 6 reported on all factors within the framework related to the feature, activities and outcomes, as well as all factors pertaining to digital wellbeing. Conversely, School 2 reported on fewer factors in both these features, and slightly over a fifth of the factors associated with digital agency. It is important to emphasise that the percentage values have been deliberately excluded from this representation. As such, this analysis should not be interpreted as a metric of weaknesses or strengths in the attitudes or practice of schools, leaders, or staff members towards teacher wellbeing. The diagram is, instead presented as, a visual fingerprint of the responses linked to the framework from the participants in each school at the time of the study. The dominance of discussion relating to, for example, activities and outcomes is clearly evidenced across all schools, as is the marked lower reporting effects on physical, social, and psychological wellbeing.

FIGURE 2

Frequency of Factors Perceived as Influencing Teacher Wellbeing Identified by School and Grouped by Feature
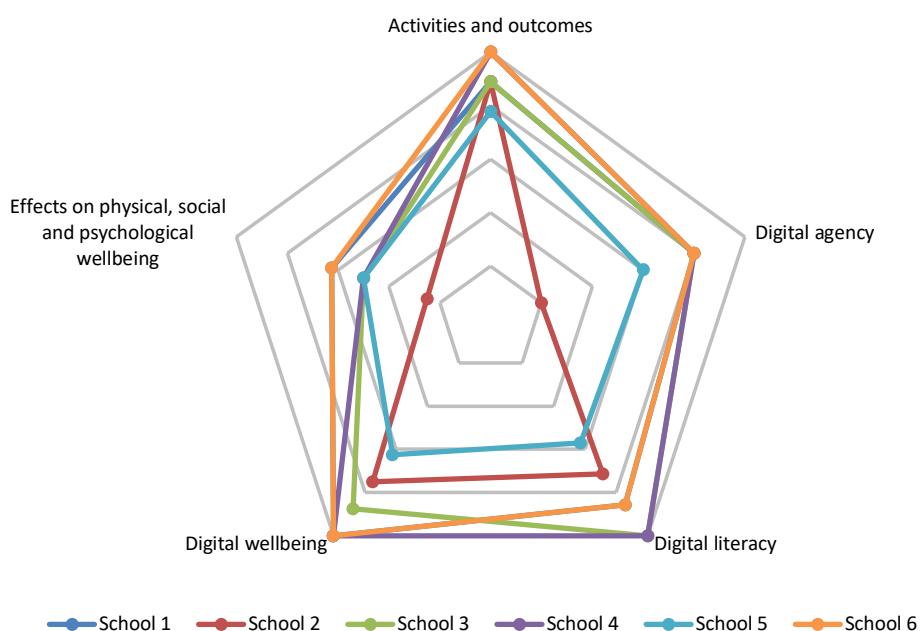
Responses presented in Table 4 evidence how teachers and school leaders perceive digital technologies to have positively impacted on their wellbeing and highlight the value of using Passey's (2021) conceptual framework and research instrument to demonstrate this.

TABLE 4

Examples of Participant Quotations Linked to the Feature, Factor, and Relevant Code Influencing Teacher Wellbeing from Passey's (2021) Conceptual Framework

Feature	Factor	Code	Examples of participant quotations
Digital literacy	Supporting information and data literacy	A3	"…it's showing them that they will win, that they will gain from this and actually it will lessen their workload in the long run." (Principal, School 1)
			"…it is about an attitude. It is about driving it… Coming from the top as well, it is about everybody in the school being prepared to say, listen, I'm a learner here… This is changing every month, but we all have to continue to learn." (Principal, School 1)
Digital agency	Feeling more responsible for one's actions	B2	"At home as well, it [my work iPad] would sit on the island at home and if I hear something dinging, and if I have an opportunity, it allows me to manage it in a way that suits me."
		B2	"…it's about creating a sense of direction as a leadership team; it's about creating the parameters within which we're working and then creating as much agency as we possibly can." (Principal, School 1)
	Feeling that there has been a positive impact on learning	B4	"'Insights' reveals the words that the whole class are having difficulty with. So, then you can focus on those words in your literacy lessons. So, it's making the teaching smarter, because suddenly you know you can say, OK, you know, maybe 80% of the class had difficulty with this word…and then use that to inform my actual planning." (Classroom Teacher, School 4)
Digital wellbeing	Feeling motivated from digital technology use	C1	"…helps keep you young in teaching - if you go with the new technologies, you work to keep up with them and you won't look incompetent." (Classroom Teacher, School 2)
	Feeling motivated from digital technology use Feeling the use has value for learning	C1 & C2	"Physically typing more vocabulary and all that comes with that has been quite a burden this year but I am looking ahead and seeing, because I see how much the pupils are benefiting from it… that has motivated me to go along with it and it will be of even more value next year." (Classroom Teacher, School 2)

