Ireland's Education Yearbook

2023

IRELAND'S EDUCATION YEARBOOK

EDUCATION MATTERS®

Introduction

Early Childhood

Primary

4

IRELAND'S
2023 EDUCATION
YEARBOOK

IRELAND'S
EDUCATION **2023**
YEARBOOK

5

Second Level

Further Education & Training

Higher Education

8

IRELAND'S
EDUCATION
2023 YEARBOOK

IRELAND'S
EDUCATION **2023**
YEARBOOK

9

Research

10

IRELAND'S
2023 EDUCATION
YEARBOOK

IRELAND'S
EDUCATION **2023**
YEARBOOK

11

Our Advertisers

Editorial

Pasi Sahlberg, speaking at the annual WISE conference (World Innovation Summit for Education) in Qatar some years ago, suggested that the reason Finland was topping the international charts in education at the time was more to do with *who* than with *what* or *how*. To an international delegation visiting Finland seeking the formula to replicate their success, he suggested that it was grounded in teachers' status in Finnish society. To become a teacher in Finland, he said, you had to attain the highest educational standards, and only the brightest and the best succeeded in becoming teachers in their country.

Dr Brian Mooney
Editor of *Ireland's Education Yearbook*

Ashling Murphy personified all that is best in Irish education

I thought of Pasi's comments as I reflected on the all-too-short life of Ashling Murphy. As we all followed the harrowing legal proceedings following her death, we saw a picture of Ashling emerge which clearly demonstrated that she was indeed the brightest and the best of her generation, whether in her role as a loved teacher to her young pupils, as a gifted musician, or as a sportswoman with the GAA.

No words from me can ease the painful loss that her family and grieving partner will live with forever, but they can take some comfort from the fact that during her short life, she set an example for the next generation of children to emulate: in music, in sport, and in her chosen profession of teaching.

The value placed on education in Irish society

Ireland has excelled in educational outcomes at all levels in the first hundred years of its existence as an independent nation. I am immensely proud to be a small part of that story through my grandfather Daniel Mc Sweeney, who served as a teacher and principal of a

small school in Tralee for the first 30 years of the State's existence, on down through three of his children, Daniel, Maureen, and Brighid, who emulated him as model teachers and school leaders, and yours truly since I entered the profession in 1976.

Notwithstanding all the failings and imperfections in our education system, which are regularly pointed to by teachers' union representatives at early childhood, primary, post-primary, further, and higher education levels, we have one of the most highly educated populations on the planet. Recently published PISA data (Programme for International Student Assessment) from the OECD confirms our place among the elite of educational outcomes.

Paul Crone in his overview of second-level education in this edition of *Ireland's Education Yearbook*, points out that at an international level, we are deemed to have 'mastered school leadership'. To quote Paul directly, 'The Irish system is held in high regard, and I was surprised that our colleagues abroad are looking to Ireland as an exemplar of best practice on the operation of schools and the delivery of effective school leadership.'

Although how we manage our schools, what we teach in our classrooms, and how our pedagogy in doing so at all levels are central to our educational success story, the real key to our success is that we continue to attract the Ashling Murphys of this world into the profession.

How do we ensure that our appreciation of education at all levels persists?

What is it about the island of Ireland, and who we are as a people, that we continue to have such a deep respect for the profession of teaching, and that generation after generation of our youth choose to follow a career in teaching after completing their second-level education? This is not an insignificant question, given how important a high-quality education system is to overall national wellbeing. We must protect and nurture that which inspires a love of education in our people.

Thankfully, many of those on whose shoulders rest the decisions that shape society now and into the future, and education's place within it, started their lives as teachers before being drawn into serving their community as political leaders. Many of them directly shaped the ongoing development of the system as ministers for education: Micheál Martin, Noel Dempsey, Mary Hanafin, and Norma Foley, to name but a few.

"Our colleagues abroad are looking to Ireland as an exemplar of best practice on the operation of schools and the delivery of effective school leadership."

We are seeing the emergence of a truly holistic education system to enable all citizens to find appropriate educational opportunities when and where they need them.

Embracing a far wider meaning of the concept of education

Micheál Martin set the establishment of a second department of education, to deal with further and higher education, as a condition for entering the current government. His foresight has been richly rewarded through the initiatives of Minister Simon Harris, as outlined by him in his foreword in the current *Yearbook*.

Every child is a unique creation, with skills and talents which – with an appropriate education in the original Latin sense of *educere*, 'to bring out, to lead forth' – can be fulfilled in their working lives. For too long, many parents saw success for their children only in terms of a narrow range of options centred on literacy and numeracy skills and delivered through academically oriented university educational options. It was not so much a case of 'leading out or bringing forth' as of imposing a definition of success onto the child, irrespective of their innate skills and talents.

With the advent of the five new technological universities, the expansion of the apprenticeship model to cover over 73 options, and the introduction of the new tertiary degrees this September to provide third-level degree access outside the CAO system, we can clearly see that people of all ages and circumstances are now engaging with education in its broadest sense.

As Andrew Brownlee reports in his overview of the further education and training (FET) sector, 2023 has seen a surge in participation at all levels of FET. We are seeing the emergence of a truly holistic education system to enable all citizens to find appropriate educational opportunities when and where they need them.

Education – a process rather than a product

In the past, we tended to see education as a product to be acquired on a scale from 1–10, as per the Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) framework of qualifications. But real life is ever-changing, and even those with PhDs may find that their skills become obsolete as they age. What of those in mid-career who are struggling with the advances in technology or in the transition from full-time employment to a more eclectic lifestyle in their 60s? For too long we have paid lip service to the concept of lifelong education while in practice ignoring mature adults.

Thankfully, we are coming to terms with the fact that in our ever-changing world, educational opportunities in a healthy society must be in fact lifelong. At a recent board of management meeting of a further education college that I am privileged to chair, the principal informed the board that a full class group for

the Tour Guiding course was already in place for September 2024. The average age of that class group is in the mid-60s.

A public, high-quality early childhood education is still some way off

Much progress has been made in developing Ireland's early childhood education system over recent years. But as Mathias Urban writes in his overview of the sector, 'A truly *public* system requires active government involvement in all aspects of the system, including service delivery, planning, regulation, monitoring, and evaluation. It includes the State taking responsibility as employer of educators.' As yet, there does not seem to be the political will to provide such a high-quality education for our youngest children.

Research in Ireland is central to the growth and development of our society and economy

As Dr Peter Brown points out in his overview article, the key focus for Ireland's research system in 2023 was to develop legislation that will provide for a new agency, to be named *Taighde Éireann – Research Ireland*, amalgamating the functions of the Irish Research Council and Science Foundation Ireland. The bill is currently being finalised for cabinet approval.

Free schoolbooks plus wellbeing and mental health support at primary level

Minister Norma Foley established a scheme in 2023 to cover the cost of all schoolbooks, workbooks, and copybooks for children in primary and special schools. She also decided to provide primary schools in seven counties with a programme of counselling, wellbeing, and mental health supports, including access to one-to-one counselling. These groundbreaking commitments were much welcomed by hard-pressed families.

The emergence of AI as a dark cloud over education worldwide

As technological advances have accelerated and platforms such as ChatGPT reshape how society interacts with data, there has been much wailing and gnashing of teeth from all sectors of the education system about the dangers of this technology to how we assess students' work.

A truly public system requires active government involvement in all aspects of the system, including service delivery, planning, regulation, monitoring, and evaluation.

Surely our task as educators should be to teach students to embrace this technology and engage with the fruits of its potential.

It is true that the rapid advances in artificial intelligence (AI) threaten the existing models of how we educate at all levels. This is not new: how we interact with data has been changing rapidly throughout my lifetime. During my undergraduate years in University College Dublin (UCD) in the mid-1970s, I vividly remember sitting towards the back of a lecture theatre so that I could dash to the library to get my hands on the single copy of a book named by the lecturer. Very often the book was not available, as someone from the previous year's group had skilfully cut out the relevant pages with a blade.

We have come a long way from those days; access to all sources of information is now available online to everyone. The current advances in AI simply accelerate the pace at which we can interrogate and analyse data. It is already revolutionising medical research, enabling data to be processed at previously unimaginable speed, leading to the creation of new drugs for the treatment of disease.

What the advance in AI will do is radically alter the process of education. We must never forget that we educators are preparing our students for the world in which we live. Yes, this may mean that we must change both how we interact with our students in the education process itself and how we assess their progress.

We can continue to build programmes to identify students who have presented online content as their own work, and punish them for doing so. But surely our task as educators should be to teach them to embrace this technology and engage with the fruits of its potential, in a way that enables them to acquire the relevant skills to use the technology effectively in the future world of work which they are about to enter.

It may mean that exams by interview board or by presentation, followed by questioning to determine the level of a student's comprehension of a topic, will become more prevalent in our assessment processes at all levels.

Teacher supply shortages

As Teresa O'Doherty points out in her overview of primary-level education, it is becoming progressively more difficult for many principals to secure teachers at early childhood, primary, and post-primary levels. There are a wide range of reasons for this situation.

At early childhood education, the problem is driven by the lack of a pay scale that is in any way comparable to that paid to teachers at primary level. Many qualified early childhood teachers are progressing into the 18-month conversion programmes to become primary school teachers in order to secure a living wage.

At second level, the problem is both general and specific to certain subject areas. Some curricular subjects have an acute shortage of graduates seeking careers in teaching. In others, such as Home Economics, graduates are being enticed into careers in hospitality and the food industry the moment they graduate.

By far the biggest problem is that teachers are paid the same salary wherever they live and work. With the average cost of a starter home in urban areas circa €450,000, it is next to impossible to build a family life in many areas of Ireland today.

Grappling with the consequences of Ireland's educational success story

The problems that we are grappling with today arise directly from our educational achievements over the past hundred years. The Irish education system has become a victim of its own success. Having brought over 95% of each year group to Leaving Cert level, and two thirds of that number on to further and higher education, the country has one of the most dynamic economies in the world, employing over 2.6 million people and requiring the inward migration of over 40,000 additional workers annually to continue to service its needs.

The difficulty for any government, current or future, in facilitating any public servant in securing accommodation is stark in an economy which has added 350,000 additional jobs in the past five years, and where, according to Revenue estimates, there has been a rise of 50% since 2022 in the number of 'tax units' – individuals or jointly assessed couples – with an income over €100,000.

Resistance to change is an innate human response which must be handled sensitively

No more than educators who may see technological advances that disrupt their current lifestyle and work practices as negative developments, communities experiencing rapid change – including the arrival of many new, unfamiliar faces – may see the fruits of our success in growing our economy and employment opportunities in a negative light, if it contributes, as it inevitably has, to an acute shortage of housing.

All of us are going to have to accept that if we want young people to be able to establish families and live in our cities working as teachers, nurses, gardaí, and so on, we are going to have to accept radical change to housing and transport, to name but two areas.

Having brought over 95% of each year group to Leaving Cert level, and two thirds of that number on to further and higher education, the country has one of the most dynamic economies in the world.

Outlook

Following two very difficult years, in which the education system navigated the choppy waters of the pandemic, we have emerged in 2023 with by far the strongest and most effective education system that Ireland has ever possessed.

As we enter 2024, the hundredth anniversary of the establishment of the Leaving Cert, and face into a series of elections that will shape all our lives, both in Ireland and in the EU, we should reflect on the fact that the real problems we face as a society are the fruits of a hugely successful education system. That system has transformed the quiet backwater of my youth, which raised its children for the emigrant boat to England and the United States, into one of the most vibrant countries on the planet, where we are grappling with the consequences of our educational achievements.

The secret of our success is that education in Ireland is a team effort, with every voice listened to respectfully – from the parent, the student, the teachers and lecturers in our schools and colleges, the civil and public servants who manage the system and its delivery, and the ministers in government with responsibility to decide on future policy. Long may it continue.

Foreword

Purpose

2023 has been an incredible year of success for the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. Across the further and higher education sectors, we have made incredible progress together.

It was the year we launched degree programmes outside the CAO system, reduced the cost of education for families, approved significant student accommodation projects, launched four more apprenticeship programmes, and increased investment in both the higher education and further education and training (FET) sectors.

As we look back, I think we can take great pride in the changes we are making across the third-level sector. Just three years ago, this Department was in its infancy, and now, I believe, it is making an enormous contribution to the economic and societal success of this country.

Our purpose is simple. We have to ensure that each citizen can reach their full potential. When I consider what this means, I imagine a country in which everyone can access the training and skills they need to pursue a career they are passionate about. To find a job they love doing and are good at – one that they're happy to get out bed in the morning for.

It shouldn't matter where you are from, what your parents did, how old you are, what gender you are, or how much money you have. There must be no barriers to making your ambition a reality. But the hard truth is that this mission remains just that – a mission, albeit one we are working hard to fulfil.

Simon Harris TD

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

Different paths

We live in a country which, over many years, has become obsessed with the arduous, and too often unfair, CAO points race. We live in a country where most of the population is highly educated, but when it comes to lifelong learning, we are lagging behind Europe's top performers. We live in a country where – to our shame – a snobbery towards further education and apprenticeships persists.

The hard truth is that ours is a country which has become blinkered in its belief that there is just one preferred route through an established higher education institution to finding your perfect career.

Let me be clear: There is no one right way; there are just different paths. There is no one right time in your life to study, only many life-defining steps on your educational journey. There is no one right educational provider, only the right course that will offer you the skills you need and want. There is no one size fits all in education; there are just different ways – and they must be open and available to everyone.

It is my job, and that of my Department, to ensure that the policies and strategies are in place to make these truths not just aspirational but real and tangible for everyone.

One of the proudest moments I have had since becoming the first Minister of this new Department was the launch this year of new courses which offer students the opportunity to earn a university degree outside of the points system.

These unified third-level courses challenge the notion that your Leaving Certificate results should determine your education and career path, define a person or their capabilities, or get in the way of their dreams.

Why should someone with a creative streak be denied a career in animation and visual effects because they didn't do well in Irish, Maths, or Biology? Or what about the young person with an entrepreneurial drive, who is denied a business degree because they didn't do as well in subjects with little relevance to where their talent lies?

There are now, for the first time in the history of the State, dozens of degree courses up and running across business, IT, science, sustainable technologies, animation, and media production for which the students did not need to meet a certain Leaving Cert points tally. In September, these students began their studies in further education institutions, and they will later progress to a higher education institution to complete their fully accredited degree.

> *The hard truth is that ours is a country which has become blinkered in its belief that there is just one preferred route through an established higher education institution to finding your perfect career.*

Step change

This is only the beginning of this significant step change in how we offer different pathways outside of the CAO points system. Over the coming weeks, we plan to announce many more new courses as we continue to unify the third-level system and ensure there is a route to success for everyone.

And to ensure it is inclusive and accessible to all, there is no tuition or student contribution fee while the students are at FET, and students are still able to apply for student maintenance grants.

Working tirelessly behind the scenes in all this is the National Tertiary Office, which I established in December 2022 with a mandate to develop joint further and higher education degree programmes. Our vision and goal was to create a more unified third-level system, one which is flexible and diverse, and which offers clear pathways for our students to reach their potential and fulfil their dreams.

I firmly believe it is one of the most exciting developments in third-level education the country has seen in decades, and I am excited to see how it develops and grows over the coming years.

Prior to this, in our bid to drive parity of esteem across third-level education, we also asked the CAO to change its website so that students could see the other options available to them outside of higher education, such as apprenticeships and further education.

Apprenticeships

To drive this message home, I visited over 80 secondary schools across Ireland in 2022 and spoke to students from Fourth Year upwards about all the educational pathways available to them. My message to them was clear: Follow what you are passionate about, and we will make sure there is a course or pathway available to you.

For some, this will be degree at a university, but for others the correct route to their dream job is through further education or an apprenticeship.

We have been doing an incredible amount of work to increase the number and variety of apprenticeships available for learners. As part of Budget 2024, funding of €67 million was announced for the continued growth of apprenticeships from 13,000 places in 2022 to over 16,000 places next year.

We now have 73 apprenticeship programmes in Ireland, and a key part of our strategy has been the development of craft apprenticeships. We know we need

Working tirelessly behind the scenes in all this is the National Tertiary Office, which I established in December 2022 with a mandate to develop joint further and higher education degree programmes.

It's vital that people of all ages and backgrounds in Ireland who want to choose the apprenticeship route have the means to do so.

50,000 new skilled workers by 2030 in order to build the homes this country needs, and we are working hard to hit those targets.

But the idea of what an apprenticeship is, and can be, is also rapidly changing. For example, in November we announced two really important programmes – a level 6 Higher Certificate in Civil Engineering, which will take two years, and a level 7 Bachelor of Engineering in Civil Engineering, which will take three years.

This new mode of delivery is already attracting new entrants into the profession and is satisfying a growing demand for learning through apprenticeship. And we won't stop there. Phase two, due to begin in 2024, will include apprenticeships at degree and master's level in Civil Engineering.

All of this ties in with our strategy to change the perception of an apprenticeship and encourage students to consider this route through third level when chasing their dream profession.

But changing how people think about apprenticeships is not enough – we need to tear down any barriers that might exist for those who want to pursue one. In May, I announced a new bursary to help make apprenticeships more inclusive and accessible for everyone.

From this September, learners who participated in an 'access to apprenticeship' course, in Technological University Dublin or Technological University of the Shannon, were eligible for €3,000 in financial support to help cover the costs of travel, accommodation, and successful participation in the access course.

It's vital that people of all ages and backgrounds in Ireland who want to choose the apprenticeship route have the means to do so. There must be no barriers in apprenticeships and across third level as a whole. We know that accommodation and travel costs were proving to be a barrier for many who wanted to pursue a third-level degree.

Mission

It was not fair that the main universities were based in the main cities, and that's why we worked hard to establish five technological universities across Ireland. These are five new national universities, operating at a world-class standard, while delivering for each of their regions and far beyond.

When I think about my Department's mission, I am filled with a desire to create a society that takes learning for granted, and knows that there are pathways available and accessible at every stage of life for everyone willing to take that vital next step.

We want to achieve a cultural shift in Ireland, one in which personal development does not end once we enter the workforce but, instead, continues throughout our lives. And we want to create a society where the snobbery that has existed in relation to some areas of third-level education is soon the bias of a different era.

Education is the great equaliser and can offer everyone the opportunity to reach their full potential. My Department and I remain steadfast in our determination to make that mission a resounding success.

The Gift of Education in a World of Artificial Intelligence

Norma Foley TD
Minister for Education

Introduction

I was privileged to provide a foreword to this publication last year, noting then that 'our students stay with us for only a finite period, but their education stays with them for the entirety of their lives'.

I had the opportunity recently when speaking to the Daniel O'Connell School to explore the gift and responsibility that education is. We are fortunate to have an education system in Ireland that is world-recognised, with committed and dedicated staff in welcoming school communities all around the country. But we also face challenges. As Education Minister, my task is to meet the challenges at a system level and to support our school leaders, teachers, parents, and the entire school community to deliver the gift of a nurturing and inspiring education to each and every child.

How we navigate those challenges, including at a macro level, is what will define how well we serve our current and future students whilst they are with us for that finite period. We must face questions like what kind of education do we want to provide to our students whilst striving to equip them for the challenges they face, and will face, in the world at large. Equally, we have to ask ourselves not just what is it we want to teach our students, but how do we teach it and how do we enable our students to demonstrate their abilities.

The OECD report 'Building the Future of Education', published in January 2023, suggests: 'Education shapes the world we live in by developing the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values on which societies rely, forging social cohesion and preparing people to become and remain competent workers and active citizens. . . . education systems foster democracy and the transformation to innovation-oriented knowledge societies.'

In short, therefore, we ought to be preparing our students to be effective and responsible world citizens. So the finite time we share with them must contribute to their ability to navigate and prosper in the world – not just in terms of work but in society generally, both today and in the future in a world that is evolving rapidly.

One of the many gifts of education is that it can prepare students for the great unknown that is their future – creating, developing, and fostering the skills they need as well as providing them with the fundamental confidence and resilience necessary to apply those acquired skills.

Curriculum – or what we teach – has been described as the stories that one generation chooses to pass on to the next; the known knowledge of the day. We need to continue to evolve our curriculum so that it serves our students' interests and abilities and equips them for the future. We must make sure we are building the skills and the knowledge that students need. In today's world we must therefore consider the impact, and critically the potential, of artificial intelligence (AI).

Development of AI

The world, and specifically educators and students at all levels, are on a journey of discovery regarding AI. But AI is not new – so why has it gained such currency in recent months? The answer to that question is simple, but the consideration of the topic is not.

AI has been around for approximately 70 years. In 1950, the pioneering mathematician and computer scientist Alan Turing posed the question as to whether machines could think. In the same year, Claude Shannon proposed the creation of a machine that could play chess. However, many consider the Dartmouth Summer Research Project in 1956 as the birthplace of AI.

The term 'artificial intelligence' was coined in a proposal that was written for the Dartmouth conference. One of the authors of that paper was John McCarthy, a Stanford University computer scientist whose father was born in Cromane, near Killorglin in Kerry. He is considered to be one of the founding fathers of the discipline of artificial intelligence. In the late 1950s, McCarthy invented LISP, which became the programming language of choice for AI applications.

Despite the great strides forward made by the likes of McCarthy, there followed an 'AI winter' for much of the following 40 years. Then, in the mid-1990s, IBM's Deep Blue (which played chess) emerged, and in 2015, Alphabet (the parent company of Google) launched AlphaGo, which played the ancient game of Go. Of course, the key difference was that Deep Blue and AlphaGo could not only play these games but also beat human experts in each. So why the hype now?

AI has been around for approximately 70 years: in 1950, the pioneering mathematician and computer scientist Alan Turing posed the question as to whether machines could think.

Whilst AI has been around for a long time (and we have all been using it in our everyday lives, for example to identify spam mail, in navigation apps, and in online chatbots) it is the emergence of *generative* AI, particularly in the form of large language models such as ChatGPT in November 2022, that has caught our attention. ChatGPT became the fastest-growing app in history, reported to have 180 million users by autumn 2023 and around 1.5 billion monthly visits to its website.

Problems and opportunities

It was the emergence of generative AI in such an explosive way that caused me to reflect in particular on how the assessment reforms in Senior Cycle could best proceed. To assist in further thinking on this, I have asked the State Examinations Commission to undertake research on the implications of AI for the future design of assessment.

The development of AI technologies is proceeding at an unprecedented rate, according to all of the available commentary. The OECD, in its July 2023 paper 'Generative AI in the classroom: From hype to reality?', tells us: 'GenAI capabilities compared to humans will only continue to improve. It is therefore critical to understand how to tap its potential and address its multiple challenges, including the potential for bias, cheating and plagiarism, privacy and data security issues.'

Also in July, in the paper 'Generative AI and the future of education', Stefania Giannini, UNESCO assistant director-general for education, points to the digital evolution over time: 'I have witnessed at least four digital revolutions: the advent and proliferation of personal computers; the expansion of the internet and search; the rise and influence of social media; and the growing ubiquity of mobile computing and connectivity.' She goes on to say: 'Although most of us are all still trying to come to terms with the sweeping social and educational implications of these earlier revolutions which are still unfolding, we have, in the past several months, awoken to find ourselves abruptly entering yet another digital revolution . . . . the AI revolution.'

Ms Giannini articulates questions which we must grapple with, including: What will be the role of teachers with this technology in wide circulation? And what will assessment look like? She challenges all of us with the responsibility for shaping education, at the system level and for individual students:

I have asked the State Examinations Commission to undertake research on the implications of AI for the future design of assessment.

> *Our education systems often take for granted what the world looks like – and will and should look like. Our formal learning systems are designed to help people develop the competencies needed to navigate and, we hope, thrive in the known world. AI is forcing us to ask questions about the known world . . . that we usually take as a starting point for education.*

She warns us that 'we can no longer just ask "How do we prepare for an AI world?"', before concluding that 'Education systems need to return agency to learners and remind young people that we remain at the helm of technology. There is no predetermined course.' It particularly resonated with me when Ms Giannini notes:

we have numerous precedents for slowing, pausing, or ceasing the use of technologies we do not yet understand, while continuing to research them. The research is vital because it adds to our understanding of the technology and informs us when and how it might be safe to use and for what purposes.

What might sound like caution should not be interpreted as fear of AI. AI offers opportunities for the education sector – for students, teachers, school leaders, and administrators. For example, when used appropriately, generative AI has the potential to reduce workload across the education sector, to free up teacher time, to individualise learning for students, and to generate meaningful and timely feedback for students.

I am particularly interested in how the capacity of AI to support differentiated teaching and learning can facilitate stronger personalisation in teaching approaches to benefit all learners, but particularly non-traditional learners and children with diverse needs. AI can analyse vast amounts of educational data to identify patterns and trends, enabling teachers to make data-driven decisions and adapt teaching strategies. Implemented and utilised ethically and equitably, AI has the potential to improve wellbeing and outcomes for both teacher and learner.

However, we do need to be mindful that generative AI can be inaccurate, inappropriate, biased, unreliable, out of date, and taken out of context. It may also infringe on intellectual property and privacy rights. It has been accused of 'hallucinating' facts, but it is worthwhile to remember that all generative AI outputs are essentially made up – a result not of considered examination and analysis of the pertinent facts, but of grouping the statistically most likely words related to a topic. We are likely then to get useful outputs on topics about which there is a substantial corpus of existing knowledge from which generative AI can draw, but the system works less well when asked to generate material on a topic about which there is much less training material available.

If AI algorithms are not properly trained or monitored, they can perpetuate bias and discrimination. This can stem from the AI system having been trained on unrepresentative or incomplete data, or on data that reflects historical inequalities. We hope that these biases will be easily observable in the AI algorithm's erroneous output and such outputs discounted through appropriate human oversight. It behoves us all, however, to be conscious that such biases can often be very subtle, and that there is a need to be ever-vigilant in order to ensure that biased outputs do not translate into discrimination.

AI can analyse vast amounts of educational data to identify patterns and trends, enabling teachers to make data-driven decisions and adapt teaching strategies.

We also have to be concerned about data privacy and security. The use of AI in education will involve the collection and storage of sensitive student data; it may even involve the digital observation and recording of students. It obviously goes without saying, but is worth repeating, that there is absolutely no room for error in ensuring that, whatever AI application might be utilised, it is in full compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation.

There have been some sensational claims made about potential negative future consequences of fully embracing AI – from Armageddon to 'learnt helplessness' arising from an over-reliance on technology. There is, however, an immediate, clear, and present danger in the potential misuse of AI to spread disinformation at a level, and on a scale, not seen before. It is therefore imperative that we prioritise the imparting of digital literacy, critical thinking, and research skills to our students to ensure that they are readily able to identify and combat disinformation.

One of the gifts of education is to prepare our young people for their future, and that future is one in which we know AI will play an increasing role.

Rising to the challenges

History can offer us some lessons in how we can face technological evolution or even revolution, or at least to prove that as the technology evolves, we evolve and adapt our behaviours and, in professional terms, our practice. For example, Plato told us that if people learn to write, 'it will implant forgetfulness in their souls. They will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks.' Equally, the 1979 song 'Video Killed the Radio Star' has not proven to be prophetic.

As the world evolves, we must look to how we in education must evolve. Looking specifically at how assessment in Senior Cycle will evolve, a recent consultation paper from the Australian Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency gives us parameters that may help us frame our own thinking. It points to the work of Boud and Associates from 2010 in 'Assessment 2020' and notes:

assessment acts as a powerful intervention in student learning . . . . Good assessment design that allows for 'rich portrayals' of student learning is critical. Thus, we take as given that assessment should engage students in learning, provide a partnership between teachers and students, and promote student participation in feedback. These key elements of assessment can then guide how best to consider the role of AI in assessment design.

We cannot deny the existence of generative AI or ignore its potential impacts. One of the gifts of education is to prepare our young people for their future, and that future is one in which we know AI will play an increasing role. Now is

28

IRELAND'S
2023 EDUCATION
YEARBOOK

IRELAND'S
EDUCATION 2023
YEARBOOK

29

the time to seek to identify the opportunities and to rise to the challenges. The research I have asked the SEC to conduct on assessment specifically will certainly assist how Senior Cycle evolves.

Education is a gift which we received from past generations. We are its current caretakers, and our responsibility is to ensure that the gift lives on in current and future generations of students. But we should not see education as only the curriculum of the past – the 'known' knowledge which we acquired – but also as the acquisition of the skills to navigate the world of today and, to the extent possible, tomorrow.

Chuck Feeney: Transforming Higher Education in Ireland – the Example of University of Limerick

Introduction

Charles 'Chuck' Feeney passed away in October 2023, but his legacy has shaped and will shape the educational opportunities of several generations, as well as Ireland's capabilities and capacity to advance its knowledge economy and promote social justice and inclusion. The North American entrepreneur and businessman focused a considerable portion of his generous gift on education and research, employing strategic philanthropy underpinned by a value-based vision to invigorate individual, collective, and societal ambitions and opportunities for knowledge and skills creation, acquisition, and application.

The Atlantic Philanthropies were set up as a charitable vehicle to identify investment opportunities for Chuck Feeney's own benefaction, as well as garnering the support of people who subscribed to his philosophy of 'giving while living'. Atlantic also worked to build relationships with government agencies and the third sector to catalyse impact. The foundation awarded grants in Ireland from 1987 up to 2016.

Professor Kerstin Mey
President, University of Limerick

Chuck Feeney of the Atlantic Philanthropies has left a lasting legacy on higher education in Ireland. This article recounts how he came to invest in the University of Limerick and describes the various projects that his charity helped bring to fruition for UL. It also details the broader impact that Feeney has had on research and infrastructure in Irish higher education.

Chuck Feeney and UL

At the outset of Atlantic, Chuck Feeney developed an interest in Limerick. This was triggered by a chance encounter with the then president of the National Institute of Higher Education (NIHE), Dr Ed Walsh, in the Kildare Street and University Club in Dublin (Walsh, 2011, p. 234). It seems to have been a meeting of two minds, with the NIHE leader understanding the potential and benefits of philanthropy for the development of an

institute of higher learning and research, as demonstrated in a paper to the Planning Board in 1970 (Fleming, 2012, p. 233).

Taking up an initial invitation to visit Limerick in September 1987, the American Irish businessman, who was based in London at the time, made repeat visits to Plassey Campus over the next couple of years, some of them accompanied by delegations from Cornell University (Walsh, 2011). The Ivy League university had benefited significantly from Chuck Feeney's donations to expand its reach, create new programmes of study, and drive advancements in education and research, including Cornell Tech, the cutting-edge technology-focused campus in New York City.

Chuck Feeney was the catalyst behind the establishment of the University of Limerick (UL) Foundation as the vehicle to raise significant funds for developing the education institution, and he served as its first chairperson. Coming into being in 1988, the year before the NIHE received university status, Plassey Foundation was a first for Irish higher education institutions, which until then had had little engagement with philanthropy. With university status bestowed in 1989, and through the process of incorporation, the name of the independent fundraising vehicle changed to UL Foundation, signalling the new status awarded to Limerick's hard-fought-for higher education institution (Fleming, 2012).

Projects

One of the first acts of giving for UL was the provision of half of the funding to construct the first purpose-built concert hall after Irish independence. It was an ambitious project for the university to create a 1,100-seat state-of-the-art venue with high-quality acoustics in the aptly named Foundation building, which also offered a postgraduate library and study spaces for graduate students. At the same time, it addressed the region's need for a substantial contemporary performance space. Completed as a private–public partnership in 1993, with other monies coming from the State and private benefactors, it set an example of how philanthropy could leverage and underpin state support for capital infrastructure development.

In 1995, the Atlantic Philanthropies made a significant contribution to the design and construction costs of the purpose-built Library and Information Services Building. In 1997, construction of state-of-the-art sports facilities were enabled, including an Olympic-size 50-metre swimming pool on the South campus, which support elite athletes and the wider community to this day.

Alongside his gifts to Dublin City University and Trinity College Dublin, Chuck Feeney's donations to UL enabled the design and construction of most of the

The Atlantic Philanthropies were set up as a charitable vehicle to identify investment opportunities for Chuck Feeney's own benefaction, as well as garnering the support of people who subscribed to his philosophy of 'giving while living'.

Motivated by his value-driven approach, his commitment to education, access to knowledge, the furthering of knowledge creation, and his belief in the benefits of investing in talent, Chuck Feeney gave well over €100 million to the University of Limerick.

new buildings on Plassey campus in the 1990s and the campus expansion across the River Shannon into County Clare in the early 2000s.

The North campus is shaped significantly by the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance (IWAMD), with its two performance spaces, rehearsal studios, study and teaching facilities, and the School of Medicine, home to the first programme of graduate-entry medicine in Ireland. Both buildings were enabled by Chuck Feeney. The appreciation for creativity that led to the establishment of IWAMD is also visible in the stunning mosaic by Desmond Kinney in its centre space. Another Kinney mosaic adorns the Foundation building.

A scholarship programme stimulated the beginnings of this unique performance study and research unit. Widening participation in the UL graduate-entry medical education programme was fostered through an Atlantic Philanthropies scholarship programme since 2007, and support was also given for student housing for the School of Medicine, alongside other grants towards student accommodation on campus.

In 2011, Atlantic provided support for establishing 10 Bernal professorships in science and engineering, seeding capacity and capability in material sciences at UL that define a key research strength of the institution to this day. Other grants before then had supported the recruitment of research professors and postdoctoral researchers to enhance UL's capacity and capability for cutting-edge research. A range of innovative programmes and research, including in tourism, was enabled over the past three decades.

Legacy

Motivated by his value-driven approach, his commitment to education, access to knowledge, the furthering of knowledge creation, and his belief in the benefits of investing in talent, Chuck Feeney gave well over €100 million to the University of Limerick. His vision and foresight came also to the fore in making funds available to purchase additional land north of the River Shannon, required to complete the long-term development of the UL campus.

The public–private partnership approach that helped shape the capital infrastructure of many Irish universities was made fruitful to leverage support for knowledge generation and talent development, among other causes, by the Atlantic Philanthropies.

In 1998, Chuck Feeney proposed to invest €75m for research in higher education if the Irish government was able and willing to match this funding. Through one of the largest private gifts the state had ever received, the Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions (PRTLI) was established and

served as a catalyst for advanced inquiry, talent development, and the delivered underpinning research infrastructure for universities and institutes of technology. The scale of the investment was remarkable then and remains so today.

The programme provided for approximately 103,000 m2 of new research facilities, 46 research institutions or programmes, 1,000 research positions, and 1,600 new postgraduate positions. It also resulted in a direct commercial return on investment of €1.8 billion, while also providing significant research infrastructure, creating jobs, and stimulating indirect economic benefits.

Equally important, and unlike other competitive and prescriptive project-focused research funding, the PRTLI enabled participating institutions to develop their own research strategies; it thus supported the development of institutional research strengths and strategic research planning at all participating institutions (see Atlantic Philanthropies, 2016). It serves as an exemplar of what can be achieved when philanthropy, government, and institutions partner to revitalise, expand, and deepen research. An initiative of this scale and ambition is much needed today – Chuck Feeney demonstrated what is possible.

To this day, Chuck Feeney, one of the wealthiest businessmen in the US, has been the single most important donor for the University of Limerick and a catalyst for higher education on the island of Ireland. Yet, in the true spirit of philanthropy, he was determined to protect his privacy and remain anonymous for most of his active giving endeavours. It was only recently possible to acknowledge his munificent 'giving while living'. All universities of Ireland, South and North, joined to award him an honorary doctorate of laws in 2012. UL and the UL Foundation recognised his generosity and benefaction in 2022 by naming the main avenue across the South campus 'Feeney Way'.

In 2012, all universities of Ireland, South and North, joined to award Chuck Feeney an honorary doctorate of laws.

REFERENCES

Atlantic Philanthropies (2016) 'University Research Across Ireland: Formula for Excellence: Grand Vision and Big Bets. Republic of Ireland | Northern Ireland | 1996–2006'. www.atlanticphilanthropies.org/subtheme/university-research-across-ireland.

Fleming, D.A. (2012) *The University of Limerick: A History*. Dublin: Four Courts Press.

Walsh, E. with Fagan, K. (2011) *Upstart: Friends, Foes and Founding a University.* Cork: Collins Press.

Early Childhood

The Arts in Education Portal, 2023 Portal Documentation Award Recipient Project, *'SCEALTA; Our Bus, Our Journey'* led by artist-in-residence Cliodhna Noonan with Tuam Community Childcare and WizzKids, Tuam, Co. Galway. Funded by the Arts Council, facilitated by ATU Galway and Mayo.

Beginning Is the Hardest Part

A Critically Sympathetic View on the Early Childhood Education and Care Landscape

Beginnings

The year is drawing to its close as I sit down wondering how to begin the 2023 overview of events and developments in the Irish early childhood education and care (ECEC) environment. I feed my procrastination habit with a quick search for quotes about beginnings being the hardest part; 0.35 seconds and 74,200,000 hits later, I am none the wiser. But perhaps 'beginnings' is not the word to look for in this annual stock-taking exercise? We'll come to that.

As is evident in the contributions to the Early Childhood chapter of *Ireland's Yearbook of Education*, 2023 was again a year of vibrant activity. It is a strong indication of a rich and fast-developing educational environment that the contributions to this section of the book have doubled over the last six years. ECEC is clearly very much alive in Ireland.

The spread of contributions to the current edition also shows a much-needed shift in thinking, in the collective self-image of those working in and around educational settings for the youngest children. Reaching from engaging parents in shaping our pedagogical practices, ensuring the rights of all young children regardless of their background, and opening the educational institution to art and science, to active engagement between formal (e.g., preschool) and non-formal education and care settings (e.g., childminding, home visiting), the authors and protagonists are examining themselves, their practices, and their understanding of ECEC from an extended *systemic* perspective.

My hopeful reading of this is that a remarkable evolution of the discourse – our collective making sense – of what ECEC is, and should aspire to be, has taken hold, and is here to stay! This systemic turn, as I have called it, is by no means limited to Ireland. It has been a defining feature of

Mathias Urban

Desmond Chair of Early Childhood Education, Early Childhood Research Centre, Dublin City University

This article comments on developments in the Irish early childhood education and care landscape in 2023. The many initiatives documented in this *Yearbook* are a sign that early childhood education in Ireland is very much alive. The article traces some of the critical aspects that have shaped the early childhood environment, following up on the author's overview articles in previous editions of the *Yearbook*.

the global development in our field for the past decade, its importance emphasised during the course of the Covid-19 pandemic (Kagan & Tucker, 2018; Urban, 2014, 2022a; Urban et al., 2012, 2018; 2022).

It is more than welcome to see systems thinking firmly embedded in Irish ECEC in 2023. The shift towards an early childhood *system* is reflected in the *Yearbook* articles' frequent reference to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, and in a policy environment that, since the publication of *First 5* (DCYA, 2018), has embraced ECEC as a critical part of an *effective system* of supports for *babies, young children, and their families.*

No such thing

With a nod to the work of Donald Woods Winnicott (1964), one of the important foundational theorists in early childhood development, one could be tempted to say that what we see play out around us is the tacit acknowledgement that *there is no such thing as a preschool.* Winnicott never thought about early childhood education, or preschools more specifically. He was a brilliant and groundbreaking child psychiatrist; he did not take a sociological perspective on educational institutions. His original quote reads: 'There is no such thing as a baby. [. . .] A baby cannot exist alone, but is essentially part of a relationship' (Winnicott, 1964, p. 88).

Like Winnicott's baby, early childhood education and care does not, cannot, exist on its own. Instead, our settings and institutions, and the educational practices within them, are part of a complex societal web of often contradicting aims, purposes, practices, and aspirations. ECEC does not exist in isolation. It is part of 'the sum total of societal reaction to the fact of ontogenetic development' – Siegfried Bernfeld's classic definition of education (Bernfeld, 1973, pp. 31–32).

The first duty

It is this societal, cultural, political, historical, and economic embeddedness that requires us to take a much wider view on the urgent task to transform Irish ECEC into an *effective, competent system* – a system that delivers just and equitable outcomes for *all* children from birth, and their families and communities. Building such a system is an ambitious task; it was expressed, proudly, as one of the *raisons d'être* of the newly independent Irish State a little over a century ago:

> *It shall be the first duty of the Government of the Republic to make provision for the physical, mental and spiritual well-being of the children, to secure that no child shall suffer hunger or cold from lack of food, clothing, or*

My hope is that a remarkable evolution of the discourse – our collective making sense – of what ECEC is, and should aspire to be, has taken hold, and is here to stay!

Have we seen real beginnings of change, of radical transformation towards a universal, rights-based, free, and public ECEC system?

> *shelter, but that all shall be provided with the means and facilities requisite for their proper education and training as Citizens of a Free and Gaelic Ireland. (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2019)*

Considering Ireland's performance against a whole range of indicators – beginning with homelessness, child poverty, mental and physical health, and well-being, and extending to access to affordable ECEC for all – I leave it to you to judge how close Ireland has come, in 2023, to fulfilling her 'first duty' to her children. What the Democratic Programme of the first Dáil Éireann on 21 January 1919 should inspire us to do is to reclaim the radical ambition to make ECEC a public concern, a *res publica*, placed at the very core of what it means to be an independent, democratic republic.

This takes me back to my initial question as I consider the state and development of ECEC over the past 12 months: Besides vibrant activity, the extraordinary commitment of all involved, inspiring practices, and numerous welcome initiatives, have we seen real beginnings of change, of radical transformation towards a universal, rights-based, free, and public ECEC system?

Let me recap where we were at the end of 2022. This was year one of the Employment Regulation Order (ERO), put in place to establish 'minimum rates of pay and conditions of employment for workers' in the 'business sector' of Early Learning and Childcare, or, as the Department of Enterprise, Trade, and Employment also refers to it, the Early Years Services sector (DETE, 2022).

One year on, the ERO has indeed delivered modest wage increases for professional educators. However, my concern at the time, expressed in my roundup in *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2022,* was that the process carried two fundamental risks:

1. It firmly frames ECEC as a low-skill 'service', in line with only two other sectors of the Irish economy: contract cleaning and security industry. This is hugely counterproductive and undermines the unfinished task to recognise ECEC as a highly qualified profession whose members are on par with equally qualified education professionals at all levels of education.
2. While it establishes much-needed 'industrial' relations and a legal forum for wage negotiations, it also gives significant leverage to large corporate employers and their representatives. In a context of rising corporate activity and for-profit provision, I predicted that this would lead to increased pressure on pay, regulations, and working conditions (Urban, 2022b).

