Iris Eireannach An
OIDEACHAIS
The Irish Journal of
EDUCATION

Meaningful Methodologies in Initial Teacher Education Practicum Research

Melanie Ní Dhuinn[1*], Julie Uí Choistealbha[1], Julie Hamilton[2], and Tandeep Kaur[3]

[1]*Marino Institute of Education, Dublin*
[2]*St. Mary's University College, Belfast*
[3]*Dublin City University*

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

Please cite as: Ní Dhuinn, M., Uí Choistealbha, J., Hamilton, J., & Kaur, T. (2023). Meaningful methodologies in initial teacher education practicum research. *Irish Journal of Education*, *47*(7), 76–98. www.erc.ie/IJE/special-issues

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.

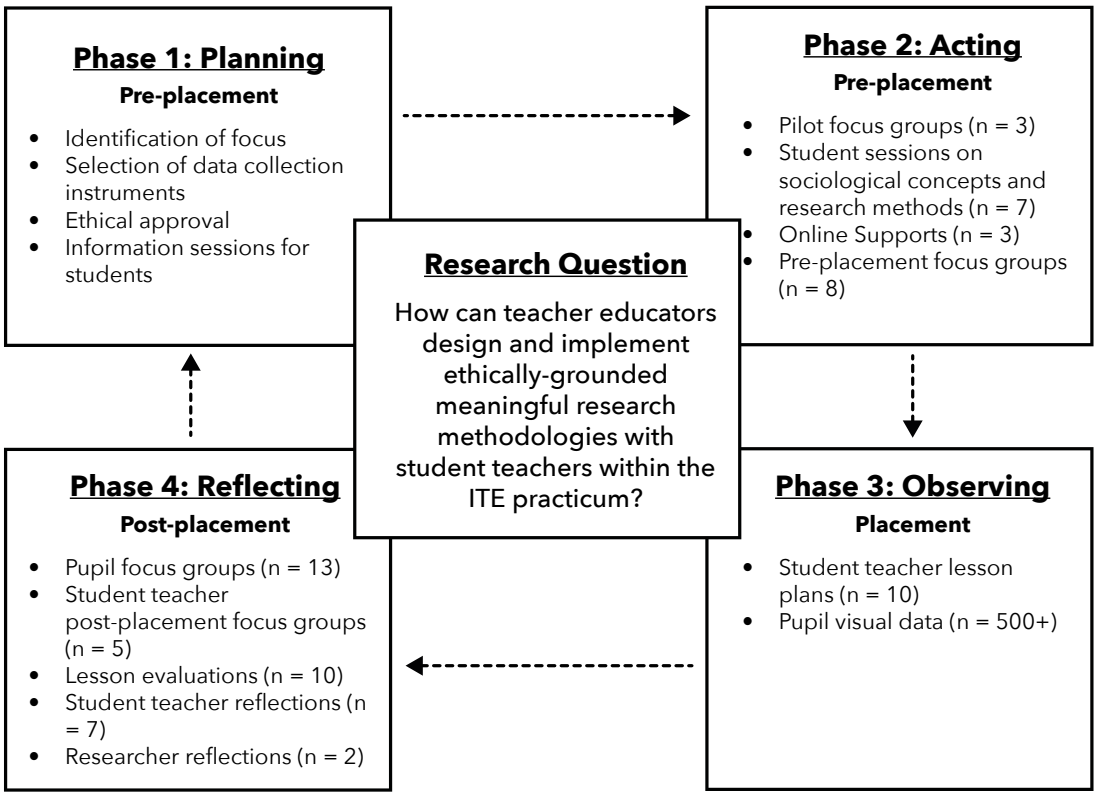
At all stages of the research process, the researchers were aware of the need to ensure that the project should never harm anyone, intentionally or otherwise, and maintained an open and transparent modus operandi throughout. The research advisory team provided useful and supportive advice to the researchers 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

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.

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.