Feature	Factor	Code	Examples of participant quotations
	Feeling the use has value for learning Supporting recording of evidence	C2 & C8	"…it also means that there's less risk of [pupils] losing their work. We have evidence of the important pieces of work that they do, and then it allows you to track their progress." (Classroom Teacher, School 1)
	Feeling personal satisfaction Feeling professional satisfaction	C4 & C5	"Our staff were so proud of what they had achieved during COVID and I was so proud of them. But they just felt that throughout the pandemic they had delivered for the children. I mean we were delivering in e-learning ways, even pastorally for children… there was just this sense that 'yes we did good' and I think from a staff wellbeing perspective, there is no greater feeling than that. Just that sense of yes, I'm good at my job." (Principal, School 1)
Activities and outcomes	Support for planning	D1	"…aids lifework balance." (Digital Leader, School 3)
			"So in terms of teacher wellbeing, it reduces the workload on an annual basis." (Classroom Teacher, School 1)
			"I now no longer need a lever arch file; I no longer need a box of keep tapes or CDs they're all stored on my iPad and I can share them with any members of my department. We need them. And, you know, I can upload them to the pupils and pupils can write on." (Classroom Teacher, School 1)
	Feeling access is easily feasible	D4	"…there are times when I leave this room and I could come back and there could be 23 emails in the space of, you know, 20 minutes waiting for me. So I certainly found for me, to be able to manage my workload, this notion that you didn't have to go and log in somewhere and do all your work at once - the iPad sits on the table. Just as I come in and out all day, [I] will answer emails or forward." (Principal, School 1)
	Having access to digital technologies to support interactions in class or beyond Supporting pupil practice	D5 & D8	"I think that's a win for me because I get my students to think about Geography for three times longer than they would otherwise have done - from their view they think it's a win because they get multiple gos." (Classroom Teacher, School 2)
	Support for planning Supporting pupil practice	D1 & D8	"…it's raised standards for everyone really… teachers and students alike. For teachers it's allowing us to be more organised and more efficient with time… allows me to have the time to focus on seeing where they're at… for students because it's allowing them to have more control within the classroom… there's a huge shift and I think it's a really positive one." (Classroom Teacher, School 3)

Feature	Factor	Code	Examples of participant quotations
Effects on physical, social, and psychological wellbeing	Reducing workload	E9	"…it really reduced the amount of work our pastoral team had to do on a weekly basis in terms of following up on an engagement." (Digital Leader, School 1)
			"…it's easily accessible for parent-teacher conferences. We can create their marks over the term, over the year and into a table or a grid that just opens at a parent-teacher meeting." (Classroom Teacher, School 1)
	Gaining more trust from managers	E18	"…within Microsoft Teams we've created dedicated channels… [and colleagues] have tasks to work on it, which I've given them dedicated hours. At the end of the day, I'm quite happy for them to go home and work independently without feeling the need to be in school and be interrupted because we have a shared OneDrive." (Principal, School 5)

Extension and Validation of the Framework

In addition to the identification of existing elements of Passey's 2021 framework, the six case studies provided evidence of possible extensions to the framework. Seven additional factors or recurring subsets of existing factors were identified, reflecting ways in which teachers perceived their use of digital technologies to ease and enrich their pedagogic practices (see Table 5). These additions highlighted how, for some teachers, using digital technology enabled them to more positively augment their workloads through sharing workloads with colleagues and being able to offer students opportunities to access classwork more independently. Furthermore, teachers reported that knowing that technological failures can be fixed, usually through the availability of local technical support from teaching and support colleagues, was an important factor in reducing stressors linked to the use of educational technologies.