Arguably, both developments came to pass in 2023. This was entirely predictable (and predicted!); it follows the neoliberal playbook of similar devastating developments in countries with an overreliance on a supposed 'market' and policies that rely on vital public services to be delivered for private

profit: UK, New Zealand, and Australia, to name a few. As governments are committed to increase public spending on ECEC, as is the case in Ireland, well-organised internationally operating corporations find their profits underwritten by public funds. It is extremely worrying to see the apparent inability – or lack of political will? – to learn from these well-documented examples and to devise clear political counter-strategies for Ireland.

As I argued in 2022, there is a specifically Irish aspect to the problem of private provision of ECEC: *private*, in the Irish context, is a rather complex mix of models that includes small, community-embedded services and large international corporations. While the former find it increasingly difficult to operate in an environment of tougher regulation and bureaucratic demands, the latter can operate in an economy of scale and return sizeable profits that are extracted from the system and channelled to shareholders. There can be no ethical or fiscal justification for such a model.

It does not help that the early childhood profession in Ireland is still fragmented and lacks a strong unified voice, that is, an active professional association that would enable the profession to 'think and speak for itself' (Urban & Dalli, 2012), and to complement the much-needed and welcome representation of workers' rights by trade unions.

All for public?

As regular readers of *Ireland's Education Yearbook* will be aware, I have long advocated for the principle of universal, free, and public education to be extended to the youngest children. Considering the ongoing systemic challenges and perma-crisis of ECEC in Ireland, not only is it the only sustainable solution, it is an ethical and political obligation for a democratic society to take collective responsibility for all children.

Taking this responsibility seriously begins with acknowledging that the 'market' does not deliver children's and families' rights. Therefore, it is one of the most promising developments over the past 12 months that the term *public* has firmly entered the debate. Across the political spectrum there is now broad recognition of the need for much stronger public involvement in providing services for 'babies, young children, and their families' as we seek to address the right to education and care for all children from birth. Whether you reluctantly accept or enthusiastically embrace the conclusion might depend on where you position yourself on the political spectrum. The reality is that the debate about a public system of ECEC is here to stay and has found its way onto political and electoral agendas.

The recognition of public responsibility for the education and care of the youngest children brings Ireland broadly in line with global developments.

It does not help that the early childhood profession in Ireland is still fragmented and lacks a strong unified voice.

While children, families, and educators are entitled to sustainable funding, there can be no place for profit in a public system.

International actors, including UNESCO, are affirming education as a universal right beginning from birth – requiring well-educated, well-recognised, and well-paid educators and sustainable public funding. Three pillars – the right to early childhood education, the workforce, and finance – are inseparable parts.

This is made explicit in the Tashkent Declaration and Commitments to Action for Transforming Early Childhood Care and Education (UNESCO, 2022). On public funding, the Declaration recommends that countries assign 'at least 10 per cent of education expenditures to pre-primary education, and prioritize and reorient public expenditures for ECCE to focus on the poorest and most disadvantaged' (ibid.). One year after Tashkent, the global debate on early childhood focuses on regional implementation and on the declaration of a *decade for early childhood* by the United Nations.

While it is most welcome to see at least some of the international discourse reflected in Ireland, I think we should be much more ambitious. We should not be behind the curve, constantly catching up with developments. We should aim at joining other countries in leading the debate and model the transition to a universal, rights-based, free, and public system of early childhood education and care.

It is necessary, though, to be clearer in the internal debate about what exactly *public* might mean in the Irish context. While it is increasingly embraced, there remains a lot of confusion in the debate. Let me offer some pointers.

Public – not just publicly funded

1. There is a fundamental difference between a *publicly funded* and a *public* system.

» All governments are obliged to provide adequate public resources for education. Whether they meet that obligation is another question (albeit an important one).
» A truly *public* system requires active government involvement in all aspects of the system, including service delivery, planning, regulation, monitoring, and evaluation. It includes the State taking responsibility as employer of educators.
» While children, families, and educators are entitled to sustainable funding, there can be no place for profit in a public system (i.e., public funds extracted from the system for personal, corporate, or shareholder gain).

2. A public system requires strengthening of local democracy and decision-making powers.

» Ireland has one of weakest systems of local government, with many decision-making powers centralised in national government departments (Council of Europe, 2023).
» This is a colonial legacy that Ireland shares with other former British colonies. Colonial rule depends on strong central and weak local power. It rests on distrust of the locals, on the dismissal of their expertise and capability to govern themselves, to be governed instead by centrally appointed magistrates.
» None of this is specific to early childhood. However, a transition to a public *system* of ECEC requires building structures that enable local governance of early childhood provision, including planning, resourcing, administering, and evaluating. The task at hand is to envisage, build, resource, and qualify the entire system.
» Is that an overambitious exercise in catching up with unfinished decolonisation? Maybe. But why not let early childhood pave the way?

3. A public system addresses more than provision of education and care to children and families in your local setting.

» The key characteristic of early childhood provision in Ireland is that services are often small and close to the community they serve. Individually managed, it leaves services overburdened with administrative tasks. A public system can turn this into an advantage and introduce local-level bundled administration, reporting, management, and so on.
» Caveat: the same goes for large-scale corporate providers. They, too, can operate at an economy of scale, putting them at an unfair advantage over independent services. Left uncontrolled, they create 'childcare deserts': entire communities left without access to services that are deemed unprofitable (for an example from Fingal, see Dalton, 2021).

4. A public system requires expression of political will, political leadership, a roadmap, milestones, and accountability. This includes (not an exhaustive list):

» Commitment to a transition to a universal, rights-based, free, and public early childhood education and care system in the next programme for government.
» The establishment of a Minister for ECEC, complemented by significantly strengthened local ECEC governance.
» The phase-out of any for-profit provision (see definition of 'profit' above) over a five-year period, complemented by significantly increased funding.
» A fully funded programme to prevent buyout of independent services by corporate or chain providers. Any service considering closing must be

The key characteristic of early childhood provision in Ireland is that services are often small and close to the community they serve.

A public system requires expression of political will, political leadership, a roadmap, milestones, and accountability.

offered the chance to transition into public ownership. This will be a complex task, requiring that investment and property issues be sorted out.

Does such a programme stand a chance of realisation? I am convinced it does, not only because it is necessary but because it will enable us to show who we are, and aspire to be, as a society that takes shared responsibility for all children. As Howard Zinn wrote:

To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. [. . .] If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction.

REFERENCES

Bernfeld, S. (1973) *Sisyphus: Or, The Limits of Education.* Berkeley, California: University of California Press.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979) *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design.* Cambridge, Massachussetts: Harvard University Press.

Council of Europe (2023) 'The ratification of the Additional Protocol will be among the follow-ups given to the monitoring, says Irish Minister Kieran O'Donnell'. Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, 30 October. www.coe.int/it/web/congress/-/the-ratification-of-the-additional-protocol-will-be-among-the-follow-ups-given-to-the-monitoring-says-irish-minister-kieran-o-donnell.

Dalton, C. (2021) *Double Disadvantage: Reduced Access to Early Childhood Care and Education for Children at Risk of Poverty in Fingal.* Dublin: Fingal Children and Young People's Services Committee.

Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) (2018) *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019–2028.* Dublin: Government of Ireland.

Department of Enterprise, Trade, and Employment (DETE) (2022) SI No. 458 of 2022 Employment Regulation Order (Early Years' Service Joint Labour Committee) Order No. 2, 2022. 16 September. https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/legislation/si-no-458-of-2022.html.

Houses of the Oireachtas (2019) Democratic Programme. Dáil Éireann debate, 21 January 1919, Vol. F, No. 1. www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/1919-01-21/15/.

Kagan, S.L. and Tucker, M.S. (2018) *The Early Advantage 1: Early Childhood Systems that Lead by Example: A Comparative Focus on International Early Childhood Education.* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

UNESCO (2022) *Tashkent Declaration and Commitments to Action for Transforming Early Childhood Care and Education.* UNESCO World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education, 16 November. UNESCO: Paris, France.

Urban, M. (2014) 'Not solving problems, managing messes: Competent systems in early childhood education and care', *Management in Education,* 28(4), 125–129. DOI: 10.1177/0892020614547315

Urban, M. (2022a) 'Scholarship in times of crises: Towards a trans-discipline of early childhood', *Comparative Education*, 58(3), 383–401. DOI: 10.1080/03050068.2022.2046376

Urban, M. (2022b) 'Tales from A Thousand and One Nights? New stories for early childhood education and care'. In: B. Mooney (Ed.) *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2022.* Dublin: Education Matters.

Urban, M. and Dalli, C. (2012) 'A profession speaking – and thinking – for itself'. In: L. Miller, C. Dalli, and M. Urban (Eds.) *Early Childhood Grows Up: Towards a Critical Ecology of the Profession.* Dordrecht and London: Springer.

Urban, M., Cardini, A., and Flórez-Romero, R. (2018) 'It takes more than a village. Effective early childhood development, education and care services require competent systems / Los servicios efectivos de desarrollo, educación y cuidado de la primera infancia requieren sistemas competentes'. In: A. Cardini (Ed.) *Bridges to the future of education: Policy recommendations for the digital age / Puentes al futuro de la educación: recomendaciones de política para la era digital,* pp. 25–42. Buenos Aires: Fundacion Santillana.

Urban, M., Guevar, J., Acosta, A., Anand, P.K., Vargas-Barón, E., Costín, C., Okengo, L., Mayol Lassalle, M., Pangastuti, Y., Adrijani, V., and Priyono, D. (2022). *Education for Survival. Strengthening multi-sectoral and integrated policy approaches to early childhood education, care, and development as a global common good.* T20 Indonesia 2022. www.t20indonesia.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/EDUCATION-FOR-SURVIVAL-STRENGTHENING-MULTI-SECTORAL-AND-INTEGRATED-POLICY-APPROACHES-TO-EARLY-CHILDHOOD-EDUCATION-CARE-AND-DEVELOPMENT-AS-A-GLOBAL-COMMON-GOOD.pdf.

Urban, M., Vandenbroeck, M., Van Laere, K., Lazzari, A., and Peeters, J. (2012) 'Towards competent systems in early childhood education and care: Implications for policy and practice', *European Journal of Education,* 47(4), 508–526. DOI: 10.1111/ejed.12010

Winnicott, D.W. (1964) *The Child, the Family and the Outside World.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Perseus Publishing.

Zinn, H. (2004) 'The optimism of uncertainty', *The Nation*, 2 September. www.thenation.com/article/politics/optimism-uncertainty/.

Early Years 2023: Challenges in the Sector from a Service Provider's Perspective

Paula Donohoe
Early Years Educator

The value of enrolling a child in an early years facility is now widely recognised, with acknowledged gains in social, emotional, and educational development in our youngest cohort of children. The work being carried out by the sector is commendable, underpinned by both *Aistear* and Síolta. At the culmination of their time in an early years setting, children progressing to primary school have developed into confident, competent learners ready to step into the formal educational setting.

But as we consider the early years sector in 2023, what strikes us immediately is the political unrest in which it is embroiled, especially since June. This seems to fly in the face of the government's largest investment ever into early years, and it raises the question of why there seems to be such a myriad of critical issues, all currently vying for attention.

We have seen a massive problem with recruitment and retention in our sector. Many providers throughout Ireland cite this as the number one issue we face. It is a result of extremely low wages being paid to the highly professional educators who work in our childcare facilities. Last year saw a historic employment regulation order (ERO) being put in place for the men and women in childcare. The rates were set at €13 per hour for educators, up to €15.50 per hour for those with a graduate degree. These rates, while welcome, fall far below a desired wage for such a responsible position. The obvious answer is to pay more to the deserving staff.

This brings us to the second, and in my opinion far more worrying, issue we face: lack of funding. We invest 0.3% of GDP into childcare in Ireland. Compared to the average investment across Europe of 0.8%, one begins to see why our sector is suffering – and will continue to suffer without a far greater investment package.

> The value of early years education is now widely recognised. But we also need to recognise how under-resourced the sector is. This under-resourcing makes it very difficult to meet the quality agenda that we all so desire.

In September 2022 we received the first of a brand-new funding stream titled core funding – a very well-conceived, well-balanced, and well-intentioned stream of funding. The early years sector consequently had great hopes for a brighter future, coming off the back of historic underfunding. Sadly the rates for core funding had been set well in advance of the unprecedented inflation hikes that plagued the entire country.

To sign up for this new funding, providers had to agree to a fee freeze, ensuring that the government's policy of affordability to parents was enshrined. The target year for the freeze was 2021. The landscape in childcare in 2021, like the rest of the country, was that we were in receipt of the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme to support our businesses through the pandemic; we were already in a voluntary fee freeze, leaving many providers with fee structures that dated as far back as 2016–2017.

Now we have the perfect storm for a financial crisis: a new funding stream that had not accounted for the massive inflationary costs and fees, which were simply not at all relevant to operating a business in 2023.

We also have a recruitment issue: it is almost impossible to attract staff into the sector. We have financial pressures that make it impossible to pay staff their true worth, and we have parents who, try as they might, simply cannot find a vacant space in a crèche for their child, especially in the under-two age bracket, within a large radius of their home.

It makes for sad reading when you sum up the sector: providers who are at breaking point with financial viability; educators who are not in receipt of fair remuneration that reflects their true worth, and are thus exiting the sector; and parents who are at their wits' end trying to locate a crèche for their child so they can return to employment.

What can be done? Childcare is accepted to be the cornerstone of a functioning economy and is essential for the workforce of Ireland. So we must look closely at government policy to ensure that it acts immediately to shore up these essential services by, in the first instance, increasing direct investment into childcare, and supporting a new ERO that would enshrine better rates of pay, thus making it a more attractive career path. This would enable more places to be made available to parents who are desperately seeking them.

As a government policy, affordability of childcare has been a major issue that needed addressing. This is being achieved through the introduction of the National Childcare Scheme in 2019, a subsidy directly to parents to offset the high cost of childcare in Ireland. But while investment is directed to affordability, it is very important that we do not lose sight of another policy: to provide the high quality that every child availing of early years deserves. Quality is a must, but it cannot be supplied on a shoestring budget. In my opinion, when

In Ireland we invest 0.3% of GDP into childcare, compared to the average investment across Europe of 0.8%.

financial pressure occurs, quality is the first compromise in a service. It is therefore essential that investment in the sector will support the delivery of high-quality services, in accordance with government policy and in line with the desires of childcare providers, the children, and their families.

While this may paint a bleak picture of the early years sector in 2023, I would like to finish on a note of hope. The hope is that the government will deliver a Budget 2023 that genuinely addresses the financial viability of the early years sector for 2024 and for many years to come, ensuring that we can deliver this essential service to all who need it with the highest quality at its heart.

✳✳✳
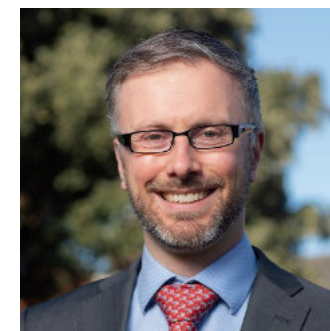
Speaking at Government Buildings on 10 October 2023, Minister Roderic O'Gorman said

"In summer 2022, I set out an ambition to half the cost of childcare for parents in this country recognising it is a major cost for so many families."

"I was able to take 25% off the cost in the budget in Budget 2023, and in Budget 2024 we have been able to announce that we will take a further 25% off the cost. It is going to apply from September of next year and it applies through increasing the subsidy we give to parents through the national childcare scheme," O'Gorman added.

He said that like "every Minister", he had to work within limits when securing funding under Budget 2024.

He added that it is noteworthy that the National Childcare Scheme will be extended to childminders for the first time in 2024, making subsidies available to thousands of more families.

Teresa Heaney, CEO of Early Childhood Ireland, said that the additional funding announced for childcare provision in Budget 2024 was welcome, but there was "a lot still to be done".

"Budget 2024 has not provided the radical rethink which was needed to bring Ireland in line with the best countries in the world for young children," she said.

The Journal, 10 October 2023

Updating *Aistear:* the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

Introduction

Aistear is now 14 years old, having been published back in 2009. In the years since, *Aistear* has made a significant contribution to the learning, development, and wellbeing of thousands of children from birth to six years old in Ireland. It was the first curriculum framework introduced in Ireland, supporting the development of emergent and enquiry-based curriculum in a range of settings.

Ireland is now more socially, culturally, and linguistically diverse than ever before. Since *Aistear* was published there has been considerable change in early childhood provision in Ireland in terms of national developments, policies, and strategies; curriculum and assessment developments; and children's lived experiences. There is a need to see how the framework might be updated so that it continues to support high-quality learning and development experiences for the country's babies, toddlers, and young children.

This article describes the process so far in updating *Aistear*, beginning with Phase 1, which included consultation and an update to the research base. It then provides an overview of Phase 2, including the proposals for an updated *Aistear* and an outline of the consultation on those proposals.

Phase 1 consultation strands and findings

Phase 1 of updating *Aistear* took place between May 2021 and April 2022 and consisted of two strands:

1. Consultation with (a) the early childhood sector, and (b) babies, toddlers, and young children
2. A literature review to support the updating of *Aistear*'s Themes.

Donna Carolan
Education Officer, NCCA

Dr Mary Daly
Education Officer, NCCA

Dr Jacqueline Fallon
Former Director, Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA

Lorraine Farrell
National *Aistear* Development Officer, NCCA

Dr Derek Grant
Director, Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA

Dr Sharon Skehill
Education Officer, NCCA

This article from the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) describes the Council's work since May 2021 in updating *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009). It briefly references the rationale for updating *Aistear* before describing the updating process and the proposals for the updated framework.

The consultation asked two key questions:

» What is working well with *Aistear*?
» What needs to be enhanced or updated?

The early childhood sector

Stakeholders, including educators, parents, support agencies, and those involved in further and higher education, were invited to share their views through online focus groups, questionnaires, written submissions, and an invitational consultation event. Feedback was analysed to identify the main themes in responses to the two key questions.

The findings indicated that *Aistear*'s Principles remain relevant. However, due to a strong sense that the Themes sometimes overshadow them, findings suggest enhancing the connections between the Principles and the Themes, while making the Principles more visible and prominent.

The findings also highlighted broad agreement that *Aistear*'s four Themes (Wellbeing, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking) have stood the test of time and have had a positive impact on babies', toddlers', and young children's learning and development. Across the four Themes, areas identified as needing to be updated were: child agency; diversity, equality, and inclusion; relationships; and play.

Feedback also indicated the need to reduce the number of Learning Goals and their level of detail. In general, the Guidelines for Good Practice received positive commentary and were viewed as a useful resource in working with *Aistear*. In considering the need for future resources, it is clear from the findings that practical resources for educators in working with *Aistear* are considered to be essential.

Babies, toddlers, and young children

The consultation with babies, toddlers, and young children was undertaken by a consortium of Maynooth University, Stranmillis University College, and Early Childhood Ireland. This consultation was innovative and groundbreaking in its design and in respecting the rights of all children to have their voices heard and responded to in matters affecting them. Using participatory action research, it took place in early childhood settings, including childminder and home environments, and was carried out by the educators working daily with the children. It focused on noticing and observing the children's reactions and responses to elements of *Aistear* in action.

The consultation reaffirmed the importance of viewing children as 'capable and competent' learners; respecting all children as citizens with rights and

> *Feedback indicated the need to reduce the number of Learning Goals and their level of detail.*

responsibilities; and the role of the educator in facilitating and responding to the voices of babies, toddlers, and young children in the different ways they communicate. These voices communicated the importance of relationships and interactions with their families, friends, and the wider community. Babies, toddlers, and young children also emphasised the importance of play, self-direction, and access to rich indoor and outdoor learning environments.

Recommendations for how *Aistear* may be enhanced included a greater focus on: citizenship and responsibility; relationships; diversity, visibility, and inclusion; engagement with families and visibility in communities; role of the adult; and creativity.

Literature review to support the updating of Aistear's Themes

A team of researchers from the Institute of Education, Dublin City University, conducted a literature review to update the research base that informs the Aims and Learning Goals of *Aistear*'s Themes.

The review's findings affirmed the role of educators in providing quality curriculum experiences which are challenging, authentic, and meaningful. They highlighted the importance of nurturing relationships and slow relational pedagogy, compassion, empathy, adventurous play, inclusion, sustainability, and children's agency through social justice. The findings indicated a lack of visibility of babies and toddlers in the literature on curriculum and learning. In addressing this, a chapter was dedicated to this younger age group to ensure they were visible throughout proposals for updating *Aistear*.

The review also provided key trends for consideration that could enhance the Aims and Learning Goals in an updated *Aistear*. Across the four Themes, commonalities in key trends were evident and included a greater focus on sustainability; children's agency; social justice and citizenship; rights-based participation; children's digital lives; play and risky play; and intentional and guided pedagogies.

Both the consultation findings and the information from the literature review were fundamental in preparing for Phase 2 of Updating *Aistear*, which will be discussed next.

Phase 2 consultation proposals and strands

Phase 2 consultation proposals

The NCCA distilled all the information from Phase 1 and developed a set of proposals for an updated *Aistear*. These proposals build on and update the

A chapter was dedicated to the babies and toddlers group to ensure they were visible throughout proposals for updating Aistear.

original framework and were the basis for the Phase 2 consultations, which took place in autumn 2023. The proposals are structured in two sections:

» *Aistear*: *the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*
» Supporting *Aistear*.

Figure 1: Structure of the updated *Aistear*

Updated Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

The updated framework is made up of the Vision, Purpose, Principles, and Themes. The proposed Vision presents an even more respectful and empowered view of the baby, toddler, and young child and that of the educator. (In the proposals, 'educator' is used to refer to all those who work with *Aistear* to support babies', toddlers', and young children's learning and development, including early years educators who work in professional roles, parents, childminders, and other adults.)

Responding to the findings from the consultation for more visibility of the youngest age groups, the proposals specify babies, toddlers, and young children throughout. The proposed image of the baby, toddler, and young child presents them as agentic, competent, and confident. The proposals also include an image of the educator as competent, confident, agentic, and reflective.

The proposed Purpose of *Aistear* is to support babies', toddlers', and young children's learning and development. In doing so, it reaffirms parents as the primary educators of their children; promotes partnerships with families and communities; supports transitions; supports educators and practice in various contexts; and embeds appreciation of our cultural and linguistic history and story by introducing terms and phrases *as Gaeilge* (in Irish).

Aistear's Principles have been updated to reflect the information gathered in Phase 1, particularly inclusion and a rights-based approach, and reframed from twelve into nine. The Themes have been retained but updated as described above. The number of Learning Goals has been reduced, but they remain intentionally broad, observable statements to support holistic learning and development. The Principles are now interwoven with the Themes, with key messages from the consultation embedded throughout the Framework.

Supporting Aistear

This is made up of:

» Part A – *Guidance for Good Practice* proposes a set of big ideas, focused on *Aistear*'s Principles and Themes. These big ideas are intended as a platform to update and extend the current Guidelines for Good Practice in the *Aistear* Toolkit.
» Part B – *Supporting Educators* draws attention to wider conditions necessary to support *Aistear*'s Vision and Principles.

The *Guidance for Good Practice* expands on some of the important ideas introduced in the Principles and Themes. It also reflects other important messages, or big ideas, from Phase 1, as well as from research and wider societal and policy changes.

Overall, greater attention is drawn to the vital importance of *interactions and relationships* between babies, toddlers, young children, parents, educators, and other important people and places in their lives. There is a clear focus on building these trusting relationships through a slow, relational pedagogy. The importance of a key-person approach and of fostering connections with friends, communities, and neighbourhoods is emphasised.

The proposed Purpose of Aistear is to support babies', toddlers', and young children's learning and development.

Babies, toddlers, and young children are further acknowledged as *citizens with rights*, so that they can have greater influence on decisions that affect them by expressing their views and having their views given due consideration. There is a focus on them as agents of and for change, as global citizens, with acknowledgement of their emerging responsibilities for themselves, others, and the environment.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion, including diversity of age, gender, family status, ethnicity, religion, worldview, and membership of the Traveller community, are evident in the proposed updates. There is a focus on respecting and celebrating diversity while also noticing and valuing our similarities and connectedness. Aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations Development Programme, 2015), there is a focus on identifying and addressing barriers to meaningful participation for all babies, toddlers, and young children.

The update retains, encourages, and enhances *learning through play and hands-on experiences*, both indoors and outdoors. Responding to the Phase 1 consultation findings, there is a greater emphasis on outdoor play, learning through engagement with nature, and opportunities for 'risky adventurous play'.

Proposed updates include supporting *continuity of experience and progression in learning* through, for example, alignment between *Aistear* and the Primary Curriculum Framework (Department of Education, 2023). The update indicates clearly the importance of supporting all transitions, both daily and between settings. Proposals also refer to a cycle of noticing, observing, documenting, assessing, planning, implementing, and reflecting in practice.

In relation to supporting educators, in the Phase 2 consultation, the NCCA gathered feedback from stakeholders, education partners, educators, and parents to identify practical ways that settings can be supported in a comprehensive manner as they become familiar with and begin to use an updated *Aistear*.

Phase 2 consultation strands

The proposals for an updated *Aistear* were published in autumn 2023. A broad range of data collection methods were used to ensure that all stakeholders could provide feedback, including questionnaires, focus groups, stakeholder meetings, and written submissions. A second consultation with babies, toddlers, and young children on the proposed updates also took place. Following the Phase 2 consultation, it is envisaged that the NCCA will complete its work on the updated *Aistear* in mid-2024.

Babies, toddlers, and young children are acknowledged as citizens with rights, so that they can have greater influence on decisions that affect them by expressing their views and having their views given due consideration.

Conclusion

Aistear, the Irish word for 'journey', is the name given to Ireland's *Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. A memorable and worthwhile journey entails countless adventures, explorations, and discoveries, along with inevitable challenges. So in living up to its name, *Aistear* continually seeks to enhance our babies', toddlers', and young children's learning journeys, providing them with rich and wide-ranging experiences within loving relationships.

As we journey further into the 21st century, may *Aistear* continue to be embraced by the early childhood sector and in doing so positively influence the early learning and development of our agentic, competent, and confident babies, toddlers, and young children, through the support and commitment of a competent, confident, agentic, and reflective early childhood profession.

REFERENCES

Department of Education (2023) *Primary Curriculum Framework*. Dublin: Government Publications.

French, G. and McKenna, G. (2022) *Literature Review to Support the Updating of Aistear*, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework. Dublin: NCCA. https://ncca.ie/media/5915/literature-review-to-support-the-updating-of-*Aistear*-the-early-childhood-curriculum-framework-jan-2023.pdf.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2009) *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. Dublin: NCCA. www.curriculumonline.ie/Early-Childhood/.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2023) *Consultation Report on Updating Aistear: Phase 1*. Dublin: NCCA. https://ncca.ie/media/6091/consultationreport_phase1_ua_en.pdf.

United Nations Development Programme (2015) *Sustainable Development Goals 2030*. Geneva: UN General Assembly. www.undp.org/sustainable-development-goals.

Nigerian Immigrant Mothers' Perspectives on the Universal Early Childhood Care and Education Programme in Ireland

Introduction

This article gives an insight into Nigerian immigrant mothers' perceptions of the universal Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme in Ireland. Fifteen mothers whose children availed of the programme from 2020 to 2022 were recruited through ECCE settings to participate in doctoral research at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick.

The ongoing research, titled 'An investigation of the lived experiences of Nigerian immigrant mothers' engagement with their children's early childhood care and education', used a qualitative enquiry based on one-to-one semi-structured interviews. These were transcribed and coded using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis (2019; 2022).

The mothers were asked to share their experiences of parenting a child availing of the universal ECCE programme. They reported positive experiences: the findings indicate many benefits of the programme for Nigerian mothers and their children.

Florence Ajala

Assistant Lecturer and Doctoral Researcher in Early Childhood Education, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick

This article summarises the findings of a study describing the views of Nigerian mothers on the many benefits of the universal Early Childhood Care and Education programme in Ireland. Without this programme, the participants probably would not have been able to send their children to preschool, return to work, or take up training, because of the high costs in Ireland.

Universal ECCE programme

The ECCE programme was introduced in January 2010 by the Childcare Directorate of the then Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. It replaced the Early Childcare Supplement of €1,000 a year for preschool children aged three years and three months to four years and six months (Department of Education, n.d.; Taguma et al., 2010).

The programme is a universal approach to free quality early childhood care and education to promote equality of educational opportunity and outcomes for children aged two years and eight months to five years and six months, before they begin primary school. It runs from September to June each year, and all young children in Ireland within the eligible age range are entitled to two full academic years before they enter primary school (Taguma et al., 2010). Through the programme, early childhood settings in Ireland such as playgroups, Montessori, Naíonraí, and crèches provide children with care and education for three hours a day, five days a week, for 38 weeks of the year (Health Service Executive, n.d.).

Benefits of the programme for the Nigerian mothers

The participants reported two main benefits of the programme for themselves: that their children receive free preschool education and learn from knowledgeable others.

They said the programme enabled them to avail of free childcare for three hours a day during the school year. They acknowledged that Ireland has high childcare costs – it is one of the highest among OECD countries (Russell et al., 2018) – and the programme allowed them to save money while they worked, engaged in training, or did other necessary tasks:

I'm not paying any money in the preschool or to get her to the Montessori, so it's totally free, and I really do appreciate that because it is saving me money, yeah.

It did give me an opportunity to go back to work. I had to stay off work for two years because I had both of them just in a space of one year. But with a free preschool coming into play, I was able to go back to work.

The participants said their children learnt from knowledgeable others in the preschool through the support from early years educators. They recognised this because they saw improvement in their children's growth and development since availing of the ECCE programme. They also said that this reduced their mothering stress or worries about their children's development:

Yeah, the benefit there is that at least it gives me rest of mind and it gives me less of stress. You know, what I would have been stressing myself to put in her, they already did part of it. So I'm just brushing it off.

Sometimes when you try to teach your own children as a mother, they tend to [be] like, I don't want to do it, and you can't really put much pressure on them, but the preschool is there to help.

Nigerian mothers reported two main benefits of the programme for themselves: their children receive free preschool education; their children learn from knowledgeable others.

Participants detailed three main benefits of the universal ECCE programme for their preschool children: socialisation, language development, and preparation for primary school.

Benefits of the programme for the children

The participants detailed three main benefits of the universal ECCE programme for their preschool children: socialisation, language development, and preparation for primary school.

They said the programme created opportunities for their young children to interact with their peers, which they found helpful for social and language development. They reported differences in their children's ability to socialise and make friends since availing of the programme:

It gives children that are born after a certain period of the year, not to just stay at home for a whole year and then not being able to do anything, the opportunity to be around their peers, people of their age.

I would say it's been helpful not just to me but also to the child, you know, socially. So sometimes the child might not be socially inclined, but then the preschool has kind of availed that opportunity for the child to be socially inclined and to be open to voice out, you know, their thoughts.

The participants said their children are more vocal and expressive since availing of the programme. They believed that this was because their children related with people in the preschool, which boosted their communication skills:

Her speech and everything had really improved.

She's much more outspoken in terms of language development than she was before, and I just believe that that's just an influence she got from being around her peers and knowledgeable others, especially with her teachers.

She's learning; she's communicating more, it really helped them in their talking.

The participants also said that the programme's timing and learning experiences and the preschool's classroom-like structure prepare their children for primary school. They believed that since their children were already used to the routine of the programme and the preschool set-up, this prepared them for primary school:

I think the preschool, it kind of set them up for things to come in the proper school, the main school. I have to kind of like get them into that routine, which is good.

It helps them more in going to school. So it gives them that sense that they are graduating from one step to another, and they are graduating to big school. So they are ready to go into big school.

Conclusion

The universal Early Childhood Care and Education programme gave participants access to free childcare for three hours a day during the school year, which allowed them to save money. Moreover, it was established in this study that these free childcare hours helped the participants take up work and training. They said their children could express themselves confidently, were better prepared for primary school, and socialised well with their peers since availing of the programme.

Overall, the universal ECCE programme has significantly changed the lives of young children in Ireland and their families. A reduction in its age of entry could benefit more younger children in Ireland, especially disadvantaged and minority children, by giving them access to free, high-quality, and inclusive early years education.

REFERENCES

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2019) 'Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis', *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), 589–597. DOI: 10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2022) 'Conceptual and design thinking for thematic analysis', *Qualitative Psychology*, 9(1), 3–26. DOI: 10.1037/qup0000196

Department of Education (n.d.) Government of Ireland. www.gov.ie/en/organisation/department-of-education/.

Health Service Executive (n.d.) Childcare options and free pre-school scheme. www2.hse.ie/wellbeing/child-health/childcare-options-and-free-pre-school-scheme.html.

Russell, H., McGinnity, F., Fahey, É., and Kenny, O. (2018) 'Maternal employment and the cost of childcare in Ireland', *ESRI Research Series 73*. Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute. DOI: 10.26504/RS73

Taguma, M., Kim, M., Wurzburg, G., and Kelly, F. (2010) *OECD Reviews of Migrant Education: Ireland*. OECD Publishing. www.gov.ie/en/collection/policy-and-education-reports/.

Integrating STEAM into Early Childhood Education Planning and Practice

Investigating the barriers and facilitating factors

Introduction

Science, Technology, Engineering, the Arts and Maths (STEAM) is an approach that draws on knowledge and skill from two or more of the STEAM domains (Hapgood et al., 2020) which are applied to address real-life problems and find practical solutions (Moore et al., 2014). For example, the use of solar panels to promote sustainable energy draws on scientific understanding of solar energy, mathematical knowledge to calculate energy requirements, and technology, engineering, and creativity to design and create the solar panels and associated infrastructure to transform the sun's energy into a useable power source.

Paula Walshe
Assistant Lecturer and PhD Student, Dundalk Institute of Technology

This article discusses the role of STEAM in early childhood education and care (ECEC), and why the terminology used should be *STEAM* as opposed to *STEM*. It reports on the author's ongoing PhD research exploring educators' integration of STEAM in ECEC practice.

The use of solar panels draws on scientific understanding of solar energy, mathematical knowledge, technology, engineering, and creativity.

Photo by Trinh Trần, licensed under Creative Commons Zero

Recently there has been increasing focus on STEAM in educational policy and curriculum reform in Ireland. From the recent literature review by French et al. (2022) to the reform of the primary school curriculum (Department of Education [DE], 2023a), the enriching educational benefits of STEAM are reinforced. However, the Department's 'STEM Education: Policy Statement 2017–2026' (DE, 2017) and Department of Education Inspectorate report (2020) recognise that educators in early childhood education and care (ECEC) need training and supports to help them incorporate STEAM into their practice.

STEAM, not STEM

The arts undoubtedly has a significant role to play in the STEAM approach. In recent years the value of the arts and creativity has been recognised as supporting the development of future-oriented skills (Kim & Kim, 2017) and engagement of the STEM learner (Allina, 2018). The arts have particular relevance for ECEC as a modality to support children to express their ideas and thoughts about how the world works (Sharapan, 2012), in addition to expressing their interest in, and knowledge of, the other STEM domains (Johnston et al., 2022).

This year the DE published recommendations for enhancing STEM education, aligned with the arts, due to opportunities for enriched STEM engagement which the arts can offer (DE, 2023b). But the terminology it used is 'STEM and the Arts', due to concerns that using 'STEAM' might undermine the value of the arts:

> The acronym STEAM . . . carries the risk of framing the arts in education entirely within its relationship to the STEM disciplines and ignoring the wider reach of arts education beyond its commonality with those disciplines (p.3).

Contrastingly, I suggest, just as the arts support engagement and expression in the other STEM areas, it would be difficult to identify an area of arts engagement that does not draw on STEM funds of knowledge. For example, a dancer uses spatial reasoning when moving across the stage, or uses gravity when lifting their partner; a graphic designer uses technology and software; a sculptor uses knowledge of scale, height, and geometry to create a lifelike piece.

Separating the 'A' and using 'STEM', or even 'STEM and the Arts', may actually perpetuate an idea that the arts are subservient to the other STEM domains. Whereas 'STEAM' places significant and equal importance on each domain, highlighting STEAM's reciprocal transdisciplinary nature, where the arts can both support and be supported by the other domains.

'STEAM' places significant and equal importance on each domain, highlighting STEAM's reciprocal transdisciplinary nature, where the arts can both support and be supported by the other domains.

58% of survey respondents reported receiving no STEAM training during their initial ECEC qualification, 32.7% said that STEAM was incorporated within another module, and only 9% said that a full module on STEAM was included in their initial training.

A dancer uses spatial reasoning when moving across the stage, or uses gravity when lifting a partner.

Photo by Pavel Danilyuk, licensed under Creative Commons Zero

My STEAM in ECEC research

The OECD calls for ECEC to become increasingly 'future-oriented' (2023, p.117) so that children are enabled to be active 21st-century citizens. Incorporating STEAM in ECEC helps children to develop important 21st-century skills to support this (Leavy et al., 2022; OECD, 2023). However, research indicates that educator knowledge and beliefs about STEAM can significantly impact their ability and inclination to include STEAM concepts (Ball & Cohen, 1996; Pajares, 1992; DeJarnette, 2018; Jamil et al., 2018).

My PhD research, funded by the Higher Education Authority's (HEA) Technological Universities Transformation Fund and Dundalk Institute of Technology, explores the barriers and facilitating factors affecting the integration of STEAM in ECEC practice. Its findings will be used to develop an appropriate STEAM training intervention for educators.

In the first phase, data from surveys (n = 245) and focus group participants (n = 6) indicated that the biggest factor affecting educators' integration of STEAM is insufficient training. Most survey respondents (58%, or 142) reported receiving no STEAM training during their initial ECEC qualification, one third (32.7%, or 80) said that STEAM was incorporated within another module, and only 9% (22) said that a full module on STEAM was included in their initial training.
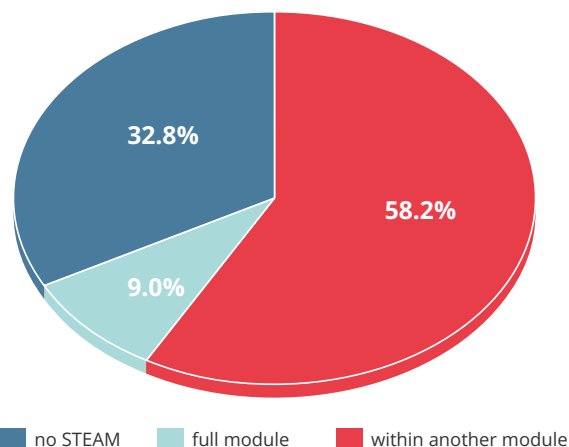
STEAM During Initial Qualification

Legend: no STEAM | full module | within another module

32.8%
58.2%
9.0%

The survey findings also indicated that educators who received STEAM training perceived their knowledge of STEAM to be higher and were therefore more likely to consider STEAM in their planning and practice. This aligns with existing literature describing how educators' belief in their understanding and ability in a particular area directly impacts their behaviour (Hsiao & Yang, 2010) and their ability to successfully introduce an area into practice (Greenfield et al. 2009; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998).

The next stage of my research will involve developing and delivering a STEAM training intervention to a cohort of practising ECEC educators. The following six themes, identified through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) of the focus group data, will be addressed when developing the training:

Theme	Question
1. The Importance of STEAM	Does the training support educators to understand the importance of STEAM in ECEC?
2. Definition of STEAM	Does the training support educators to fully understand the definition of STEAM and the role of the educator to facilitate STEAM?
3. (Mis)Perceptions of Technology	Are perceptions and misperceptions addressed to delineate what constitutes technology and the importance of active over passive use?
4. Training and CPD	Does the training meet educators where they are at in terms of differing levels of qualification and prior interest in and knowledge of STEAM?
5. Intrinsic Value of the Arts	Does the training appropriately address the important reciprocal role of the arts within STEAM?
6. Other Barriers	Does the training address other barriers, including time and cost of materials, to support educators to incorporate STEAM seamlessly in their practice using affordable and accessible resources?

Conclusion

STEAM in early childhood education and care helps children develop important 21st-century skills and dispositions such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration. However, ECEC educators are not currently receiving training to support them to incorporate STEAM in pedagogical practice. My research aims to address this issue.

REFERENCES

Allina, B. (2018) 'The development of STEAM educational policy to promote student creativity and social empowerment', *Arts Education Policy Review*, 119(2), 77–87.

Ball, D.L. and Cohen, D.K. (1996) 'Reform by the book: What is – or might be – the role of curriculum materials in teacher learning and instructional reform', *Educational Researcher*, 25(6–8), 14. DOI: 10.3102/0013189X025009006

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2022) *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide.* Sage.

DeJarnette, N.K. (2018) 'Implementing STEAM in the early childhood classroom', *European Journal of STEM Education*, 3(3).

Department of Education and Skills (2017) *STEM Education: Policy Statement 2017–2026.* Government publications.

Department of Education (DE) (2023a) Primary Curriculum Framework For Primary and Special Schools. Government publications.

Department of Education (DE) (2023b) *Recommendations on STEM and the Arts in Education.* Government publications.

Department of Education Inspectorate (2020) *STEM Education 2020: Reporting on Practice in Early Learning and Care, Primary and Post-Primary Contexts.* Government publications.

French, G., Mckenna, G., Giblin, F., Concannon-Gibney, T., Farrell, T., Gillic, C., and Halligan, C. (2022) *Literature Review to Support the Updating of **Aistear**, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework.* Dublin City University.

Greenfield, D.B., Jirout, J., Dominguez, X., Greenberg, A., Maier, M., and Fuccillo, J. (2009) 'Science in the preschool classroom: A programmatic research agenda to improve science readiness', *Early Education and Development*, 20(2), 238–264. DOI: 10.1080/10409280802595441

Hapgood, S., Czerniak, C.M., Brenneman, K., Clements, D.H., Duschl, R.A., Fleer, M., Greenfield, D., Hadani, H., Romance, N., Sarama, J., Schwarz, C., and VanMeeteren, B. (2020) 'The importance of early STEM education'. In: C.C. Johnson, M.J. Mohr-Schroeder, T.J. Moore, and L.D. English (Eds.) *Handbook of Research on STEM Education.* Routledge.

Hsiao, H. and Yang, S. (2010) 'The study of teaching beliefs reflected on teaching behavior: Focusing on elementary school teachers', T*he International Journal of Learning*, 17(1), 299–309.