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

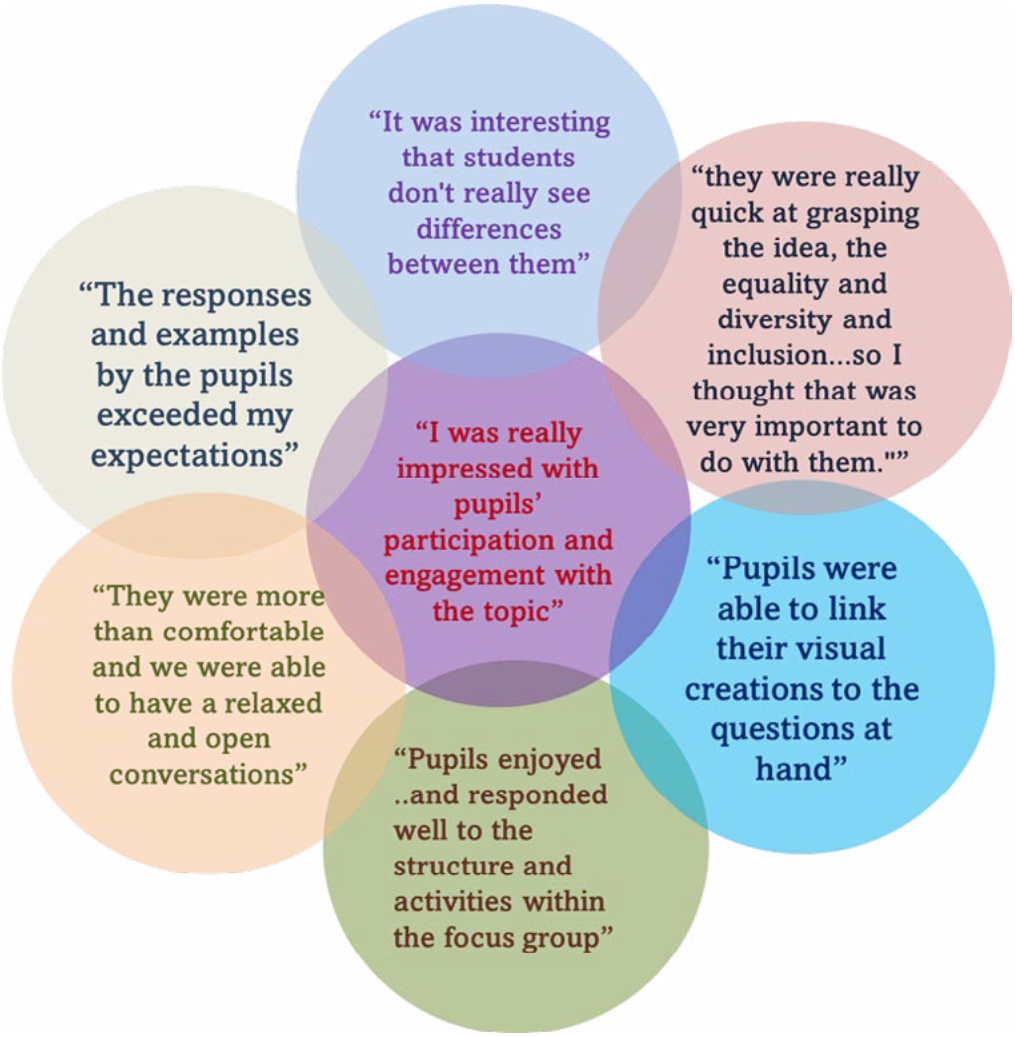
It can be challenging to include children (pupils) and vulnerable adults in research projects. Issues of consent, availability, literacy, numeracy and language can exclude them from research opportunities, and deny their voice in the research domain. O'Toole et al. (2019), drawing on the work of Alanen 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.

References

Alanen, L., Brooker, L., & Mayall, B. (Eds.). (2015). *Childhood with Bourdieu*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137384744

Alexander, R. (Ed.). (2009). *Children, their world, their education*. Final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1099-0860.2010.00300.x

Ayers, W., Quinn, T., & Stovall, D. (Eds.). (2009). *Handbook of social justice in education*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203887745

Banks, M. (2001). *Visual methods in social research*. Sage Publications. https://methods.sagepub.com/Book/visual-methods-in-social-research

Barthes, R. (2000). *Camera Lucida: Reflections on photography*. Vintage Classics.