TABLE 5

Additional Factors, or Subsets of Existing Factors, Identified in Case-Study Schools Extending Passey's Original 2021 Framework

Additional factors/subsets of existing factors identified	New factor or subset of existing factor	Number of schools in which these were identified
Improving student access to classwork	New	5
Reducing time in subsequent years	Subset of reducing workload – E9	4
Connecting or sharing with other educators beyond the school	New	4
Knowing technology issues can be fixed	New	4
Sharing of teacher workload	Subset of reducing workload – E9	4
Supporting student, class or group management	New	3
Reducing marking workload	Subset of reducing workload – E9	1

Analysis of the six case studies also positively validated, strengthened, and extended the value of the research framework in three main ways. Firstly, findings confirm that there was a strong digital learning culture in all of the schools. This was reflected in the breadth of perceptions teachers demonstrated in relation to the benefits of digital technologies for their wellbeing. Constructive uses of digital technologies were also identified, based on teachers' views of the role of technologies as an aid to the professional duties of the teacher (in administration and management, pedagogy, and professional learning and development), rather than as a technology-led intrusion into their practices. Finally, the analysis highlighted the agency of the teacher in controlling their own actions and in being both open-minded and collegial in identifying and sharing professional insights.

Conclusions and Implications

This study set out to evaluate Passey's (2021) framework through validation and, where relevant, to extend the identification of ways in which technologies might promote the wellbeing of teachers. The findings presented validate and strengthen the value of the research framework beyond Passey's (2021) case studies in Northern Ireland and Germany on which it was based. The findings also support an extension of the original research framework by identifying additional factors and ways in which teachers perceive digital technology to ease and enrich their professional practices; for example, through the sharing of teacher workload and by knowing that technology issues can be fixed.

Each case-study school was uniquely described through Passey's (2021) framework, with details provided of the approaches used to embed specific or effective adoption of digital technology that might (directly or indirectly) benefit the wellbeing of teachers. The findings illustrate that a variety of digital technology options are available to primary and post-primary schools, which may benefit the wellbeing of teachers.

When the data were analysed, and factors influencing teacher wellbeing listed by frequency, it was apparent that factors concerned with the activities and outcomes feature, closely aligned with teaching and learning, were most commonly identified as benefitting teacher wellbeing. Factors influencing a teacher's physical, social, and psychological wellbeing were least commonly identified and there appeared to be reservations (or possibly some reluctance) amongst teachers to discuss these matters. This raises questions as to why this may be the case.

As a result of this research, several areas have been identified for future study. Firstly, research to date has tended to focus on teacher stress but not on teacher wellbeing; therefore, research identifying and addressing those issues negatively impacting on teacher wellbeing and how to overcome them is recommended. Secondly, it is important to investigate how digital technologies can be utilised to enhance the physical, social, and psychological wellbeing of teachers. Although these aspects of wellbeing did not feature much in the reports of participants, it is crucial to explore ways in which teachers can appreciate and benefit from digital technologies that promote all aspects of their wellbeing. Thirdly, future work could be based on a wider sample of schools with a focus on identifying those factors that are most directly associated with teacher wellbeing.

These findings may be particularly relevant to the concerns of those responsible for policy and practice development both at school and at regional levels, to help teachers and leaders identify how the use of educational technologies may positively impact their wellbeing. Regionally, it could be beneficial to incorporate Passey's (2021) extended framework into teacher professional learning and to ensure that external

support for school improvement and teacher wellbeing highlights constructive examples of practice. Similarly, schools could adopt the extended framework into their school self-evaluation and improvement process as a means of recognising and sharing examples of constructive practices. This would promote better understanding and adoption of digital technologies, and enhance the professional and personal wellbeing of teachers.