Jamil, F.M., Linder, S.M., and Stegelin, D.A. (2018) 'Early childhood teacher beliefs about STEAM education after a professional development conference', *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 46(4), 409–417.

Johnston, K., Kervin, L., and Wyeth, P. (2022) 'STEM, STEAM and makerspaces in early childhood: A scoping review', *Sustainability (Switzerland)*, 14(20).

Kim, Y. and Kim, J. (2017) 'Analysis of status about theses and articles related to domestic STEAM education', *Journal of the Korean Institute of Industrial Educators,* 42(1), 140–159.

Leavy, A., Carroll, C., Corry, E., Fitzpatrick, M., Hamilton, M., Hourigan, M., LaCumbre, G., McGann, R., and O'Dwyer, A. (2022) *Review of Literature to Identify a Set of Effective Interventions for Addressing STEAM in Early Years, Primary and Post-Primary Education Settings.* Mary Immaculate College.

Moore, T., Stohlmann, M., Wang, H., Tank, K., Glancy, A., and Roehrig, G. (2014) 'Implementation and integration of engineering in K-12 STEM education'. In: S. Purzer, J. Strobel, and M. Cardella (Eds.) *Engineering in Pre-College Settings: Synthesizing Research, Policy, and Practices*, pp. 35–60. Purdue University Press.

Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) (2023) *Empowering Young Children in the Digital Age*. OECD.

Pajares, M.F. (1992) 'Teachers' beliefs and educational research: Cleaning up a messy construct', *Review of Educational Research,* 62, 307–332.

Sharapan, H. (2012) 'From STEM to STEAM: How early childhood educators can apply Fred Rogers' approach', *YC Young Children*, 67(1), 36–40.

Tschannen-Moran, M., Hoy, A.W., and Hoy, W.K. (1998) 'Teacher efficacy: Its meaning and measure', *Review of Educational Research,* 68(2), 202–248.

The Early Childhood STEAM Network

An established community of practice

In 2021 the use of a STEM network was proposed to support early childhood (EC) professionals' understanding and knowledge of EC STEM. Since then, a vibrant community of EC educators, managers, and academics has blossomed. This article details the network's aims, successes, and plans, showing the valuable role that communities of practice can play in embedding and supporting STEM in EC.

Sandra O'Neill
Assistant Professor, DCU Institute of Education, and Founder of EC STEAM Network

Cora Gillic
Lecturer and Researcher, School of Language, Literacy and Early Childhood Education, DCU Institute of Education

Nicola O'Reilly
Lecturer and Researcher, School of Language, Literacy and Early Childhood Education, DCU Institute of Education

Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) education is increasingly a focus of educational policy. In early childhood education settings, almost a third of educators show a less than satisfactory awareness of STEM learning (DES, 2020). This is concerning, given that children's engagement in STEM is part of the Department of Education's inspection criteria for early childhood settings (DoE, 2022).

Communities of practice (COPs) have been found to mediate learning in STEM (Boonstra et al., 2022), and government policy identifies COPs as an effective means of supporting early childhood educators' STEM learning. The Early Childhood STEAM Network was founded in 2021 to support early childhood professionals' understanding and knowledge of STEM. Since then, a vibrant community has flourished. This article shows the valuable role that COPs can play in embedding and supporting STEM in early childhood.

Early Childhood STEAM Network

The aim of the Early Childhood (EC) STEAM Network is to bring together early childhood education (ECE) professionals from pre-primary settings (from birth to six years) with an interest in STEM education and the Arts.

The network meets regularly to support, connect, and inform the ECE community, identifying opportunities to share knowledge, build on research, and disseminate learning (O'Neill et al., 2022; O'Reilly, 2022). Professional collaboration is a crucial part of educator professional development (Boonstra et al., 2022), and COPs provide supportive, dynamic spaces where individual and group social learning is explored, challenged, shared, and grown (McDonald & Cater-Steel, 2017).

Members of the network share a common goal but have disparate interests and expertise (practitioners, researchers, academics, students). While the focus is always on STEM, the variety of discipline interests has allowed for an array of topics to be examined during online and in-person meet-ups. Network meetings provide a safe space to question, discuss, and learn through a 'situated process of participation and socialisation' (Lave & Wenger, 1991) focusing on early education pedagogy and traditions. Everyone has something to offer, and everyone has something to learn.

Network event focusing on supporting Mathematics in preschool using picture books

The network challenges its members to be progressive in adopting new practices. STEM's constituent parts are not traditionally included in ECE practice, so the introduction of some aspects of STEM – such as engineering principles or modern technologies for learning – can be challenging. Play, holistic learning, and child-led approaches are fundamental to ECE and must be reimagined, as lines between digital and traditional play become ever more blurred (Marsh et al., 2019; Pettersen et al., 2022).

Opportunities to use traditional play materials alongside digital devices often form part of network meet-ups. These hands-on STEM experiences positively impact on practice by widening children's experiences of STEM in preschool (Venkat & O'Reilly, 2022) or by giving pre-service educators opportunities to engage with STEM concepts and materials (O'Neill, 2021).

Research and collaboration

The Early Childhood STEAM Network has begun collaborating with established and well-respected STEM organisations, such as the Science Foundation Ireland (SFI)-funded programme Maths4all (maths4all.ie).

In spring 2023, the network facilitated maths workshops with Maths4all in urban and rural locations in Leinster.

Visit to Microsoft Ireland to learn about computational thinking for young children using robots

There is a dearth of information about ECE educators' perceptions of, and attitudes towards, STEM learning in Ireland. In response, the network gathered and analysed the opinions of 300 educators on this topic in 2021. Findings suggest that pre-service education often omits STEM content and that ECE educators are eager to learn more about STEM (O'Neill et al., 2023).

The network has also begun collaborating with established and well-respected STEM organisations, such as the SFI-funded programme Maths4all (https://maths4all.ie/). In spring 2023, the network facilitated six early maths workshops with Maths4all in urban and rural locations in Leinster. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive, and further workshops are planned for autumn 2023. Crucially, network members were supported to facilitate these workshops, building STEM knowledge, capacity, and expertise within the ECE community.

Through the network, we have identified a need for STEM support and information-sharing at all levels of practice (O'Neill et al., 2023). Those in teaching, support, and policy roles can benefit from network collaboration as much as pre-service educators and those currently working in ECE. The network provides ongoing opportunities for learning and access to digital devices and STEM materials, and connects those interested in innovative STEM practice and research. In addition, mentoring for recent graduates (or those

new to STEM) and networking opportunities for established educators will embed STEM further in Irish ECE.

Impact on policy and practice

The STEM Education Implementation Plan to 2026 (Government of Ireland, 2023) identifies COPs as a support for expanding STEM knowledge in pre-primary and beyond. The EC STEAM Network exemplifies how COPs promote the sector's understanding of and engagement with STEM. For COPs to flourish and succeed, however, supports are required. Kezar and Gehrke (2017) stress that supports for COPs should include a viable funding model; professionalised and committed staff; leadership development, distribution, and succession planning; and an articulated community strategy. At present, network members give their time and energy freely, and resources (including STEM materials, teaching resources, room rental, and utilities) are gratefully donated. But this is not a sustainable model.

How to develop, cultivate, and sustain a COP for supporting learning and innovation needs to be addressed. If this method is to be adopted as part of the STEM Implementation Plan, thought will need to be given to how these groups can be established and sustained. Should the COP model be replicated throughout the country – and we strongly recommend that it is – then leadership in EC STEAM education is essential. Leaders are needed who have the necessary EC STEM expertise and who are community focused and committed to developing the skills and knowledge of people in the sector. Government investment in people (skills and expertise development), and dedicated funding for inevitable running costs (administrative, resource provision, venue) are imperative.

The EC STEAM Network exemplifies how COPs (Communities of Practice) promote the sector's understanding of and engagement with STEM.

Looking forward

A strength of the network is our combined practice and research expertise. A long-term goal is to carry out collaborative classroom-based research illustrating EC STEM practice in Ireland. The relationships between members provide support for educators and ensure that research is meaningful and useful to the sector. Collaboration with similar organisations in other countries will add to our contribution to the field internationally.

The EC STEAM Network exemplifies how COPs can benefit the ECE sector. Its success can be defined by its growing membership and strong attendance at meetings. It has shown how a group of committed individuals can build capacity, competence, and confidence in EC STEM education, growing expertise from the bottom up. The community is creating a vision for what EC STEM should and could look like in Ireland, and we are excited for its future.

REFERENCES

Boonstra, K.E., Miesner, H.R., Graue, E., and Grodsky, E. (2022) 'Participation and learning in PreK teacher workgroups: A communities of practice analysis of mathematics-focused professional development', *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, 44(3), 510–530. DOI: 10.1080/10901027.2022.2104185

Department of Education (DoE) (2022) *A Guide to Early Years Inspection.* Dublin: DoE.

Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2020) *Digital Learning 2020: Reporting on Practice in Early Learning and Care, Primary and Post-Primary Contexts.* Dublin: DES.

Government of Ireland (2023) *STEM Education Implementation Plan to 2026.* Dublin: Government publications.

Kezar, A. and Gehrke, S. (2017) 'Sustaining communities of practice focused on STEM reform', *Journal of Higher Education*, 88(3), 323–349.

Lave, J. and Wenger, E. (1991) *Situated Learning.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Marsh, J., Wood, E., Chesworth, L., Nisha, B., Nutbrown, B., and Olney, B. (2019) 'Makerspaces in early childhood education: Principles of pedagogy and practice', *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 26(3), 221–233. DOI: 10.1080/10749039.2019.1655651

McDonald, J. and Cater-Steel, A. (Eds.) (2017) *Implementing Communities of Practice in Higher Education.* Singapore: Springer.

O'Neill, S. (2021) '"Hands-on experience has completely changed my perception of technology in Early Childhood": An exploration on the impact of a technology module on the attitudes of Early Childhood undergraduates', *An Leanbh Óg: OMEP Ireland Journal of Early Childhood Studies*, 14(1), 61–81.

O'Neill, S., Gillic, C., and Winget-Power, J. (2022) 'Using communities of practice to support STEM education in early childhood care and education: A proposal'. *Early Childhood Ireland's National Early Years Research Day Proceedings*, Volume 3, pp. 26–32.

O'Neill, S., Gillic, C., and O'Reilly, N. (2023) 'Hungry for more: Early childhood educators' perspectives on STEM education, teaching, and professional development'. *Irish Educational Studies*. DOI: 10.1080/03323315.2023.2261903

O'Reilly, N. (2022) 'Early childhood STEAM: Networking and recent Irish research', *Child Links*, 3, 2–5.

Pettersen, K., Arnseth, H.C., and Silseth, K. (2022) 'Playing Minecraft: Young children's post-digital play', *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*. DOI: 10.1177/14687984221118977

Venkat, H. and O'Reilly, N. (2022) '"This machine cleans the air" – Early childhood STEM in Ireland: A look at current policy and inspiring practices'. In: B. Mooney (Ed.) *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2022.* Dublin: Education Matters. https://irelandseducationyearbook.ie/downloads/IEYB2022/YB2022-Early-Childhood-05.pdf.

Early Childhood Home Visiting in Ireland

An essential prevention and early intervention service for children, parents, and families

Early childhood home visiting (ECHV) is an evidenced-based proven service delivery strategy that helps children and families thrive. In 2022 only 4,340 children aged 0–5 years – 1% of the eligible population – received this service. The current policy context in Ireland is an unique opportunity to develop an integrated, strategic ECHV approach aligned with national policies, in particular *First 5* (DCEDIY, 2018). Creating the necessary funding, infrastructure, research, and strategic planning supports at national and local level would enable, at the very least, the 12,000 babies born into poverty each year to receive a high-quality home visiting service.

Josephine Bleach

Director of the Early Learning Initiative, National College of Ireland, and Chair of the Home Visiting Alliance

Susan Brocklesby

Independent Consultant

Early childhood home visiting (ECHV) is a proven service delivery strategy that helps children and families thrive, and has a long history in Ireland.

Introduction

Early childhood home visiting (ECHV) is a proven service-delivery strategy that helps children and families thrive, and has a long history in Ireland. An essential local community lifeline, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic, home visiting programmes address wellbeing, developmental delays, educational disadvantage, parental isolation, and poor mental health. It provides a continuum of support and prioritises first-time parents, children with additional needs, and families who are socially isolated and experiencing challenging circumstances.

A body of research, including multiple randomised controlled trials and longitudinal studies, has shown that home visiting significantly improves the lives of children and their families. Demonstrable impacts include improving maternal and child health, preventing child abuse and neglect, increasing family education and earning potential, promoting children's development and readiness to start school, and connecting families to community resources and support.

Established in November 2020, the Home Visiting Alliance (HVA, 2022) is a collaboration of five Irish, evidence-based ECHV programmes: Community Mothers, Infant Mental Health, Lifestart, ParentChild+, and Preparing for Life. Together we represent the collective national voice of ECHV in Ireland, visiting 4,340 children aged 0–5 years across 40 local programme sites.

2022 was a significant year for home visiting, with the publication of *Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services* (DCEDIY, 2022) and the commencement of actions to progress agreement on a national approach to home visiting as part of *First 5* (DCEDIY, 2018). With support from the Department's What Works 'Sharing Knowledge' Fund 2022, the HVA engaged in a collaborative feasibility study on the replication, scaling, and expansion of ECHV in Ireland. This article outlines the findings and recommendations of the resulting report.

Study methodology and findings

The primary methodology was participatory action learning, involving a collective iterative process, including literature reviews, documentary evidence, structured reflective practice reviews, interviews, and consultative workshops. Existing expertise on replication, scaling, and expansion among the five HVA home visiting programmes complemented learning from the UK, US, Jamaica, Australia, and elsewhere. Existing barriers and facilitating factors in the replication and scaling-up of evidence-based programmes were identified.

Replicating, scaling up, and expanding evidenced-based programmes is complex. ECHV in Ireland developed organically in response to needs identified at local level, and currently operates in a policy and service-delivery context that does not provide the necessary infrastructure, research capacity, funding, or strategic planning support. The small scale and absence of a recognised 'sector' has resulted in a lack of clarity about home visiting and whether it is a programme, a service, or both. Home visitors' unique skill set and role are undervalued in terms of pay, terms, and conditions. They are not explicitly differentiated from other professions and functions working with parents from pregnancy to school age.

In order for sustainable, high-quality, evidence-based home visiting to reach a significant population of children and families, a strategically funded approach is required with integrated, top-down and bottom-up, national and local-level infrastructure. A national approach to funding, research, evidence, and quality was highlighted as essential in creating the context to enable viable home visiting at scale.

With only 1% of the current eligible child population receiving home visits, the following strategic fundamentals were identified:

» Ensure the sustainability of existing services and learn from real-time data-gathering to inform future delivery and expansion.
» Build the national and local infrastructures required to support scaling across Ireland. An integrated four-layered infrastructure connecting government departments at national level and sectors, agencies, and structures at local level is necessary to sustain and grow home visiting across Ireland.
» Support National Programme Support Structures to ensure quality, fidelity, ongoing programme development, and data collection and analysis so that home visiting remains responsive to emerging needs and a high-quality, consistent service is available no matter where you live in Ireland.
» Adopt and fund mechanisms for a real-time innovative evidence base aligned to national outcomes, which can inform budgets, policies, and delivery locally and nationally.

The full potential of ECHV in engaging and supporting all parents across the continuum of need and multiple sectors needs to be recognised. The quote below illustrates home visitors' impact on parents, particularly when families are isolated and suffering from various stresses and mental health issues:

Thank you for your support during this time. You were there in our tiny apartment and the stressful situation we were living in. You were there when I could not stop crying and feeling lonely. Thank you for the job you do. Supporting families like you do is essential in some situations, and it really does make a difference. Waiting for your weekly home visit sometimes really saved my life.

Conclusion

The current policy context in Ireland presents a unique opportunity to develop an integrated, strategic approach to ECHV. This study makes a valuable contribution to informing the upcoming national approach to home visiting as outlined in *First 5* and other national policies such as the National Model of Parent Support Services, Tusla's Parenting Strategy, the Health Service Executive's Mental Health Promotion Plan, and Sláintecare.

In particular, this study highlights important considerations for the replication and scaling-up of evidence-based ECHV programmes across Ireland. With almost 60,000 children born in Ireland each year and 12,000 born into poverty, our new social reality requires that every community in Ireland has skilled

Quote from a parent:
Thank you for your support during this time... You were there when I could not stop crying... Thank you for the job you do. Supporting families like you do really does make a difference. Waiting for your weekly home visit sometimes really saved my life.

home visitors who can deliver high-quality home-visiting experiences that enable children and parents to thrive.

Aspiring to ensure that all children and families have access to an ECHV programme from pregnancy to five years of age seems dauntingly ambitious. But by building a viable infrastructure to support the sustainable growth of ECHV incrementally over the next 10 years, it is hoped that access to such invaluable parental support could grow from its current 1% reach to 30% of the eligible population, with clear benchmarks of how to ensure the whole child population would be offered an ECHV programme.

REFERENCES

Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY, 2018) *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019–2028.* Dublin: Government publications.

Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY, 2022) *Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services.* Dublin: Government publications.

Home Visiting Alliance (HVA) (2022) Home Visiting Alliance. https://hva.ie/.

***

Following the Home Visiting Alliance Launch on 13 October 2023, the full Feasibility Study on *Scaling Up Home Visiting*, and a summary, are available on the Home Visiting Alliance Website: *Early Childhood Home Visiting in Ireland – Feasibility Study – Home Visiting Alliance* (hva.ie).

Stay and Play Sessions in the Early Years

A medium for integrating Ukrainian children and their families into communities in Ireland

The Ukrainian humanitarian crisis

In 2022 around 89.3 million people were displaced by war (UNHCR, 2023). The humanitarian crisis unfolding in Ukraine has posed significant challenges, particularly for the youngest victims of the conflict. As families fled their homes seeking refuge in neighbouring countries, the need for rapid integration and support became paramount. Ireland, responding to this global crisis, took proactive measures through the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY).

During a crisis, children are among the most vulnerable, facing significant challenges to their overall development and wellbeing. Quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) and play-based pedagogical approaches have emerged as crucial factors in meeting the developmental needs of early minds, often a ray of hope and resilience amidst adversity.

This article explores the exemplary approach taken by the Westmeath County Childcare Committee integration team's (WCCCIT) Stay and Play sessions, grounded in evidence-based practices and guided by the *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) and Síolta (CECDE, 2006) frameworks that underpin quality ECEC. It delves into the pivotal importance of early brain development and play-based educational and care methods, emphasising their role in addressing the developmental needs of children fleeing a humanitarian crisis.

In County Westmeath, despite its rural landscape and limited transportation system in some areas (Carroll et al., 2021), the community has emerged as a haven for Ukrainian families. Challenges persist, notably the trauma experienced by these children, which requires a specialised approach for their integration. Bearing this in

Helen Awhinawhi

Early Childhood and Education Lecturer, Technological University of the Shannon

Muriel Martin Flynn

Committee Manager, Westmeath County Childcare

When traumatic situations like war occur early in life, the wiring of children's neural pathways is affected negatively. In light of the current Ukrainian humanitarian crisis, this article addresses the integration of Ukrainian children (0–18 years) into the Irish community through Early Childhood Education and Care settings and after-school support programmes. Underpinned by the *Aistear* **and Síolta frameworks, Stay and Play sessions were facilitated in children's residential facilities.**

mind, Stay and Play sessions were tailored to the developmental needs of the families that were located in the county (Figures 1 and 2).
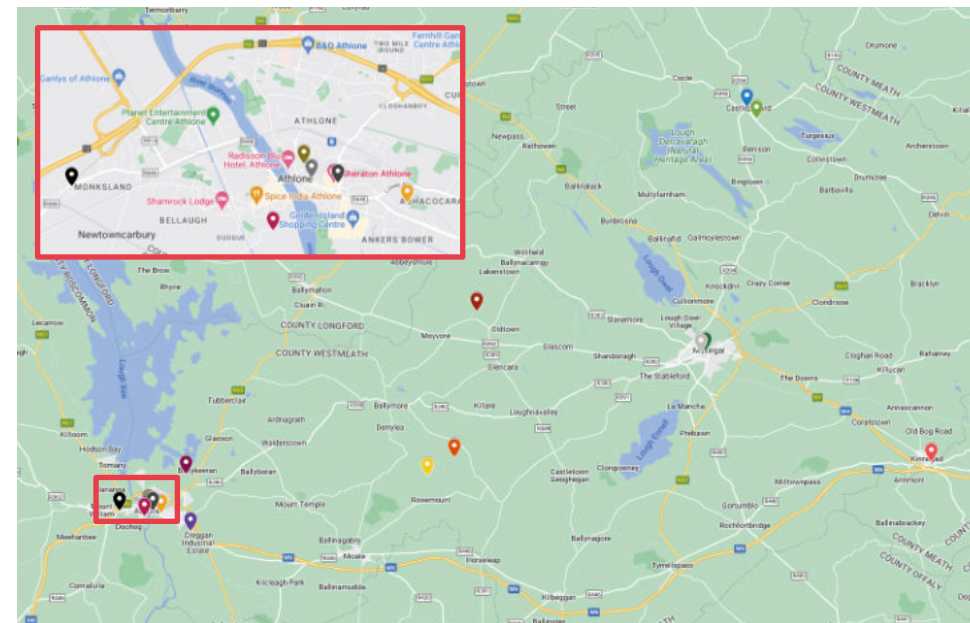
Figure 1: Map of County Westmeath

Ballykeeran Lodge - Ballykeeran	N37P6Y0		Mearescourt House B&B - Rathconrath	N91Y40H	
Bishopstown - Rosemount	N37X430		Mullingar B&B - Mullingar	N91V2FV	
Bower Hall - Athlone	N37W403		Newbury Hotel - Mullingar	N91YP9Y	
Coolatore House - Moate	N37FN70		Prince of Wales - Athlone	N37T2P0	
Court Devenish house - Athlone	N37NF77		Sheraton Hotel - Athlone	N37D953	
Creggan Court - Athlone	N37YW25		Shines Guesthouse - Athlone	N37X5N8	
Harrys, Kinnegad - Kinnegad	N91KT2F		The Callows B&B - Athlone	N37N7Y8	
Maple Court - Castlepollard	N91RX30		The Courtyard B&B - Castlepollard	N91ED68	

Figure 2: Legend for map

Play-based pedagogy and lifelong learning

Quality early brain development is the cornerstone on which a child's future is built. The early years from birth to six years are a critical period of rapid brain growth and neural connectivity. During this phase, the brain exhibits remarkable plasticity, making it highly receptive to environmental stimuli and experiences. Positive interactions, stimulating environments, and responsive

caregiving during these formative years lay the foundation for overall developmental milestones (Garner et. al., 2012).

Play-based pedagogical approaches provide a natural and effective platform for early learning. Play is not merely a recreational activity but a fundamental mechanism through which children explore, experiment, and make sense of the world around them (NCCA, 2009). Play-based learning encourages curiosity, creativity, problem-solving, and social interaction (Smith, 2019). By engaging in play, children develop essential skills such as communication, collaboration, and critical thinking, forming a robust basis for future academic achievements (Johnson, 2017).

Children fleeing humanitarian crisis, whether due to conflict, displacement, or natural disasters, often face substantial trauma and stress. Meeting their developmental needs becomes paramount in mitigating the long-term impact of these adversities. Quality ECEC rooted in play-based pedagogy acts as a healing mechanism. Through carefully designed play activities, these children can express emotions, build connections, and regain a sense of normalcy amidst chaos (Garcia & Smith, 2016).

Stay and Play

Stay and Play programmes are structured, interactive sessions designed to provide a safe, supportive, and intellectually stimulating environment for children; in this case, children facing crisis situations. These programmes, often facilitated in community centres, shelters, or temporary housing facilities, focus on interactive games and storytelling. The key components of Stay and Play initiatives lie in their ability to offer children a nurturing environment where they can explore, learn, and interact with others (Spry-Hartley, 2010).

The benefits of Stay and Play sessions for children exposed to crisis can be categorised as follows:

Psychological wellbeing: Stay and Play sessions serve as therapeutic spaces, allowing children to express their emotions through play. Engaging in creative activities helps them cope with stress and trauma, reducing anxiety levels and promoting a sense of emotional stability (Smith, 2019).

Social interaction and communication: Through interactive play, children develop essential social skills. Engaging with peers and adults in a supportive environment enhances their ability to communicate effectively, thereby building self-confidence and a sense of belonging (White, 2012).

Cognitive/intellectual development: Stay and Play activates and stimulates cognitive growth by encouraging problem-solving, creativity, and critical

Through carefully designed play activities, children can express emotions, build connections, and regain a sense of normalcy amidst chaos (Garcia & Smith, 2016).

thinking. Engaging in puzzles, games, and artistic endeavours enhances children's cognitive abilities, laying a strong foundation for future learning (Brown & Lee, 2018).

Language acquisition: For children facing language barriers due to displacement, Stay and Play programmes provide opportunities for language acquisition. Through storytelling and conversational play, children develop language skills that help their integration into new environments (Johnson, 2016).

Emotional expression and regulation: Play-based activities offer a non-verbal platform for children to express their emotions. By engaging in creative expression, they learn to regulate their emotions, leading to improved emotional intelligence and resilience (Garcia & Smith, 2016).

Parental involvement: Stay and Play sessions often involve parents and caregivers, fostering positive parent–child interactions. These interactions promote a supportive family environment, essential for the child's emotional and psychological stability (Roberts & Martinez, 2015).

Play-based pedagogy and community engagement: This approach not only engaged the children but also actively involved parents, creating meaningful interactions that fostered a sense of belonging and community. The collaborative efforts between parents, children, the facility management teams, and the integration team proved instrumental in nurturing a supportive environment (see Figure 3).
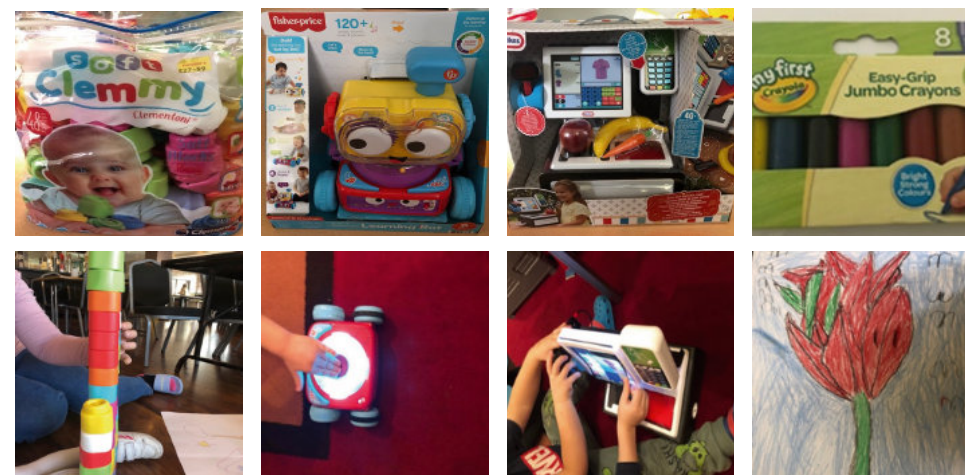
Figure 3: Documenting the children's learning in pictures

Outcomes and future implications

The integration of Ukrainian children and their families into the County Westmeath integrations programme showcased the transformative power of play-based learning. By combining safe and stimulating play activities, encouraging parental involvement, and meticulously selecting educational resources, the session provided a conducive environment for positive integration. The outcomes of this initiative are promising, illuminating a path for future integration endeavours.

These sessions acted as a bridge connecting young minds with broader Irish society, fostering understanding, empathy, and unity. Stay and Play sessions have become beacons of hope, reducing inequality and integrating children and their families into their communities in Ireland.

By recognising these children's unique needs and addressing them through evidence-based, play-oriented interventions, the DCEDIY, through WCCCIT, not only facilitated education and care experiences but also sowed the seeds of understanding, empathy, and unity in the community. As this initiative continues to flourish, it illuminates a path towards a harmonious and inclusive society, where every child, regardless of their background, is positively supported with quality ECEC experiences in which to thrive.

REFERENCES

Brown, A. and Lee, J. (2018) Play and Child Development, 4th edn. Routledge.

Carroll, P., Benevenuto, R., and Caulfield, B. (2021) 'Identifying hotspots of transport disadvantage and car dependency in rural Ireland', Transport Policy, 101, 46–56.

Center on the Developing Child (2022) The Science of Early Childhood Development. Harvard University. https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/inbrief-science-of-ecd/.

Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) (2006) Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education. Dublin: CECDE.

Garcia, N. and Smith, J. (2016) 'Play therapy for preschool children', Journal of Counselling & Development, 94(2), 143–151.

Garner, A.S.; Shonkoff, J.P; Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health; Committee on Early Childhood, Adoption, and Dependent Care; Section on Developmental and Behavioural Pediatrics; et al. (2012) 'Early childhood adversity, toxic stress, and the role of the pediatrician: Translating developmental science into lifelong health', Pediatrics, 129(1), pp.e224–e231. DOI: 10.1542/peds.2011-2662

Johnson, E.K. (2016) 'Constructing a proto-lexicon: An integrative view of infant language development', Annual Review of Linguistics, 2, 391–412.

Johnson, K. (2017) An Introduction to Foreign Language Learning and Teaching. Routledge.

White, R.E. (2012) The Power of Play: A Research Summary on Play and Learning. Minnesota Children's Museum. https://mcm.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/MCMResearchSummary1.pdf.

Roberts, J. and Martinez, A. (2015) Supporting Positive Parent-Child Relationships. Child Welfare Information Gateway. www.childwelfare.gov/.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2009) Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework. National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education. Dublin: CECDE.

Smith, P.K. (2019) 'Play in children's development, health, and well-being', Pediatrics, 143(1), e20183348.

Spry-Hartley, M. (2010) 'Family experiences with Stay and Play: An early child development program'. Doctoral dissertation, University of Lethbridge, Alberta.

UNESCO (2019) Inclusive Early Childhood Education: A Global Review. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000370637.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2023) The UN Refugee Agency United Nations Global Trend Reports on Refugees. Geneva: UNHCR. www.unhcr.org/global-trends.

Walker, S.P., Wachs, T.D., Grantham-McGregor, S., Black, M.M., Nelson, C.A., Huffman, S.L., Baker-Henningham, H., Chang, S.M., Hamadani, J.D., Lozoff, B., and Gardner, J.M.M. (2011) 'Inequality in early childhood: Risk and protective factors for early child development', The Lancet, 378(9799), pp. 1325–1338.

✱✱✱

Capturing the Joy of Learning - This image showcases a toddler deeply engaged in assembling a jigsaw puzzle with a playful cartoon mouse motif. Jigsaw puzzles are more than just fun; they are a gateway to enhancing cognitive skills, improving problem-solving abilities, and fostering hand-eye coordination in young children.

My Place to Play

An interagency response to addressing the needs of young children living in emergency accommodation

This community action research explores an interagency response to supporting parents living in emergency accommodation to provide a safe, playful, developmentally appropriate environment for their babies and young children. Research highlights the importance of parental involvement if their children are to thrive in education and life. This work and its findings show the positive effects of interagency working at local, regional, and national level to improve outcomes for children and families.

Shingirirayi Mabika

Research Intern, Early Learning Initiative, National College of Ireland

Marion Byrne

ABC 0–2 Programme Senior Specialist, Early Learning Initiative, National College of Ireland

Lána Cummins

National Assistant Director, Early Learning Initiative, National College of Ireland

Introduction

Homelessness, war and displacement, and international protection have become familiar terms in our media outlets. Access to adequate housing dominates the needs of those experiencing these situations in Ireland. But there is little focus on the impact on the social-emotional, communication, play, and physical development of young children living in such precarious circumstances. The social infrastructures designed for families in these circumstances can also be difficult to navigate for professionals seeking to support families.

My Place to Play is an evidence-based programme for professionals and parents to reimagine play opportunities for young children aged 0–3 years living in confined conditions. It provides a basis for interagency collaboration for professionals at local and national level to work across organisational strategies towards common objectives and government policy goals. Community action research harnesses the power of participant voices by ensuring that the needs of families, children, and professionals are central to future iterations of the programme.

My Place to Play

My Place to Play was created to enhance the learning and physical development of infants living in homelessness. Due to lack of space and parental stress because of homelessness, Area-Based Childhood (ABC) programmes in Dublin City North were concerned that there were few opportunities for infants to enhance their physical and social development through play, which is a fundamental pillar for healthy development and learning (DCYA, 2014; ELI, 2020). Literature both nationally and internationally highlights how children in precarious living conditions are at risk for inadequate play opportunities (Raghallaigh et al., 2019; Brents, 2020; Chen & Knoll, 2022).

Through these observations, Marion Byrne developed a play mat as part of her research to create a play space for infants that aligns with best practice and national early-years policy. Her research highlighted that even just 15 minutes a day for play can enhance infants' physical and social development (Byrne, 2018). A mobile play mat filled with evidence-based play resources was developed to provide a space for families to enhance parent–child interactions, prioritise play, and promote physical development through 'tummy time'. The resources are all linked to *Aistear*, as the core components enhance children's well-being, identity, and belonging (NCCA, 2009).

A mobile play mat, filled with evidence-based play resources, was developed to provide a space for families to enhance parent–child interactions, prioritise play, and promote physical development through 'tummy time'.

Local innovation to national mainstream

The programme soon drew attention from Dublin City North's Children and Young People Services Committee (CYPSC). ABC programmes from the area came together to pool resources, use Healthy Ireland funding, and support from CYPSC to create briefing seminars for professionals to implement My Place to Play and to continuously evaluate the materials provided to families.

The combined expertise of the ABC programmes and engagement of 220 families and practitioners in the programme in 2018–2019 led to a project framework that garnered support from Prevention, Partnership and Family Support (PPFS) and CYPSC national offices in Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. Through the programme, it was evident that My Place to Play demanded capacity to influence change in practices, understanding, and the conditions of practice (Kemmis, 2009) and a collaborative effort in all stages of planning and implementing the programme.

An interagency National Implementation Group was established with representatives from International Protection Accommodation Services in the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY); Tusla Homeless Liaison; PPFS; CYPSC national and local offices; and the Early Learning Initiative at National College of Ireland. With funding from the Department of Justice and support from the Katherine Howard Foundation,

Oakfield Trust, and the Children's Rights Alliance, a further 248 families living in international protection and 52 practitioners engaged in 2020.

By 2022, an additional 1,375 families and 177 practitioners were engaged to provide support to families fleeing the Ukrainian crisis and living in international protection. The number engaged was a direct result of intense collaboration at national and local level where the DCEDIY provided funding to support the National Implementation Group to work with City and County Childcare Committees and other local infrastructures, such as Family Resource Centres, to reach as many families as possible who were entering Ireland at unprecedented levels.

Community action research

Community action research is used with this programme to harness the capacity to influence change in practices, understanding, and the conditions of practice (Kemmis, 2009). The approach ensures that participant feedback is incorporated into future iterations of the programme in order to be responsive to emerging needs.

As a result of this method, satisfaction rates are over 90% for both practitioners and parents. Parents said they found the My Place to Play information helpful, as they learned about their child's development and learning and how play can support parent–child bonding. Professional feedback highlights how My Place to Play gave parents more understanding of and opportunities to play. For their professional practice, they highlighted that they were more equipped to encourage and understand the importance of play time and to build relationships with parents. One social worker said:

> It gave me an opportunity to build my relationship with mum from the start and do something positive and beneficial for her and the children together. In child protection work, families do not always see us as supportive from the start, and I feel mum was less defensive as a result of being able to provide this outlet for her and her child.

The findings of the interagency work highlighted how working collaboratively had positive outcomes for families and children and allowed for positive working relationships for future projects.

Combining the data from all cohorts, we continue to find that using community action research to harness the expertise of a range of stakeholders has the powerful effect of breaking silos to meet the needs of families who need support most.

My Place to Play is an evidence-based programme for professionals and parents to reimagine play opportunities for young children aged 0–3 years living in confined conditions.

Conclusion

While we continue to promote the importance of play and parent–child interactions through My Place to Play, the overall objective is to ensure that families are strong and healthy in adversity. The programme highlights how community action research can be used as a positive approach to harness complex social infrastructures. Working collaboratively with interagency partners at local and national level ensures that parents have access to supports that are vital to ensuring their children can thrive. Engaging all stakeholders in My Place to Play requires the expertise at all levels and committed personnel to driving change that uses and drives national policy. Only by working together in this way can long-term change be realised for some of our most marginalised children.

REFERENCES

Brents, H. (2020) 'Children and war', *International Review of the Red Cross*, 101(911). 459–479. DOI: 10.1017/S1816383120000120

Byrne, M. (2018) 'To assess the impact of a home-based play intervention for infants as perceived by parents in the docklands'. Undergraduate thesis, National College of Ireland, Dublin.

Chen, S. and Knoll, M. (2022) 'Understanding spatial characteristics of refugee accommodations associated with refugee children's physical activity in microenvironments: Six case studies in Berlin', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(13), 7756. DOI: 10.3390/ijerph19137756

Early Learning Initiative (ELI) (2020) *ELI Annual Report 2019–2020.* Dublin: National College of Ireland.

Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) (2014) *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014–2020.* Dublin: Stationery Office.

Kemmis, S. (2009) 'Action research as a practice-based practice', *Educational Action Research*, 17(3), 463–474. DOI: 10.1080/09650790903093284

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2009) *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework.* Dublin: NCCA.

Raghallaigh, M., Smith, K., and Scholtz, J. (2019) *Safe Haven: The Needs of Refugee Children Arriving in Ireland through the Irish Refugee Protection Programme: An Exploratory Study.* Dublin: Children's Rights Alliance.

Understanding Play–Based Pedagogy in the Irish Infant Classroom

Introduction

Play has been accredited in key government documents as an efficient, developmentally appropriate method for early childhood education in Ireland (NCCA, 2009; DES, 2011). *Aistear*, the early childhood curriculum framework, rolled out implementation guidelines for early childhood teachers in 2009, while the mandatory implementation of the literacy and numeracy strategy for learning and life for primary school was unveiled in 2011 (DES, 2011).

Play cannot be isolated from the main curriculum. Ultimately it helps children develop the knowledge and skills necessary for successful citizenship. Wood (2004) described the pedagogy of play as a technique wherein teachers develop play-based activities and create play-learning classrooms and the pedagogical skills and approaches to facilitate, support, and improve learning and teaching through play. Teachers' understandings clearly influence the relationships they form with children in their classrooms, and they are more likely to provide emotional security when they are 'responsive, playful and sensitive to children's emotional needs' (Whitebread, 2012, p.33).

Teaching and play

To facilitate a play-based pedagogy, it is essential for teachers to attain theoretical awareness of what play is. Some commentators have argued that for play to promote high-quality learning, it should be prepared well in advance and carefully considered (Broadhead, 2004; Wood, 2004; Wood and Attfield, 2005). The *Aistear* User Guide (NCCA, 2009, pp. 17–18) shows an example where infant teachers are urged to exercise 'circle of play' activities for one hour each day. This phase of play is

Dr Linda Davern

Lecturer, Technological University of the Shannon

There is growing interest in the play-based pedagogy known as *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) in the infant classroom. To facilitate a play-based pedagogy, it is essential for teachers to attain theoretical awareness of what play is and how it helps children learn and develop. This article provides an overview of this subject and outlines the obstacles to successful implementation of play-based pedagogy in infant classes in Ireland.

worthwhile, as children engage in self-directed discovery and forge learning links in a meaningful setting (Wood, 2004; NCCA, 2009).

By adopting this approach, teachers have occasion to allocate time for play-based activities through *Aistear* and to encourage children's play and eventual development and learning (Broadhead, 2004). Frost et al.'s (2008) work in these areas has ring-fenced a specific function in the creation of education theories, especially in how best to devise instructional strategies founded on appreciating how children learn. Nonetheless, general understandings of learning have been characteristically linked with a formal schooling environment, either eradicating or reducing the effect of learning outlets even before children enter a school.

Teachers of young children play a critical role in helping them develop self-regulation skills. But because early childhood is also an important period of imaginative play (Singer & Singer, 1990), wherein children think about make-believe situations more than at any other time of their lives, the formulation of balanced self-regulation largely depends on the characteristics of exterior stimuli. Like Bronfenbrenner (1979), Mead (1934) identified make-believe play as one of the prime stimuli of human development, while Bronson (2001) identified self-regulation as the highest accomplishment of early childhood.

Development in context

Mead (1934) identified make-believe play as one of the prime stimuli of human development, while Bronson (2001) identified self-regulation as the highest accomplishment of early childhood.

When children are engaged in any form of play, whether make-believe, pretend play, or listening to stories offered in a playful way, they become responsive to learning concepts and developing relationships (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2008). Children's thinking is embedded in a context that has meaning for them, whereas to a great extent school is 'disembedded' (Moyles, 2001). Activities such as 'filling in the blanks', worksheets, and 'colouring in' are often removed from meaning and purpose for the child and consequently make learning more complex (ibid.). Moreover, worksheets 'encourage obedience, passivity, and the mechanical application of techniques' (Kamii, 1985, p.120). Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) provides a framework that places individual development in the context where it takes place. Children thus develop not in isolation but through relationships and society.

Understandings are closely related to teacher approaches to dealing with barriers in their professional lives, their well-being, how they reform the student learning environment, and how they inspire student motivation and accomplishment. Research suggests that teacher behaviour in the classroom is inspired and shaped by their understandings (Rogers & Evans, 2008).

Infant teachers are particularly mindful of the centrality of play to children's development. As there is a direct correlation between teacher understandings

and practices, it is imperative that infant teachers establish their priorities for children before entering a class. Through play interactions, teachers can validate and challenge children's senses and thoughts, allowing them to focus on awareness, interactions, and intentions (Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008). To this end, to support additional learning, teachers must observe what children are doing, support their efforts, and become more thoughtfully involved.

Evidence indicates that teachers' understanding shapes their judgements more organically than abstract conceptualisations of child development and learning (Spodek, 1987). Infant teachers who have staunch convictions about basic-skill practices (i.e., highly structured teacher-directed education) are less inclined to support child-centred practices, while infant teachers who support a child-centred curriculum promote child autonomy and self-respect (Stipek and Byler, 1997).

Studies confirm that infant teachers generally adhere to belief systems and approaches that align with the developmentally appropriate practices that satisfy children's cognitive and age requirements (Stipek & Byler, 1997; Buchanan et al., 1998; Vartuli, 1999). This may be an indication of the positive appeal of child-centred practices and the residual effects of developmentally appropriate practice across numerous early childhood training programmes (Vartuli, 1999).