Beauchamp, C., & Thomas, L. (2009). Understanding teacher identity: An overview of issues in the literature and implications for teacher education. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 39(2), 175–189. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057640902902252

Bradbury, H. (Ed.). (2015). *The Sage handbook of action research*. Sage Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473921290

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis?. *Qualitative research in psychology*, *18*(3), 328–352. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238

Brookfield, S. D. (2017). *Becoming a critically reflective teacher,* (2nd ed.). Jossey Bass. https://www.wiley.com/en-gbBecoming+a+Critically+Reflective+Teacher%2C+2nd+Edition-p-9781119049708

Clarke, L., Galvin, C., Campbell, M., Cowan, P., Hall, K., Magennis, G., O'Doherty, T., Purdy, N., & Abbott, L. (2021). Assessing the value of SCOTENS as a cross-border professional learning network in Ireland using the Wenger–Trayner value-creation framework. *Oxford Review of Education*, *47*(1), 79–97. https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2020.1835624

Clarke, L., & O'Doherty, T. (2021). The professional place of teachers on the island of Ireland: Truth flourishes where the student's lamp has shone. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, *44*(1), 62–9. https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2020.1844660

Cochran-Smith, M. (2018). Against the grain. In E. B. Hilty (Ed.), *Thinking about schools,* (1st ed., pp. 205–225). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429495670-19

Cochran-Smith, M. (2021). Rethinking teacher education: The trouble with accountability. *Oxford Review of Education*, *47*(1), 8–24. https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2020.1842181

Correll, J. (2017). Unlocking the secrets of agency. *The Learning Professional*, *38*(4), 52–57. https://learningforward.org/journal/august-2017-vol-38-no-4/unlocking-secrets-agency-new-teacher-induction-program-empowers-educator-centered-growth/

Drake, P., & Heath, L. (2008). Insider research in school and universities: The case of the professional doctorate. In P. Sikes & A. Potts (Eds.), *Researching education from the inside*, (1st ed., pp. 135–151). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203932353

Dyches, J., & Boyd, A. (2017). Foregrounding equity in teacher education: Toward a model of social justice pedagogical and content knowledge. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *68*(5), 476–490. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487117705097

Eteläpelto, A., Vähäsantanen, K., Hökkä, P., & Paloniemi, S. (2013). What is agency? Conceptualizing professional agency at work. *Educational Research Review*, *10*, 45–65. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2013.05.001

Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement in Northern Ireland. (2021). *A fair start*. https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/A%20Fair%20Start%20-%20Final%20Report%20and%20Action%20Plan.pdf

Forster, C., & Eperjesi, R. (2021). *Action research for student teachers*. Sage Publications. https://www.perlego.com/book/3013373/action-research-for-student-teachers-pdf

Goodwin, A. L. (2020). Globalization, global mindsets and teacher education. *Action in Teacher Education*, *42*(1), 6–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/01626620.2019.1700848

Hall, K., Murphy, R., Rutherford, V., & Ní Áingléis, B., (2018). *School placement in initial teacher education*. Teaching Council. https://www.teachingcouncil.ie/assets/uploads/2023/08/school-placement-report.pdf

Hennink, M., Hutter, I., & Bailey, A. (2020). *Qualitative research methods*. Sage Publications. https://uk.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-assets/114917_book_item_114917.pdf

Kavanagh, A. M., Waldron, F., & Mallon, B. (Eds.). (2021). *Teaching for social justice and sustainable development across the primary curriculum*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003003021

Knowles, C., & Sweetman P. (Eds.). (2004). *Picturing the social landscape: Visual methods and the sociological imagination*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203694527

Kokka, K. (2020). Social justice pedagogy for whom? Developing privileged students' critical mathematics consciousness. *The Urban Review*, *52*(4), 778–803. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-020-00578-8

Koshy, V. (2010). *Action research for improving educational practice,* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications. https://uk.sagepub.com/en-gb/eur/action-research-for-improving-educational-practice/book233428

Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2000). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research*. Sage Publications. https://uk.sagepub.com/en-gb/eur/focus-groups/book243860

Liston, J., Ní Dhuinn, M., Prendergast, M., & Kaur, T. (2021). Exploring reflective practice in an initial teacher education program in Ireland. In J. Madalanska-Michalak, M. A. Flores, E. L. Low, & S. Van Nuland (Eds.), *Recruiting and educating the best teachers: Policy, professionalism and pedagogy* (pp. 226–46). Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004506657_013

Loxley, A., O'Leary, B., & Minton, S. J. (2011). Space makers or space cadets exploring children's perceptions of space and place in the context of a Dublin primary school. *Educational and Child Psychology*, *28*(1), 46–63. https://doi.org/10.53841/bpsecp.2011.28.1.46

Mayne, H. (2019). Pedagogical content knowledge and social justice pedagogical knowledge: Re-envisioning a model for teacher practice. *Research in Educational Administration and Leadership*, *4*(3), 701–718. https://doi.org/10.30828/real/2019.3.9