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Comparing Approaches to Home-School Links on the Island of Ireland: The BUDDIES Study

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Abstract

Parental engagement in children's learning can have beneficial effects on many areas of home and school life and is often cited as having a key role in children's academic attainment. Whilst parental engagement is part of every teacher's remit, there are different schemes and approaches in the two jurisdictions of the North and South of Ireland. This paper is based on a project that set out to gather key insights on two particular interventions – the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme in the South and the Parent Officer (PO) scheme in the North. In-depth qualitative case studies, which included questionnaires completed by school principals, were carried out in six schools across pre-school, primary, and post-primary levels. The findings highlight stark differences in policy between both jurisdictions, with the role of the HSCL coordinator clearly stipulated in relation to qualifications, duties and funding, compared to a more ad hoc system for the role of the PO. Participants across the case-study sites agreed on the unique skills and characteristics of the HSCL coordinator and PO and, despite the HSCL coordinator being a qualified teacher and the PO being a community worker, both roles were considered integral to tackling educational disadvantage and building partnerships.

Keywords: parental engagement, parent officer, home-school links, educational disadvantage policy

Parental engagement in education has long been cited as a key indicator of educational success and can have many beneficial effects on home and school life (Emerson et al., 2012). Yet, not all families are actively engaged in their children's schooling and

schemes have been set up both in the North and the South of Ireland to actively address this gap.

In the South, the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme, established in 1990, is fully funded by the Department of Education. Designed to support families living in disadvantaged communities, the central thrust of the scheme is to promote and create relationships between home and school; between teachers and parents. It focuses directly on the significant adult in children's lives (the parent) but is child-centred, and seeks to promote collaboration between school, home and the community (Conaty, 2002). Specifically, the HSCL coordinator works with parents whose children are at risk of educational disadvantage via a range of different avenues, including provision of home visitations, parents' classes, and a designated room for parents in their child's school. Providing this room within the school building visibly showcases the relationship between school and home. Parents are provided with a safe, welcoming environment where they can come to meet other parents, wait for their children, or attend classes within the school.

In the North, the Parent Officer (PO) role exists more on an ad hoc basis, with no centrally-defined job description. Schools have freedom to allocate funds according to their own priorities. This place-based approach has led to a less formalised landscape in relation to parental engagement, with little information available on the number of POs in schools or on the activities carried out.

Study Aims and Methods

Given the very different approaches to parental engagement in both jurisdictions, the BUDDIES study (Walsh et al., 2022) aimed to bring together key insights on the role of HSCL coordinators and POs across the island of Ireland. Focusing principally on a qualitative research design, the study set out to uncover what the HSCL coordinator/ PO role looks like in both policy (Phase One) and practice (Phase Two). In Phase One, a desk-based scoping review was undertaken to examine the policy landscape in relation to both roles. This was complemented by an exploration of literature, to allow for a review of the HSCL coordinator/PO role potential. For Phase Two, an in-depth qualitative research approach was chosen.

Participants

Six schools participated in the study, three from Northern Ireland (NI) and three from the Republic of Ireland (ROI) and all school phases or levels (preschool, primary and post-primary) were represented. The schools were purposively recruited, the main inclusion criterion being the use of a HSCL coordinator or PO. In-depth qualitative case studies were conducted in each setting. These comprised of one-to-one interviews and focus

groups with HSCL coordinators or POs, school leaders, teachers, and parents (Table 1). One policymaker from the South and one from the North also took part in the study.

A form of light touch observation was carried out across most of the schools to gain a deeper insight into the realities of parental engagement in each setting. A short online questionnaire was also distributed to school principals/leaders in an effort to uncover some of the high-level issues regarding types of schools, funding sources, employment status, and job or role of the HSCL coordinator/PO (further details and results of the questionnaire analysis are reported in Walsh et al., 2022).