Findings

The works of Mead and Bronfenbrenner comprised the theoretical frame of reference for the present author's research. The study used a qualitative design, whose data sources included individual interviews, two-phase classroom observations, and before-and-after focus groups. Building on the initial findings, training sessions were put in place as continuous professional development (CPD). Data was analysed via content analysis and a constant-comparison approach.

There are a number of obstacles to successful implementation of play-based pedagogy in infant classes: time restrictions, large class sizes, shortage of space, and lack of continuing professional development (Gray & Ryan, 2016). Findings from the present study confirmed that regardless of the current political support of a play-based approach, play receives only tangential positioning in infant classes in primary school classrooms in Ireland; teachers still identify formal didactic teaching as the proper work of the day (ibid.).

Findings showed that teachers constructed a concept of 'play' in the infant classroom which emphasised the instrumental significance rather than the intrinsic significance of play. Teacher participants identified barriers to inclusively incorporating *Aistear* into the infant classroom. They considered a

Regardless of the current political support of a play-based approach, play receives only tangential positioning in infant classes in primary school classrooms in Ireland; teachers still identify formal didactic teaching as the proper work of the day.

formal didactic attitude essential for certain aspects of teaching, and they maintained that the degree of *Aistear* support in their school environment determined the efficacy of infant play-based pedagogy.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Broadhead, P. (2004) *Early Years Play and Learning: Developing Social Skills and Cooperation*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979) *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bronson, M.B. (2001) *Self-Regulation in Early Childhood: Nature and Nurture.* New York: Guilford Press.

Buchanan, T.K., Burts, D.C., Bidner, J., White, V. Y., and Charlesworth, R. (1998) 'Predictors of the developmental appropriateness of the beliefs and practices of first, second and third grade teachers', *Early Childhood Research Quarterly,* 13(3), 459–483.

Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2011) *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life. The national strategy to improve literacy and numeracy among children and young people.* Dublin: DES.

Frost, J.L., Wortham, S., and Reifel, S. (2008) *Play and Child Development,* 3rd ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice-Hall.

Gray, C. and Ryan, A. (2016) ' *Aistear* vis-a-vis the primary curriculum: The experiences of early years teachers in Ireland', *International Journal of Early Years Education,* 24(2). DOI: 10.1080/09669760.2016.1155973

Hirsh-Pasek, K., Golinkoff, R.M., and Eyer, D. (2008) *Einstein Never Used Flash Cards: How Our Children Really Learn – and Why They Need to Play More and Memorize Less.* Emmaus, PA: Rodale Press.

Kamii, C. (1985) *Young Children Reinvent Arithmetic: Implications of Piaget's Theory.* Columbia University, New York: Teachers College Press.

Mead, G.H. (1934) *Mind, Self, and Society.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Moyles, J. (2001) 'Just for fun: The child as active learner and meaning maker'. In: J. Collins, K. Insley, and J. Soler (Eds.) *Developing Pedagogy: Researching Practice,* pp. 4–10). London: Paul Chapman Publishing.

Moyles, J. (Ed.) (2012) *Thinking about Play: Developing a Reflective Approach.* Maidenhead: Open University Press.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2009) *Aistear*: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework. Dublin: NCCA.

Rogers, S. and Evans, J. (2008) *Inside Role Play in Early Childhood Education: Researching Young Children's Perspectives.* London: Routledge.

Samuelsson, I.P. and Carlsson, M.A. (2008) 'The playing learning child: Towards a pedagogy of early childhood', *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 52(6), 623–641.

Singer, D.G., and Singer, J.L. (1990) *The House of Make Believe.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Spodek, B. (1987) 'Thought processes underlying preschool teachers' classroom decisions', *Early Child Development and Care*, 29(2), 197–208.

Stipek, D.J. and Byler, P. (1997) 'Early childhood education teachers: Do they practice what they preach?', *Early Childhood Research Quarterly,* 12(3), 305–325.

Vartuli, S. (1999) 'How early childhood teacher beliefs vary across grade level', *Early Childhood Research Quarterly,* 14(4), 489–514.

Whitebread, D. (2012) *Developmental Psychology and Early Childhood Education.* London: Sage.

Wood, E. (2004) 'Developing a pedagogy of play for the 21st Century'. In: A. Anning, J. Cullen, and M. Fleer (Eds.) E*arly Childhood Education: Society and Culture.* London: Sage.

Wood, E. and Attfield, J. (2005) *Play, Learning and the Early Childhood Curriculum,* 2nd ed. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.

✱✱✱

World Children's Day 2023

"The playing adult steps sideward into another reality; the playing child advances forward to new stages of mastery."

Erik H. Erikson

World Children's Day was first established in 1954 and is celebrated on 20 November each year to promote international togetherness, awareness among children worldwide, and improvement of children's welfare.

LINC-ing the Gap between Aspirations and Realities of CPD in the Early Years Sector

The influence of learning on educators' perceptions and practices of inclusion

Introduction

The Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years (LINC) programme was introduced as part of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) in 2016 to support children's inclusion and meaningful participation in early childhood education and care (ECEC). LINC would support educators to develop the knowledge and skills required to lead inclusive practice and pedagogy in early years settings. On completion, learners are awarded a level 6 certificate which qualifies them as a room leader who can take on the leadership role of inclusion coordinator (INCO) in their setting.

This article, based on a doctoral research study, considers the influence of engaging with the LINC programme on educators' perceptions and practices of inclusion. It uses a hermeneutic lens acknowledging the world of those working in the early years sector.

Heidegger (1929) wrote that a phenomenon can only be truly understood through *Dasein* ('being' or 'existence'). He presented *Dasein* as related to individuals and their different situations. His work underpins the methodology for this study, which emphasises the social dimensions of *Dasein*: how one perceives oneself in society, and how this self-perception affects the phenomenon. Heidegger also considered the importance of moods and the potential of our emotions to influence life experiences. This application of understanding *Dasein* is particularly relevant to the study of educators' experiences in the context of their professions (Skehill, 2022).

Heidegger's philosophy aligns with Guskey's (2002) levels of evaluation in thinking about CPD in education and the
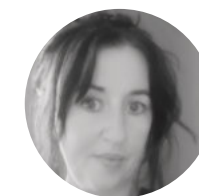
Dr Sharon Skehill

Early Childhood Researcher and Educator, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

The paper is drawn from a PhD study on Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years (LINC) and how engagement in this continuing professional development (CPD) programme influences early years educators' perceptions and practices of inclusion. It considers the contextual reality of the sector and addresses challenges to inclusive practice. It looks at Guskey's (2002) evaluation of CPD in education and how learning from such programmes can be adapted and considered in relation to child voice and participation in settings and schools.

factors that influence participants' reactions to and learning from a programme. Owing to the fragmented nature of ECEC qualifications and course content (DCEDIY, 2021; Nutbrown, 2021), CPD has the potential to develop professional practice and provide a mark of learner achievement. Indeed, participation in CPD is the most consistent indicator of quality in child development and learning (OECD, 2019). It is also linked to staff retention by enhancing professional identity and improving career satisfaction. But such learning experiences must be incentivised and linked to pay and conditions.

Mooney-Simmie and Murphy (2021) consider the professional role of educators in Ireland from a feminist perspective, with competing entities of power and education underpinning policy. They highlight challenges for the predominantly female workforce engaging in CPD: lack of time, accessibility, and no wage increase for participation. While LINC offers the flexibility of blended learning and the professional title of INCO on completion, Mooney-Simmie and Murphy criticise such CPD as benefiting providers rather than learners, perpetuating the potential for exploitation in a childcare business model.

Making a difference

There are renewed government commitments to improving quality in ECEC through formal and informal CPD initiatives, which are included alongside aspirations for developing the terms and conditions of the educator role (DCEDIY, 2021). In considering engagement with LINC in this context, Guskey (2002) advises that one must plan backward – 'starting where you want to end and then working back' (p.50). Can LINC achieve the learning outcome of empowering INCOs to enhance the inclusion of all children?

Braun and Clarke (2022) ask the important 'so what?' question in qualitative research: What can one take from this study that might make a difference to practice and policy? First and foremost is the recognition that there are different understandings and perceptions of inclusion that depend on educators' perspectives and experiences (Gadamer, 2004). Through their stories as educators, and in the broader societal context as parents, learners, colleagues, and carers, they reveal how their personal stories from these different biographical lenses (Brookfield, 2017) influenced their engagement with and interpretation of the learning from LINC.

The findings from this study show features of an inclusive culture where the pedagogical approach is underpinned by respectful regard for the rights of each child. Respectful relationships are built through a nurturing pedagogy in an inclusive environment. This child-centred approach is evident in the various interpretations of inclusion, which are not necessarily led by professional knowledge but rather a kindness that underpins pedagogy. The LINC

Respectful relationships are built through a nurturing pedagogy in an inclusive environment.

programme renewed participants' empathy, creating a shift in perspective: they realised the importance of their role in facilitating participation in the group. Inclusive environments and considered resources and routines all indicated the positive impact of learning from LINC during field visits.

As well as influencing how participants engaged with children in a more nurturing way, LINC also helped them work collaboratively with parents. One educator said LINC 'made me more aware' of communicating effectively and empathically with parents on supporting children's belonging in the setting. After the programme, participants articulated a renewed awareness of the need for relational pedagogy to guide their work with families as well as children. There was an evident shift towards reflective practice in the conversations and considerations of new ideas in the module content.

The findings show how inclusion is facilitated by seeking out and developing positive relationships with important people in the child's life. Effective communication, and the confidence to initiate it, are presented as key responsibilities of the educator in supporting participation. While there were positive examples of collaboration with early years specialists and early intervention teams, there was minimal evidence of collaboration with local primary schools to support transitions from one setting to another, despite the emphasis on this in the LINC programme content.

Findings indicate that the professional identity of leaders in early years settings directly influences the development of an inclusive culture.

Leadership on inclusion

Findings indicate that the professional identity of leaders in early years settings directly influences the development of an inclusive culture. Personal recognition of the importance of their role is overshadowed by frustration at having to assert their professional worth. Engagement with LINC illustrated leaders' capacity to lead and implement change, and consequently the challenges of doing so, to promote the inclusion of all children.

A leadership role in any organisation means taking responsibility for guiding the team and setting standards of practice. Leaders in early years settings need to have the qualifications, knowledge base, and skills to take on this role (Skehill, 2021). LINC graduates qualify with the title of inclusion coordinator (INCO) but not necessarily with the 'organisational support and change' (Guskey, 2002, p.50) to make this work in settings. While the potential for positive change and development is evidenced through participants' stories, the practicality of leading inclusion is dependent on one's role in the setting and on one's engagement with the CPD.

Respondents from the AIM review (DCYA, 2019) indicated similar challenges in how the learning from LINC could contribute to an inclusive culture. On a practical level, assuming one has acquired new knowledge about inclusive

practice, there is the challenge of finding time and space in the daily routine to share this learning with the team. This is further complicated when the INCO is not in a leadership position and lacks supporting resources. Participants also worried about how the additional duties of INCO could be incorporated with existing responsibilities as an educator.

The contextual reality of precarious funding, staff shortages, inconsistent quality, inspection processes, and lack of value in the sector (Urban, 2022) is balancing against educators' enthusiasm for new learning, feeling valued by children and families, and knowing the difference one might make in their lives. Amidst change with the new workforce plan for the sector (DCEDIY, 2021), the findings support previous research (Oke et al., 2019) showing the impact of this reality on educators and the children they work with.

A sector led from within

In view of Guskey's (2002) criteria for effective CPD experiences, this study concurs with the initial review of the AIM (DCYA, 2019), which illustrates how LINC has influenced practice in settings. In response to challenges identified, the programme might be extended to include all educators to bridge any gap in qualifications and knowledge, adapting the format as appropriate and relevant to staff needs. Blanchard et al. (2018) argue for purposeful CPD as relevant to the professional role of adults working with children, with consideration of qualification and knowledge to support understanding of differing perspectives of diversity, inclusion, and equity in the setting.

While this is the rationale for the additional CPD element of LINC, extending access to all educators rather than limiting it to the INCO would facilitate 'cascading of learning' to the team in line with the responsibilities of the role. There might be consideration of shared learning across initial teacher education in modules pertaining to inclusion, children's rights, playful pedagogies, supporting transitions, and leading learning. As well as the value of modular content, a collegial regard between early years educators and primary teachers would lay a foundation for collaboration and alignment to support the inclusion of all.

There is no doubt of the quality of learning in the LINC programme, and its worth is more than a sticking plaster on a damaged sector. We need a sector led from within, where confident, skilful, knowledgeable educators can take on leadership roles to support children's meaningful participation. Ironically, the solution lies in embracing inclusion of the early years sector within the education continuum, to establish and affirm the professional role of educators.

There is no doubt of the quality of learning in the LINC programme, and its worth is more than a sticking plaster on a damaged sector.

REFERENCES

Blanchard, S.B., King, E., Van Schagen, A., Roach Scott, M., Crosby, D., and Beasley, J. (2018) 'Diversity, inclusion, equity, and social justice: How anti-bias content and self-reflection support early childhood preservice teacher consciousness', *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, 39(4), 346–363. DOI:10.1080/10901027.2017.1408722

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2022) *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide*. London: Sage.

Brookfield, S. (2017) *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) (2019) *An End of Year One Review of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)*. Dublin: Government publications. https://aim.gov.ie/app/uploads/2021/05/AIM-end-of-year-one-review.pdf.

Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) (2021) 'Nurturing skills: The workforce plan for early learning and care and school-age childcare, 2022–2028'. Dublin: DCEDIY. www.gov.ie/en/publication/97056-nurturing-skills-the-workforce-plan-for-early-learning-and-care-elc-and-school-age-childcare-sac-2022-2028/.

Gadamer, H.G. (2004) *Truth and Method*. New York: Continuum Publishing.

Guskey, T.R. (2002) 'Does it make a difference? Evaluating professional development', *Educational Leadership*, 59(6), 45–51.

Heidegger, M. (1929, repr. 1962) *Being and Time,* New York: Harper and Row.

Mooney-Simmie, G. and Murphy, D. (2021) ' Professionalisation of early childhood education and care practitioners: Working conditions in Ireland', *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 1–15. DOI: 10.1177/1463949121010187

Nutbrown, C. (2021) 'Early childhood educators' qualifications: A framework for change', *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 29(3), 236–249, DOI: 10.1080/09669760.2021.1892601

Oke, O., Butler, J.E., and O'Neill, C. (2019) 'Choose your words wisely: Descriptions of a professional early childhood practitioner', *The Qualitative Report*, 24(12), 3047–3060. https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol24/iss12/8 .

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2019) *Providing quality early childhood education and care: Results from the Starting Strong survey 2018*. Paris: OECD.

Skehill, S. (2021) 'Leadership in the early learning and care setting'. In: E. Ring, L. O'Sullivan, M. Ryan, and P. Daly (Eds.) *Leading Inclusion from the Inside Out: A Handbook for Parents and Early Childhood Teachers in Early Learning and Care, Primary and Special School Settings,* pp. 229–254. Oxford: Peter Lang.

Skehill, S. (2022) 'Fusing the horizons between aspirations of continuing professional development and the realities of educators' experiences in practice: Interpretative hermeneutic phenomenology in early childhood education', *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, 22(1). DOI: 10.1080/20797222.2022.2157221

Urban, M. (2022). 'A thousand and one nights: New stories for early childhood education and care'. In: B. Mooney (Ed.) *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2022*. Dublin: Education Matters. https://irelandseducationyearbook.ie/downloads/IEYB2022/YB2022-Early-Childhood-01.pdf.

Critical Hope: Meaningful Inclusion through the Primary School Curriculum Framework

Possibilities and practicalities

Introduction

The challenges for children as they transition from a play-based curriculum in early childhood to a subject-laden curriculum in primary school are well documented (e.g., Gray & Ryan, 2016). Following calls to align the infant curriculum in primary school more closely with *Aistear*, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, the newly published Primary Curriculum Framework (DoE, 2023) can potentially transform infant pedagogy in primary schools (Moloney, in press).

This article, which focuses on children with additional needs, examines the Primary Curriculum Framework from an ecological stance (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), discussing possibilities and practicalities in its implementation.

Microsystem: Children at the centre of learning

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which has informed much policy governing inclusive education policy and practice, permeates the Primary Curriculum Framework. In keeping with Article 12, and consistent with *Aistear*, the framework reinforces the need to value the voices of all children. Further aligning with *Aistear*, the child's right to play (Article 31) is embedded in the curriculum specifications for stages 1 and 2: Junior Infants to Second Class.

Consistent with *Aistear*, the framework places children at the centre of their learning, providing for a holistic approach to their education (DoE, 2023, p.3). Equally, the principle *Inclusive Education and Diversity* notes that inclusive education 'provides for equity of opportunity

Mary Moloney

Lecturer in Early Childhood and Inclusive Education, Mary Immaculate College

Sarah O'Leary

Researcher and Lecturer in Inclusive Education, Mary Immaculate College

This paper, which focuses on children with additional needs, examines the recently published Primary Curriculum Framework from an ecological stance, discussing possibilities and practicalities in its implementation.

and participation in children's learning' and 'celebrates diversity and responds to the uniqueness of every child' (ibid., p.6).

Since each child's learning journey is different, curriculum areas recognise their ages and stages of development. Emphasising teacher agency, the framework affords 'greater choice in preparing for and facilitating rich learning experiences through playful and engaging approaches' (ibid., p.16). Unlike the current prescriptive curriculum, the framework serves as a scaffold to help teachers develop a curriculum for all children.

Microsystem: The agentic teacher

At micro-classroom level, the agentic teacher is indispensable, making 'professional and informed decisions in response to the children's learning needs', ensuring an inclusive curriculum and pedagogy for all (DoE, 2023, p.5). Pedagogy, a core principle underpinning the framework, calls upon the agentic teacher to:

> use appropriate and evidence-based pedagogical approaches and strategies to foster children's engagement, ownership, and challenge . . . [that] connect with children's life experience, circumstances, strengths, and interests. (p.6)

This pedagogical responsibility creates endless possibilities for the agentic teacher to reform infant pedagogy: to become pedagogical leaders and agents of change, moving away from the much-used, discrete *Aistear hour*, to embedding play and integrated learning in their teaching. Certainly, Lynch (2017) argues that instances of good practice typically rely on individual pedagogical leaders recognising their role as 'an important agent of change' (p.61).

The Teaching Council (2020) describes agency as a teacher's understanding of their 'status as autonomous professionals' (p.3) and their capacity to make decisions based on this. Both aspects of this agentic identity are discussed in terms of their relational nature. This presents agency as something a teacher does, rather than has; something that informs, and possibly transforms, every interaction and experience (Block & Betts, 2016).

The concept of agentic teacher is not new. In fact, the individual agentic teacher has effected change in Irish inclusive education, sometimes within a collaborative framework (e.g., the Access and Inclusion Model (DCYA, 2016)), sometimes acting alone (Leonard & Smyth, 2020). Certainly, the responsibility of the individual teacher is undeniable. While this presents many possibilities for inclusive education in Ireland, it unearths potential practicalities, as discussed later.

Emphasising teacher agency, the framework affords 'greater choice in preparing for and facilitating rich learning experiences through playful and engaging approaches.

Mesosystem: Relationships and partnerships

The culture of individual settings and the actions of individual teachers generally determine if children are included and supported to meaningfully engage in the curriculum (Moloney & McCarthy, 2018). The role of individual teachers in implementing inclusive theory into practice in Ireland is accepted (NCSE, 2014; DoE, 2023), as is their role in bridging the child's experiences across early childhood and primary school contexts (O'Leary & Moloney, 2020).

Caring relationships are the bedrock of quality education (ibid.). Such relationships in the school 'support and impact positively on children's engagement, motivation, and learning' (DoE, 2023, p.6). Embracing the value of caring relationships across educational contexts shows an understanding of the dynamic continuum that is the lived experience of the young child. Navigating across these contexts can be difficult for children with additional needs. Their parents or guardians are often the only constant available to them as they cope with often-tumultuous change.

The Primary Curriculum Framework recognises parents as the child's primary educator, a role first outlined in the Irish Constitution. Aligning with *Aistear*, it emphasises the importance of 'positive relationships and proactive communication between parents and schools' (ibid., p.34) to effectively support all children's holistic development. Such power-sharing partnerships are paramount to inclusive education. They allow parents to transition from wanting successful outcomes for their children towards the more holistic action of working in partnership, ensuring a more positive educational experience for their child (O'Leary & Moloney, 2020).

The role of governing bodies in such inclusive, power-sharing partnerships is also paramount. If the framework's positive impact is to outweigh the potentially challenging practicalities, it is imperative that the agentic teacher, meaningful child participation, and playful pedagogy be understood within the broader landscape of education policy in Ireland.

Macrosystem: Implications for resourcing and teacher training

The ideology underpinning the framework is commendable. Nonetheless, in the context of current class sizes, the practicality of meaningful child participation, agentic teaching, power-sharing partnerships, and so on is problematic. Class sizes in Ireland remain the highest in Europe (OECD, 2021). There is widespread agreement that for a quality education, younger children need more time and interaction with teachers (OECD, 2023). Furthermore, smaller classes may benefit children with additional needs and those from

The Primary Curriculum Framework recognises parents as the child's primary educator, a role first outlined in the Irish Constitution.

Aligning with Aistear, the Primary Curriculum Framework emphasises the importance of 'positive relationships and proactive communication between parents and schools' to effectively support all children's holistic development.

disadvantaged backgrounds (ibid.), children who may experience the most difficulty when transitioning across educational contexts (OECD, 2019).

In addition to consolidating an educational continuum for children, the framework outlines the continuum of lifelong learning for the teacher – a journey that 'begins with initial teacher education (ITE) and evolves and deepens' through reflective and collaborative practice and a commitment to continuing professional development (DoE, 2023, p.23). Critically, ITE must offer pre-service teachers opportunities to develop their agentic competence, especially with inclusive education. Likewise, practicum experiences during ITE must be premised on agentic teaching.

While the development of competencies is an accepted element of ITE, when it comes to inclusive practice, such competencies can be fostered only through experience in 'the contextual challenges and possibilities' that exist in inclusive education (Walton & Rusznyak, 2020, p.26). Providing opportunities for pre-service teachers to recognise and interact with all voices of inclusive education can increase their confidence as reflective and inclusive pedagogical leaders who can support all children. A 'critical hope' (ibid.) can thus be developed in pre-service teachers, leading to pedagogical reform during the most vital time in a child's educational journey in stages 1 and 2. It is with this same 'critical hope' that many await the impact of the framework – hopeful that it might be a catalyst for constructive action.

Conclusion

Curricular alignment across early childhood and primary school offers much hope for children and families. It places children at the centre, conceptualising their right to participation and to play, scaffolded by an agentic teacher. The Primary Curriculum Framework therefore presents endless possibilities for all children, while curricular alignment holds hope for teachers too. The framework may free teachers from the shackles of a prescriptive, subject-laden curriculum, instead fostering confidence and competence to make 'professional and informed decisions in response to the children's learning needs', thus ensuring inclusive curriculum and pedagogy (DoE, 2023, p.5).

While the curriculum framework may emerge as a catalyst for constructive action, this will take time. The training and resource implications are considerable and cannot be overlooked.

REFERENCES

Block, L. and Betts, P. (2016) 'Cultivating agentic teacher identities in the field of a teacher education program', *Brock Education Journal*, 25(2), 71–86.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979) *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Theory and Design.* Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) (2016) *Better Start Access and Inclusion Model.* Dublin: Government of Ireland. www.aim.gov.ie/.

Department of Education (DoE) (2023) *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools.* Dublin: DoE. www.curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/84747851-0581-431b-b4d7-dc6ee850883e/2023-Primary-Framework-ENG-screen.pdf.

Gray, C. and Ryan, A. (2016) '*Aistear* vis-à-vis the Primary Curriculum: The experiences of early years teachers in Ireland', *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 24(2), 188–205. DOI: 10.1080/09669760.2016.1155973

Leonard, N.M. and Smyth, S. (2020) 'Does training matter? Exploring teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of children with autism spectrum disorder in mainstream education in Ireland', *International Journal of Inclusive Education.* DOI: 10.1080/13603116.2020.1718221

Lynch, P. (2017) 'Integration in Ireland: Policy and practice'. In: C. O'Hanlon (Ed.) *Inclusive Education in Europe*, pp. 61–74. London: Routledge.

Moloney, M. (in press) 'Moving toward pedagogical continuity: Celebrating and learning from playful pedagogy in the Irish Early Childhood Context'. In: W. Boyd and S. Garvis (Eds.) *Exploring Pedagogical Practices for Early Childhood Education around the World.* Springer.

Moloney, M. and McCarthy, E. (2018) *Intentional Leadership for Effective Inclusion in Early Childhood Education and Care: Exploring Core Themes and Strategies.* London: Routledge.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2009) *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework.* Dublin: NCCA.

National Council for Special Education (NCSE) (2014) *Inclusive Education Framework: A guide for schools on the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs.* Trim, Co. Meath: NCSE. https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/InclusiveEducationFramework_InteractiveVersion.pdf.

OECD (2019) 'Curriculum alignment and progression between early childhood education and care and primary school: A brief review and case studies', *OECD Education Working Paper no. 193.* https://one.oecd.org/document/EDU/WKP(2019)1/En/pdf.

OECD (2021) *Education at a Glance.* OECD iLibrary. Paris: OECD. www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-at-a-glance-2021_b35a14e5-en.

OECD (2023) Education at a Glance. OECD iLibrary. Paris: OECD. https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-at-a-glance-2023_e13bef63-en.

O'Leary, S. and Moloney, M. (2020) 'Choosing relationships in times of change, challenge and choice', *An Leanbh Óg*, 13, 171–186.

Teaching Council (2020) *Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education.* Maynooth, Co. Kildare: Teaching Council. www.teachingcouncil.ie/assets/uploads/2023/08/ceim-standards-for-initial-teacher-education.pdf.

Walton, E. and Rusznyak, L. (2020) 'Cumulative knowledge-building for inclusive education in initial teacher education', *European Journal of Teacher Education,* 43(1), 18–37.

Atlantic Technological University's Artist–in–Residence Programme for Students of Early Childhood Education and Care

Introduction

Atlantic Technological University (ATU) Galway and Mayo campuses were delighted to be awarded an artist in residence funded by the Arts Council for 2022–2023 to work with the students undertaking the BA programme in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). The arts project *Scéalta* (Stories, Curiosity, Engagement, Active learning, Language, Theatre, *Aistear*) was funded under the Arts Council's Young People, Children and Education (YPCE) programme, which was made available for the first time to colleges specifically providing ECEC programmes in 2022.

This article identifies the positive learning experiences for the BA programme of having an artist in residence working with the students and young children. It highlights the challenges faced and how creativity and the arts can unite communities across diverse perspectives, including social, language, cultural, and minority groups.

Creativity in ECEC

When we think of creativity and the arts in early years settings, we think of what Loris Malaguzzi describes as *the hundred languages of children* (Edwards et al., 1993). Malaguzzi suggests that children have a hundred ways to express themselves, to listen, to marvel, to discover, and to invent. According to Gardner (2011), people have the potential to develop a combination of nine separate intelligences, including musical, visual, bodily, inter- and intrapersonal intelligences.

Dr Rita Melia
Lecturer in Early Childhood Education and Care, Atlantic Technological University Galway / Mayo

Atlantic Technological University was awarded an artist-in-residence programme for 2022–2023, funded by the Arts Council, for an artist to work with students undertaking the university's BA programme in Early Childhood Education and Care. This article describes how the programme arose, the creative initiatives that took place, and the results for students, children, and everyone involved.

A recent report found that exposure to cultural and creative activities fosters civic and democratic identities and the development of social skills (European Commission, 2023). We recognise the importance of a strong focus on creativity and the arts in the degree programme in which we lecture, offering opportunities for students to be curious, creative, and playful, to think critically, and to explore their multiple languages and intelligences while studying at ATU. This was the catalyst for our application for the Arts Council's YPCE artist-in-residence programme.

The programme was extended to recognise further education programmes in ECEC in higher-education institutions in Ireland from September 2022. Our team at ATU were one of the first universities offering the BA programme to receive this prestigious award. The Arts Council's YPCE residencies support artists or arts organisations to spend an academic year in residence in a higher-education institution in Ireland. The aim is to provide opportunities for artists to develop their skills and experience in education settings, and to develop their artistic work in a collaborative and supportive environment. The artist-in-residence programme also provides opportunities for teaching staff to engage with artists in creating bespoke creative initiatives with and for the students.

Artist in residence

The BA team at ATU were delighted to host Cliodhna Noonan, an early years arts creator, producer, and programmer for arts events with children and families, as artist in residence on the BA ECEC programme from September 2022 to June 2023. Cliodhna presented performances of tailor-made theatre and visual art experiences for children aged 0–6 years, including *Silver Tree* (2009) *Dream Train* (2011), *Mora* (2022), a puppetry workshop, and WAAW, a non-musical adventure with Joeri Wens from Belgium.

The performances took place on both Galway and Mayo campuses. ECEC students could experience the performances, reflect on how they affected them, and share their reflections with young children. They could also experience these performances with young children and families present at community events. These really inspired the students, who saw how children responded uninhibitedly to the magic of performance.

Children and families from early years settings, family support centres, direct provision centres, Ukraine, local primary schools, parent and toddler groups, and an active age group had the opportunity to experience these community events on ATU campus, in libraries, and in community centres. The ATU team also worked with Galway County Childcare Committee. Over 1,000 children had at least one arts experience, while adult engagement included 84 students, lecturers, parents, and childminders. Lecturers on the Mayo campus could also

The BA team at ATU were delighted to host Cliodhna Noonan, an early years arts creator, producer, and programmer for arts events, as artist in residence on the BA ECEC programme from September 2022 to June 2023.

Creativity and the arts can unite communities across diverse perspectives. Children and families who did not have English as a first language could still participate at performances.

spend a day exploring their creativity with a Mosaic workshop hosted by Akvile Simanskiene.

Looking ahead

The artist-in-residence project was extended following feedback from students, who expressed an interest in hosting Cliodhna in their early years settings. The result, *SCEALTA: Our Bus, Our Journey!*, was awarded the Arts in Education Portal Documentation Award in 2023 – the first award on this portal for the ECEC sector (Arts in Education, 2023).

As a follow-up, ATU's BA Early Childhood Education and Care team, led by the present author, were appointed co-ordinators of the Arts in Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare pilot project, funded by the Arts Council and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) from May to December 2023. This will explore how the Draft Principles for Engaging with the Arts in Early Learning and Care (DCEDIY, 2022) can be supported in practice in ECEC settings.

What we learned from this initial artist-in-residence programme is that creativity and the arts can unite communities across diverse perspectives. Children and families who did not have English as a first language could still participate at performances. Many performances were emotional, bringing people of all ages together. BA students at ATU reflected on how the programme helped them reflect on their practice and their role as educators in supporting children's creativity, curiosity, and explorations through play.

ATU was delighted to have this opportunity to support student engagement with creativity and the arts, but also to bring the arts into the communities of Galway and Mayo. Students, lecturers, children, and their families were inspired and developed new skills and competencies. The programme fostered civic and democratic identity. ATU *Scéalta Eile* (Stories, Curiosity, Engagement, Active learning, Language, Theatre, *Aistear* Extended Initiative for Learners in Early years education) has been awarded funding for the academic year 2023–2024. Our creativity and the arts in *Aistear* at ATU continue.

REFERENCES

Arts in Education (2023) 'Part 2 – Announcing the 2023 Arts in Education Portal Documentation Award Recipients'. Arts in Education. https://artsineducation.ie/en/2023/04/27/part-2-announcing-the-2023-arts-in-education-portal-documentation-award-recipients/.

Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) (2022) Draft Principles for Engaging with the Arts in Early Learning and Care. Dublin: Government publications. www.gov.ie/en/publication/03e1c-draft-principles-for-

the-facilitation-of-the-arts-in-promoting-play-and-creativity-in-early-learning-and-care/.

Edwards, C., Gandini, L., and Forman, G.E. (Eds.) (1993) *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education.* New Jersey: Ablex Publishing.

European Commission (2023) *Culture and Democracy: The evidence. How citizens' participation in cultural activities enhances civic engagement, democracy and social cohesion.* Luxembourg: European Union.

Gardner, H.E. (2011) *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences.* Boston: Basic Books.

***

Atlantic Technological University Artist in Residence Cliodhna Noonan, performing *Dream Train* **at Tuam Community Childcare Centre as part of the Arts in Education Documentation Portal Award ;** *Our Bus Our Journey*.

The Vital Role of Parental Engagement in Early Learning and Care

Background

One of Friedrich Fröbel's key principles, 'Come, let us live for our children', encapsulates his belief in the importance of adults, particularly parents, being active in their child's developmental journey. In recent years, the Irish government has implemented policies and initiatives to support and encourage parental involvement during their children's formative years. (This article uses 'parent' to refer to children's primary caregivers and educators, including fathers, mothers, carers, and guardians.)

The first five years of life should provide every child with a good, strong, and equal start. This runs deep through *First 5* (Government of Ireland 2019), with an explicit focus on supporting parents in many of the objectives set out. The Review of the Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School Age Childcare (SAC) Operating Model in Ireland (Indecon, 2021) recognises that a systems approach including meaningful parental engagement is characteristic of a fit-for-purpose operational model. *Supporting Parents* (DCEDIY, 2022b) reiterates parents' important role in a child's life and focuses on providing accessible and evidence-based parenting information, resources, and support services.

The importance of parental partnerships is not only recognised throughout policy but evident in the implementation of *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009), the curriculum framework, and *Síolta* (CECDE, 2006), the national quality framework. The Early Years Quality and Regulatory Framework, which sets out standards for ELC settings, emphasises the importance of collaboration and partnership between parents and educators.

A High-Level Policy Statement (DCEDIY, 2022a) underpins parent and family support policy. It emphasises the importance of proactive, evidence-based, integrated services, with children and their parents at the centre. The
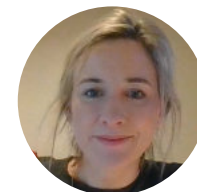
Mareesa O'Dwyer
National Team Lead, Access and Inclusion Model

This article describes the importance of parental engagement during early childhood, with a focus on children with needs. It draws on survey data gathered from parents whose children accessed supports through the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM).

Childcare Act 1991, amended by the Child and Family Agency Act 2013, provides the statutory basis for child protection and welfare functions of Tusla and other organisations. Additionally, initiatives like the Parent and Toddler Grant Scheme, the Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme, and the National Childcare Subsidy aim to facilitate parental engagement by providing parents with financial support and encouraging their active participation.

Overall, Ireland recognises the vital role of parents in shaping their children's early development. It has put in place policies and initiatives to foster parental engagement, aiming to create a supportive and enriching environment for all children to thrive.

Better Start AIM

The Better Start Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) is a model of supports designed to ensure that children with disabilities can access and meaningfully participate in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme. It is a cross-government initiative led by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) and administered by Pobal (IDG, 2015).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, when ELC settings were closed, Better Start adapted the programme's delivery to engage more meaningfully and directly with parents who had applied for targeted AIM supports (Goodman, 2021). The adaptations have been retained, with the objective of delivering a more needs-driven response while enabling providers to choose from individual and blended mentoring supports.

Survey results

Each year, Better Start invites ELC providers who have engaged in supports through the Quality Development Service, the Learning and Development Unit, and AIM to complete a customer satisfaction survey. For the first time this year, parents were also invited, and 1,384 took part. The results may inform programme development, expansion, and implementation going forward – particularly given the recent adaptations made.

Parents shared feedback on areas including accessing information, applying for AIM supports along with their child's ELC provider, their involvement in plans to support inclusion at preschool, level 4 expert advice and mentoring, and expanding AIM beyond the ECCE programme.

The Better Start Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) is a model of supports designed to ensure that children with disabilities can access and meaningfully participate in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme.

Building partnerships with parents is a pillar in the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide. The benefits of this collaboration are fundamental to building a shared understanding of a child's strengths, interests, and needs.

Applying for AIM support

Building partnerships with parents is a pillar in the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide. Application for targeted AIM support was mindfully designed to enable and empower parents and providers to apply jointly for support for the child. In the survey, 90% of respondents completed the Access and Inclusion Profile in conjunction with the preschool; of these, 84% said they were very satisfied or satisfied with the application process.

The benefits of this collaboration are fundamental to building a shared understanding of a child's strengths, interests, and needs. It gives space to acknowledge the diversity of families, and it provides an opportunity to communicate about the child's experiences, development, and learning in a transparent and respectful manner.

The main themes in parents' responses were the 'ease of application', the 'critical role of the preschool' during application, and the 'helpful discussion and support offered by the early years specialist'. Parents offered constructive feedback on the level of paperwork required and the confusion over the different supports available and the inconsistent terms used to describe the professionals who implement different aspects of AIM.

The application process was very quick, efficient, the early years specialist I met with was knowledgeable, kind and understanding.

The preschool helped make the process easy, but the application form is extremely intimidating, with language such as disability etc. that did not apply to my child. It scared us.

Very easy and supportive. Non-judgmental. Efficient.

Communication from AIM

Parental engagement is even more critical for children with disabilities (Rispoli et al., 2018). These children require more support and involvement from parents to ensure they have the best possible opportunities for growth and success (Acar et al., 2021).

To this end, Pobal and Better Start place a high value on sharing information consistently with parents and providers. Parents are notified, via an automated system on Hive, about the levels of support their child has been recommended; 72% of respondents said this was very informative or informative. But they said confusion can arise over what the different levels of AIM support mean. More broadly, parents desire more information about their child's inclusion and participation at preschool:

I feel it would be beneficial to have an update on any further advice or support that's been given; other than my initial phone call with the specialist I haven't received any further information from them.

AIM level 4 advice and mentoring

Central to AIM level 4 is a dedicated national team of early years specialists who provide expert educational advice and mentoring to educators. Parental involvement is an important part of implementing this: 'experience indicates that parents and preschool practitioners often have good insight into what the child needs to participate in preschool, and their views and input are crucial' (IDG, 2015, p.42).

In the 2023 survey, many parents said level 4 had positively impacted their child's development, boosting confidence, communication skills, and inclusion; 65% said it was extremely or very useful. Over half (54%) engaged in telephone support, 39% met the specialist at the preschool, and 59% received updates from the preschool about the specialist support.

Over half (56%) of parents were unaware if 'My Inclusion Plan' existed for their child; 31% were aware of it, and 92% of these were involved in its development. Overall, parents want more information about the support their child is receiving and about plans for their child's inclusion. Over half (54%) were involved in setting goals for their child's participation in ECCE. The most reported focus of goals were 'communication' and 'social and emotional development'.

These findings provide valuable insights into parents' perspectives on level 4 support and its impact on children's inclusion in ECCE settings.

Expansion of AIM beyond ECCE

The 2023 survey examined the perspectives of parents and providers on expanding AIM supports to ECCE-eligible children beyond 15 hours a week. Of the 431 providers who participated, 93% have AIM support and 86% have availed of level 7 support. Most (84%) reported that children were currently benefiting from level 7 support, with 72% expressing interest in extension beyond 15 hours. Providers said 44% of children with level 7 support availed of additional hours in 2022/23.

Of 1,384 parent responses, 60% said their child received level 7 support; 28% said their child attended additional hours outside of ECCE (ranging from 1–35 hours a week during term time, 1–50 hours outside term time). Parents whose children don't currently avail of additional hours (62%) would be interested in extending AIM support beyond ECCE. When asked about additional level 7

Central to AIM level 4 is a dedicated national team of early years specialists who provide expert educational advice and mentoring to educators.

support outside term time, 36% of parents expressed interest in an average of 11 hours a week.

The findings highlight strong interest from parents and providers in expanding AIM level 7 support, particularly during ECCE term time. Relatively few providers (16%) believed that children would not use additional hours if available. These results suggest a promising outlook for expanding AIM support in response to demand.

Conclusion

For children with needs, parental engagement plays a crucial advocacy role in educational, care, and social settings. It gives these children emotional support and a sense of security. It fosters a nurturing environment where children can develop a strong sense of self-worth, confidence, and independence. Meaningful parental involvement is linked to parental advocacy for inclusive practices, raising awareness in the community, and working towards breaking down barriers and misconceptions about disabilities.

These parents contribute to a more inclusive and compassionate society that values everyone's abilities and potential, regardless of their needs. Better Start recognises the value and importance of partnering with parents and supporting ELC providers to build capacity in this construct of quality. Better Start is committed to delivering on government priorities for the Irish ELC quality and inclusion agenda, ensuring that meaningful parental engagement is engrained in this part of society.

The Better Start Access and Inclusion team would like to sincerely thank those who completed the survey. This feedback is invaluable in continuing to review and develop the programme to best meet the needs of children accessing and participating in their ECCE year.

REFERENCES

Acar, S., Chen, C.I., and Xie, H. (2021) 'Parental involvement in developmental disabilities across three cultures: A systematic review', *Research in Developmental Disabilities,* 110, 103861.

Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) (2006) *Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education.* Dublin: CECDE.

Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) (2022a) *High-Level Policy Statement on Supporting Parents and Families.* 13 April. Dublin: Government Publications.

Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (2022b) *Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services.* Dublin: Government Publications.

Goodman, D. (2021) 'Adapting the AIM programme during the pandemic: Providing level 4 educational advice and mentoring'. In: B. Mooney (Ed.) *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2021.* Dublin: Education Matters.

Government of Ireland (2019) *First 5: A Whole-Of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and Their Families 2019–2028.* Dublin: Government Publications.

Indecon International Consultants (2019) *Review of Early Learning and Care ('ELC') and School Age Childcare ('SAC') Operating Model in Ireland.* Dublin: Indecon.

Inter-Departmental Group (IDG) (2015) *Supporting Access to the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme for Children with a Disability: Report of the Inter Departmental Group.* Dublin: Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2009) *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework.* www.aistearsiolta.ie/en/introduction/. Dublin: NCCA.

Rispoli, K.M., Hawley, L.R., and Clinton, M.C. (2018) 'Family background and parent–school interactions in parent involvement for at-risk preschool children with disabilities', *Journal of Special Education,* 52(1), 39–49.