McNamara, G., Skerritt, C., O'Hara, J., O'Brien, S., & Brown, M. (2022). For improvement, accountability, or the economy? Reflecting on the purpose(s) of school self-evaluation in Ireland. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, *54*(2), 158–173. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2021.1985439

McNiff, J. (2013). *Action research: Principles and practice*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203112755

Mezirow, J. (1978). Perspective transformation. *Adult Education, 28*(2), 100–110. https://doi.org/10.1177/074171367802800202

Mitchell, C. (2011). *Doing visual research*. SAGE Publications. https://uk.sagepub.com/en-gb/eur/doing-visual-research/book231677

Morgan, D. L. (1997). *Focus groups as qualitative research*, (2nd ed.). Qualitative Research Methods Series. Sage Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412984287

Ní Dhuinn, M., Uí Choistealbha, J., Hamilton, J., & Kaur, T. (2022). *SHARED student hopes: Achievement, research, equity and diversity*. SCoTENS. https://scotens.org/site/wp-content/uploads/SHARED-Research-Report.pdf

Nussbaum, M. C. (1997). *Cultivating humanity. A classical reform of liberal defense education*. Harvard University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvjghth8

O'Toole, L., Kiely, J., & McGillicuddy, D. (2019). *Parental involvement, engagement, and partnership in their children's education during the primary school years*. National Parents Council. http://hdl.handle.net/10197/9823

Phillips, L. (2010). Social justice storytelling and young children's active citizenship. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education 31*(3), 363–376. https://doi.org/10.1080/01596301003786993

Prosser, J., & Loxley, A. (2008). *Introducing visual methods*. NCRM Publications. https://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/id/eprint/420

Reay, D. (2022). Lessons from abroad: How can we achieve a socially just educational system? *Irish Educational Studies*, *41*(3), 425–440. https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2022.2085766

Rose, G. (2014). On the relation between "visual research methods" and contemporary visual culture. *The Sociological Review 62*(1), 24–46. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954x.12109

Sahlberg, P., Furlong, J., & Munn, P. (2012). *Report of the International Review Panel on the structure of initial teacher education provision in Ireland: Review conducted on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills*. https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/05/Review-of-Structure-of-Teacher-Education.pdf

Sannino, A. (2010). Teachers' talk of experiencing: Conflict, resistance and agency. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *26*(4), 838–844. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2009.10.021

Schepens, A., Aelterman, A., & Vlerick, P. (2009). Student teachers' professional identity formation: Between being born as a teacher and becoming one. *Educational Studies*, *35*(4), 361–378. https://doi.org/10.1080/03055690802648317

Sweetman, P. (2009). Revealing habitus, illuminating practice: Bourdieu, photography and visual methods. *The Sociological Review, 57*(3), 491–511. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954x.2009.01851.x

Teaching Council. (2020). *Céim*: *Standards for initial teacher education*. https://www.teachingcouncil.ie/en/news-events/latest-news/ceim-standards-for-initial-teacher-education.pdf

Waldron, F. (2014). Concluding remarks. *Joint INTO – St Patrick's College, Drumcondra Seminar,* (pp. 37-38). Irish National Teachers' Organisation.

Wang, D., & Zhang, L. J. (2021). Sustainability as a goal in teaching workforce retention: Exploring the role of teacher identity construction in preservice teachers' job motivation. *Sustainability*, *13*(5), 2698. https://doi.org/10.3390/su13052698

Williams, S. (2018). Learning to hope and hoping to learn: A critical examination of young refugees and formal education in the UK. In M. Pisani, T. Basarab, B. G. Bello, & S. Laine (Eds.), *Between insecurity and hope*: *Reflections on youth work with young refugees,* (pp. 85-100). Council of Europe and European Commission. https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/bitstream/123456789/113400/1/Between_insecurity_and_hope.pdf

Zuber-Skerritt, O., Fletcher, M., & Kearney, J. (2015). *Professional learning in higher education and communities: Towards a new vision for action research*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137455185

Author Note

*Melanie Ní Dhuinn may be contacted at melanie.nidhuinn@mie.ie

Melanie Ní Dhuinn's ORCID iD is: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2150-6724

Julie Uí Choistealbha's ORCID iD is: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6807-1428

Julie Hamilton's ORCID iD is: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1899-4184

Tandeep Kaur's ORCID iD is: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4208-7787

The research on which this article is based was funded by the Standing Conference on Teacher Education, North and South (SCoTENS) under the Shared Island SCoTENS Research Partnership.