Interview and focus group data were transcribed verbatim, and analysed using MaxQDA, following Albon and Mukherji's (2018) steps for analysis of qualitative data. A process of thematic analysis took place based on a "grounded" approach allowing the themes to emerge from the data.

Study Themes and Findings

Four main themes were identified and the findings are organised and presented around these in the following sections. Section one explains how, across both the North and the South, HSCL coordinators/POs are considered from a policy perspective. Section two outlines how HSCL coordinators/POs operate in practice, and attempts to create a picture of "best practice" across both jurisdictions. Section three discusses the level of importance or value attributed to the role by relevant stakeholders within each setting, while section four examines how the HSCL coordinator/PO operates in terms of educational disadvantage.

HSCL Coordinator/PO as Policy

A review of policy documents pertaining to parental engagement across the North and the South highlighted that the greatest difference between both jurisdictions relates to how the role of the HSCL coordinator/PO was considered. The review reinforced how the HSCL scheme is a highly-developed government-funded policy initiative where all DEIS[1] urban primary schools and all DEIS post-primary schools have access to a full-time HSCL Coordinator. HSCL coordinators are employed by their schools and are paid by the Department of Education. They may have responsibility for more than one school, but are employed by only one of the schools they serve, known as their "base school" (Archer & Shortt, 2003, p. 50). The HSCL coordinator, according to policy stipulation, must be a qualified teacher who is already employed within the school, and in receipt of a teacher's salary, but who can be released from all teaching duties to focus solely on parental engagement. The HSCL scheme is *"well-funded and is very well-received by schools in the South"* and is considered *"the jewel in the crown"*

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[1] DEIS refers to the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools scheme, which was established in 2005 as an integrated approach to educational inclusion through supports targeted at schools in disadvantaged communities.

(ROI, policymaker). This perspective was underpinned by stakeholder comments throughout the study in the South, where principals suggested that the role of the HSCL coordinator is essential to children's success and central to their needs within a DEIS setting. One school principal stated that "*I see it as a must if we're to succeed*." (primary principal, ROI). In the Northern context, the role of PO appears much more ad hoc in nature. No reference could be found to a formal job description for POs. There is little government intervention in terms of direct funding and streamlining. Instead, the role is solely at the discretion of school principals, where "*we very much have an open door sort of policy*" (primary principal, NI).

In both jurisdictions, funding for parental engagement is subject to eligibility criteria and targeted to benefit pupils and families from disadvantaged social groups. This is in keeping with an overall aim to reduce educational disadvantage that informs policies across the island of Ireland. In the North, the schools eligible for funding to support parental engagement are determined on a year-by-year basis. The schools are identified in accordance with the proportion of pupils entitled to Free School Meals (FSM) or living in an area classified as disadvantaged, through the Extended Schools Programme. Although it is not specified that these funds should support the role of a PO, in practice, the available financial resources extend to POs being employed only on a part-time and temporary basis. According to a preschool principal in the North, unless schools have additional funding, or funds within their own budget, "*we are often very much trying to get people in the door on our own*" (primary principal, NI). Data on recent funding amounts also suggest that a full-time member of staff, whose role it is to work with parents, could be funded exclusively through the Extended Schools Programme. For most schools in the North, however, this is currently not feasible due to the costs involved in the programme (Department of Education, NI, 2021).

It is also important to note that allocation of the Extended Schools Programme is based on level of need rather than on geographical location, which means that it serves both rural and urban communities and is available to all school levels/phases including preschool. This is in contrast to schools in the South as, despite the extent of and high level of funding in DEIS, the HSCL scheme currently excludes rural primary schools and does not have a formal status within the early years' sector. From an early intervention perspective, this is particularly significant, and runs counter to research evidence that highlights the significance of home-school liaison beginning as early as possible (Henrich, 2013). The lack of a formal focus within the early years' sector has been recognised by policymakers in the South, and, as such, several pilot schemes have been set up to focus specifically on early years. The impact of these has yet to be felt, however. Additionally, the Republic's Department of Education argues that parental engagement with early years is targeted through certain aspects of the HSCL coordinator's work as children transition from preschool to primary education (Department of Education and Skills Circular 0016/2019). This reinforces the focus on transition and engagement, but is dependent upon the workload of individual