***

GEALACH AGUS GRIAN (Moon and Sun)

If you ever wondered how the *Gealach agus Grian* (moon and sun) came to live in the sky, this is the book for you. The answer is not as scientific as you might think! It's a simple case of two polar opposite best friends who needed their own space. If you know a child who shares a bedroom, he/she will love this funny, heartwarming tale!

Written by Sadhbh Devlin
Illustrated by Brian Fitzgerald
Published by FUTA FATA

Childminding's Role in Early Childhood Education and Care
Creating societal awareness

This article aims to create societal awareness about childminding. It explores the various types of childminding provision that are currently available and what they offer to families and children. It also outlines the introduction of the National Action Plan for Childminding (2021–2028) and what impact it may have for childminding in Ireland.

Sinéad Moran
Childminder and PhD Candidate, Trinity College Dublin

Aoife Lynam
Assistant Professor in Psychology of Education, Trinity College Dublin

Conor Mc Guckin
Associate Professor in Psychology, Trinity College Dublin

Childminding role and definition

In 2023, childminding emerged as a central topic of discussion in the context of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Ireland. Recent increases in financial subsidies for families opting for Tusla-registered ECEC provision have influenced the discourse on childminders' potential role in government supports to families (CMI, 2023b; McQuinn 2023).

There has also been growing emphasis on the forthcoming regulations for childminding. With their introduction anticipated in 2024, it is imperative to cultivate public awareness about the nature of childminding and what it entails. This article explains the uniqueness of childminding while examining the need to consider childminders as equal partners in ECEC provision in Ireland.

Childminding stands out as a distinctive form of ECEC provision (TCD, 2021), with 16% of children requiring ECEC and benefiting from childminders (CSO, 2022). This underscores childminders' significant role in Irish society. A childminder is defined as 'someone who looks after other people's children in the childminder's own home' (CMI, 2023a).

There is confusion over the differences between childminders, nannies, and au pairs. Nannies and au pairs are directly employed by a family and work in the family's

home. Centre-based provision is situated in a building outside the family home or in a separate area attached to the family home. In childminding, children have access to the family home and become an extended part of the childminder's family. Childminders in Ireland have advocated for recognition of the uniqueness of their profession rather than being compared to centre-based ECEC provision (O'Regan et al., 2022).

Childminder profiles

Gathering data on childminding in Ireland is characterised by uncertainty and variability (DCEDIY, 2023a). Childminding figures vary, with providers nationwide estimated at 13,000 (CSO, 2022) and 35,000 (DCEDIY, 2019). No two childminders are identical, and they offer great variety that may be influenced by contextual factors such as the type of family home, its location (e.g., urban or rural), and the type of provision offered. No childminder-specific qualifications are currently available; however, 68% of childminders in a recent survey had a qualification at level 5 or above on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) (DCEDIY, 2023a).

Currently, less than 0.5% of childminders are regulated by Tusla (2022), which prescribes a maximum of six mixed-aged children (CMI, 2023a). Tusla (2023) mandates registration for childminders looking after more than four preschool-aged children. Tusla-registered childminders (TRCs) are classified as either ELC (0 years to primary-school age) or school-age care (SAC) childminders (primary school age to 15 years), following corresponding regulations. ELC childminders require an NFQ level 5 ECEC qualification or equivalent, while SAC childminders are exempt from formal requirements.

Despite their low numbers, TRCs offer diverse ECEC services, including full-day care, sessional services, part-time care, and SAC care. They may access government-funded programmes, including the ECCE Scheme and the National Childcare Scheme. Inspections entail Tusla assessing for quality and regulation, Pobal inspections for financial compliance, and Department of Education inspections for ECCE Scheme providers (DoE, 2023). Core funding, initiated in 2022, is under review in conjunction with the National Action Plan for Childminding 2021–2028 (NAPC) (DCEDIY, 2021).

Childminder registration and options

For this overview, engaged childminders (ECs) (formally voluntary notified childminders) are described as currently exempt from registration with Tusla, as they care for fewer than six children of mixed ages and no more than three of preschool age (CMI, 2022). There are about 750 ECs in Ireland who are engaging with their county childcare committee (DCEDIY, 2023a), which

Despite their low numbers, Tusla-registered childminders (TRCs) offer diverse ECEC services, including full-day care, sessional services, part-time care, and school-age care (SAC).

Childminding is a flexible option for families for many reasons, such as nontraditional working hours and accommodating siblings together.

involves notifying it of their intention to operate a childminding service. There are also childminders who are members of Childminding Ireland but do not engage with their county childcare committee.

ECs and CMI members must hold valid childminding insurance and have garda vetting. Currently no systems are in place for ECs to register with Tusla. Similarly to TRCs, ECs offer a variety of childminding services, but they currently cannot offer government-funded schemes.

TRCs and ECs are a minority in the broader childminding landscape in Ireland, though the exact figures remain uncertain. Many families use relatives for childcare or have ad hoc arrangements whereby the childminder may be operating without insurance or garda vetting (DCEDIY, 2023a). This type of provision poses a potential risk to the children and to the childminder. A change in legislation was therefore essential, and in 2023 the government approved the drafting of the Child Care (Amendment) Bill, allowing for the removal of the exemption of some childminders to register (DCEDIY, 2023b).

Childminding is a flexible option for families for many reasons, such as non-traditional working hours and accommodating siblings together. Childminding is like an extension of the immediate family setting, where the same families may collaborate with childminders long-term and through important transitions in a child's life.

Childminding may benefit children who struggle in larger, centre-based ECEC settings, due to lower ratios, consistency of care, and a less-overwhelming environment (Cassidy, 2021). A recent survey found that 42% of childminders had experienced working with children in their setting who required additional supports (CMI, 2022). Access can be challenging, however, especially for children with physical disabilities, as each childminder's home varies, necessitating adaptations. Balancing full inclusion with home alterations can be complex, and the practical elements of alterations to a childminder's home will directly affect the childminder's family life.

Supports for childminding

Traditionally, childminding has lacked support in policy and society (DCEDIY, 2023c). However, Childminding Ireland has been a vital resource for childminders and parents for four decades. It offers diverse support, including training, financial advice, and policy insights, and it fosters a crucial community of practice to combat the isolation often experienced by childminders.

Childminders can also access their local county childcare committees, many of which have childminding development officers to help with business setup, policy updates, and financial supports. Minister O'Gorman recently increased

funding for the Childminding Development Grant due to oversubscription (DCEDIY, 2023c). The grant helps childminders establish their services, purchase equipment, and enhance their settings.

The National Action Plan for Childminding (2021–2028) was developed to outline steps towards the regulation and professional recognition of childminding in Ireland (DCEDIY, 2021). While its introduction is important, it is necessary to have meaningful consultation with childminders, acknowledging the variety of provision and how regulatory requirements may affect individual childminders. The DCEDIY (2021) acknowledged the importance of reaching childminders who have no engagement with support agencies. Regulations will affect childminders in various ways, and a one-size-fits-all approach will not suffice.

Concluding thoughts

Childminders play an indispensable role in Irish society. With impending changes for childminding in 2024, it is imperative to foster awareness about the identity and professional role of childminders. It is crucial that their diversity be recognised and that regulations mirror the distinct qualities of each setting. Any changes to childminding must be approached and developed with the utmost care, to ensure the preservation of this essential contributor and vital partner of ECEC in Ireland.

REFERENCES

Cassidy, B. (2021) 'Certified BrainCalm for Childminders Minding Babies and Toddlers'. [Zoom] Online training session for members of Childminding Ireland, 10 May 2021.

Central Statistics Office (CSO) (2022) *Census 2022 Results Profile 3: Households, Families and Childcare.* Cork: CSO. www.cso.ie.

Childminding Ireland (2022) *Childminding in Ireland Survey 2022.* www.childminding.ie/childminders/childminding-ireland-survey-2022/.

Childminding Ireland (CMI) (2023a) 'Childminders'. Arklow, Co. Wicklow: CMI. www.childminding.ie/childminders.

Childminding Ireland (CMI) (2023b) 'Parents – Stay updated at this time of change'. *Standing Up for Childminding.* Arklow, Co. Wicklow: CMI. www.childminding.ie/home/standing-up-for-childminding/.

Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) (2019) '"Pathway to a Quality Support and Assurance System for Childminding in Ireland" – Launch of Report of the Working Group on Reforms and Supports for the Childminding Sector'. Press release, 26 March. Dublin: Government publication. www.gov.ie/en/press-release/e010fb-pathway-to-a-quality-support-and-assurance-system-for-childminding-i/

Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) (2021) *National Action Plan for Childminding 2021–2028.* Dublin. Government publications.

Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) (2023a) *National Childminder Survey 2023.* Dublin. Government publications.

Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) (2023b) *Heads and General Scheme of the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2023.* 19 April. Dublin: Government publications. www.gov.ie/en/publication/d5ddf-heads-and-general-scheme-of-the-child-care-amendment-bill-2023/.

Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) (2023c) 'Minister O'Gorman launches the 2023 Childminding Development Grant'. 14 June. Dublin: Government publications. www.gov.ie/en/press-release/83865-minister-ogorman-launches-the-2023-childminding-development-grant/.

Department of Education (2023) *Guide to Early Years Education Inspections.* www.gov.ie/en/publication/68fac2-guide-to-early-years-education-inspections/.

McQuinn, C. (2023) 'Thousands of parents may receive subsidies under plans going to Cabinet', *Irish Times*, 31 January. www.irishtimes.com/politics/2023/01/31/cabinet-approval-could-pave way-for-thousands-of-parents-to-receive-childminding-subsidies/.

O'Regan, M., Halpenny, A.M., and Hayes, N. (2022) 'Childminding professionalism and professionalisation in Ireland: A different story', *Journal of Early Childhood Research.* DOI: 10.1177/1476718X221077171

Trinity College Dublin (TCD) (2021) 'The Childminding Difference Webinar' [video]. YouTube, 22 November. www.youtube.com/watch?v=BGUkE26KHpg,

Tusla (2022) *Register of Early Years Service by County.* Dublin: Tusla.

Tusla (2023) *Types of Early Years Service.* Dublin: Tusla.

SECOND SLIGO CHILDCARE FACILITY SIGNALS GOOD THINGS FOR ALL

Families in Sligo are celebrating the addition of 110 new crèche places following the opening of a €1.1m purpose-built childcare facility in the town.

Bridgestock Childcare opened the new Cre8ive Corner Crèche in Farmhill Manor on the Strandhill Road in Sligo in October 2023, providing 25 new jobs for early years educators and much-needed relief for working parents in the area.

Michael Gillen, CEO of Bridgestock Childcare, said: "The shortage of crèche places in the north-west and midlands puts undue strain on working families, restricts parents wishing to return to work, and inhibits the social development of children," Mr Gillen said.

"The opening of this new state-of-the-art facility in Sligo will go some way to alleviating that stress, while at the same time creating 25 new jobs for Early Years Educators."

"Bridgestock Childcare is moving now to increase its investment in childcare facilities into the future," Mr Gillen continued.

Good things for All

"This expansion means good things for parents and for children - but it also means good things for staff who will benefit from enhanced opportunities for career development," Mr Gillen concluded.

Early Childhood – My Wish List for 2024

Dr Rita Melia

Access to quality ECEC

Access for every child to high-quality, affordable early childhood education and care (ECEC) provision, where each child's basic care and psychological needs are met, resulting in children having high levels of wellbeing and involvement in their play and learning.

Funding: children, families, professionals

Increased investment in ECEC in recognition of the cost of quality provision and the important role of ECEC professionals. Opportunities to support the ongoing professional learning and development of the sector, from initial training to lifelong learning.

Access and inclusion

Extension of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), working in partnership with parents to ensure that all children have access and opportunities to participate to their full potential. Recognition and support for the increasing cultural and diverse needs of children and families accessing ECEC provision.

Parental choice

Ensuring that parents' choice of childcare, whether provided by a childminder or in centre-based care, is funded and regulated, to ensure that all children have access to quality early-years experiences that meet the needs of children, parents, and families.

Sustainability, creative play, and learning for babies, toddlers, and young children

Embedding science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics (STEAM) through creative play and learning for children in practice and through the early years curriculum framework, Aistear, accessing both indoor and outdoor provision and promoting environmentally friendly practices and environmental responsibility.

PINE FOREST ART CENTRE

Set in the Dublin Mountains amidst beautiful scenery, for 40 years now Pine Forest Art Centre has been providing camps and courses for children and young people which combine creativity with fun.

Summer Courses for 5-16 year olds,
Schools Activity Days from March to June,
Halloween Workshops,
Christmas Workshops,

Easter Courses,
Portfolio Preparation Courses,
Birthday Parties,
Parent/Adult and Child Art Activity mornings.

Summer Camps
The Centre runs two-week summer camps during July and August for children aged 5-12 years and teenagers aged 13-16 years. Activities are many and varied - participants paint, sculpt, sketch, make pottery and clay items, weave, do batik and paper crafts.

Portfolio Preparation
There is also a Portfolio Preparation course during the summer for young people aged 16-19 years. This course is provided with a view to helping young people organise and expand portfolios with Art College and /or Leaving Cert in mind.

Courses during the year
The Centre runs courses during the Halloween, Christmas and Easter Holidays. Birthday Parties and Team building events.

School Groups Activity Days
School Art and Craft activity days are available from March to June.

Parent and Child Art & Craft Days
Held on the last Sunday of each month.

PINE FOREST ART CENTRE

Glencullen, Kilternan,
Dublin 18

Phone 01 2941220
Fax 01 2941221

info@pineforestartcentre.com
www.pineforestartcentre.com

Primary

A very excited Jessica McKean at Dublin Airport with her mother Sarah as they head to Nice, France, where Jessica will represent Ireland at the grand final of the Junior Eurovision Song Contest on 26 Novemeber 2023. Jessica's song 'Aisling' was written by Niall Mooney and his team.

Overview of Primary-Level Education in Ireland in 2023

Introduction

2023 has been a year of substantial change and challenge, much of which is reflected in the themes of the articles in this edition of *Ireland's Education Yearbook*. One of the realisations of recent times is that Ireland and its citizens are part of a global matrix, and that matters which we had thought were concerns for others – be it geopolitical conflict or teacher shortages – are real matters of concern for us, impinging on our daily lives in classrooms across the state.

Covid-19 demonstrated effectively how permeable borders are, and how foolish it is to expect that an event in another part of the world will not impact on us. We know that the closure of schools and the social restrictions of the pandemic have impacted significantly on children, and now their wellbeing and resilience have become the focus of much attention. We have seen that migration quickly brings the trauma associated with fleeing conflict into our classrooms, and that these classrooms are more diverse and culturally rich now than ever before.

The redeveloped Primary Curriculum Framework was launched in March 2023, while the new mathematics curriculum was published in September. These changes require strong leadership in schools and a population of high-quality teachers who are well prepared to interpret the curriculum while working in ever more complex settings. We are at a crucial point in the nation's educational journey. We can no longer assume that we will continue to have the appropriate quality or quantity of teachers and school leaders into the future, unless urgent action is taken to address these matters.

Prof Teresa O'Doherty
President, Marino Institute of Education

The educational landscape in Ireland has changed considerably in recent years, not least at primary level. This overview looks at the major themes, developments, and challenges in the sector this year, including teacher supply and shortages, curriculum change, wellbeing and mental health, and diversity and inclusion.

Teacher supply

Workforce and skills planning is not a new phenomenon in Irish life. However, for many decades, the supply of teachers has been constant and predictable, and teaching has not been identified as an area where we have experienced a skills shortage. We have celebrated the fact that traditionally, teaching has attracted candidates from the top 10%–15% of Leaving Certificate students, but also that Irish teachers were competent, were respected for their contribution to society, and enjoyed a good standard of living.

In 2023 there are some constants in this profile. Initial teacher education programmes are still highly sought after and can select students from high-calibre applicants. We can boast that the quality of our teachers is very high, and that with more than 121,000 teachers registered with the Teaching Council, we have never had such a large pool of teachers. Public confidence in teachers is strong, and in a recent survey by the Medical Council, teachers ranked as the most trusted professionals in Ireland (O'Regan, 2023).

It is now widely acknowledged by the Department of Education and the Teaching Council that the most pressing issue in Irish education across all sectors today is the acute shortage of teachers. Irish teachers are recognised internationally as being of excellent quality, and, with education now a global market, schools in Australia, New Zealand, and the United Arab Emirates are benefiting from the excellent teacher education standards provided in Ireland. Understandably, younger teachers have an appetite to travel and to experience life which was much curtailed during the pandemic.

But this migration of early-career teachers does not fully explain the shortage of teachers in schools each day. The picture is more complicated. There are opportunities to job-share and to take career breaks, and there are more and better periods of parents' and parental leave, while teachers are seconded to Oide and other agencies to provide professional development. Teaching has become more challenging, and, according to a recent survey by the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, nine in ten teachers are struggling with their workload (Donnelly, 2023).

The range of curriculum change and innovation, allied with the complexity of children's needs in the classroom and the challenge of meeting the high expectations that teachers and others have of their role, mean that teaching is increasingly stressful. Many are retiring early, leaving the profession they love to protect their own long-term health and wellbeing.

The landscape of teaching is further impacted by the cost of living, particularly the cost of buying a home in urban centres, especially Dublin (Sheehy, 2023). This intricate web of considerations translates into an unprecedented non-

Public confidence in teachers is strong and, in a recent survey by the Medical Council, teachers ranked as the most trusted professionals in Ireland (O'Regan, 2023).

While it is heartening that Ireland has retained its position as a high-achieving country, standards have fallen across the board.

availability of teachers, and vacant posts across the system, with specific challenges for special and Irish-medium schools, and schools in Dublin.

International perspectives

The OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022 results reveal that Ireland's 15-year-olds are the best in reading literacy in the EU and the OECD, and that they are also performing significantly higher than the OECD average in mathematics and science (OECD, 2023). These data, published in December 2023, have been the source of much celebration, suggesting that we have weathered the pandemic well and have done better than many neighbouring countries.

While the statistics illustrate that the Irish education system is doing comparatively well in an international context, it is also clear that the recent performance of our students dipped when compared to their achievement in mathematics and reading in both 2018 and 2015 PISA surveys. While it is heartening that Ireland has retained its position as a high-achieving country, standards have fallen across the board. This is not a time for complacency.

Free schoolbooks

Recognising the back-to-school costs, and to ensure equal access to education, the Department of Education in 2023 established a scheme to cover the cost of all schoolbooks, workbooks, and copybooks for children in primary and special schools. Schools received €96 in respect of each pupil enrolled: a total spend of more than €53 million. This groundbreaking decision by the State was much welcomed by families and brought Irish education in line with the resources provided for children in other EU states.

Wellbeing and mental health supports

Several articles in this chapter of *Ireland's Education Yearbook* address the issues of belonging, values, mental health, wellbeing, and grief. This is not surprising, given the impact that school closures have had on children and their families, and the escalating pressures on school staff. PISA this year also delved into students' wellbeing, sense of belonging, and satisfaction with life. While 81% of students in Ireland said they make friends easily at school (OECD average: 76%), 71% felt that they belong at school (OECD average: 75%).

Meanwhile, 14% reported feeling lonely at school, and 14% felt like an outsider or felt left out of things at school (OECD average: 16% and 17%). Some 13% of girls and 19% of boys reported being the victim of bullying acts at least a few

times a month (OECD average: 20% of girls, 21% of boys). Clearly students' safety, wellbeing, and mental health are of concern, and schools are actively promoting kindness, inclusion, respect, and wellbeing through activities such as Anti-Bulling Week and are working towards the Cineáltas Flag standards.

At primary level, the Department made the landmark decision in summer 2023 to provide a two-strand programme of counselling, wellbeing, and mental health supports to primary schools. Recognising schools' elevated needs, particularly in the fallout of the pandemic, the Department has secured €5m in funding to provide in Strand One access to one-to-one counselling for children in primary schools across seven counties, via access to an approved counsellor.

In the second strand of this pilot programme, clusters of primary schools in Cork, Carlow, Dublin 7, and Dublin 16 have access to wellbeing/mental health practitioners working under the direction and supervision of the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), focusing on whole-school preventative approaches to support children. While this initiative is very welcome, a comprehensive, national children's mental health strategy is required to adequately support children and their families.

Recognising the needs of all school staff, the Department established an Employee Assistance Service in 2020. However, as Brian O'Doherty's article in this chapter reveals, primary-level principals experience burnout, stress, and depressive symptoms at almost double the rates of the healthy working population, and they experience more than double the incidence of sleeping disorders and cognitive stress. When comparing the outcomes of health and wellbeing surveys from 2015 and 2022, while all scores have elevated, the percentage of school leaders reporting burnout has increased significantly.

The wellbeing of our pupils cannot be addressed in isolation; rather, steps are required to support school staff, who can provide empathy, compassion, and a nurturing environment for children only when they themselves are adequately supported.

Diversity and inclusion

Inclusion of children with special or additional education needs in Irish schools has been a focus of investment and development for many years. Based on the premise that children are entitled to be educated in their local community, 126 new special education classes opened in September 2023, and two new special schools are to be established in 2023/24.

Budget 2023 committed to an increase of over 50% in staffing levels in the National Council for Special Education (NCSE). There are now more than 20,000 special needs assistants (SNAs) in schools, and the first SNA development plan

Schools are actively promoting kindness, inclusion, respect, and wellbeing through activities such as Anti-Bulling Week.

has been announced; consultation has yet to begin on how SNAs' role can be envisaged to meet current and future inclusive practices in schools. While some schools have sensory rooms or nurture rooms, these resources should be available to all children, in all schools.

Increasingly our schools are more multicultural and multilingual. In October 2023 there were 17,501 Ukrainian pupils in our schools, 10,655 of them in primary schools. We know that 17% of all pupils in Irish schools are from a migrant background, many fleeing war or natural disasters. The broad spectrum of needs that children are presenting with in school underlines the complexity of school life and Irish education.

Irish education is at a pivotal point in its development. The range and nature of challenges being experienced across the system are unprecedented. A comprehensive review of the needs of the system, its children, and its teachers is required. There are big questions to be asked. Let's hope that the listening and thinking process established through the National Education Convention of 1993 might be repeated in 2024.

REFERENCES

Donnelly, K. (2023) 'Primary teachers suffering "burnout" as they struggle with huge workload, union survey finds', *Irish Independent*, 7 February. www.independent.ie/irish-news/primary-teachers-suffering-burnout-as-they-struggle-with-huge-workload-union-survey-finds/42331160.html.

O'Regan, E. (2023) 'Teachers more trusted than doctors, as TDs poll the worst in table of professionals', *Irish Independent*, 1 November. www.independent.ie/irish-news/teachers-more-trusted-than-doctors-as-tds-poll-the-worst-in-table-of-professionals/a1979120850.html.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2023) *PISA 2022 Results: Factsheets: Ireland*. 5 December. www.oecd.org/publication/pisa-2022-results/country-notes/ireland-01173012#chapter-d1e11.

Sheehy, M. (2023) '"Unprecedented" teacher shortages affecting "most vulnerable children in society"', *Irish Examiner*, 7 November. www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-41263975.html.

The Primary Curriculum Framework

Heralding a new era for primary and special school education in Ireland

This article, written by the four members of the advisory panel supporting the redevelopment of the primary school curriculum, explores the key features, concepts, and 'big ideas' in the Primary Curriculum Framework, as well as the opportunities and challenges inherent in the curriculum change process.

Introduction

In March 2023, the Department of Education published the Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools (Department of Education, 2023). This adds 2023 to the short list of seminal years since the foundation of the State in which substantive changes to the primary school curriculum in Ireland have been published, the others being 1922, 1971, and 1999.

The curriculum redevelopment has been prompted by advances in research and understanding on children's learning and development since the 1990s, and by the need to ensure the curriculum remains reflective of and responsive to local and global societal changes. The framework was prepared by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) after a long process of consultation, deliberations, and engagement with research (Grant et al., 2020).

This article, written by the four members of the advisory panel supporting the redevelopment of the primary school curriculum, explores the key features, concepts, and 'big ideas' in the Primary Curriculum Framework, as well as the opportunities and challenges inherent in the curriculum change process.

Thomas Walsh
Maynooth University

Dominic Wyse
University College London

Jim Spillane
Northwestern University, Chicago

Louise Hayward
University of Glasgow

The shift to presenting learning in the primary curriculum as a set of outcomes as opposed to a set of objectives marks a new approach.

Key features of the Primary Curriculum Framework

The publication of the framework is noteworthy for four substantive reasons. First of all, it is the first time that a curriculum framework as opposed to a more detailed and prescriptive curriculum will inform teaching and learning in schools in Ireland (Walsh, 2016). It sets out a vision, a set of principles, and a list of key competencies that underpin and inform all elements of teaching and learning (summarised in Figure 1).

Over the next two years, this foundational framework document will be complemented by a suite of additional subject area and subject specifications which will articulate, among other things, the aims and learning outcomes for each subject. The shift to presenting learning in the primary curriculum as a set of outcomes as opposed to a set of objectives also marks a new approach and is in line with the more recent Primary Language Curriculum (NCCA, 2019) and Primary Mathematics Curriculum (NCCA, 2023). A key element of the curriculum development process is to focus on continuity and progression in children's learning by building on previous learning experiences in early childhood education (Walsh, 2020) and to prepare for future learning at Junior Cycle.

Figure 1: Key competencies in the Primary Curriculum Framework (Department of Education, 2023, p.8)

Second, and consistent with the move away from prescription, the framework articulates a new vision for the primary curriculum in Ireland, one that emphasises the individual and collective agency of teachers and children in

teaching and learning (Hayward et al., 2022). There has been much discussion of agency in the research literature and in the curriculum development. It relates to the freedom and capacity to make informed decisions and choices. The framework's focus on agency empowers school leaders, teachers, and children to make key decisions about the content and approach to education – by, for example, determining themes and topics that are contextually appropriate and enriching.

Third, the framework introduces changes to the range and grouping of primary school subjects, with new distinctions for the various classes and stages (Figure 2). Most noteworthy is the introduction of Technology and Engineering Education alongside Mathematics and Science to form a STEM curriculum area. A Well-being curriculum area has also been established, incorporating elements of Social, Personal and Health Education and Physical Education, and a modern foreign language is being introduced for all children from Third Class.

The framework's focus on agency empowers school leaders, teachers, and children to make key decisions about the content and approach to education.

Substantive changes to the curriculum: reducing prescription, emphasising teacher and child agency, revising the range and grouping of subjects, and encouraging flexible time allocations.
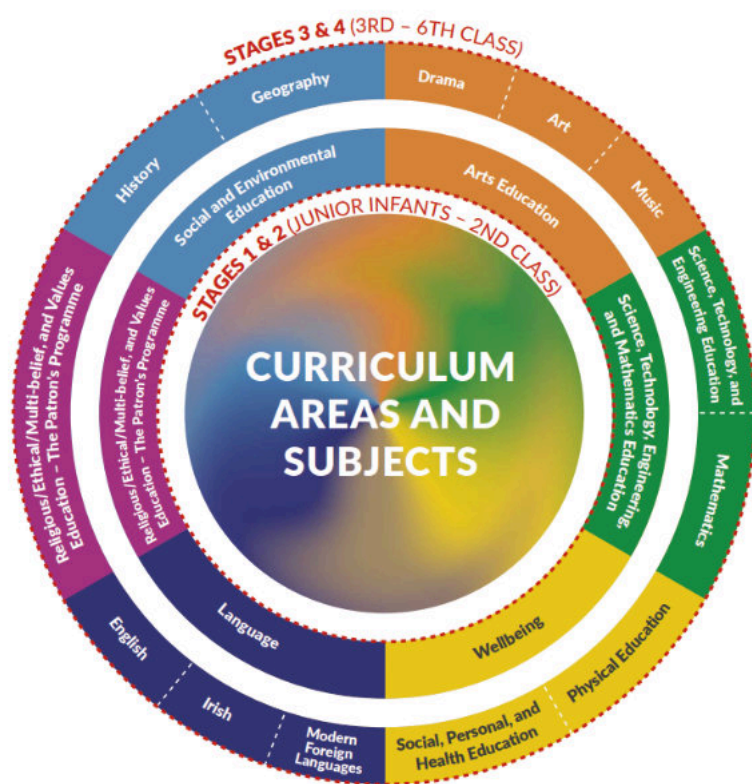
Fourth, and in line with the increased emphasis on teacher and child agency, the framework includes revised suggested guidance on time allocations for the various curriculum areas and subjects. This guidance is provided in a new format with 'minimum curriculum time' and 'flexible time' that includes both weekly and monthly allocations for the various subjects. Overall, flexibility is encouraged in the suggested time allocations 'in order to embrace integrative learning, avail of unexpected learning opportunities, pace learning in response to children's needs, and support immersive and engaging learning experiences' (Department of Education, 2023, p.38).

Supporting system-wide primary curriculum change

Curriculum change is exciting but also challenging. Indeed, its history in Ireland and internationally is replete with examples of ambitious and progressive policy provisions not becoming embedded in widespread practice in schools (Walsh, 2012; Bascia & Hargreaves, 2013). For the first time in primary school curriculum development in Ireland, the curriculum provisions have been accompanied by a published set of 'conducive conditions' necessary for the introduction and enactment of the curriculum: Supporting Systemwide Primary Curriculum Change (NCCA, 2022). The 'familiar flaws' (ibid., p.2) in redevelopment and enactment, garnered from national and international research and consultation, have been used as the basis for developing three overarching conditions to support teachers, school leaders, and the wider system (Figure 3).

While the three broad categories and their various subcategories are individually important, it is only in combination and in unison that the fertile ground can be created for introducing and enacting the ambitious curriculum plans. One key strength of this document is that it focuses on potential pathways and actions for all stakeholders across the education system, from national to school level, that will be necessary to support sustainable curriculum change. In our view, the enactment of the actions in this document is as important and necessary as the focus on enacting the framework itself.

Figure 2: Curriculum areas and subjects (Department of Education, 2023, p.15)

Shared Vision
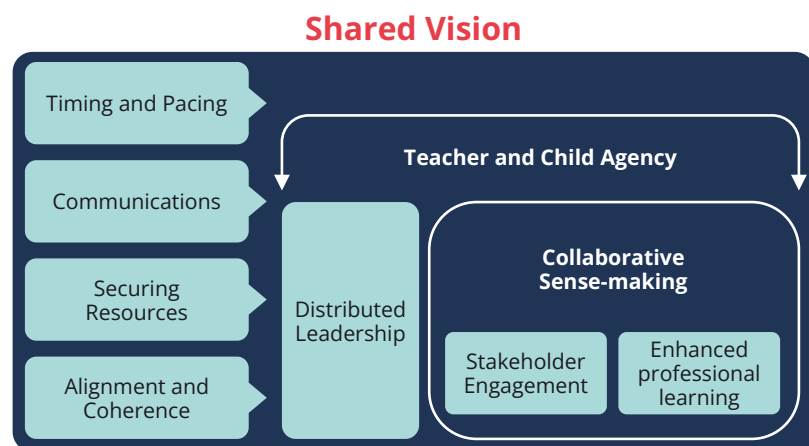
Figure 3: Overview of conducive conditions (NCCA, 2022, p.3)

Conclusion

The substantive changes to the curriculum – reducing prescription, emphasising teacher and child agency, revising the range and grouping of subjects, and encouraging flexible time allocations – provide boundless opportunities and possibilities to enhance teaching and learning experiences into the future. However, these provisions represent significant shifts in curriculum and pedagogical understandings and introduce changes for school leaders and teachers which may challenge their existing beliefs, identities, and practices.

How successful the curriculum framework becomes in informing teaching and learning in schools will depend on the cultivation of conducive conditions for its introduction and enactment. A propitious start has been made with the publication of a rigorous and informed curriculum framework and the identification of the supports necessary for its enactment. It is hoped that the necessary human, infrastructural, and financial resources will be forthcoming to make the curriculum vision a reality for the next generations of teachers and children in Ireland.

REFERENCES

Bascia, N. and Hargreaves, A. (2013) *The Sharp Edge of Educational Change: Teaching, Leading and the Realities of Reform*. Oxfordshire: Taylor and Francis.

Department of Education (2023) *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools*. Dublin: Department of Education. www.curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/84747851-0581-431b-b4d7-dc6ee850883e/2023-Primary-Framework-ENG-screen.pdf.

Grant, D., Ó Cadhain, C., Behan, J.y and Blennerhassett, C. (2020) 'Primary curriculum review: Consultation on the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework'. In: B. Mooney (Ed.) *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2020*, pp. 78–83. https://irelandseducationyearbook.ie/yearbook-article/primary-curriculum-review/.

Hayward, L., Spillane, J., Walsh, T., and Wyse, D. (2022) *From Purpose to Practice – Primary Curriculum Developments in Ireland: Reflections from the Advisory Panel (Primary)*. Dublin: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2019) *Primary Language curriculum/Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile*. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills. https://curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/2a6e5f79-6f29-4d68-b850-379510805656/PLC-Document_English.pdf.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2022) *Supporting Systemwide Primary Curriculum Change*. Dublin: NCCA. https://ncca.ie/media/5990/supporting-systemwide-primary-curriculum-change-1.pdf.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2023) *Primary Mathematics Curriculum for Primary and Special Schools*. Dublin: Department of Education. www.curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/484d888b-21d4-424d-9a5c-3d849b0159a1/PrimaryMathematicsCurriculum_EN.pdf.

Walsh, T. (2012) *Primary Education in Ireland, 1897–1990: Curriculum and Context*. Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang.

Walsh, T. (2016) 'The primary school curriculum in Ireland: Looking at the past – Learning for the future'. In: B. Mooney (Ed.) *Education Matters Yearbook 2016–2017*, pp. 160–163. https://irelandseducationyearbook.ie/downloads/YB20162017.pdf.

Walsh, T. (2020) 'The redeveloped primary school curriculum: An opportunity for continuity and coherence in early childhood'. In: B. Mooney (Ed.) *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2020*, pp. 34–37. https://irelandseducationyearbook.ie/yearbook-article/the-redeveloped-primary-school-curriculum/.

✱✱✱

Malcolm Noonan, Minister of State for Heritage and Electoral Reform, was welcomed by South East Technological University (SETU) to its Carlow Campus to acknowledge the work of local primary school students who took part in the Sustainable Packaging Challenge (SPac) in conjunction with the university.

Student Participation during Inspection

A rights–based approach

Introduction

The right of children and young people to participate in decisions on all matters affecting them is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), most specifically in Article 12, which relates to the child's right to express their views freely and have their views given due weight. The Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) emphasises that children do not leave their human rights behind when they enter the school gate (General Comment No. 1, 2001, para. 8). It avers that schools, and bodies providing services for children, establish permanent ways of consulting with children in all decisions about their functioning.

The Department of Education Inspectorate is one such body. Because inspection affects children, it is therefore a matter about which they are entitled to have their views sought, listened to, and taken into account.

Section 13 of the Education Act 1998 defines the Inspectorate's role, providing it with both evaluative and advisory functions. The advisory remit facilitates direct involvement in developmental activity at both individual school and system levels; this may include the modelling of participative, rights-based consultation approaches with children and young people during inspection. Indeed, the principles and commitments set out in the *Code of Practice for the Inspectorate* (Department of Education Inspectorate, 2022) show a clear commitment to Article 12.

The benefits of student participation

The benefits of student participation in decisions are widely acknowledged. They include the creation of a

Dr Suzanne Conneely

Assistant Chief Inspector, Department of Education

The inspection of early learning and care settings and schools affects children; it is therefore a matter about which they are entitled to have their views sought, listened to, and taken into account. This article outlines the rights-respecting approach taken by the Department of Education Inspectorate in working with children. The approach gives them an opportunity to express their views about the quality of provision they experience and plays an important role in advocating for children's rights in schools and settings generally.

The Inspectorate wanted to do more than treat children's views as a data source. It wanted to facilitate children to express their views freely during inspection and to have their views given due weight as part of an empowering, emancipatory process benefiting students, schools/ settings, and the Inspectorate.

stronger sense of agency, where students realise they can have impact on things that matter (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006); the enhancement of status through recognition of their capacity as insightful commentators (Frost & MacBeath, 2010); and honing thought processes by thinking critically about their experiences (Roberts & Nash, 2009). According to Lansdown (2011), a 'virtuous circle' is created: the more that children participate, the more effective their contributions and the greater the impact on their development.

Educational stakeholders also highlight considerable benefits when students are consulted, such as improvements in service provision (Shier, 2008), decision-making (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006), and fulfilling legal requirements in schools (Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007). Teachers and policymakers also gain access to the specialist and largely untapped knowledge that learners have about their schools (Czerniawski, 2012).

Getting started

Involving children and young people in inspection is not new. The Inspectorate began to listen formally to them as part of the inspection process in the early 2000s through the use of surveys and focus groups. More recently, there was a renewed focus on whether the purpose and method of such engagement sufficiently emphasised children's agency or did justice to the principle enshrined in Article 12. The Inspectorate wanted to do more than treat children's views as a data source. It wanted to facilitate children to express their views freely during inspection and to have their views given due weight as part of an empowering, emancipatory process benefiting students, schools/settings, and the Inspectorate.

Informed by the work of its student participation team, the Inspectorate began a journey to developing a rights-respecting approach in how it works with children. This approach ensures that appropriate conditions are in place to enable children to express their views, however young they are; it combats negative attitudes towards their participation; and it leads to multiple benefits, including improved decision-making and outcomes (Lansdown, 2011).

Three stages

Advice from school leaders and other government departments and agencies informed the developmental process. Critically, the voice of children from early years to Senior Cycle had a central part to play. The *National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making* (DCEDIY, 2021) and the Lundy Model (2007) were influential in progressing the work. Lundy conceptualised Article 12 as encompassing space (opportunity to express a view), voice (facilitation to express a view), audience (to be listened to), and influence (views to be acted upon, as appropriate). The goal for the Inspectorate was to enhance opportunities for children's participation accordingly at all three stages of inspection: before, during, and after.

Before inspection

To facilitate children and young people to express their views readily, inspectors need to be able to put them at their ease. This can be challenging in the context of a formal process such as an inspection. Children said that advance information about the purpose of inspection and the role of the inspector would help to alleviate fears, ensure consistent messaging, and enhance readiness to participate. They gave advice on the information that would be relevant and the most effective ways to share it.

The Inspectorate supports the principle that children have the right to information (Articles 13, 17) and adult guidance (Article 5) while their views are being formed, in order to be assisted in determining and expressing what will then be both a formed and an informed view (Lundy & McEvoy, 2011). A set of resources ensued, including information leaflets and animated videos for children in early years, primary, and post-primary, including an e-book for the early years.

In its publications and public engagement, the Inspectorate actively promotes children's participation. For example, published inspection guides advocate that all learners, from the youngest in our preschool settings to the oldest in our post-primary schools, should be given a voice, recognising them as key stakeholders.

The *Chief Inspector's Report 2016–2020* (Department of Education Inspectorate, 2022) includes a chapter on student participation, and the Inspectorate's April 2023 *Update* to schools and settings outlined its commitment to listening to children and young people. In its webinars for educators, the Inspectorate outlines why and how it elicits children's views during inspection. It explains that it does not reify the voices of students over the voices of adults in inspection; the views of teachers, school leaders, and parents remain important.

> *The Inspectorate supports the principle that children have the right to information (Articles 13, 17) and adult guidance (Article 5) while their views are being formed, in order to be assisted in determining and expressing what will then be both a formed and an informed view.*

During inspection

To ensure that its engagement with children is enacted in a rights-respecting way, the Inspectorate focuses on the voluntary and informed participation of children and young people. Children provided advice about what would best help them decide whether to participate in focus groups; accordingly, informational videos were created about how focus groups operate during inspection. Children also advised on the strengths-based approaches that inspectors should take; thus, as part of the journey, inspectors were upskilled as rights-respecting focus group facilitators. In 2022–2023, the Inspectorate extended the use of focus groups to all inspection types where schools and settings get advance notice of an inspection.

After inspection

In line with well-established practice, inspectors undertake post-evaluation meetings with the leadership and teaching staff of schools and settings to discuss the findings and recommendations following an inspection. A report then issues to the leaders of the school or setting for response and is subsequently uploaded to the Department's website for public access. Inspectors write these reports with an adult readership in mind.

Children said that the Inspectorate should also report to them after an inspection; they recommended the use of a discrete page for children. In early 2023, the Inspectorate trialled the inclusion of such a page in the inspection reports of a small number of schools and settings. This work is at an early stage, and the Inspectorate looks forward to progressing it in consultation with relevant parties.

> *Children said that the Inspectorate should also report to them after an inspection; they recommended the use of a discrete page for children.*

Concluding comments

The Inspectorate believes that student participation in inspection, appropriately handled, provides considerable benefits for the Inspectorate, children, and schools. It is also aware that enhancing student participation is not easy or administratively expedient. It is continually seeking to improve how it seeks, listens to, and takes on board the views of children.

The Inspectorate has opted to take a Do-and-then-Do-More approach. In so doing, it commits to revisiting its approach for each of the three stages of inspection and, through consultation, to do more each time. In undertaking a proactive and informed approach towards recognising the rights of children during school inspection, the Inspectorate provides them with an opportunity to express their views about the quality of provision they experience and plays an important role in advocating for children's rights in schools and settings generally.

132

IRELAND'S
2023 EDUCATION
YEARBOOK

IRELAND'S
EDUCATION **2023**
YEARBOOK

133

REFERENCES

Committee on the Rights of the Child (2001) *The Aims of Education* (General Comments) CRC/C/GC/2001/1, 17 April 2001. Geneva: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Czerniawski, G. (2012) 'Student voice-by-numbers', *Research in Secondary Teacher Education,* 2(1), 14–18.

Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) (2021) *Participation Framework: National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making.* www.hubnanog.ie.

Department of Education Inspectorate (2022) *Code of Practice for the Inspectorate* Dublin: Inspectorate.

Department of Education Inspectorate (2022) *Chief Inspector's Report 2016–2020.* Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Fielding, M. (2004) 'Transformative approaches to student voice: Theoretical underpinnings, recalcitrant realities', *British Educational Research Journal*, 30(2), 295–311.

Frost, D. and MacBeath, J. (2010) *Learning to Lead: An Evaluation.* University of Cambridge Faculty of Education.

Lansdown, G. (2011) *Every child's right to be heard: A resource guide on the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 12.* UK: Save the Children UK on behalf of Save the Children and UNICEF.

Lundy, L. (2007) '"Voice is not enough": Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child for education', *British Education Research Journal,* 33(6), 927–942.