coordinators. Findings from this study referenced HSCL coordinators focusing their work on programmes such as "Get Ready with Teddy" and creating welcome packs for their respective schools: *"I have to say out of all of the things I spend my grant money on, I love it, I love making those packs…they are incredibly important"* (primary HSCL coordinator, ROI). This highlights how important it is to have a support system in place in the early years. Parental engagement from an early age can help minimise fears, alleviate problems, and allow for knowledge sharing, even before a child starts school. One school principal mentioned that the HSCL visits every play school and crèche in their locality talking to parents, crèche leaders, and administrators *"just to see if there's anything we need to know"* (primary principal, ROI). With over 70 incoming junior infants in that particular school, the principal mentioned that the HSCL coordinator will have *"all the hard work and the slog done before we put them into classes"* (primary principal, ROI*)*. This allows for resources to be allocated, reassurances to be given, and links to be strengthened, *"getting them on board from the get go"* (primary principal, ROI). As one PO in the North highlighted, it allows for a strong bond to evolve between home and school as the parents *"are frightened you know, I think the parents are worse than the children sometimes. So they can ask us loads of questions and anything that they needed sorted out before they came, we kind of did that"* (primary PO, NI). These comments underline agreement about the importance of parental engagement in the early years between practitioners in the North and South.

HSCL Coordinator/PO in Practice

The discourse on parental engagement in both the North and the South was very positive. There was extensive evidence of how schools value the role of the parent, and how they wished to support meaningful engagement. The findings also indicate that the skills and attributes of the HSCL coordinator/PO are perceived as key to the success of the role. It was appreciated that HSCL coordinators/POs bring their own unique skillset (policymaker, ROI) to the work they perform, and that certain characteristics are considered necessary to ensure successful outcomes. Typically, it was agreed that HSCL/POs should be warm, sensitive, caring, approachable and empathetic individuals who are able to form appropriate relationships with others. As one principal in the South commented *"I know her [HSCL coordinator] personality is amazing, she is kind and practical, she seems to be all things to all people"* (primary principal, ROI). There was an understanding that the HSCL coordinator/PO needed to be genuine and trustworthy, as well as being a good communicator. An effective HSCL coordinator/PO, according to this study, is someone who is personable, sociable and highly professional in their approach.

Findings highlighted that providing activities and opportunities for parents to meet is an essential component of the HSCL/PO scheme across both the North and the South. Work with parents, according to Tusla (2018), should be carried out via a range of

avenues, such as engaging in home visitations, providing a parents' room in schools, and offering classes and course for parents. Focusing on the practical ways in which schools engage with pupils' families, it was evident that there are many similarities across both jurisdictions. It was indicated that the central aim of all activities was to strengthen the links between home and school, thus reinforcing the educational experiences of pupils. Central to discussions on the range of activities provided was a distinct focus on supporting learning for parents, *"giving them the best foundation for learning"* (primary teacher, NI). This coincides with best practice recommended in the research literature where interventions that address parents' own role construction and support their ability to engage with their children's learning in the home are considered most successful (Emerson et al., 2012; Higgins & Katsipataki, 2015). HSCL coordinators were eager to highlight the high levels of participation in events and activities they were involved in such as "One Book, One Town" and "Cuddle and Read". Parents involved in these, and similar, initiatives spoke out about feeling reassured and *"happy"* that they had taken part as, previously, one explained, *"phonics was alien to me"* (parent, ROI). This was also echoed in ad hoc events in the North, with one PO speaking about literacy coffee mornings which had focused on sharing best practices with parents around reading. Such was the success of the coffee mornings, that, when Covid-19 occurred, they were replaced with Facebook live sessions where parents engaged with literacy support online.