Lundy, L. and McEvoy, L. (2012) 'Children's rights and research processes: Assisting children to (in)formed views', *Childhood*, 19(1), 129–144.

Roberts, J. and Nash, A. (2009) 'Enabling students to participate in school improvement through students as researchers programme', *Improving Schools*, 12(2), 174–187.

Rudduck, J. and Fielding, M. (2006) 'Student voice and the perils of popularity', *Educational Review*, 58(2), 219–231.

Rudduck, J. and McIntyre, D. (2007) *Improving Learning through Consulting Students.* UK: Routledge.

Shier, H. (2008) 'Pathways to participation revisited Nicaragua perspective', *New Zealand Association for Intermediate and Middle Schooling, 2 (Dialogue and Debate)*, November.

Belief Fluidity in Ireland's Changing Primary School Context

Challenges for religious education

Introduction

In 2018, Ireland was ranked the third most religiously observant country in Western Europe (Pew Research Centre, 2018). However, recent Census data indicates that the number of people self-identifying as Roman Catholic has decreased by 10 percentage points in just six years, falling from 79% in 2016 to 69% in 2022. The situation is complex, especially considering that the number of Catholics in Northern Ireland has risen slightly, from 45% in 2011 to 45.7% in 2021.

The Republic of Ireland has witnessed increasing religious and cultural diversity and a gradual rise in those not affiliated to any religion. This 'No Religion' category, which includes people identifying as humanist, free-thinkers, atheists, sceptics, and agnostics, has risen from 10% in 2016 to 14% in 2022. Sometimes described as the 'new nones', this diverse group resist religious labels, and though many may not believe in God, some are not hostile to religious engagement in education and faith schools (Woodhead, 2016).

These recent changes in people's religious and philosophical identity have impacted on the Irish educational system, where religion plays a key role. Indeed, in contrast to many other European countries, at primary level Ireland has no nationwide system of State schools but instead has a public-funded system of private faith schools. Currently 88.5% of Ireland's 3,095 mainstream primary schools have a Catholic ethos (DoE, 2023).

Despite their prominence, faith schools are encountering multiple changes and challenges. While most parents and faith leaders welcome educational choice, the

Dr Aiveen Mullally

Lecturer in Religious Education, and Director of the Centre for Religious Education, Marino Institute of Education

Patricia Kieran

Associate Professor of Religious Education, and Director of the Irish Institute for Catholic Studies, Mary Immaculate College

This article profiles the complex, evolving role played by religion and belief in the context of sociocultural changes impacting on Ireland's denominational primary school system. Recent research indicates that the religious and belief self-identification of initial teacher educators and primary school teachers is complex and fluid. The article focuses on the challenges that teachers may face as they teach Religious Education.

government's commitment to increasing the number of multidenominational schools to 400 by 2030 – a target that seems increasingly unlikely to be met – has brought change to the primary school system. In the last five years, all of the 25 newly opened mainstream primary schools are multidenominational and none have a religious ethos. From 2012 to 2022, while 69 multidenominational schools have opened, 118 Catholic schools and 11 Church of Ireland schools have closed. Although the system is still heavily denominational, there is a perceptible feeling that change is inevitable.

Role of Religious Education in Ireland's denominational system

Ireland's denominational primary educational system is distinct in how it defines its school system in terms of religious affiliation. Further, the State does not prescribe content for the curricular area of Religious Education (RE), leaving responsibility for its content, delivery, and assessment in the hands of school patrons. In 2023, the Department of Education's inaugural curriculum framework designates Religious Education as one of the curricula areas, but there has been considerable change in its identity, role, and location in schools.

Initially, the most noticeable change is terminological. It is worth remembering that terminology has changed in the past. In the 1971 curriculum, Religious Instruction, conceptualised as forming students in faith, was integrated with other curricular areas and identified as the most important subject in the curriculum. By 1999 it was renamed Religious Education and emphasis was placed on educationally inclusive approaches that recognised the diversity of religions and beliefs.

In 2023, what was previously termed RE has emerged as an amalgamate and fluid term called 'Religious/Ethical/Multi-belief, and Values Education – The Patron's Programme' (NCCA, 2023). The awkwardness of this expansive term testifies to the NCCA's desire to avoid offending any one educational sector by diplomatically including a cover-all term that encompasses different approaches to patron's programmes in primary schools.

Interestingly, across Europe, RE is accepted as an inclusive umbrella term encompassing a range of ethical, values, and multi-belief dimensions, as well as faith formation approaches. But in Ireland the term *religion* or *religious* is sometimes linked to the contested notion that religious bodies, in particular the Catholic Church, should not be involved in State-funded education.

The State does not prescribe content for the curricular area of Religious Education (RE), leaving responsibility for its content, delivery, and assessment in the hands of school patrons.

Belief fluidity

Though the new curricular framework designates RE as a curricular area in primary schools with a new recommended teaching time of 2 hours per week, studies suggest that primary teachers may not be teaching it as intended in Catholic schools. Recent research with 400 postgraduate initial teacher education (ITE) students in two Catholic teacher education colleges in Ireland reveals a disconnect between students' personal beliefs and the curricular content they are required to teach children in Catholic primary schools (Kieran & Mullally, 2021).

This mixed-methods study profiles the religious beliefs and non-religious worldviews of ITE students as part of a study on their understanding of and attitudes towards religious and non-religious beliefs. The data indicates that 97% of participants attended a Catholic primary school and 89% a Catholic post-primary school. Further, 99% received the Sacraments of First Eucharist and Confirmation at primary school. With Catholic education and sacramental initiation playing such a significant role in their education, it might be expected that participants' personal beliefs and lives would mirror conventional Catholic teaching and practice. But this is not always the case.

While 58% continued to identify as Roman Catholic, only 39% said they believed in one God and 37% in the Holy Spirit, two core non-negotiable aspects of Catholic belief. Further, 19% were unsure what they believed, and 11% did not believe in God. When it comes to their religious practice, 16% said they attended weekly Mass and 30% said they never attended. Participants revealed an interesting range and fluidity of beliefs, ticking boxes for energy (53%), spirits (44%), psychics (18%), and crystals (10%). Their belief in energy and spirits was greater than their belief in God. Moreover, 7% believed in gods, 9% in magic, and 14% in reincarnation.

The data shows ITE students' fascinating identification with a range of eclectic, fluid, and individual beliefs drawn from outside formal orthodox Christian beliefs. Findings suggest that they are hesitant to identify with any one tradition. Harmon's (2018) research on the voice of the child on religion in an Irish Catholic primary school also reveals belief fluidity among children. A significant number of children in his research identified with a sense of belonging to different religious traditions (one said, 'I am a Catholic Buddhist'), suggesting comfort with a variety of cultural and religious practices that they may be experiencing in more diverse, multicultural families.

With recent studies indicating a trend towards extra-institutional religious practice (Ganiel, 2019) and disaffiliation from institutional religion and practice among ITE students, it is important to ask questions about the appropriateness of expecting beginning teachers to be tasked with sacramental preparation and faith formation in Catholic primary schools. Nurturing children's faith is also a

Recent research reveals a disconnect between students' personal beliefs and the curricular content they are required to teach children in Catholic primary schools (Kieran & Mullally, 2021).

very onerous role for teachers that is often not being complemented by the role of the family and the parish.

In a move towards reform, the Dublin Diocese set up a Sacraments Implementation Group in 2020 (Association of Catholics in Ireland, 2020). It began with a listening process with parishes and parents. Parents revealed a strong desire to communicate to their children a belief in God and for prayer, but their disposition towards Church was complex. A 'lingering fondness' for their childhood experiences of faith was clear, but Mass attendance is not where they are now experiencing a spiritual connection. Many felt an alienation from Church language and its teachings (ibid.).

Conclusion

In a country with an overwhelmingly denominational or faith-based system of schooling at primary level, and a sizeable majority of faith schools at post-primary level, it is important to explore what this rise of the religiously unaffiliated and belief fluidity might mean for children, parents, and educators. Research is revealing that many young teachers in Irish primary classrooms are now more comfortable aligning themselves with a broader spectrum of beliefs than with more traditional, orthodox belief systems.

This emerging fluidity of belief among ITE students and children situates Ireland's denominational primary-school system in a new landscape. It is crucial for denominational schools to consider the place of religiously unaffiliated students and teachers in the educational system and to recognise the changing contours of the traditionally hegemonic relationship between religion and education in Ireland. Far from this being a bleak analysis, the reality points to more diverse, inclusive, dialogical classrooms in Ireland, with opportunities to reimagine the role and place of religion in Irish primary schools.

It is crucial for denominational schools to consider the place of religiously unaffiliated students and teachers in the educational system.

REFERENCES

Association of Catholics in Ireland (2020) 'Breakthrough for Family-Led Sacraments Model in Dublin'. 12 November. https://acireland.ie/breakthrough-for-family-led-sacraments-model-in-dublin/.

Department of Education (DoE) (2023) 'Statistical Bulletin: Overview of Education 2002–2022'. Dublin: Government publications. www.gov.ie/en/collection/annual-statistical-reports/.

Ganiel, G. (2019) 'Religious Practice in a post-Catholic Ireland: Towards a concept of "extra-institutional religion"', *Social Compass*, 66(4), 471–487.

Harmon, M. (2018) '"I am a Catholic Buddhist": The voice of children on religion and religious education in an Irish Catholic primary school classroom'. Doctoral thesis, Dublin City University.

Kieran, P. and Mullally, A. (2021) 'Beyond belief? Pre-service teachers' perspectives on teaching RE in Ireland', *Journal of Religious Education*, 69, 423–437.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2023) *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools.* Dublin: Department of Education.

Pew Research Centre (2018) *Being Christian in Western Europe,* p.95. www.pewforum.org/2018/05/29/being-christian-in-western-europe/.

Woodhead, L. (2016) 'The rise of "No Religion" in Britain: The emergence of a new cultural majority', *Journal of the British Academy*, 4, 245–261.

✱✱✱

Powerstown Educate Together School wins Nature Hero Award 2023

Powerstown Educate Together National School in Tyrrelstown, Dublin, was the winner of the Glenveagh Nature Hero Award 2023. The prize was a certificate, a plaque, and a €10,000 school garden makeover.

The Glenveagh Nature Hero Award aims to support schools with their biodiversity goals and provides a mark of excellence to schools looking to create an educational space that nurtures love of nature, develops knowledge of Irish biodiversity and encourages real action to help it locally.

School Principal Helena Hench said:

" It's incredible to see the pupils all work together over the past year and see how their hard work paid off. The children are beyond excited to have won a garden makeover for the school, and myself and the staff at Powerstown ETNS could not be more proud."

Where There's Blame, There's a Claim

Duty of care and negligence in schools

Law

A dynamic approach to supervision in the school community is the best way of discharging a school's duty of care, avoiding accidents, and mitigating negligence claims. The greater proportion of recent school negligence cases adjudicated by our courts have been dismissed due to an irrefutable level of vigilant supervision that ensured a duty of care was sufficiently discharged. But such claims are best avoided because, regardless of the outcome, the defence of negligence claims is both expensive and stressful.

The tort of negligence is defined as the failure to exercise the appropriate care that is expected under specific circumstances. To succeed in a negligence claim, the plaintiff must prove that the defendant owed him or her a duty of care and breached this duty. The plaintiff must also have suffered a loss or damage and must prove that the defendant's breach caused it.

So what exactly does 'duty of care' mean? The infamous case of *Donoghue v. Stevenson* established the baseline definition, which has endured for nearly a century. Duty of care essentially requires us to take reasonable care to avoid acts or omissions which we could foresee may cause harm to people with whom we have a 'proximate relationship'.

Two distinct legal concepts emerge here: foreseeability and proximity. Foreseeability requires us to anticipate, as a reasonable probability, that someone could get injured by our carelessness. The greater the degree of foreseeability, the more likely we may be found negligent in the event of an accident.

John Houlihan
Education Law Consultant

'Duty of care' is a familiar term in our vernacular, but its full import and mechanics are not always clearly understood. This article outlines the scope of this legal concept and provides insights into what schools and teachers can do to discharge this duty and avoid negligence claims.

Duty of care essentially requires us to take reasonable care to avoid acts or omissions which we could foresee may cause harm to people with whom we have a 'proximate relationship'.

Next is proximity. As a general rule, we do not owe everyone in society a duty of care, only those with whom we have a proximate relationship. But the concept is rather elastic, and there have been many negligence actions where proximity was not clearly obvious. In *Purtill v. Athlone*, a young boy who stole detonators from an abattoir, and was injured when he discharged them at home, successfully sued for negligence.

For many years the courts applied the law of negligence on the basis that where there was proximity and foreseeability of loss or injury, liability for negligence would invariably apply. But in an effort to curb the expansion of negligence claims, the Supreme Court in *Glencar Exploration and Andaman Resources v. Mayo County Council* held that courts should not be obliged to hold that a duty of care exists in every case but should consider whether it is just and reasonable to impose a duty of care in all the circumstances. This now appears to be the settled approach in negligence cases in Ireland.

Duty of care is therefore essentially a control mechanism which sets a reasonably high threshold for litigants to surpass, so that our courts are not flooded with negligence claims arising from accidental damage or injury. If no duty of care exists, then negligence cannot be proven.

Applying the law to teachers and schools

We can see in a school situation that we have an undeniable proximate relationship with students and accordingly owe them a duty of care. The standard of duty owed by teachers was established in *Maher v. Board of Management Presentation Junior School* as that of a prudent parent, given that teachers operate in loco parentis. In this case the court held that teachers or school management are not necessarily negligent simply because an injury occurs during school hours. A degree of foreseeability is required.

Foreseeability in a school environment is a relatively easy concept to anticipate, though it may differ with the students' age group, capacity, and activities. Clearly, younger children require more supervision than adolescents, though adolescents may require closer supervision in certain circumstances for different reasons. Equally, students engaging in practical subjects involving hazardous tools, dangerous chemicals, or rigorous physical activity require close supervision, because without it, it is foreseeable that accidents could occur, causing injury. Moreover, students with special educational needs often require a high degree of supervision to keep them safe while engaging in normal school activities.

Section 15 of the Education Act 1998 provides that the board of management is responsible for the overall governance of a school, while day-to-day management is devolved to the principal. For primary schools, Circular 16/73

requires a principal to organise effective supervision of pupils during assembly, breaks, and dismissal. Rules 121(4) and 124(1) of the Rules for National Schools oblige individual teachers to take all reasonable precautions to ensure pupils' safety and to participate in supervising pupils while on the school premises and in school activities.

There's no doubting the legal, ethical, and moral responsibility of teachers, both individually and collectively, to provide a duty of care at all times towards the children in the schools where they teach. But how is this duty effectively discharged?

A clear supervision policy, ongoing risk assessment, and constant vigilance are key to avoiding accidents and reducing negligence claims arising from injuries to students while in school or on school-related activities. This requires more than a nominal supervision rota applied ineffectually. It requires a risk assessment to be carried out for all activities, supported by a culture of vigilant supervision that permeates all aspects of school activities in every classroom, corridor, hall, play area, and pitch which involves students. A supervision policy appropriate to students' age, the number of students, and their activities must be developed and strictly observed if schools are to have any chance of defeating negligence claims.

This is too important an issue to assign to special needs assistants (SNAs) or volunteer parents, because neither are part of the school management system. That is not to say that SNAs could not assist teachers with supervision duties in the school environs or that volunteer parents are prevented from assisting teachers supervising school trips, once a teacher remains responsible for that supervision.

Ultimately, the duty-of-care buck stops with the principal, and in the event of a successful negligence claim, vicarious liability will also be attached to the board of management. The leadership roles of the board of management and principal are crucial in establishing, implementing, and reviewing the provision of effective supervision in their schools. Prudent schools will have this on their agenda regularly. The start of the school year is perhaps the most appropriate time to establish management expectations and staff obligations, with further reviews and reminders throughout the school year to avoid complacency.

A review of recent case law shows how important a bulletproof supervision policy is in strengthening a school's response to a negligence claim. Many schools have successfully defeated such claims by being able to show that such policies not only existed but were strictly implemented. Others were not so lucky, as illustrated in *Murphy v. County Wexford VEC*, where a school that did not implement its supervision rota on the day a student was injured was found negligent for breaching its duty of care.

A clear supervision policy, ongoing risk assessment, and constant vigilance are key to avoiding accidents and reducing negligence claims.

A school's duty of care is not limited to actual school hours but extends to the periods when students are on the premises before and after school. (Green v. Mundow)

Not surprisingly, physical activity in schools features in much of the case law, highlighting the need for continuous risk assessment for such activities. For example, in *Kane v. Kennedy*, a student was injured while playing a simple game of rounders in a school hall. The school was found negligent because there was insufficient space to play the game, which resulted in the plaintiff student colliding with a brick wall.

Judges appreciate that physical education is a necessary and important part of the curriculum and that, by its nature, injuries will occur from time to time. They also appreciate that not every accident points to teacher negligence. For example, in *Carolan v. St. Ciaran's National School,* a claim of negligence arising from an injury sustained in a physical education (PE) class was dismissed on the ground that there was no evidence of negligence on the part of the teacher. Again, in *Cole v. St. Joseph of Cluny Secondary School,* a student who suffered an injury while playing hockey had her negligence claim dismissed on the ground that she simply slipped on wet grass. More recently, in *O'Brien v. Waterford and Wexford ETB*, a student who injured himself in a collision with a wall during a sprinting exercise had his claim dismissed on the basis that the PE teacher had provided clear instruction and had allowed a sufficient run-off area to avoid such collisions.

Arrival and dismissal of students

A school's duty of care is not limited to actual school hours but extends to the periods when students are on the premises before and after school. It is now generally accepted that supervision should be provided for a reasonable amount of time before and after school (*Green v. Mundow)*. Crucially, these times should be clearly stated in a school's supervision policy, and parents should be made aware that the school will not be responsible for students who are on school property outside of these published times.

Prudent schools would ensure that a teacher is present at the school gate for a reasonable period to supervise students arriving and departing by school transport or independently, as these present occasions where boisterous or aggressive activity can often result in injury.

The recent case of S*ilva v. Templeogue College* illustrates such risk. Here, an earlier altercation during school time continued during lunch break, when the plaintiff was assaulted by another student near the school while on his way to a local shop. He alleged that the school failed to exercise the required supervision of a large number of students who leave the school at lunchtime. Having considered the evidence provided, the court held that the school was not negligent because it was unaware of the assault and the previous altercation which led to it, but took appropriate action once notified of the

assault by suspending the other student in accordance with the school's code of behaviour.

Conclusion

By their nature, children have a propensity for high jinks and high-octane activities which can put them in harm's way. Despite the best efforts of teachers, accidents can and do happen, resulting in injuries to students and subsequent negligence claims. In their professional role, teachers have a clear duty of care to their students. In this regard they must make reasonable efforts to protect students from harm. In general terms this requires a reasonable level of supervision in classrooms, common areas, and play areas.

More specifically, teachers of practical subjects should contemplate foreseeable risks which could cause injury to students, carry out a risk assessment of these activities, and provide a level of supervision appropriate to the students' age, their capacity, and the nature of the activities. Activities outside the controlled school environment, such as school tours, greatly elevate this duty of care and associated risk assessment.

This dynamic approach to supervision in the school community is the best way of discharging this duty of care, avoiding accidents, and mitigating negligence claims. Teachers may take some comfort from the dicta of Mr Justice Peart in *Maher v. Board of Management Presentation Junior School,* where he opined that simply because an injury takes place in a school does not automatically demonstrate that a school or teacher is negligent.

The courts have endeavoured to curb the expansion of negligence claims in recent years, and this is reflected in the greater proportion of cases reviewed in this article where teacher negligence was not found, due to the irrefutable level of vigilant supervision which ensured that a duty of care was sufficiently discharged. However, such claims are best avoided because, regardless of the outcome, the defence of negligence claims is both expensive and stressful for those involved.

The courts have endeavoured to curb the expansion of negligence claims in recent years, and this is reflected in the greater proportion of cases reviewed in this article where teacher negligence was not found.

CASE LAW CITED:

Carolan v. The Board of Management of St. Ciaran's National School [2006] IEHC 416

Cole v. St Joseph of Cluny Secondary School [2016] *Irish Times* 16 December 2016

Donoghue v. Stevenson [1932] A.C. 562

Dunne v. Trustees and Board of Management of St Paul's Secondary School [2019] IEHC 22

Glencar Exploration plc and Andaman Resources plc v. Mayo County Council [2002] 1 I.R. 84

Green v. Mundow (Unreported, Circuit Court, 20 January 2000)

Kane v. Kennedy [1999] IEHC 142

Kelvin O'Brien v. Malcolm Byrne and Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board [2023] IEHC 367

Maher v. Board of Management Presentation Junior School [2004] IEHC 337

Murphy v. County Wexford VEC [2004] IESC 49

Purtill v. Athlone UDC [1968] I.R. 205

Silva v. Templeogue College (Unreported, High Court, 20 April 2023)

REFERENCES

Department of Education (1965) *Rules for National Schools under the Department of Education.* Dublin: Stationery Office.

Department of Education (1973) Primary Branch, Circular 16/73.

Department of Education and Science (2013) Primary Branch, Primary Circular 18/03.

✷✷✷

In July 2023, over 75 primary school teachers took part in the Marine Institute's Explorers Continuing Professional Development marine-themed 5-day training courses, where they learned the value of integrating marine themes in their teaching as part of the new Primary School Curriculum Framework.

A Sense of Belonging

Perspectives on the integration and inclusion of Ukrainian pupils in Irish schools

One of the most challenging but rewarding tasks in Irish education recently has been welcoming and managing displaced children from Ukraine in our schools. As principals we are familiar with enrolling and offering education to pupils whose first language is not English. For over two decades, we have enrolled varying numbers of non-Irish-national children to our schools as their parents and families relocated to Ireland. We all recall the Polish influx in the early 2000s: beautiful children and families who simply sought work and a better life here.

Like many Irish schools, St Joseph's Primary School in Tipperary Town serves a diverse community – we now have 42% non-Irish-national children from 23 countries. In 2011, we lost our shared permanent EAL (English as an additional language) teacher and must appeal each year for language support for almost half our pupil cohort. This year we have one full-time EAL teacher and 20 hours part-time, which enables us to offer quality support and English-language lessons to these pupils and assist and settle newcomer pupils who arrive throughout the school year.

We currently have over a dozen Ukrainian pupils, each from a different region in their home country. In the last school year, we also had a 24-year-old Ukrainian graduate with excellent English; since October 2022, Olha Hnativ has been working for 10 hours a week in our school. Olha has helped the girls settle in, understand the systems in our school, and access their daily education. She is the bridge between them and their new school setting, with a language barrier and cultural differences to manage.

Olha, who has a master's degree in interpreting, taught children and adults in Kyiv before the invasion. She says the Ukrainian girls love school here: 'the school day is shorter in Ireland, with a more varied curriculum,

Louise Tobin

President of the Irish Primary Principals' Network

This article tells the story of how displaced Ukrainian children have settled into an Irish primary school and embraced the opportunities and learning in the Irish education system. It reports the opinions of teachers on their in-class experiences with newcomer Ukrainian pupils, and it includes a first-hand account by Olha Hnativ, a Ukrainian teacher who supported and taught our pupils.

including Music, Drama, PE [Physical Education], and Art, whereas back in the Ukraine, school was mainly focused on Maths and language learning.'

Our teachers report that our Ukrainians pupils in general made good progress at English, were strong at Maths, enjoyed the interactive online Irish lessons, participated well in Music – particularly in learning to play the ukulele – loved all PE classes and playing sports, and engaged very well with Art.

As regards friendships, our Ukrainian students made friends with fellow Ukrainians and Russian-speaking pupils initially, and then over time mixed with all students and made friends with all their classmates. Their teachers described them as generally very sociable, capable, and adaptable. They integrated well and settled in seamlessly. What a remarkable achievement and success story for these wonderful young children forced to flee their homes and country to escape the perils and dangers of war.

Our teachers report that our Ukrainians pupils in general made good progress at English, were strong at Maths, enjoyed the interactive online Irish lessons, participated well in Music, loved all PE classes and playing sports, and engaged very well with Art.

For my own part as principal, and to create this sense of belonging for these most deserving pupils, I meet the Ukrainian pupils and their teacher, Olha, every week. I am learning some Ukrainian phrases and practise them weekly with these brave young ladies. At our weekly meet, we discuss customs in our countries, and I am hugely impressed at their efforts in acquiring English. They tell me they love Tipperary school.

At our monthly whole-school assemblies, after an initial settling-in period, our Ukrainian pupils gladly agreed to participate. They sang their national anthem to an audience in awe at their resilience. They shared other songs and poems at further gatherings and took part in the many Irish celebrations and dress-up days such as St Patrick's Day, Jersey Day, and Valentine's Day.

I would describe the Ukrainian people in Ireland as ambitious, determined people who want to make the best of a dreadful situation. They are delighted their children are learning English, and they are most appreciative of our efforts to include their children. I applaud our school leaders and staffs for welcoming over 15,600 Ukrainians into our schools and giving them a real sense of belonging. Let us remember:

One book, one pen, one child

And one teacher can change the world.

— Malala Yousafzai

Ukrainian Children in Irish Schools

— Olha Hnativ

The Russian war against the Ukraine made every young innocent Ukrainian child become emotionally mature in a very short time. In my case, as a Ukrainian national seeking refuge in Ireland, I was so lucky to secure a job as an EAL teacher in Tipperary Town, working with Ukrainian pupils who had moved to Ireland to escape the war. My main priority for my pupils was to ensure a happy transition.

Ukrainian students are very happy in Irish schools and seem to settle in very well. Sometimes they just need a friend to listen to them and speak their mother tongue. Sometimes they just wanted to share their painful thoughts about the homes they were forced to leave, relatives they had happy memories of, or interesting stories about an ordinary happy life that was ruined by the war in the blink of an eye. That friend, for many displaced Ukrainian children, became their EAL teacher, a role I was very happy to take, and to befriend and support my young compatriots.

According to a survey we undertook among Ukrainian students at St Joseph's Primary School, all said they feel safe and are making friends with children of different nationalities. Ukrainian pupils love and respect their teachers in Irish school; they always say that their teachers and classmates are very nice, friendly, and supportive.

A Growth Mindset Programme that is worked on in the school helped Ukrainian children feel and share positivity, kindness, gratitude, and love. I also feel it helped to shape their personalities and vision in their new world. Children are aware that they are part of a supportive, diverse pupil community at St Joseph's, where they can rely on the principal and their teachers and classmates to ensure their inclusion and integration.

The school principal, Ms Tobin, has a special place in their hearts. The Ukrainian pupils look forward to their weekly meetings with her, where they share their ups and downs, tell about Ukrainian traditions and holidays, sing Ukrainian songs, and even teach the principal some Ukrainian words. Ukrainian students are not afraid of new experiences in their new school setting, even though there is a huge sense of loss and of course a language barrier.

But no one can deny the fact that there are some days when these displaced young children are upset. Their sadness is witnessed by the teachers, the principal, and their classmates. In most cases, these expressions of sadness are caused by the trauma of the war. There is a justifiable conflict at play constantly in their young minds, between their current reality and a desire to just go back home.

No one can deny the fact that there are some days when these displaced young children are upset... In most cases, these expressions of sadness are caused by the trauma of the war.

The most challenging part of integration concerns language. Some Ukrainian pupils need EAL teachers. The Department of Education has put a lot of resources into providing additional teaching supports for Ukrainian learners.

They express much of their sadness through art. Drawings and craft ideas are a great illustration of their true sadness for their motherland. The unspoken language of art became the children's bridge for intercultural communication: they could reflect their true thoughts and feelings through singing, dancing, poems, drawings, DIY crafts, stage performances, and playing musical instruments.

Although the Ukrainian pupils had to join a completely new and truly different education system, they showed great courage alongside a desire to progress their education. They are so brave, not only to step into a new world of education and culture, but also to share their vision about ongoing events at their primary school through participation in the monthly assemblies, the celebration of national Irish holidays, sports weeks, the Growth Mindset Programme, and indeed contributing to these events by performing on the stage, singing, dancing, creating posters, and so on.

It must be emphasised that there is a need for supports to enable Ukrainian children to access their education in Irish schools. The most challenging part of integration concerns language. Some Ukrainian pupils need EAL teachers. The Department of Education has put a lot of resources into providing additional teaching supports for Ukrainian learners, and that is definitely appreciated by both Ukrainian students and teachers. Ukrainian teachers, side by side with Ukrainian students, are warmly welcomed by loving, friendly, supportive Irish school communities, who showed great understanding and shared their best methods of teaching, and we are all very grateful for that.

It is worth mentioning that these brave, intelligent young ladies have a great desire and readiness to make new friends, learn a new language and culture, study, share their best ideas, and support each other. Looking at their happy faces during school breaks, one might wonder how it is possible that these young Ukrainian pupils who were forced to abandon their motherland, and are so vulnerable, have this enormous strength to fight for the opportunity to be heard and progress their lives and learning, knowing that there is no home and previous life to go back to, because it is destroyed.

The Wellbeing and Values In–School Project

Designing a wellbeing and values programme for primary school children

Introduction

All schools are mandated to promote wellbeing through the school self-evaluation process (DES, 2018). The Department of Education provides no prescribed curriculum, so each school must create their own wellbeing programme. It recommends a whole-school approach comprising universal and targeted levels of intervention, as set out by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS, 2007; DES, 2019).

In a busy primary-school environment, teachers are under pressure to deliver overloaded curricula and meet stringent time pressures and multiple demands. They struggle to source and refine appropriate materials and resources to meet their students' wellbeing needs. This article shares insights from a practitioner project that sought to work with teachers in their school contexts to design and develop a detailed, year-long, whole-school wellbeing and values programme.

Support for Few:
Individualised, targeted intervention for children and young people with more complex and enduring needs.

Support for Some:
Identification, targeted prevention and early intervention for those at risk.

Support for All:
Whole School and Classroom Support for All:
Whole school support for wellbeing promotion that includes prevention and development of social and emotional competence & coping skills for all.

Figure 1: NEPS Framework

Susan Brophy
Special Education Teacher, Holy Cross NS

This article describes the design and implementation of a programme of interventions to support the development of independent wellbeing skills among younger children in primary education. Teachers used innovative pedagogies that empowered children to become self-directed, self-regulated learners. By reinforcing universal human values through quotes, songs, and stories, the children learned to build on their strengths, take control of their feelings and emotions, and develop their inner moral compass.

The Literature

Definitions of wellbeing in children are problematic, because it is not constant and can vary from child to child and from moment to moment (Svane et al., 2019; Vujčić et al., 2019). As a result, solutions and programmes informed by both academic and practitioner research are difficult to find, particularly on providing teachers with the resources to help them support young children in the development of appropriate wellbeing or coping strategies.

The inextricable link between emotion and cognition must be recognised in order for learning to be truly holistic (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007; Eustace & McHugh, 2022). The cognitive processes of learning, decision-making, and problem-solving, used widely in schools, are all affected by emotion. These emotional processes are necessary for the child to develop an 'emotional rudder' or inner moral compass. Regular mindfulness practice helps children comprehend their mind–body connection more fully. It allows them take control of their emotions, trust their moral compass, boost their self-esteem, and strengthen their resilience.

The Wellbeing and Values In–School Project

'I consider time a challenge for teachers, but the Plan is very accommodating, so this should help with organising it, as the information and resources are ready to go!' (Teacher)

Phase One: This action learning project took place during 2021–2022 in a large co-education urban primary school. A customised wellbeing programme (the 'Plan') for all classes provided: a year-long multimodal values pedagogy for the holistic development of children from all classes; targeted support for an at-risk cohort with additional needs; and universal support for all children.

Class teachers, special education teachers (SETs), deputy principal, and parents all contributed to designing, developing, and refining the Plan, which comprised songs, stories, quotes, mindful activities, guided visualisations, breathing exercises, and coping techniques. Children who needed extra support were provided with small-group wellbeing sessions (focused interventions) by the SET. They were encouraged to write about a particular value and what it meant to them, to share their story at home, and with the SET and their peers in the small-group session the following week.

Positive affirmations from family, teachers, and peers provided a triangulation of support for the children, who each week built up a positive picture of themselves. Teacher buy-in was critical to our success. To avoid adding to teachers' workload and ensure their engagement with the Plan, we made it

'This is so child-centered, with the lovely variety of different video clips. They are all there for you. That's the highlight. You can go in, find the link, put it on, and the children are engaged. It's so age-appropriate.'

easy to implement, delivered teacher training and support, and provided hyperlinked content with easy access to additional resources.

Phase Two: A research grant from the Teaching Council enabled further development of the Plan during 2022–2023 that specifically targeted children from Infants to First Class and an at-risk cohort with additional needs in the original school and a second, smaller, rural primary school. This revised Plan also met the specific need of developing children's coping skills and strategies for use in the schoolyard and other social situations. Teachers in both schools found that the Plan's non-prescriptive nature gave them autonomy as professionals to choose and apply the resources with the children in their group as they saw fit.

Figure 2: Components of the Wellbeing and Values Plan

Discussion

All children need to be resilient. Resilience training is not just for at-risk groups (Forman, 2021; Eustace & McHugh, 2022). Both school communities recognised the need for a customised, detailed Plan to help children develop coping skills and strategies to deal with life's uncertainties. Having a Plan was essential to meet the specific needs of schools facing unique or localised challenges.

The teacher's role goes beyond teaching and plays an important part in student wellbeing. Developing new pedagogical practices is a necessary part of the

teacher's role in implementing a whole-school wellbeing plan; especially for younger classes and children at risk.

Final thoughts

In today's ever-changing, always-on world, it can be increasingly difficult for children to explore that space, to find the time to choose a response, to simply be in the moment and balance life's challenges with the resources within themselves.

Teaching children the skills of mindful breathing and the power of positive thinking, and reinforcing human values through songs and stories, can empower them to become self-directed, self-regulated learners, building on their strengths, learning how to take control of their feelings and emotions and helping them develop the resilience and mental strength necessary to deal with the pressures of modern life. Recommendations from the study include the need to provide a complete, fully functioning Wellbeing Resource Pack for teachers, and more detailed training for special education teachers with the focus on at-risk children.

Note: The author would like to acknowledge the invaluable contribution of Dr Anne Graham Cagney to the publication of this article, and would like to thank her most sincerely for her guidance and support throughout the writing process. Her expertise, insights, suggestions, and encouragement were much appreciated, and without them publication would not have been possible

.

REFERENCES

Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2018) 'Best practice guidance for primary schools in the use of programmes and/or external facilitators in promoting wellbeing consistent with the Department of Education and Skills' Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice'. Circular 0042/2018. Dublin: Government publications. www.gov.ie/en/circular/6e3c9d8cac2b4455af829826ff16ec74/.

Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2019) *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018–2023*. Dublin: Government publications. www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/wellbeing-policy-statement-and-framework-for-practice-2018%E2%80%932023.pdf.

Eustace, S. and McHugh, D. (2022) 'Supporting the wellbeing and mental health of primary school pupils'. In: B. Mooney (Ed.) *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2022*, pp. 108–113. Dublin: Education Matters. https://irelandseducationyearbook.ie/downloads/IEYB2022/YB2022-Primary-03.pdf.

Forman, F. (2021) 'Staff wellbeing impacts student wellbeing: Supporting resilience in school communities'. In: B. Mooney (Ed.) *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2021*, pp.

86–88. Dublin: Education Matters. https://irelandseducationyearbook.ie/downloads/IEYB2021/YB2021-Primary-02.pdf.

Frankl, V.E. (1946) *Ein psycholog erlebt das konzentrationslager.* München, Germany: Verlag für Jugend und Volk.

Immordino-Yang, M.H. and Damasio, A. (2007) 'We feel, therefore we learn: The relevance of affective and social neuroscience to education', *International Mind, Brain, and Educational Society,* 1(1), 3–10.

National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) (2007) *A Continuum of Support: Guidelines for Teachers and Resource Pack.* Dublin: Government publications.

Svane, D., Evans, N., and Carter, M. (2019) 'Wicked wellbeing: Examining the disconnect between the rhetoric and reality of wellbeing interventions in schools', *Australian Journal of Education,* 63(2), 209–231.

Teaching Council (n.d.) *Researchers in Residence Scheme (RiRS).* Maynooth: Teaching Council. www.teachingcouncil.ie/professional-learning/research/research-support-framework/researchers-in-residence-scheme-rirs/.

Vujčić, M.T., Brajša-Žganec, A., and Franc, R. (2019) 'Children and young peoples' views on well-being: A qualitative study', *Child Indicators Research,* 12, 791–819.

* * *

Scoil Chaitríona Junior, Renmore, Galway, was named as the national winner of the Explorers Ocean Champion School Awards 2023 for their Healthy Ocean project, 'Caring for our Ocean'.

Mick Gillooly, Interim CEO of the Marine Institute said:

"The children's enthusiasm was evident in many ways: in their shadow puppetry films, when they went on beach cleans, and in their musical performance 'Fadhb na Mara' about ocean conservation. Their work was exceptional."

The Potential of Small-Group Parallel Instruction for EAL Support Provision in Primary Schools

Lessons from the Tell–a–Tale | Inis Scéal Programme

This article unpacks the potential of using a small-group parallel instruction model for English as an additional language in Irish primary schools. Drawing on doctoral research findings in the 'Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal' programme, it outlines current approaches to collaborative (co-)teaching, charts participants' responses to the small-group parallel instructional model, and proposes future action for policy and practice.

Introduction

The launch of the Primary Curriculum Framework, Free Schoolbooks Scheme, and Revised Mathematics Curriculum represent some of the major milestones charted in the Irish primary education system in 2023. Such new advances prompt critical reflection on former developments in the primary education sector, two of which underpin the foundations for this article: the integrated Primary Language Curriculum (NCCA, 2015; DES, 2019), and the revised Special Education Teaching Allocation (DES, 2017). Lessons from these changes in education are fundamental to the trajectory of any newly introduced approaches in Ireland.

Markedly different from its predecessor, the Primary Language Curriculum integrates considerations for the teaching of English, Irish, and alternative home languages. Transferability of knowledge, skills, and concepts is a central tenet of its conceptualisation, which exemplifies the key role of collaboration within and across languages in education.

Dr Aoife Merrins
Primary school teacher at Scoil Mhichíl Naofa, Athy, and PhD graduate of the Institute of Education, Dublin City University

An tOllamh Pádraig Ó Duibhir
Institute of Education, Dublin City University

Gillian Lake
Assistant Professor in Early Childhood Education, Institute of Education, Dublin City University

This unified approach to language instruction is mirrored in the Special Education Teaching Allocation, which gives primary school leaders the autonomy to manage and deploy support personnel for pupils with special educational needs (SEN) or English as an additional language (EAL), based on such learners' individual learning needs. As such, educators are invited to proceed with co-teaching practices, like 'team-teaching and small-group teaching' (DES, 2017, p.18), which raises the matter of current co-teaching practices in the Irish context.

Collaborative (co-)teaching in an Irish context

Co-teaching emphasises the role of teachers as collaborative agents to support learning in the mainstream classroom, with an emphasis on sharing expertise, decision-making, lesson delivery, and assessment (Tasdemir & Yildirim, 2017). Co-teaching models evident in Irish primary classrooms include station teaching, team teaching, and small-group parallel instruction.

Station teaching, a well-documented co-teaching approach in Irish primary schools (Daly, 2015; Merrins et al., 2019; O'Connell, 2020), occurs when students are put into three or more groups and rotate to different teacher-led learning centres in the classroom. Team teaching involves two teachers teaching in the same classroom at the same time; it has limited reported evidence in practice at primary level (Vahey, 2013), yet it shows promise for educating post-primary students (Ó Murchú & Conway, 2017). Small-group parallel instruction involves three or more teachers working together in a classroom to teach the same content to their own assigned group for a set amount of time. As with team teaching, there is only one known study of this approach in Irish primary education (Merrins & Lake, 2020).

All primary schools in Ireland were obliged to refrain from co-teaching models between 2020 and 2021 to help control the spread of Covid-19. This reduction of co-teaching models was very apparent in the 'Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal' study.

About Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal

The Tell-a-Tale | Inis Scéal programme was designed, developed, and delivered as part of a qualitative PhD study (Merrins, 2023), providing a child-centred, interactive, and engaging language-learning experience for infant primary pupils to improve their oral narrative retell skills. It adopts daily dialogic shared reading of six weekly traditional tales in English and three fortnightly traditional tales in Irish (Figure 1), gradually encouraging learners to retell the narrative for their group and partner over the course of the week.

Markedly different from its predecessor, the Primary Language Curriculum integrates considerations for the teaching of English, Irish, and alternative home languages.
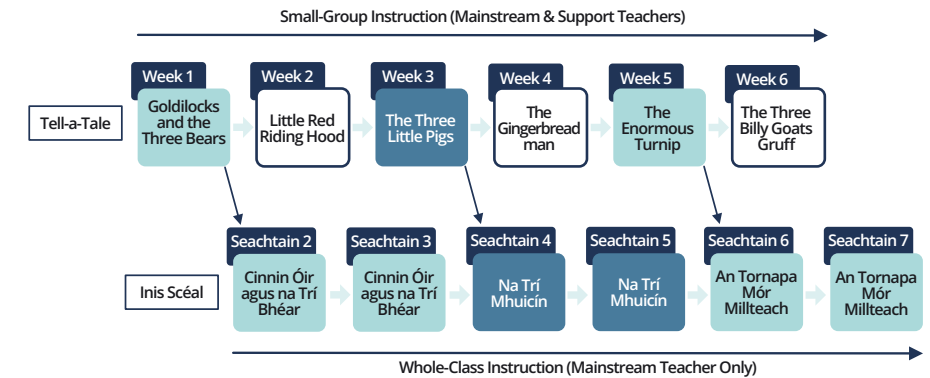
Figure 1: Programme overview

Tell-a-Tale is delivered through small-group parallel instruction by mainstream and support teachers, while Inis Scéal is delivered independently by the mainstream teacher using whole class instruction. Though they differ in their instructional approaches, they share similarities by occurring within the mainstream classroom over a six-week period, by reading the same content in English and Irish, and by using the same resources to support the development of vocabulary, grammar, phonological awareness, and comprehension skills in both English and Irish.

Participant responses to small-group parallel instruction

The study elicited teachers' and pupils' experiences of programme participation. The current article focuses on the thematic analyses of participants' experiences of small-group parallel instruction.