One of the key disparities between North and South relates to the function of a HSCL coordinator being fulfilled by a teacher and that of a PO being provided by a community-based worker. In the South, it was argued that a teacher is best-placed to undertake the role of HSCL due to their existing knowledge of a particular school, its staff and pupils. The HSCL coordinator is a full-time member of the teaching staff released from all teaching duties for the duration of their tenure as coordinator. Some of the HSCL coordinators considered a teacher's understanding of education and of the parameters of DEIS as central to the role as *"they know how schools work"* (primary, HSCL, ROI). A teacher, they argued, understands DEIS targets, DEIS initiatives and DEIS supports, and can therefore ensure that this is extended into the home. It also builds capacity and creates understanding amongst school staff, helping to bridge gaps, and raise awareness around educational disadvantage: *"When I was a class teacher, I thought I knew what DEIS was, but I didn't."* (primary HSCL coordinator, ROI*). This sentiment was echoed by other school principals who claimed that having a member of the teaching staff as a HSCL coordinator helps to bridge the divide between parents and teachers. It also leads to more understanding and a more balanced perception of what happens inside and outside of the school setting: *"I think having the word teacher in it is really important, because it's the teacher who has the connection with the staff, and that's what makes the difference. That's what helps teachers to say – Okay, should we give it a go? We'll try"* (primary principal, ROI). Others, mainly from the North, believed that someone who lives in the community, understands the community and

is a member of that community may be less intimidating and in turn more successful in terms of breaking down barriers and creating a positive working partnership. From this perspective, life experience was considered fundamental to the role of PO: *"they need to have lived in the real world and got a wee bit of life experience"* (primary teacher, NI).

Despite this fundamental and significant difference between teacher and community worker, there was consensus about the significant advantages to employing an individual with sufficient time to devote to this important designated role. Furthermore, it was agreed that it is critically important to find the right person with the right fit for the community in which they will be working.

HSCL Coordinator/PO as Value

There was evidence that the role of the HSCL coordinator/PO is highly valued amongst school communities, and a culture of support for parental involvement was evident across all case-study sites. This was reflected in the discourse of associated stakeholders (principals, senior leaders, teachers, HSCL coordinators, parents and policymakers), irrespective of jurisdiction or school phase/level. The position of the HSCL coordinator/PO was described as *"intrinsic to the school"* (primary teacher, ROI), *"hugely important"* (post-primary principal, NI) with one teacher commenting that they *"couldn't cope without them"* (primary teacher, ROI).

The HSCL coordinator was considered central to the success of parental engagement. Having a dedicated post-holder within school communities, whose role is focused entirely on parental involvement, helps to alleviate and minimise everyday pressures within the school. School principals and teachers regarded the role as an essential support, which allowed meaningful partnerships to evolve between families and schools. This sentiment was echoed in the North, where it was argued that having an individual, particularly in a paid capacity, working with an educational lens, both for and with families, ensured that open, honest discussions could take place. The HSCL coordinator/PO was seen as being in a position to diffuse potentially difficult situations to help ensure that everyone could work towards a common goal, with a principal in the South suggesting that *"it takes out the aggro"* (primary principal, ROI). Parents also seemed to appreciate having someone at hand with whom they could speak to sort things out before they had become *"big issues"* (parent, NI). In this way, therefore, having a HSCL coordinator/PO in practice was associated with those softer benefits of keeping everyone happy and, in so doing, enabling the school and school life to run smoothly.

From a children's perspective, having a HSCL coordinator/PO was considered intrinsic to reducing barriers to learning, where strong communication between home and school ensured *"the best school experience possible"* that a child could potentially

have (primary HSCL, ROI). Indeed, the input invested by HSCL coordinators and POs was recognised by principals in both jurisdictions as being associated with increased attendance, enhanced academic outcomes, and pupils' overall success, particularly at post-primary level. Having a HSCL coordinator/PO make an informal home visit to families *"opening up the lines of communication"* (post-primary HSCL, ROI) ensures that families engage with the school, and that students who are at risk of disengaging are kept in the system, thus *"breaking the cycle"* (post-primary principal, ROI).