A sample of 20 teacher participants engaged in focus group discussions before, during, and after programme implementation. These conversations charted initial teacher preference for, and extensive experience with, station teaching; all participants reported having never used small-group parallel instruction as a co-teaching model.

Critical reflection revealed that initial teacher education experiences had emphasised solo rather than collaborative teaching models, with the latter being learned 'on the job' after graduation. As with embracing any new initiative, there was some initial hesitation to adopting this approach. Nonetheless, teachers reported their enjoyment of certain factors associated with this method during and after programme delivery:

» the development of teacher–learner relationships over a sustained period of daily instructional time
» the ability to monitor and scaffold progress from one lesson to the next

» the opportunities for meaningful differentiation as and when the needs arose.

Two-thirds of the participant pupil sample (n = 110) emphasised the importance of social interaction in their small-group learning experiences. They expressed a special interest in the opportunity to work with their peers. Friendship, collaboration, play, and conversation were important catalysts for this preference. Thus, small-group learning that enables learner-centric social encounters has wide-ranging functions to support social learning experiences.

Reflections for policy and practice

These findings inform the following recommendations for policy and practice:

Policymakers are encouraged to ensure:

» continued autonomy for schools in the deployment of support personnel for the provision of additional support in SEN and/or EAL
» publication of guidelines for teachers to adopt small-group parallel instruction in mainstream classrooms (applicable to both literacy and numeracy)
» the introduction of an array of co-teaching models in initial teacher education, and to provide opportunities for student teachers to implement these co-teaching approaches during their placements.

Practitioners are invited to adopt:

» multiple methods of in-class co-teaching to avoid over-use of station teaching
» peer tutoring within small-group parallel instructional approaches
» playful learning experiences that enable conversation, collaboration, and friendship formation in junior primary classrooms.

Conclusion

It is evident from this research that small-group parallel instruction may be an underused yet promising approach to teaching language in infant primary classrooms. Despite initial hesitation with this model, practitioners recognised its value for classroom relations, learners' academic progression, and effective differentiation. The interpersonal learning experiences that it enabled were important to many of the pupils, and raise questions for all to consider the social opportunities that prevail within and across the language curriculum.

Ireland's primary education system is once again on the cusp of curriculum reform, and co-teaching approaches, like the small-group parallel instruction

It is evident from this research that small-group parallel instruction may be an underused yet promising approach to teaching language in infant primary classrooms.

model, can greatly assist with embracing this change. This article invites policymakers and practitioners to embrace such approaches to create innovative, collaborative, and effective systems in education.

REFERENCES

Daly, D. (2015) 'The implementation of a literacy intervention "Station Teaching" in infant classes in Irish primary schools'. Doctoral dissertation, University College Cork.

Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2017) *Circular to the Management Authorities of all Mainstream Primary Schools: Special Education Teaching Allocation.* Dublin: DES.

Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2019) *Integrated Primary Language Curriculum.* Dublin: Government publications.

Merrins, A. (2023) 'Exploring the design, development and delivery of a bilingual English-Irish oral narrative programme in linguistically diverse junior primary classrooms'. Doctoral dissertation, Dublin City University.

Merrins, A. and Lake, G. (2020) 'A tale of two halves: Collaboratively supporting children with English as an additional language (EAL)', *ILSA Autumn Newsletter*, pp. 7–12.

Merrins, A., Kazmierczak-Murray, S., and Perkins, R. (2019) 'Using collaborative teaching and storybooks in linguistically diverse junior infant classrooms to increase pupils' contributions to story-time discussions', *Irish Teachers Journal,* 7(1), 91–112.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2015) *Primary Language Curriculum.* Dublin: Stationery Office.

O'Connell, E. (2020) 'Teachers' perspectives of station-teaching in Mathematics in an Irish primary school', *Student Teacher Educational Research e-Journal*, 3, 45–53.

Ó Murchú, F. and Conway, P. (2017) '(Re)positioning team teaching: The visibility and viability of learning in classrooms', *Education Research and Perspectives,* 44, 43–69.

Tasdemir, H. and Yildirim, T. (2017) 'Collaborative teaching from English language instructors' perspectives', *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 13(2), 632–642.

Vahey, T.M. (2013) 'Differentiated spelling instruction using co-teaching', *Learn*, 35, 48–58.

The Physical Voice in 'Student Voice'

Empowering students' physical voices through a public–speaking approach

Introduction

The topic of student voice speaks of potential and possibility and of truly placing students at the centre of their education. In my experience, however, student voice is most often spoken about in the metaphorical sense, referring to representation. In this sense it implies a whole-school commitment to listening to the views and experiences of all students, as well as pedagogical approaches based on student choices and interests.

Talking with students about things that matter in school has a central place in writing about the practice of student voice (Fielding, 2004). According to Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), children have the right to be heard in matters that affect their lives. Since its ratification, however, Article 12 has proven to be one of the most challenging articles to implement (Lansdown, 2011). To truly realise 'student voice', surely all students must be enabled and empowered to develop and strengthen their physical voice.

Empowering students' physical voices

Through my teaching and PhD studies, I've discovered that empowering the physical voices of all students is important and possible through a public-speaking approach. Nearly all teachers and parents (98.5%) who responded to my research survey said they have been called on to speak in public at some stage in their lives, which implies that public-speaking skills are necessary life skills. An initial negative experience of public speaking in childhood was cited by some respondents as a reason for their fear of public speaking into adulthood.

Dr Siobhán Keenan Fitzgerald

Teaching Principal, Eglish Primary School, Co. Galway

What is the role of children's voices in 'student voice'? This article explores the importance of empowering the physical voices of all children through a public-speaking approach to oral language development. If we are serious about realising the concept of student voice in our primary schools, we must enable and empower all students to speak up, speak out to the best of their abilities, and literally have their voice heard.

Public speaking is not often associated with primary school, yet it is engaged in every day. As one survey respondent noted: 'All areas of the curriculum require recall and recount of information, as well as explanation of work, therefore public speaking is easily integrated into all areas.' Across the world, primary school children regularly stand up in front of their peers to present, but the degree to which they are prepared for this is unclear.

Shafer (2010) writes that students as young as five years old are often required to speak in public without adequate training, and that some learn to connect public-speaking experiences with fear and anxiety. Choi (1998) writes that 'most often, students are scared and reluctant to present because they have neither had experience nor learned the rules' (p. 30). It is noteworthy that social phobias, such as fear of public speaking, develop and are most pronounced during early adolescence (10–14 years) (Field et al., 2003).

The definition of public speaking preferred by my study participants is from Merriam-Webster: 'the art of effective communication with an audience'.

Primary school: a safe space to practise

Forget about the traditional view of public speaking as a formal activity that only society's most privileged and powerful engage in. The definition of public speaking preferred by my study participants is from Merriam-Webster: 'the art of effective communication with an audience'.

The good news is that we can support all our students to develop their speaking voice, communication skills, and confidence really effectively and relatively easily, in the safe, supportive environment of our classrooms, by providing explicit training in the skills and with regular opportunities for practice and constructive feedback. Public-speaking skills can be developed in a fun, interactive way, and once the skills are learned, many opportunities for practice arise organically across the school day.

Benefits

Some of the benefits of a public-speaking approach are as follows:

» All students can get periods of uninterrupted speech exploration and can progress at their own pace.
» Students' sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) and confidence develop as a result of engaging in meaningful mastery experiences.
» Students benefit from hearing many presentations by their peers.
» Topics can be taken from across the curriculum and personalised to appeal to students' interests.
» Students learn strategies to manage nerves and self-regulate, experiencing how fears, once faced, can be overcome.

» When students present on a topic, they understand it deeply and can explain how it relates to themselves and their community (Baker, 2008).

The more that children participate, the more effective their contributions, and the strengthening of their skills, confidence, and capacity for democratic participation will bring lifelong benefits (Lansdown, 2011). Having the experience of being truly listened to and heard empowers children to continue to express themselves.

Public speaking is a part of oral language that empowers children to 'develop their thinking, expression, reflection, critique and empathy and supports the development of self-efficacy, identity and full participation in society' (NCCA, 2019, p.6). Democracy can function only if young people learn to argue effectively (Andrews, 1994). If we are truly serious about and committed to realising the concept of student voice in our primary schools, we must enable and empower all students to speak up and out to the best of their abilities, and not just figuratively but literally have their voice heard.

When students present on a topic, they understand it deeply and can explain how it relates to themselves and their community (Baker, 2008).

REFERENCES

Andrews, R. (1994) 'Democracy and the teaching of argument', *The English Journal*, 83, 62–69.

Baker, L. (2008) 'Representing: Elementary to the exhibition of learning', *Coalition of Essential Schools*, 23(1).

Bandura, A. (1997) *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control.* New York: W.H. Freeman.

Choi, E.Y. (1998) 'Through another's eyes: Student fear number one – presenting', *Gifted Child Today Magazine,* 1(4), 30–31.

Field, A.P., Hamilton, S.J., Knowles, K.A., and Plews, E.L. (2003) 'Fear information and social phobia beliefs in children: A prospective paradigm and preliminary results', *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 41, 113–123.

Fielding, M. (2004) 'Transformative approaches to student voice: Theoretical underpinnings, recalcitrant realities', *British Educational Research Journal,* 30, 295–311.

Lansdown, G. (2011) *Every Child's Right to be Heard – A Resource Guide on the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment No. 12.* Save the Children UK, on behalf of Save the Children and UNICEF.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2019) Primary Language Curriculum. Dublin: NCCA.

Shafer, S. (2010) 'Building public speaking skills across the curriculum', *The International Journal of Learning,* 17(2).

UNCRC (1989) United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Geneva: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Building Connections between the European Schools System and Ireland's Education System

The European Schools (ES) system had its platinum jubilee in October 2023, marking 70 years of educational provision for the children of EU officials since the first European School was established in Luxembourg in 1953. This followed Ireland's presidency of the ES and the opportunity to influence the rapidly evolving ES system. This article reflects on how the two educational systems complement each other in language learning, citizenship education, and reflective practice.

Dr Treasa Kirk
Assistant Chief Inspector and Ireland's Head of Delegation to the European Schools

Dr John Fitzgerald
Divisional Inspector and Assigned Nursery/Primary Inspector to the European Schools

Deborah Quigley
Assigned Post-Primary Inspector and Secondary Inspector to the European Schools

Background

The European Schools (ES) system comprises 13 traditional European Schools and 23 Accredited European Schools across the 27 European Union (EU) member states. During its presidency in 2022/23, Ireland was responsible for leading and progressing various developments in the system.

Almost 40,000 pupils are enrolled in the ES system: around 28,300 in the nursery/primary and secondary cycles in traditional European Schools, the rest in Accredited European Schools (AES).[1] Ireland has one accredited Centre for European Schooling in Dunshaughlin, County Meath, under the patronage of the Louth and Meath Education and Training Board. Up to 400 Irish nationals are enrolled in traditional European Schools, while around 64 are enrolled in the AES.

Ireland's engagement with the ES system is overseen and administered by the Department of Education's International Cooperation Unit from a policy and budgetary perspective. Ireland supports the ES system

through the secondment of teachers to teaching and management positions. The Department's Inspectorate supports policy development and the quality assurance of leadership and classroom practice in the European Schools in collaboration with the other 26 EU member states.

The centrality of home languages for second- and third-language learning

In addition to providing mother-tongue tuition, European Schools are strongly committed to developing pupils' multilingual skills and providing foreign-language learning from an early age. In light of new curriculum specifications in development by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), it is worth considering how the approach to language teaching and learning in the ES might inform discussions on language learning in Ireland.

In the ES system, each pupil is enrolled in a specific language section. The dominant language of the child (usually but not always the mother tongue) is important when choosing the section. At primary level, pupils learn all subjects of the curriculum through the section's designated language, which is the pupils' first language (L1). In the first year of secondary school, students begin to learn a third language. From year 3 in secondary level, certain subjects, such as Geography and History, are studied through students' second language (L2).

Similar to the integrated Primary Language Curriculum in Ireland, the ES syllabus makes connections within and across languages to support the transfer of skills between languages. There is a shared recognition between the ES system and Ireland's education system that pupils use their first language to help them learn a second language.

The ES system provides access to learning in 24 languages. This is facilitated either through a dedicated national language section, where all pupils' learning is mainly through their national language, or through vehicular language sections (English, French, and German), where national-language instruction is provided separately. There is a greater range of languages and language competences in the vehicular language sections than in the dedicated national-language sections. In addition to the L1 and dominant language speakers of the language, the vehicular language sections also accommodate pupils for whom there is no national language section in their school.

The ES system views the range of languages as a unique opportunity to enhance pupils' awareness and appreciation of language as teaching is enacted through a multilingual lens. The concept of learning language through such a lens comes from the iceberg theory of language acquisition (Cummins, 1981). Similar to the peaks of two icebergs, languages appear different on the surface and have common underlying linguistic features in terms of how language

European Schools are strongly committed to developing pupils multilingual skills and providing foreign-language learning from an early age.

The Centre for European Schooling in Dunshaughlin has begun the development of a 'Writing Fest' in the ES system across primary and secondary cycles, to engage pupils' multilingual repertoires to enrich their language learning.

learning occurs. Hence, pupils in ES classrooms are encouraged to note similarities across languages and to use their L1 to help them learn through other languages.

Teaching through a multilingual lens represents an interesting divergence between the ES system and Ireland's education system in the centrality of home languages for second- and third-language learning. In the language curriculum in Ireland, the focus is on *language awareness* and *cultivating positive attitudes* towards home languages – key contributors to second- and third-language learning. In ES anglophone classrooms, there is a stronger focus on actively exploiting home languages to enhance the learning of another language. As developments to incorporate Modern Foreign Languages in the primary school curriculum progress in Ireland, an opportunity exists to explore approaches to language learning and continue to consider what learning can be taken from the experience of the ES system.

The Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) dual-focused language-learning method is widely used in the ES, whereby the target language is used as the medium of instruction for learning and teaching both content and language. CLIL is also advocated in the Primary Language Curriculum in Ireland, whereby pupils being taught through English may be taught some subjects through Irish. Hence, there is potential for reciprocal learning between the ES system and Ireland's school system.

In addition to these dedicated contributions, the Centre for European Schooling in Dunshaughlin has begun the development of a 'Writing Fest' in the ES system across primary and secondary cycles, to engage pupils' multilingual repertoires to enrich their language learning. This initiative enables teachers and pupils across all 27 EU member states to use the enhanced digital learning skills they developed during the Covid-19 pandemic to write collaboratively in real time to maximise literacy engagement. Writing in 24 languages, pupils engaged in composing, constructing, designing, and illustrating texts for possible publication in Writing Fest e-booklets.

Citizenship education and reflective practice

The ES presidency offered Ireland an opportunity to support a range of developments already under way in the ES system and to implement new initiatives to impact positively on the system.

A pilot Citizenship Actions for All Programme (CAAP) for students in S5 (Secondary 5) and S6 (Secondary 6) was developed to give students additional opportunities to develop their active citizenship and civic competency skills. Students volunteer through acts of service and participation in activities in their local communities. The programme adopted a similar approach to the *Gaisce*

President's Award programme for young people. The CAAP initiative relied on the dedication of coordinators in participating schools and on the support of parents and local community organisations. It expanded connections, fostered links, and built understandings across language sections, which form the core of the ES system.

During its presidency, Ireland prioritised the need to support teachers' pedagogical practice in the ES system through a series of multilingual asynchronous webinars for teachers and school management on the theme of reflective practice. The webinars were created with support from University of Limerick, Dublin City University, Marino Institute of Education, Mary Immaculate College, and the central Office of the Secretary-General (OSG) for European Schools, and were modelled on the theories of Rolfe (1996), Brookfield (2017), and Timperley et al. (2014).

The enhanced online learning possibilities developed during the pandemic ensured the readiness of teachers to benefit from this initiative, encouraging them to reflect on students' learning experiences. This also helped raise the visibility of the ES system in Ireland.

Conclusion

Ireland's presidency of the European Schools system provided an opportunity to contribute to its pedagogical development, with students and teachers at the heart of these developments. The focus on reflective practice in the ES system coincided with the OSG's plans to prioritise teachers' learning through a new centralised digital platform.

The Italian presidency, succeeding Ireland's, will build on the concept of reflective practice as the foundation for a career development framework for teachers in the ES system. It is encouraging that the CAAP initiative will be teamed with the existing work placement programme for secondary students in the ES system. This will bolster numbers participating in voluntary acts of citizenship and foster lifelong learning attitudes and skills in students. The European Parliament's Culture and Education report (Gaušas et al., 2023) provides further insights into the opportunities and challenges facing the future development of the ES system.

Ireland's presidency of the European Schools system provided an opportunity to contribute to its pedagogical development, with students and teachers at the heart of these developments.

REFERENCES

Brookfield, S.D. (2017) *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher.* John Wiley & Sons.

Cummins, J. (1981) 'Empirical and theoretical underpinnings of bilingual education', *Journal of Education*, 163(1), 16–29.

Gaušas, S., Daminov, I., Jainskaitļ, E., Čop, D., Mileiko, I., Gudauskaitļ, G., Leaton Gray, S., Pukallus, S., Bulwer, J., Heriard, P., Iskra, K.A., Dembek, A., Ostanska, K., and Dupont, S. (2023) 'The European Schools system: State of play, challenges and perspectives'. European Parliament: Culture and Education Committee Report.

Rolfe, G. (1996) *Closing the Theory-Practice Gap.* Oxford: Butterworth/ Heinemann.

Timperley, H., Kaser, L., and Halbert, J. (2014, April). *A Framework for Transforming Learning in Schools: Innovation and the Spiral of Inquiry.* Centre for Strategic Education, Seminar series paper no. 234.

FOOTNOTES

1. Accredited European Schools are linked to the ES system by an accreditation agreement. These schools offer a European education that meets the pedagogical requirements laid down by the European Schools, but within the framework of the national school networks of member states.

✱✱✱

Lily and Ciara from Scoil Mhuire na Trócaire, Ardee, pictured at the Primary Climate Ambassador Awards

The Health and Wellbeing of Irish School Leaders

What the research is telling us

Introduction

In 2022, the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) and the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD) – the professional associations representing Irish school leaders – commissioned independent research into the health and wellbeing of Irish school leaders. This was in response to concerns that the increasing complexity and workload demands of school leadership roles are impacting on the health and wellbeing of principals and deputy principals.

Professor Philip Riley and his research team in Deakin University, Melbourne, are undertaking the three-year longitudinal research study. Its aims are to:

» support individual school leaders to prioritise their own health and wellbeing
» enable IPPN and NAPD to benchmark the demands on school leaders in Ireland against comparative international statistics
» help improve the leadership reality of Irish school leaders so their leadership roles are more sustainable
» ensure the identification and delivery of supports for members in partnership with the Department of Education and other education stakeholders
» have a significant impact on future policy development in Ireland.

Research findings

The tool used to conduct the research is the *Irish Principal and Deputy Principal Health and Wellbeing Survey*, a confidential survey for all school principals and deputy principals of primary and second-level schools in Ireland.

Brian O'Doherty
Sustainable Leadership Project Coordinator, Irish Primary Principals' Network

This article details the findings of research commissioned by the Irish Primary Principals' Network and the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals into the health and wellbeing of Irish school leaders in both primary and post-primary sectors. This research was undertaken in response to concerns that the increasing complexity and workload demands of school leadership roles are impacting on the health and wellbeing of principals and deputy principals.

Professor Philip Riley and his research team in Deakin University, Melbourne, are undertaking the three-year longitudinal research study.

Its first section establishes a demographic profile, then it focuses on health and wellbeing.

School leaders have engaged with the survey in the 2022 and 2023 calendar years, with further engagement planned for spring 2024. Participants receive detailed, individualised reports on their own health and wellbeing, while the aggregated data forms the basis of sector-specific reports that detail the impacts of workload and work environments on school leaders' health and wellbeing.

In this article, and to highlight themes indicative of the broader findings, I will focus on three elements:

1. the negative health and wellbeing scores for primary and post-primary school leaders compared with the healthy working population
2. the sources-of-stress scores for primary and post-primary school leaders
3. comparisons with data from 2015, when this research was last undertaken with Irish school leaders.

Negative health and wellbeing outcomes

In terms of negative health and wellbeing outcomes, the data revealed that the incidences of burnout, stress, and depressive symptoms among Irish school leaders were almost double those of the healthy working population, and more than double for sleeping troubles and cognitive stress – see Table 1.
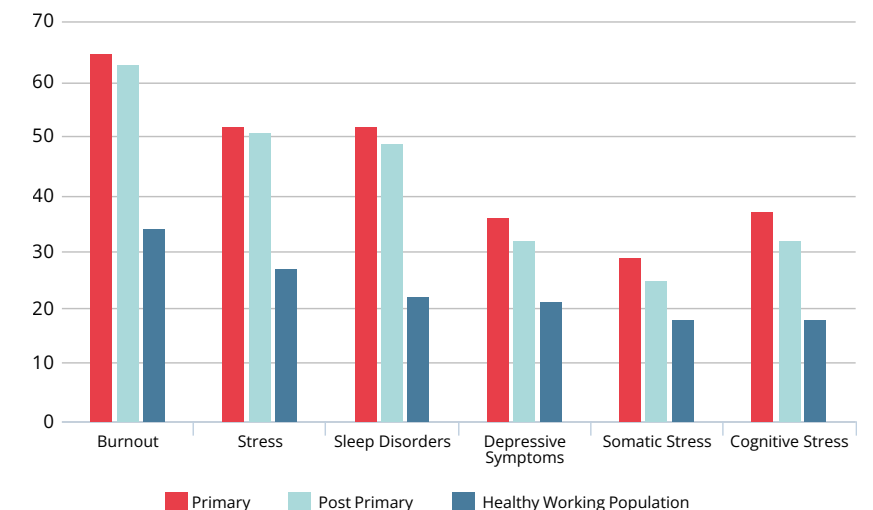
Table 1: Comparison of health and wellbeing outcomes of Irish school leaders and the healthy working population

Tables 2 and 3 detail the deterioration in the negative health and wellbeing outcomes since the research was last undertaken in 2015.

	2015	2022
Burnout	57.6	66.1
Stress	49.6	51.5
Sleeping troubles	45.4	51.3
Depressive symptoms	33.5	36.0
Somatic stress	23.8	28.7
Cognitive stress	34.2	37.5

Table 2: Comparison of health and wellbeing outcomes of primary school leaders between 2015 and 2022

	2015	2022
Burnout	56.5	63.6
Stress	47.9	50.3
Sleeping troubles	43.0	49.5
Depressive symptoms	29.0	32.5
Somatic stress	20.8	25.1
Cognitive stress	28.4	32.0

Table 3: Comparison of health and wellbeing outcomes of post-primary school leaders between 2015 and 2022

While all the elevated scores should be a cause for concern, most relevant to the sustainability of school leadership is the burnout score, which is statistically the most significant increase and also the most elevated score.

The negative health and wellbeing scores of primary and post-primary school leaders are similarly elevated, yet in all cases the scores for primary are higher. The most significant differentials are for depressive symptoms, somatic stress, and cognitive stress.

The consistent differential between the negative health and wellbeing scores of primary compared with post-primary school leaders highlights how leadership is experienced differently between the sectors. It may be attributable to better

infrastructural supports and increased capacity to share leadership at post-primary level.

Sources-of-stress scores

Tables 4 and 5 detail the sources-of-stress scores for primary and post-primary school leaders. It is significant, but perhaps unsurprising, that the top four sources of stress are identical across the sectors.

Source	Score
Sheer quantity of work	8.8
Lack of time to focus on teaching and learning	8.5
Teacher shortages	8.4
Resourcing needs	7.7
Government initiatives	7.5
Expectations of the employer	7.2
Inability to get away from school/community	6.0
Student-related issues	5.8
Mental health issues of students	5.6
Parent-related issues	5.5
Mental health issues of staff	5.4
Financial management issues	5.1
Lack of autonomy/authority	4.8
Poorly performing staff	4.5
Interpersonal conflicts	4.1
Declining enrolments	3.8
Complaints management	3.5
Critical incidents	3.1
Union/industrial disputes	2.0

Table 4: Sources-of-stress scores (out of 10) for primary school leaders 2022

170

IRELAND'S
2023 EDUCATION
YEARBOOK

IRELAND'S
EDUCATION 2023
YEARBOOK

171

Source of stress	Score
Sheer quantity of work	8.5
Lack of time to focus on teaching and learning	8.3
Teacher shortages	8.3
Resourcing needs	7.5
Mental health issues of students	7.4
Government initiatives	7.1
Expectations of the employer	6.2
Inability to get away from school/community	6.2
Poorly performing staff	6.1
Mental health issues of staff	6.1
Student-related issues	6.1
Parent-related issues	5.9
Lack of autonomy/authority	5.4
Financial management issues	5.1
Interpersonal conflicts	4.6
Complaints management	4.3
Critical incidents	4.0
Declining enrolments	3.4
Union/Industrial disputes	3.1

Table 5: Sources-of-stress scores (out of 10) for post-primary school leaders 2022

As shown in Table 6, the two highest sources of stress at work for primary school leaders were identical to the top two identified in 2015: quantity of work, and lack of time to focus on teaching and learning. In both cases, the stress rating has increased since 2015. The score for quantity of work has increased from a mean of 8.1 in 2015 to 8.8. The score for lack of time has increased from a mean of 7.9 to 8.5.

The third-highest source of stress is teacher shortages, which has jumped from 13th place in 2015. Its mean score for stress has more than doubled from 4.1 to 8.4. Mean stress scores have increased in 14 of the 19 categories.

	2015	2022
Sheer quantity of work	8.1	8.8
Lack of time to focus on teaching and learning	7.9	8.5
Teacher shortages	4.1	8.4
Resourcing needs	7.2	7.7
Government initiatives	6.9	7.5
Expectations of the employer	6.3	7.2

	2015	2022
Inability to get away from school/community	5.3	6.0
Student-related issues	5.7	5.8
Mental health issues of students	4.2	5.6
Parent-related issues	5.4	5.5
Mental health issues of staff	4.2	5.4
Financial management issues	5.2	5.1
Lack of autonomy/authority	3.9	4.8
Poorly performing staff	4.0	4.5
Interpersonal conflicts	4.2	4.1
Declining enrolments	3.3	3.8
Complaints management	3.8	3.5
Critical incidents	3.2	3.1
Industrial/union disputes	2.1	2.0

Table 6: Comparison of sources-of-stress scores for primary school leaders between 2015 and 2022

	2015	2022
Sheer quantity of work	8.0	8.5
Lack of time to focus on teaching and learning	7.9	8.3
Teacher shortages	5.1	8.3
Resourcing needs	5.7	7.5
Mental health issues of students	6.3	7.4
Government initiatives	7.1	7.1
Expectations of the employer	5.3	6.2
Inability to get away from school/community	5.5	6.2
Poorly performing staff	6.1	6.1
Mental health issues of staff	4.6	6.1
Student-related issues	6.4	6.1
Parent-related issues	5.6	5.9
Lack of autonomy/authority	4.5	5.4
Financial management issues	5.1	5.1

	2015	2022
Interpersonal conflicts	4.2	4.6
Complaints management	3.7	4.3
Critical incidents	3.3	4.0
Declining enrolments	3.3	3.4
Industrial/union disputes	2.0	3.1

Table 7: Comparison of sources-of-stress scores for post-primary school leaders between 2015 and 2022

As Table 7 shows, the sources-of-stress scores are broadly similar for post-primary and primary school leaders. The four highest-scoring sources are common to both sectors. Again, the two highest sources of work stress for post-primary school leaders were identical to the top two in 2015: quantity of work, and lack of time to focus on teaching and learning. But in both cases, the stress rating has increased since 2015. The score for quantity of work has increased from a mean of 8.0 in 2015 to 8.5. The score for lack of time has increased from a mean of 7.9 to 8.3.

The third-highest source of stress is teacher shortages, which has jumped from 11th place in 2015. Its mean score for stress has increased from 5.1 to 8.3. Mean stress scores have increased in 15 of the 19 categories; the significant increase in the mean score for students' mental health issues is a particular cause for concern.

Concluding thoughts

In his address at the IPPN Principals' Conference in 2015, Professor Riley concluded from the data that:

You have all the attributes of people who should be scoring well above average on these measures, but you are collectively below the average. This means it is very likely to be the demands of the job that are causing this.

Given the increased scores for negative health and wellbeing outcomes, and the increased sources-of-stress scores in the 2022 data, it is clear that the current reality of school leadership in Ireland is taking a significant toll on our school leaders' health and wellbeing – and that the situation is getting worse. At the time of writing this article, the draft reports from the 2023 study confirmed a further deterioration in the negative health and wellbeing scores, prompting the researchers to conclude:

Mental health issues among Irish primary school leaders are not only prevalent but also likely to be intensifying, signalling an urgent need for targeted interventions to improve their wellbeing.

Rahimi and Arnold (2022) conclude:

Overall, there is a need for all stakeholders to make school leadership work roles and responsibilities more manageable. School leaders reported 'sheer quantity of work', 'a lack of time to focus on teaching and learning' and 'teacher shortages' as the top three major sources of stress. The analysis determined that there was a strong association between school leaders who felt that work had a significant impact on their home lives and experiences of both high burnout and high stress. The key job demands were also associated with both stress and burnout. Urgent action is required to provide school leaders with adequate support and ensure that they are given the time and resources to fulfil the obligations of the role.

Urgent action is required to provide school leaders adequate support and ensure that they are given the time and resources to fulfill the obligations of the role.

The report makes a definitive recommendation in this regard:

This report presents compelling evidence that many Irish [...] school leaders are struggling with complex job roles and competing job demands. Policymakers and systems administrators should engage with school leaders to identify the workload challenges that they face and provide support to enable leaders to spend time on the activities that matter most.

This is in keeping with the findings and conclusions drawn by Burke and Dempsey (2021):

It is now time to review leaders' loaded role and identify ways in which it can be altered to positively impact on their wellbeing, ensure sustainability of the position, as well as ensure that they have the time and space to focus on rebuilding the ruptured school communities for a brighter post-Covid future.

They recommend that it is time to:

» review and clarify school leaders' role
» streamline the role by centralising some of their duties
» provide leaders with more time to manage the quality of teaching and learning.

REFERENCES

Arnold, B. and Rahimi, M. (2022) *The Irish Post-Primary Principal and Deputy Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey: 2022 Data.* Melbourne: Research for Educational Impact, Deakin University.

Burke, J. and Dempsey, M. (2021) *Wellbeing in Post-Covid Schools: Primary School Leaders' Reimagining of the Future.* Maynooth University.

Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) (2022) *Primary School Leadership: The Case for Urgent Action – A Roadmap to Sustainability.* Cork: IPPN.

Rahimi, M. and Arnold, B. (2022) *The Irish Primary Principal and Deputy Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey: 2022 Data.* Melbourne: Research for Educational Impact, Deakin University.

Riley, P. (2015) *Irish Principals & Deputy Principals Occupational Health, Safety & Wellbeing Survey.* Victoria: Australian Catholic University.

***

Fota Wildlife Park has been awarded the Sandford Award for Heritage Education for the fourth consecutive year.

The Sandford Award is a trusted certification mark for high-quality education provision which is acknowledged by schools and other educational institutions in Ireland and the UK.

'Children come to school with more than the bags on their back'

Discussing grief support in Irish schools

Introduction

The quote 'Children come to school with more than the bags on their back' (Lynam, 2015) encapsulates the profound reality that pupils bring their life experiences, including grief, into the classroom. Grief remains a sensitive and often misunderstood topic in schools, creating additional hurdles for pupils. Educators play a vital role in creating a nurturing school environment that provides empathy and support through understanding and compassion, within appropriate boundaries.

In 2022, a significant resolution was passed in Congress, advocating for teachers to have access to bereavement leave equivalent to civil service members; Circular 78/2022 implemented this provision, ensuring that teachers received the necessary support. In 2023, the Minister for Education announced an investment of €5 million to pilot a programme of counselling supports for primary school pupils in the school year 2023/24. The Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) said this new service was in response to a campaign it led on addressing the need for mental health support in primary schools (INTO, 2023).

These supports are greatly welcomed and essential in the school environment. But in terms of grief support, we must remember that only a small number of young people will need specialist supports after a death, and we need to be careful not to pathologise all grief experiences (Jones et al., 2015). As educators, we must be familiar with understanding what an expected response to grief might be for young people and understand when professional help is needed. Otherwise, there is the risk that children are automatically receiving unnecessary professional help.

Aoife M. Lynam
Assistant Professor in Psychology of Education, Trinity College Dublin

Conor Mc Guckin
Associate Professor in Psychology of Education, Trinity College Dublin

Grief remains a sensitive and often misunderstood topic in schools, creating additional hurdles for pupils. Educators play a vital role in creating a nurturing school environment that provides empathy and support through understanding and compassion, within appropriate boundaries. This article discusses the grief responses of young people and how we can support them by empowering teachers through understanding.

Research continues to emphasise that the school environment plays a role in young people's grief (Azuike et al., 2022). Seventy per cent of all schools are likely to have a bereaved child on roll at any one time, but staff often lack the skills to help pupils navigate this taboo topic, which can lead to complex mental health problems in adulthood (Stokes, 2014). Statistics for Ireland are limited, but by extrapolating from UK statistics an estimated 36,000 to 60,000 school-going young people in Ireland have experienced bereavement (McLoughlin, 2012). The national longitudinal Growing Up in Ireland study indicates that 43% of respondents had experienced the death of someone important to them by age nine (Williams et al., 2009). It is therefore essential that we understand what bereaved young people need and how teachers can be empowered to address those needs.

Experiencing the loss of a loved one during childhood is linked to challenges in social, behavioural, and mental well-being throughout adolescence and adulthood (Høeg et al., 2023). Furthermore, despite their significant role *in loco parentis,* many teachers have consistently expressed feelings of inadequacy, lack of training, and fear of exacerbating situations while supporting grieving pupils (Morell-Velasco et al., 2020). This shows the urgency of bridging this gap and empowering teachers to help grieving young people effectively while respecting the boundaries of their role.

This article discusses the grief responses of school-age young people and examines how we can support them by empowering teachers with an understanding of grief theories.

Three-tiered approach

Challenges and barriers currently exist in providing adequate support to bereaved young people in schools. To increase awareness and provide appropriate support for grieving pupils, we need a three-tiered approach to tackling: (1) the educational environment, (2) the social environment, and (3) support services and resources.

Educational environment

The educational environment poses challenges due to time constraints, curriculum pressures, and a lack of consistent policy approaches in schools for 'normative' bereavement. These complex hurdles are driven by the need to cover a rigorous curriculum and the pressures of meeting academic standards, resulting in educators having limited opportunities to focus on issues beyond core curricula areas.

The absence of a standardised approach to 'normative bereavement', which excludes any critical incidents, adds another layer of challenge. A consistent

The national longitudinal Growing Up in Ireland study indicates that 43% of respondents had experienced the death of someone important to them by age nine.

framework or set of guidelines across schools is needed to address the typical grieving process using recent understandings of grief – for example, the dual process model (Stroebe & Schut, 2010) and continuing bonds (Klass et al., 1996). Without adequate and up-to-date training or discourse, educators may also find themselves caught between their desire to help and the fear of making things worse for their pupils.

Social environment

In the social environment, we need to enhance peer reactions and foster social support while combating the pervasive stigma and misunderstanding of grief (e.g., it takes a year to get over your grief; you experience grief in linear stages). The stigma associated with death inhibits open discussions and expressing of emotions, leading to feelings of isolation and increased difficulty in seeking support.

Without adequate and up-to-date training or discourse, educators may find themselves caught between their desire to help and the fear of making things worse for their pupils.

School ethos plays a vital role in supporting grieving pupils and fostering a compassionate and inclusive environment. A child experiencing grief needs a school community that understands and acknowledges their pain. An ethos of empathy, sensitivity, and support can provide a safe space where grieving pupils feel seen, heard, and valued.

Support services and resources

The availability of support services and resources also presents challenges, notably insufficient bereavement support services and a lack of teacher training. Schools often encounter limitations in accessing specialised bereavement support services or professionals who can offer guidance and assistance to teachers and students. Consequently, the availability of adequate support systems in schools is hindered, exacerbating the difficulties faced by bereaved young people.

The investment of €5 million to pilot a programme of counselling supports for primary school pupils in 2023/24 is a start, but further accessible support for all students is necessary, particularly in post-primary schools.

Conclusion

Educators play a pivotal role in fostering a nurturing school environment for grieving young people. There is a need for consistent incorporation of grief education across all programmes in initial teacher education, the development of clear 'normative' bereavement guidelines that include recent developments in grief theory, and the allocation of time in the curriculum for discussion of grief and coping strategies (e.g., through SPHE, English, Science, Religion).

By doing so, educators can feel empowered to provide appropriate support. In 2022, Circular 78/2022 effectively implemented provision for bereavement leave for teachers. We saw pilot programmes and teacher organisations advocating for mental health support. Now we must continue to work towards understanding and addressing the grief experienced by young people and ask, Are we doing enough?

REFERENCES

Azuike, P., Anjoyeb, M., and King, L. (2022) 'Bereavement and children's mental health: Recognising the effects of early parental loss', *Nursing Children and Young People,* 34(1).

Høeg, B.L., Guldin, M.B., Karlsen, R.V., Løppenthin, K.B., Kissane, D., Dalton, S.O., and Bidstrup, P.E. (2023) 'Cohort profile of FALCON: A prospective nationwide cohort of families with minor children who have lost a parent in Denmark in 2019–2021', *Death Studies*, 1–10.

Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) (2023) 'INTO welcomes rollout of schools' counselling pilot'. Dublin: INTO. www.into.ie/2023/05/31/into-welcomes-rollout-of-schools-mental-wellbeing-pilot/.

Jones, A.M., Deane, C., and Keegan, O. (2015) 'The development of a framework to support bereaved children and young people: The Irish Childhood Bereavement Care Pyramid', *Bereavement Care,* 34(2), 43–51.

Klass, D., Silverman, P.R., and Nickman, S. (Eds.) (1996) *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief.* Taylor & Francis.

Lynam, A.M. (2015) 'Bereavement and grief in Irish schools: A thanatological approach toward understanding and intervention development'. Unpublished PhD thesis, Trinity College Dublin.

McLoughlin, K. (2012) *Establishing a Children's Bereavement Support Network in Ireland: A Scoping Study.* Dublin: Irish Hospice Foundation.

Morell-Velasco, C., Fernández-Alcántara, M., Hueso-Montoro, C., and Montoya-Juárez, R. (2020) 'Teachers' perception of grief in primary and secondary school students in Spain: Children's responses and elements which facilitate or hinder the grieving process', *Journal of Pediatric Nursing*, 51, e100–e107.

Stokes, E. (2014) *Helping Children to Say Goodbye: An Evaluation of the Training Needs of Teachers in Supporting Parentally Bereaved Children in Mainstream Primary Schools.* UK: Lambert Academic Publishing.

Stroebe, M. and Schut, H. (2010) 'The dual process model of coping with bereavement: A decade on', *OMEGA: Journal of Death and Dying*, 61(4), 273–289.

Williams, J., Greene, S., Doyle, E., Harris, E., Layte, R., McCoy, S., McCrory, C., Murray, A., Nixon, E., O'Dowd, T., and O'Moore, M. (2009) *Growing Up in Ireland national longitudinal study of children: The lives of 9-year-olds.* Dublin: Stationery Office.

Embracing Diversity, Nurturing Integration Project (EDNIP)

A school–based response to Ireland's increasingly diverse classrooms

This article outlines the background to and model of a pioneering initiative with five DEIS band 1 primary schools in Limerick city that seeks to support and promote the integration of migrant families in school and community life.

Background and context

The Embracing Diversity, Nurturing Integration Project (EDNIP) is a research and intervention partnership initiative that works with five DEIS band 1 primary schools in Limerick city to promote and support the integration of migrant children and families into school and community life. The schools involved are Our Lady of Lourdes NS, Presentation Primary, Scoil Iosagáin CBS, St John's Girl's and Infant Boy's School, and St Michael's Infant School.

Ireland has become increasingly multicultural and diverse. Census 2022 data indicates that 13.8% of the population has a nationality other than Irish and that 170,597 people have a dual Irish nationality. Over 750,000 identified as speaking a language other than English or Irish at home, an increase of 23% from 2016. Census 2022 saw a decrease in those who identify as Catholic (69%), with Church of Ireland being the second-largest religion, followed by Orthodox and Islam, and a doubling of the number of Hindus since 2016. In 2022, new ethnic group/background categories were included in census questions, such as Roma, Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi, and Arab (CSO, 2023).

Our changing society and demographics have permeated schools around the country, with students from diverse ethnic backgrounds, cultures, traditions, religious

Dr Ruth Bourke
Assistant Professor/Coordinator, Transforming Education through Dialogue (TED) Project, MIC

Áine Lyne
Assistant Professor/ Assistant Coordinator, TED Project, MIC

Lisa Martin
EDNIP Project Leader, TED Project MIC

Helen Lowe
EDNIP Support Worker, TED Project, MIC

practices, and home languages present in many classrooms. Research on the DEIS programme has long established that DEIS schools have a greater prevalence of children from non-English-speaking backgrounds (Smyth et al., 2015). Across the five EDNIP schools alone, there are 1,020 children speaking 36 languages, from over 46 nationalities and 17 religious backgrounds.

Migrants in Ireland are not homogeneous and range from those who are well-qualified and proficient in English to those arriving from conflict regions with little resources (Hennessy, 2021). Some migrant families are at greater risk of being adversely affected by economic, health, educational, and social inequality, compounded by social isolation. Changing demographics coupled with complex social issues have significant implications for our schools, our communities, and Irish society; EDNIP is a school-based response to this.

The initiative evolved through discussion with members of the PLUS and OSCAILT networks of DEIS schools facilitated by the Transforming Education through Dialogue (TED) Project, Curriculum Development Unit, Mary Immaculate College (MIC), Limerick (Bourke, 2022). The current phase (2021–2024) is funded through the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) National Integration Fund, Rethink Ireland Education Innovation Fund, and a philanthropic donation.

EDNIP's model and aspirations, detailed in Higgins et al. (2020), mirror the aim of the Department of Education and Skills' (2010) Intercultural Strategy: 'to ensure that all students experience an education that respects the diversity of values, beliefs, languages and traditions in Irish society' (p.1).