Having a HSCL coordinator/PO was considered integral to schools both North and South and the holistic role they play appeared to be valued by everyone concerned, as summed up by one policymaker in the South: *"Principals love it, parents love it and HSCLs love it"* (policymaker, ROI). Indeed, the only criticism made was that *"we need more [of their time] not less"* (primary teacher, ROI).

HSCL Coordinator/PO as Tackling Educational Disadvantage

All of the case-study HSCL coordinators/POs were operating in areas of significant deprivation, where poor housing, unemployment, mental ill health, poverty, crime and domestic violence were the norm. Increasing numbers of refugee and newcomer families were also evident and levels of special educational needs were on an unprecedented rise. The findings from this study indicate that the HSCL coordinator/PO provides a *"direct link"* between home, school and outside agencies (primary principal, NI) and can be considered a *"safety net"* (post-primary parent, NI) for parents. Both the HSCL coordinator and PO were seen as acting to empower and enable parents to deal with the myriad of financial constraints and emotional challenges they encounter on a regular basis, a support mechanism which was considered *"vitally, vitally important"* by the families concerned (primary parent, ROI). In practice, this involved the coordinators supporting families by resourcing some essential practical costs of education (and home life) such as school lunches, school uniforms, and food parcels.

The HSCL coordinators/POs also tended to act as a conduit for outside agencies, with a multidisciplinary lens evident in discussions and communication. Those interviewed spoke about links with outside agencies, community groups and various organisations with which they had engaged. This was particularly important for those parents with literacy difficulties and newcomer families, who relied on the HSCL coordinator/PO to navigate the school system. Parents in one community spoke about arriving into Ireland and knowing very little about schools in the Republic. Upon arrival at the school they had enrolled in, the HSCL coordinator helped them with uniforms and books and arranged English classes for the new families. A coffee morning was also organised where newcomer families met and created a *"little support network for themselves"* (primary HSCL, ROI).

Breaking down barriers and changing mindsets in an effort to address parents' own negative recollections of schooling, and, in turn, realise the potential of the school,

were also integral to the efforts of the HSCL coordinator/PO. Whilst getting the buy-in from parents who have tended to associate schooling with negativity is challenging, prompting teachers to question their perceptions of disadvantage was another key role of the HSCL coordinators/POs. Encouraging all teachers to fully appreciate the challenges which families within their school communities face is paramount in tackling educational disadvantage. This study highlights that it is the HSCL coordinator/PO who acts as the "*game changer*" (policymaker, ROI) by building effective bridges between home and school and, in so doing, affording all children, irrespective of their background, the opportunity to reach their full educational potential.

Conclusion

The BUDDIES study set out to examine the implementation and administration of the role of the HSCL coordinator/PO in practice across all school phases/levels in the North and South of Ireland. Principally, it aimed to uncover the lived realities of the role, attempting to shine a light on best practice across both jurisdictions. Releasing a teacher into this role is considered best practice in the South and it was widely agreed that the skillset of the individual involved is paramount. In the North, when schools are willing to promote parental engagement through investing in a PO, it is to be commended. Investing in a definite role or individual whose core goal is to build bridges between home and school for the benefit of children can really make a difference to the lives of all concerned.

While the findings of the study highlight differences between the North and the South – in terms of how the role is funded, supported, and considered in policy – there are similarities and commonalities across both jurisdictions. The findings show that the role of the HSCL coordinator/PO is perceived as highly complex, hugely demanding and unique. The need for a comprehensive approach to parental engagement within the education system was indicated across both jurisdictions. Investing in a HSCL coordinator/PO requires consideration at a political level, particularly in the North where the system is less well developed. The critical importance of the role cannot be underestimated and the HSCL coordinator role needs further expansion into preschool settings and rural areas in the South of Ireland.

Finally, though small scale, this study demonstrated that promoting parental involvement through the role of HSCL coordinator/PO in schools is seen as a crucial element in ensuring that schools are considered warm, open places where "*parents are welcomed and valued, and families flourish*" (preschool principal, NI).

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