The participating schools' experiences and existing practice in supporting migrant families underpinned its development. Schools strongly welcomed children and families from a diverse range of backgrounds. Staff identified many positive outcomes from the increasing diversity in their schools, including enriching the school culture, support from parents, and the joy of working with children from diverse backgrounds. They recognised their own need for support to embrace diversity and enhance inclusive, respectful learning environments. They emphasised the need for a holistic approach which included parents and the wider migrant community, and they identified challenges, including the difficulties of teaching children with little English and some children having little or no prior experience of schooling (Higgins et al., 2020).

The EDNIP model

For integration to be successful, a whole-school approach is essential. EDNIP understood that building an effective model would involve becoming embedded into each school through a bespoke, flexible model of integration

Changing demographics coupled with complex social issues have significant implications for our schools, our communities, and Irish society.

The Embracing Diversity, Nurturing Integration Project (EDNIP) is a research and intervention partnership initiative that works with five DEIS band 1 primary schools in Limerick City to promote and support the integration of migrant children and families into school and community life.

that is not prescriptive. EDNIP facilitates schools to decide on what works best in their unique context to support their individual school communities, while also offering opportunities to share best practice across schools through a community of practice.

EDNIP has a strong organisational structure. It is managed by a project management committee (PMC) comprising the principals of participating schools and representation from MIC, Limerick City and County Council, Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board, Limerick Education Centre, and Tusla Education Support Services. Members make substantial contributions by sharing expertise, resources, and facilities and proactively working with the project leader to expand and deliver programmes in schools.

In each partner school, school integration committees provide a platform to address individual school needs and develop school plans. These meetings are attended by the home school community liaison coordinators, class teachers, special education teachers, principals, and parents.

EDNIP is embedded in the life of the school through an intervention model that maximises opportunities to connect with the school community. It is a 'wrap-around' model that is multi-layered, holistic, and adaptive and offers in-school interventions, whole-school events, after-school activities, and a school holiday programme. Examples of in-school interventions include intercultural lessons, sport, theatre, and excursions. Children also take part in a STEM after-school club on site in MIC. Whole-school events have included intercultural days and visits by a mobile farm.

EDNIP also provides a programme during school holidays so that a strong school community is sustained when schools are closed. Family trips to local sights, the beach, farms, and forests provide experiential learning opportunities along with treasure hunts and family fun days at the schools. EDNIP also organises a parent toddler group and weekly English conversation clubs for parents to practise their English.

Conclusion

Essentially, EDNIP is a model of social change that has had a significant impact to date on children's and parents' sense of belonging in schools, on home–school links, and on school staff's knowledge and understanding of migrant families and integration (Higgins et al., 2020). It aims to empower the school community to ensure that the identity and culture of every child in the classroom is welcomed and celebrated. Schools, children, and parents need support, tools, and resources to build strong and dynamic school communities that reflect the children that attend the school, and to create respectful and inclusive environments that embrace and celebrate diversity.

REFERENCES

Bourke, R. (2022) 'How networking can support DEIS schools: The case for widespread introduction of DEIS school networks'. In: B. Mooney (Ed.) *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2022*, pp. 119–124. Dublin: Education Matters.

Central Statistics Office (CSO) (2023) *Census of Population 2022 – Summary Results Migration and Diversity.* Cork: CSO. www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpsr/censusofpopulation2022-summaryresults/migrationanddiversity/.

Department of Education and Skills and the Office of the Minister for Integration (2010) *Intercultural Education Strategy 2010–2015,* Dublin: Stationery Office.

Hennessy, O. (2021) *Secretariat Covid-19 Working Paper Series: The Impact of Covid on Ethnic Minority and Migrant Groups in Ireland. Research Paper Series, Paper No. 18.* Dublin: National Economic and Social Forum. www.nesc.ie/publications/the-impacts-of-covid-19-on-ethnic-minority-and-migrant-groups-in-ireland/.

Higgins, A., Lyne, A., Power, S., and Murphy, M. (2020) *Embracing Diversity Nurturing Integration Programme (EDNIP): Sharing the Story, Evolution, Model and Outcomes of a Research and Intervention Project in 5 DEIS Band 1 Primary Schools in Limerick 2017–2019.* Limerick: Curriculum Development Unit, Mary Immaculate College. www.mic.ul.ie/sites/default/files/uploads/140/EDNIP%202020%20Full%20Report.pdf.

Smyth, E., McCoy, S., and Kingston, G. (2015) *Learning from the Evaluation of DEIS.* Dublin: Economic Social and Research Institution. www.esri.ie/publications/learning-from-the-evaluation-of-deis.

***

Say Yes To Languages is a Primary Language Sampler Module which introduces pupils from third to sixth class to a modern foreign language in a fun interactive 8 week progamme.

Teachers of the module can be class teachers, parents, or members of the local community.

Insights on Equity in Mathematics and Reading Skills

Ireland's performance in large–scale assessments at primary level

Introduction

As part of its programme of work, the Educational Research Centre (ERC) conducts large-scale national and international assessments of education. In 2023 it published findings from the 2021 cycles of two major studies: the National Assessments of Mathematics and English Reading (NAMER) and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). This article looks at the achievement of Ireland's primary pupils in both studies and at the findings' implications for equity in Irish education.

Previous Irish research has shown that national and international assessments provide valuable alternative perspectives when examining educational inequality (Karakolidis et al., 2021). Having comparable data from two high-quality studies conducted around the same time presents a rare opportunity to gain important insights into key policy priorities.

NAMER and PIRLS

Irish education policy emphasises equity in education. The 2017 DEIS Plan includes targets to increase the percentages of high achievers and reduce the percentages of low achievers in reading and mathematics in DEIS schools (DES, 2017). Targets for primary pupils are based on snapshots of achievement in the National Assessments of Mathematics and English Reading (NAMER), a curriculum-based assessment most recently administered by the Educational Research Centre (ERC) in 2021. Over 10,000 pupils from 188 primary schools participated: Second Class pupils completed English

Dr Lorraine Gilleece
Research Fellow, Educational Research Centre

Dr Emer Delaney
Research Fellow, Educational Research Centre

In 2023 the Educational Research Centre published findings from recent cycles of two major studies that assess pupils' mathematics and reading skills at primary level. This article describes the studies, summarises their findings, and outlines the implications for educational policy in Ireland.

reading tests, and Sixth Class pupils were assessed in mathematics (Kiniry et al., 2023).

While the percentages of high and low achievers in DEIS and non-DEIS schools offer one perspective on the socio-economic achievement gap in Ireland, an alternative is provided by the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) – an international assessment of the reading achievement of pupils in Fourth (or Fifth) Class. PIRLS was carried out in 57 countries in 2021 and administered by the ERC in Ireland, where 4,663 pupils from 148 schools participated.

Due to Covid-19, the assessment was administered in Ireland to pupils starting Fifth Class, rather than finishing Fourth Class as is typical. Thus, comparisons between cycles require caution. PIRLS 2021 included a new measure of individual home socio-economic status, based on what parents said about their own education, their occupation, and the numbers of books (including children's) at home (Mullis et al., 2023). This is a key strength of PIRLS, as this detailed information supports a nuanced understanding of associations between family background, school context, and achievement.

Findings

Findings from NAMER 2021 show no significant change since 2014 in average reading or mathematics scores overall (Kiniry et al., 2023) or in urban DEIS or non-DEIS schools (Nelis & Gilleece, 2023). Very similar numbers of Second Class pupils in urban band 1 schools had low reading scores in 2014 (44%) and 2021 (43%), indicating little progress towards the target of 40% set out in the 2017 DEIS Plan. In contrast, the target for high reading achievers (25%) was met in 2021. At Sixth Class, almost 49% of pupils in urban band 1 schools had low mathematics scores in 2021, slightly below the figure in 2014 and still above the target value of 42%. The percentage of high mathematics achievers (22%) remained below the target value of 27%.

Although not statistically significant in either case, welcome findings included a small reduction between 2014 and 2021 in the reading achievement gap between urban non-DEIS and urban band 1 schools, and a slight narrowing of the mathematics achievement gap between urban non-DEIS and urban band 2 schools. It was heartening that there was no evidence of average scores declining in urban DEIS schools in 2021, given the substantial disruptions to education as a result of Covid-19.

In PIRLS 2021, pupils in Ireland achieved a high average reading score relative to pupils in most other countries (Delaney et al., 2023). Performance in Ireland was at least as strong as in 2016. As in NAMER, average achievement was substantially lower for pupils in urban band 1 and band 2 schools compared to

Welcome findings included a small reduction between 2014 and 2021 in the reading achievement gap between urban non-DEIS and urban band 1 schools.

NAMER and PIRLS findings point towards stability in overall achievement at primary level and stability in urban DEIS schools, despite Covid-19 disruptions.

those in non-DEIS schools. Gaps by DEIS status were somewhat (although not significantly) wider in PIRLS 2021 compared to 2016 – in contrast to NAMER, where gaps became slightly (but not significantly) narrower in 2021 relative to 2014.

Socio-economic status

Average socio-economic status (SES) in Ireland was relatively high compared to other PIRLS countries. In most countries, including Ireland, there was a moderate or moderate-to-strong association between SES and reading achievement. Twelve countries, including Bulgaria and Hungary, had stronger correlations than Ireland. Germany, Singapore, and Israel were similar to Ireland, while weaker associations were observed in countries including Hong Kong, the Netherlands, and Finland.

PIRLS 2021 findings suggest that the lowest-SES pupils (bottom quartile) in Ireland are consistently disadvantaged whether reading narrative or informational texts. Compared to the highest-SES pupils (top quartile), the lowest-SES pupils were *somewhat less* likely to show mastery of basic skills and *much less* likely to show mastery of more complex skills. Over half of low-SES pupils did not reach the high benchmark, which requires pupils to integrate information across texts and critically evaluate content, whereas only one in eight high-SES pupils did not show this level of skill.

In summary, NAMER and PIRLS findings point towards stability in overall achievement at primary level and stability in urban DEIS schools, despite Covid-19 disruptions. Nonetheless, substantial socio-economic-related achievement gaps persist, although there is limited evidence from NAMER or PIRLS that these were exacerbated by the pandemic. These gaps indicate an ongoing need for equity-related policy intervention, which in 2024 will be further informed by findings from other international studies administered by the ERC and the OECD *Strength Through Diversity* review.

REFERENCES

Delaney, E., McAteer, S., Delaney, M., McHugh, G., and O'Neill, B. (2023) *PIRLS 2021: Reading Results for Ireland.* Dublin: Educational Research Centre. www.erc.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/PIRLS-2021_Reading-Results-for-Ireland.pdf.

Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2017) *DEIS Plan 2017: Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools.* Dublin: DES. www.gov.ie/en/publication/0fea7-deis-plan-2017/.

Karakolidis, A., Duggan, A., Shiel, G., and Kiniry, J. (2021) 'Examining educational inequalities: Insights in the context of improved mathematics performance on national and international assessments at primary level in Ireland', *Large Scale Assessments in Education*, 9(5). DOI: 10.1186/s40536-021-00098-1

Kiniry, J., Duggan, A., Karakolidis, A., Cunningham, R., and Millar, D. (2023) *The National Assessments of Mathematics and English Reading 2021: Performance Report.* Dublin: Educational Research Centre. www.erc.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/NAMER2021_Performance-Report_Digital.pdf.

Mullis, I.V.S., von Davier, M., Foy, P., Fishbein, B., Reynolds, K.A., and Wry, E. (2023) *PIRLS 2021 International Results in Reading*. TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center and International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). https://pirls2021.org/results.

Nelis, S.M. and Gilleece, L. (2023) *Ireland's National Assessments of Mathematics and English Reading 2021: A Focus on Achievement in Urban DEIS Schools.* Dublin: Educational Research Centre. www.erc.ie/NAMER2021DEIS.

✳✳✳

Frank Krysiak (age 9) and Rían McGovern (age 8), pupils from **Little Island National School** in Cork pictured at the launch of the AbbVie STEM Prize, a new science education initiative by the biopharmaceutical company, **AbbVie**, promoting the value of STEM subjects.
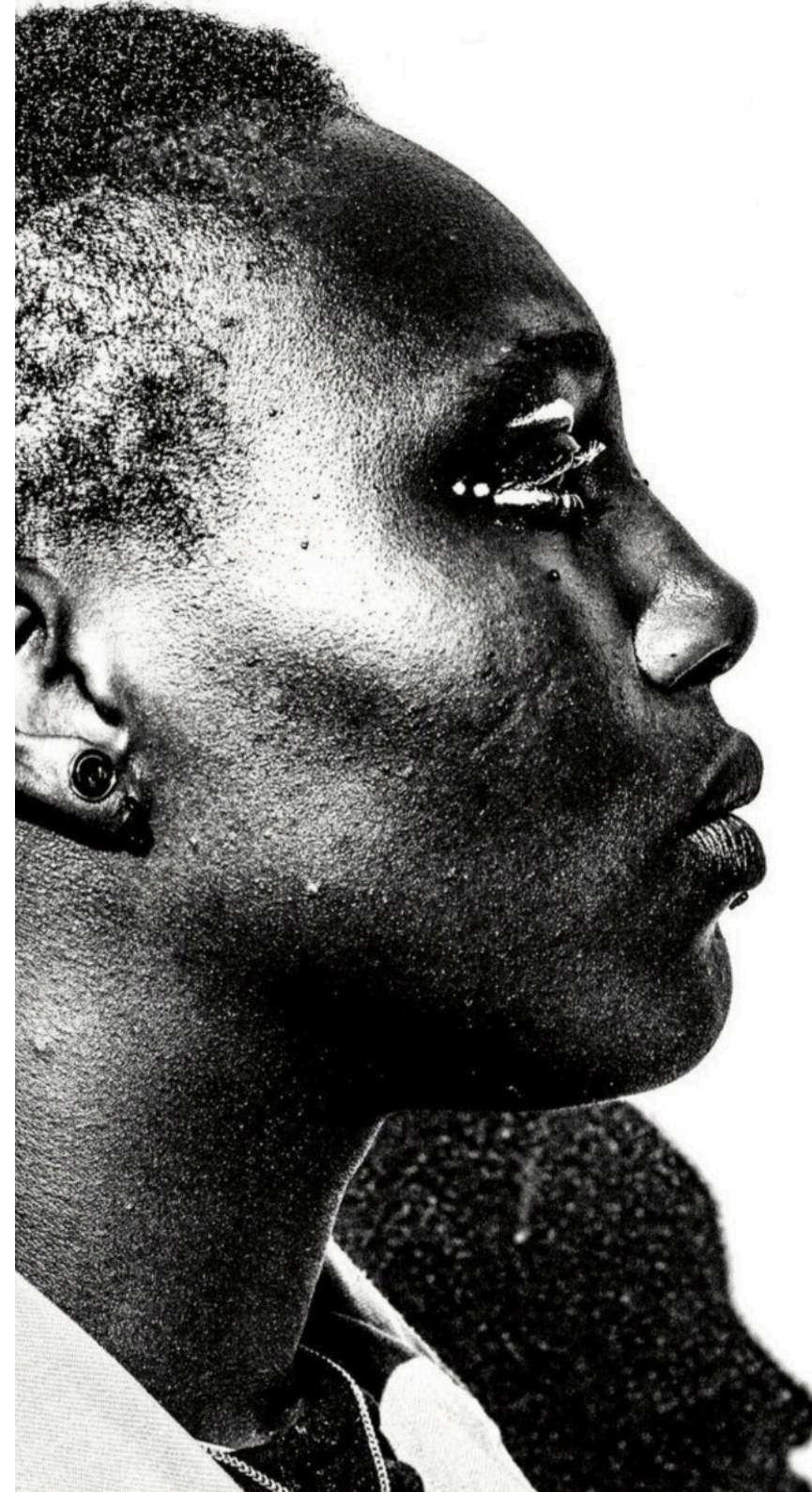
Second Level

In celebration of Science Week 2023, Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) partnered with renowned Nigerian-Irish poet and playwright FELISPEAKS to create HUMAN, a reflection on the people carrying out the research that shapes our world today and into the future: ordinary people doing extraordinary things, trying to solve some of our greatest societal challenges.

Overview of the Second-Level Education Sector in 2023

Introduction

With the benefit of hindsight some years from now, I wonder how we will judge 2023. Will we look back on it as the year that we laid the strong foundations for our innovative and creative education system of the future? Or will we reflect on missed opportunities that we allowed to slip away from us?

2023 has been the year when our lives returned to a new normal post-pandemic. We are back travelling in greater numbers than before, traffic levels are worse than ever, but as a society our priorities have changed. We are re-evaluating our life priorities and pursuing our passions, and we are working to live rather than living to work.

In light of these changes, I would argue that there is a growing consensus in 2023 that our education system is no longer fit for purpose for future generations. In this article, I will explore how our post-primary education system can try, and is trying, to respond to these new demands and where our challenges lie at the end of 2023.

Paul Crone

Director, National Association of Principals and Deputies

This overview of second-level education in Ireland explores the major themes, developments, and challenges in the sector in 2023. These include curricular change, student voice, inclusion, inertia, and artificial intelligence. It assesses our progress in relation to our European peers and takes a hopeful view of the immediate future.

Context

I was in the lucky position of attending the European School Heads Association conference this year, where school leaders from 26 European countries gathered for three days to explore school leadership in a European context. With a range of keynote speakers and workshops, the highlight of the conference was the school visits. We got the opportunity to walk around schools, visit classrooms, and speak to principals, teachers, and students. As we explored common concerns, it became evident that in Ireland we are very quick to highlight the things that are wrong or need to change and how difficult the job is. This is not the case among our European colleagues.

I was, however, a little surprised when school leaders from across Europe expressed a desire to visit Irish schools to explore, and I quote, how we have 'mastered school leadership'. The Irish system is held in high regard, and I was surprised that our colleagues abroad are looking to Ireland as an exemplar of best practice on the operation of schools and the delivery of effective school leadership. This experience put in context for me that sometimes we need to value what we already have. There are always improvements we can make, but our starting point for 2023 must be one of acknowledging how comparatively well we are doing in Ireland.

I will mention but not dwell on the teacher supply crisis. This is clearly an issue throughout Europe, and, while it is not popular to say so in Ireland, we are in a much better position than many of our European colleagues. We continue to produce high-quality teachers, our Department of Education is working with stakeholders to try to respond to the crisis, and we are starting to see small signs of improvement.

So what are the big-ticket items that catapulted Ireland onto the European stage in 2023?

Inclusion

Inclusion is an area that has taken significant strides forward during the last year. Not only in the increase in the number of special classes that have opened in post-primary schools, but in the attitudinal shift as we have moved from a desire for mere integration to genuine inclusion. I am not suggesting that the work is complete, but there is a genuine openness and desire for inclusion in our schools. My recent visits to schools in other jurisdictions confirm that Ireland is at a more advanced stage. Our schools are inclusive; we embrace diversity and support all students.

When I speak of inclusion I am referring to its wider definition, which includes special educational needs, international students, LGBTQI+ students, and minority groups in Irish society. Our schools endeavour to meet the needs of all students as best they can.

Curricular change

Over the past number of years in Ireland, we have been involved with curricular change at Junior Cycle. This is currently being evaluated by the team in the University of Limerick and was recently evaluated by the Inspectorate. Many positives and challenges have been identified, but we must remind ourselves that this is our journey and we must continue to strive for improvement.

I was a little surprised when school leaders from across Europe expressed a desire to visit Irish schools to explore - I quote - how we have 'mastered school leadership'.

The establishment of the student participation unit in the Department of Education is testament to the commitment of policymakers to ensure the students have a platform to use their voice effectively in their own best interest.

Senior Cycle reform gathered momentum in 2023. Its roll-out has been expedited, and there appears to be a determination to deliver meaningful change to the curriculum content, to teaching methodologies, and to assessment practices. These changes will bring Senior Cycle in line with Junior Cycle, the primary curriculum, and the early years curriculum. The aspiration to put students at the centre of what we do in schools is evident in all of our curricular innovations and promises to deliver for our senior students.

Oide

The birth of Oide in 2023, integrating the support services for schools, has the potential to significantly enhance supports to schools, school leaders, and teachers. Oide is the amalgamation of the previously independent services of the Professional Development Service for Teachers, Junior Cycle for Teachers, National Induction Programme for Teachers, and Centre for School Leadership.

The integration and coordination of services and supports for schools promises to raise standards in teacher and leader professional learning, while embedding professional development throughout the full career of teachers. This potential will be realised and evaluated in future years through our ability to respond to the emerging needs of our students.

Student participation

In 2023 we have seen the growth in our students' confidence and their ability and willingness to not only be involved in but also take responsibility for their own learning. The students have found their voice and are very capable of using it. The establishment of the student participation unit in the Department of Education is testament to the commitment of policymakers to ensure the students have a platform to use their voice effectively in their own best interest. This is ground-breaking in the European context and is something we should be extremely proud of.

Education is a journey, not a destination. Acknowledging this and the many things that we are doing well, in order to keep moving forward we need to learn to look around corners for the challenges we will meet. These challenges could hold us back or even prevent progress. I will outline some of them.

Inertia

At this point on our journey of change, our greatest enemy is inertia. What I mean is that when we are at the initial stages of any change initiative, there is a focus on ensuring its success: getting an early win to prove the worth of the

change. In the pilot phase there is often additional resourcing to ensure the success of a change initiative. For example, network schools for Junior Cycle were well resourced and supported as they piloted new subjects. When we pass this initial phase and the initiative is implemented universally, it becomes more difficult to maintain the intensive levels of support to all schools, so we slowly return to the way we did things before. This is the inertia of returning to what we are most comfortable and familiar with and where we feel safe.

To avoid this inertia, a clear focus must be kept on the change initiative to remind us of the reasons for the change, to reinforce its benefits, and there must be continuous support on the improvement journey. This can prove difficult in a large system with a lot of moving parts that require intensive support in specific areas at different times. Moving forward, we must acknowledge inertia and the threat it poses to undermine the excellent work done. More importantly, we must take the necessary steps to avoid it.

Assessment

Is the Leaving Certificate really fit for purpose for 21st-century students? The growing consensus is that it is not. The chief executive of the State Examination Commission (SEC), when asked recently for her highest aspiration for Senior Cycle reform, replied that the Leaving Cert is seen as 'brutal but fair', adding that she would like to 'remove the brutal but keep the fair'. I think we can all concur with her desire.

There are significant challenges for us here, such as how students are selected for places in higher education. Using the points race as the sole means of entry to higher education is stifling for Leaving Cert reform. In addition, the grinds culture embeds inequality, while changes to implement creative assessment practices that may require input from teachers could prove challenging. To implement meaningful change, these issues need to be addressed, which will involve significant collaboration with stakeholders.

Artificial intelligence

The advent of ChatGPT and generative artificial intelligence (AI) has already stalled progress on Senior Cycle reform while we await the review from the SEC. How AI may impact on classroom practices remains a cause for concern at this stage. We have decisions to make: Do we, or even can we, ban AI? Or do we need to find a way to incorporate and embrace it? The SEC has taken the latter view, and clarity is required on our systemic response to AI moving forward.

Using the points race as the sole means of entry to higher education is stifling for Leaving Cert reform.

Conclusion

In some sense, in 2023 what was clear is no longer clear. Our national obsession with education as the key to future success is as relevant today as it ever was. But our obsession with the Leaving Cert as it stands needs to be examined. We as a society need to decide what it is we want from our education system. What do our students need from participation in education? Who do we want to run our schools? And how should we manage our schools?

The programme for government promises a Citizens Assembly on the Future of Education, provisionally planned for the first half of 2024. This offers a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to put a spotlight on our education system, come to a national and collective consensus to give a mandate to policymakers, and continue our journey as educational leaders throughout Europe.

I look forward to welcoming many European colleagues to Ireland over the next year, and I cherish the opportunity to showcase the best of our Irish system to them. I am excited at the prospect that we are on the cusp of significant change that is positive, proactive, and innovative. And I look forward to looking back on 2023 as the year we laid the cornerstone for the future of Irish education.

REFERENCES

Department of Education and Skills (2019) *CUMASÚ: Empowering through learning. Action Plan for Education 2019.* Dublin: Government publications.

Department of Education (2023a) *Department of Education Statement of Strategy 2023–2025.* Dublin: Government publications. www.gov.ie/en/publication/d7691-department-of-education-statement-of-strategy-2023-2025/.

Department of Education (2023b) 'Senior Cycle redevelopment: What it means for me'. Dublin: Government publications. www.gov.ie/en/publication/45b09-senior-cycle-redevelopment-what-does-this-mean-for-me/.

Department of Education Inspectorate (2022) *Chief Inspector's Report: September 2016 – December 2020.* Dublin: Government publications.

Department of Education Inspectorate (2023) 'What Subject Inspections tell us about Junior Cycle implementation'. September. Dublin: Government publications.

McGarr, O., Mc Cormack, O., O'Reilly, J., Lynch, R., Power, J., Ó Gallchóir, C., . . . and Goos, M. (2022) *Exploring the introduction of the framework for Junior Cycle: A longitudinal study Introductory report.* University of Limerick. https://hdl.handle.net/10344/11185.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2017) *The Learner Voice Research Study: Research Report.* Dublin: NCCA. https://ncca.ie/media/3442/16539-ncca-the-learner-voice-research-study-v2.pdf.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2022) *Background paper and brief for the review and revision of the Transition Year Programme Statement.* Dublin: NCCA. https://ncca.ie/en/resources/background-paper-and-brief-for-the-review-and-revision-of-the-transition-year-programme-statement/.

Designing Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate Syllabi

The need for a new template

Introduction

In recent years, concerns have been expressed by practising teachers, university academics, professional bodies, Oireachtas committees, and experts in curriculum design about the design and quality of Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate subject syllabi published by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). *

The current design template is minimal, comprising little more than a list of topics and learning outcomes. The Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate are nationally assessed by an external body, the State Examinations Commission (SEC), but unlike in similar jurisdictions, which provide comprehensive guidelines linking syllabi with assessment, no such details are provided in Ireland.

Junior Cycle syllabi

In the past decade, all Junior Cycle subjects have been revised by the NCCA using a minimalist 'learning-outcomes-only' template, as have some new and a small number of existing Leaving Cert subjects. There has been widespread criticism of the template. In 2019, the Irish Science Teachers' Association reported that lack of depth of treatment in the Junior Cycle science specification was a major problem; 85% of 762 respondents believed that the Junior Cycle template would be unsuitable for use at Senior Cycle level (ISTA, 2019).

In a survey by An Gréasán (the Association of Teachers of Irish), 97% of teachers believed that more details should

Áine Hyland
Emeritus Professor, School of Education, University College Cork

Declan Kennedy
Senior Lecturer, School of Education, University College Cork

Concerns have been raised by teachers, academics, professional bodies, Oireachtas committees, and experts in curriculum design about the minimal 'learning-outcomes-only' template currently being used by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment for Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate syllabi. This article proposes that a new template be adopted and suggests some alternatives.

*This article uses the term 'syllabus' instead of 'specification' because it is clearer and is used more commonly at international level.

be provided in the draft specifications (An Gréasán, 2021). Another survey of over 750 teachers of Irish as a second language regarding the new Junior Cycle Gaeilge specifications in 2022 found that 95% were critical of the new template; 93% said further guidance should be provided on the subjects, themes, and topics arising from the learning outcomes (Sealbhú, 2023). And in 2022, based on a questionnaire answered by 2,981 teachers, the Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland stated:

> it would be an under-statement to say that there is profound and universal concern among teachers about the capacity of the junior cycle subject specifications to prepare students for the senior cycle curriculum. . . . Learning outcomes remain problematic. They are too broad, too vague and are lacking in guidance to the teacher on what students are expected to be able to do in order to show that they have achieved each learning outcome. (ASTI, 2022, pp. 13–14)

It would be an under-statement to say that there is profound and universal concern among teachers about the capacity of the junior cycle subject specifications to prepare students for the senior cycle curriculum.

Leaving Cert syllabi

A new Leaving Cert syllabus in Agricultural Science was introduced by the NCCA in 2019, using the same minimal 'learning-outcomes-only' template. The Irish Agricultural Science Teachers' Association criticised what they called 'a sub-standard syllabus that does not measure up to international best practice', stating: 'It is time to call a halt to the practice of the Department of Education publishing these vague and dumbed down syllabi' (IASTA, 2021).

A revised draft syllabus for Leaving Cert Irish was circulated by the NCCA in 2021 and, under the auspices of Conradh na Gaeilge, 14 organisations interested in the promotion of Irish in the education system rejected it (Hyland & Uí Uiginn, 2021). They found that the draft specifications, based on themes and learning outcomes, were sparse, lacked depth, and lacked information about what the teacher is to teach or the student is to learn. The report recommended that the learning outcomes should be clear and that the depth and breadth of knowledge required should also be provided. They recommended that teacher guidelines should be provided as well as comprehensive information on subject assessment.

Third-level academics also expressed their concern about the design template being used by the NCCA. In a letter to the *Irish Times*, Dr Peter Childs, emeritus senior lecturer in science education at University of Limerick, wrote about the use of templates of syllabus design based only on learning outcomes as follows: 'It is like trying to build a house based only on its desired features, but without an architectural drawing and detailed plans. Teachers need a detailed syllabus, like the ones currently used, in order to teach effectively' (Childs, 2021).

Very significantly, reports from the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in 2022 and 2023 were also critical: 'As part of Senior Cycle reform, a key priority for the Department of Education must be that the revised syllabus for each subject is far more detailed with comprehensive instructions for teachers' (Joint Oireachtas Committee, 2022). And in July 2023, they recommended that the NCCA 'reviews the proposed design of the new specifications to ensure teachers are properly supported and students are taught to the highest professional standards' (Joint Oireachtas Committee, 2023).

The above comments from various stakeholders are only some of the concerns expressed about the current approach being taken to syllabus design. While the NCCA has indicated that its approach is influenced by 'international best practice', the present authors have failed to find even one example of a jurisdiction or an examining board anywhere in the world which provides such sparse information on a syllabus which is nationally examined.

The way forward

When designing a syllabus using a learning-outcomes framework, especially an externally assessed syllabus, there must be alignment between (i) learning outcomes, (ii) teaching and learning activities, and (iii) assessment. Biggs (2005) referred to this as constructive alignment. Such alignment is clear and transparent in externally assessed examination syllabi in other jurisdictions. Having examined these, the present authors are particularly impressed with the quality of syllabi published for various subjects by the Oxford Cambridge and RSA (Royal Society of Arts) Examination Board (Awarding Body) in the UK.

The OCR Biology, Chemistry, and Physics syllabi have recently been revised and are in keeping with international best practice (OCR, 2022). Not only are they designed within a learning-outcomes framework laid out in tabular format, but learning outcomes are set as the starting point in the framework. This is followed by depth of treatment provided in the *Topic Content* column and the highlighting of *Skills Covered* when guiding students to achieve each learning outcome. Finally, the framework emphasises *Teaching and Learning Opportunities* to guide teachers in helping students achieve the learning outcomes to the correct depth of treatment.

Other externally assessed curricula, such as the International Baccalaureate, also provide excellent syllabus design (IBO, 2022).

In July 2023, the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science recommended that the NCCA "reviews the proposed design of the new specifications to ensure teachers are properly supported and students are taught to the highest professional standards" (Joint Oireachtas Committee, 2023).

We believe that a new syllabus template needs to be developed for all syllabi at Junior Cycle and Leaving Cert level.

Conclusions and recommendations

In a recent interview, Andreas Schleicher, Head of the OECD's Directorate of Education and Skills, and an expert on educational systems worldwide, urged caution over Senior Cycle reform in Ireland. He said the Irish educational system has helped most people to succeed and has created a high level of equity with very strong outcomes. He favours maintaining an externally assessed Leaving Cert and highlights the importance of an examination that is 'accepted by society' (Schleicher, 2022).

Schleicher has also advised against adopting curricula which are 'a mile wide and an inch deep' (OECD, 2020). In the view of the present authors, the NCCA's current approach in curriculum design risks reducing the Leaving Cert curriculum to one matching this description. To ensure that this does not occur, and that the current high quality of Leaving Cert syllabi is maintained, it is our view that when designing Leaving Cert subject syllabi, explicit details should be provided about the depth of treatment required as well as detailed documentation and guidelines for teachers and students to support them in achieving high-quality outcomes. Information about assessment should also be provided.

We believe that a new syllabus template needs to be developed for all syllabi at Junior Cycle and Leaving Cert level. This template must contain more detailed information about the depth of treatment of subjects and should explicitly link learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities, and assessment. The full range of syllabus documentation (including guidelines for teachers, sample exam papers and marking schemes, etc.) should be officially published at the same time as the syllabus itself, as has been the case in the past. This elaborated documentation should be available well before the syllabus is due to be implemented, to enable teachers to become familiar with it and to undergo appropriate continuing professional development and up-skilling programmes.

This modest proposal would ensure that Ireland will continue to be highly regarded internationally for the quality of its education system.

REFERENCES

An Gréasán (2021) *Survey regarding the consultation on the draft Leaving Certificate Gaeilge Specifications.* https://drive.google.com/file/d/1inVUoQsHF4Ahm3paQH261imnUGQU_WMy/view.

Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland (ASTI) (2022) *Survey: Teachers' Experience of the implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle.* www.asti.ie/document-library/asti-survey-teachers-experience-of-the-implementation-of-the/.

Biggs, J. (2005) *Teaching for Quality Learning at University.* Wiltshire: Open University Press.

Childs, P.E. (2020) 'We need clarity on Leaving Cert science'. Letter, *Irish Times*, 28 January. www.irishtimes.com/opinion/letters/we-need-clarity-on-leaving-cert-science-1.4153036.

Hyland, A. and Uí Uiginn, F. (2021) *Discussion Document responding to the Senior Cycle Draft Irish Specifications L1 and L2 published for consultation by NCCA on 23rd February 2021.* https://gaeloideachas.ie/senior-cycle-draft-irish-specifications-l1-and-l2/.

International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO) (2023) *International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme.* www.ibo.org/programmes/diploma-programme/curriculum/.

Irish Agricultural Science Teachers' Association (IASTA) (2021) 'Flawed Leaving Certificate Agricultural Science syllabus examined for the first time'. Press release, 21 June. https://iasta.ie/flawed-leaving-certificate-agricultural-science-syllabus-examined-for-the-first-time/.

Irish Science Teachers' Association (ISTA) (2019) *Listening to the voice of science teachers. The Response from Science Teachers in the light of their experience of teaching the new Junior Cycle Science curriculum.* www.ista.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Preliminary-Report-on-JC-Science-2019.pdf.

Joint Oireachtas Committee (2022) 'Joint Committee on Education, Further & Higher Education, Research, Innovation & Science has agreed its Report on Leaving Certificate Reform and the need for a new Senior Cycle'. Dublin: Houses of the Oireachtas. www.oireachtas.ie/en/press-centre/press-releases/20220511-joint-committee-on-education-further-higher-education-research-innovation-science-has-agreed-its-report-on-leaving-certificate-reform-and-the-need-for-a-new-senior-cycle/.

Joint Oireachtas Committee (2023) 'The Joint Committee on Education, Further & Higher Education, Research, Innovation & Science has published its report on The Future of Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM). Dublin: Houses of the Oireachtas. www.oireachtas.ie/en/press-centre/press-releases/20230713-the-joint-committee-on-education-further-higher-education-research-innovation-science-has-published-its-report-on-the-future-of-science-technology-engineering-and-maths-stem/.

Oxford Cambridge and RSA (OCR) (2023) GCSE Chemistry Syllabus. Cambridge: OCR. www.ocr.org.uk/qualifications/gcse/gateway-science-suite-chemistry-a-j248-from-2016/.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2020) *Curriculum (re)design: A series of thematic reports from the OECD Education 2030 project: Overview Brochure.* Paris: OECD. www.oecd.org/education/.

Schleicher, A. (2022) 'Interview with John Walshe', *Leader Quarterly,* winter 2022. Dublin: National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals.

Sealbhú (2023) *Early Enactment Review of Junior Cycle Irish T1 and T2.* https://ncca.ie/en/updates-and-events/latest-news/2023/may/early-enactment-review-of-junior-cycle-irish-t1-and-t2/.

Digital Resources for Second Level

The importance of accessible e-books

Hardcopy or digital?

There is ongoing debate about hardcopy and e-books and which option is better (Baron, 2021; Hillesund et al., 2022). Some studies have shown that using an e-book is more effective in terms of student knowledge (Bunkell & Dyas-Correia, 2009; Hadaya & Hanif, 2019), while other research has urged caution in the widespread adoption of e-books to replace the traditional hardcopy (Casselden & Pears, 2020). Multimedia components associated with e-books can also be attractive to many learners (Hsieh & Huang, 2020).

As an increasing number of post-primary schools are incorporating more e-books into their subjects, the level of accessibility must be a deciding factor in the choices being made. Ensuring that digital schoolbooks are accessible benefits all students, regardless of their abilities. Accessible features promote inclusivity, flexibility, and personalised learning, ultimately leading to improved educational outcomes and a more equitable educational experience (Marcus-Quinn, 2022; Marcus-Quinn & Hourigan, 2022).

When a teacher chooses an e-book, it is important to assess its compatibility with assistive technology; this means ensuring that the e-book works well with common assistive technologies like screen readers, Braille displays, and voice recognition software. This can be an issue where some school textbooks have an associated e-book but it is merely a PDF version of the hardcopy text and has no enhanced accessibility features or interactive options.

Decisions about typographic differentiation should be made on the basis of whether the text will be read in hardcopy or digital format. One problem with display can sometimes be observed where italicised text has been used. When text is bold italic (i.e., both styles together),

Ann Marcus-Quinn

Associate Professor in Technical Communication and E-Learning, University of Limerick

Making schoolbooks accessible is crucial in ensuring that all students, including those with disabilities or learning difficulties, have equal opportunities to learn and succeed academically. Many school textbooks in e-book form are not as accessible as they could be. This article outlines the importance of accessibility in digital materials to ensure that all students have a better experience of digital resources and the opportunity to achieve academic success.

many fonts do not display this properly. Bold italic is used in many ways, including for emphasis, quotations, older text, and foreign words. This problem can be particularly frustrating for students reading from a History e-book, where the style can be used more frequently than in other subjects because it is useful to draw attention to specific information.

If teachers are using an e-book that has no accessible features, they can contact the publisher. Sometimes there is an accessible version of the book that has not been made available as a general option. If there is no accessible option available, identifying the issues is very helpful feedback for publishers, and later editions can seek to address the problems. Improving the e-book's accessibility will have a positive impact on both students with disabilities and the entire class, fostering an inclusive learning environment.

Key accessibility features

Key accessibility features that can be incorporated into e-books to promote inclusivity include text-to-speech functionality, which allows the e-book to be read aloud. This option can aid students with visual impairments or reading difficulties. It can also benefit auditory learners. Ensuring that e-books are compatible with screen readers, which convert on-screen text into synthesized speech, can enable blind and visually impaired users to access the content. Allowing users to adjust the font size, style, and spacing enhances readability for people with visual impairments or dyslexia. This feature also caters to diverse reading preferences.

Often, basic affordances that are overlooked can make a huge difference to the accessibility of e-books and other digital resources (Marcus-Quinn & Hourigan, 2017). One such affordance is to provide a high-contrast mode with distinct colour contrasts. This can make the content easier to read for people with low vision or colour vision deficiencies. Adding alt text to images provides descriptive text that screen readers can read aloud, enabling visually impaired users to understand the visual content.

Other features of accessibility include keyboard navigation, transcripts for audio and video content, navigation aids, and responsive design. It is also crucial to ensure that multimedia elements (videos, audio clips, interactive elements) have proper captions, transcripts, and descriptions, to help users with different sensory needs engage with the content.

Ongoing efforts are expected to focus on enhancing the usability of e-books. For instance, e-book publishers and providers will likely address the present shortcomings of e-book technology that hinder complete interaction with the content. This includes tackling concerns about the need for multiple logins to

When a teacher chooses an e-book, it is important to assess its compatibility with assistive technology; this means ensuring that the e-book works well with common assistive technologies like screen readers, Braille displays, and voice recognition software.

gain access, and addressing any challenges posed by cumbersome online readers or reading tools (Casselden & Pears, 2020).

REFERENCES

Baron, N. (2021) *How We Read Now: Strategic Choices for Print, Screen, and Audio.* Oxford University Press.

Bunkell, J. and Dyas-Correia, S. (2009) 'E-books vs. print: Which is the better value?', *The Serials Librarian*, 56(1–4), 215–219.

Casselden, B. and Pears, R. (2020) 'Higher education student pathways to ebook usage and engagement, and understanding: Highways and cul de sacs', *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 52(2), 601–619.

Hadaya, A. and Hanif, M. (2019) 'The impact of using the interactive e-book on students' learning outcomes', *International Journal of Instruction*, 12(2), 709–722.

Hillesund, T., Schilhab, T., and Mangen, A. (2022) 'Text materialities, affordances, and the embodied turn in the study of reading', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 827058.

Hsieh, Y. and Huang, S. (2020) 'Using an e-book in the key secondary English classroom: Effects on EFL reading and listening', *Education and Information Technologies*, 25, 1285–1301.

Marcus-Quinn A. (2022) 'The EU Accessibility Act and Web Accessibility Directive and the implications for Digital Teaching and Learning Materials'. Routledge Open Research. DOI: 10.12688/routledgeopenres.17581.1

Marcus-Quinn, A. and Hourigan, T. (2017) 'The potential of OERs for K-12 schools: Why policy is crucial to success'. In: A. Marcus-Quinn & T. Hourigan (eds.) *Handbook on Digital Learning for K-12 Schools*. Springer, Cham. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-33808-8_28

Marcus-Quinn, A. and Hourigan, T. (2022) 'Digital inclusion and accessibility considerations in digital teaching and learning materials for the second-level classroom', *Irish Educational Studies*, 41(1), 161–169.

Deputy Principals – A Hidden Asset in Schools?

Introduction

Our work with aspiring school leaders prompted a research project on the position of deputy principal in Irish primary and post-primary schools. Anecdotally, we were aware of unevenness of practice. A survey of national and international literature indicated that the position is often poorly understood, under-appreciated, and under-researched. Recent discourse on school leadership has emphasised the value of greater collaboration, including 'distributed leadership' (e.g., Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018; DE, 2022b, 2022c).

The Chief Inspector's Report 2016–2020 (DE, 2022a) observes that 'the extent of the burden of the principal's role' continues to be a matter of grave concern, 'despite the investing in restoring middle leadership posts and the increased powers to delegate roles and responsibilities across middle leaders'. As the chief inspector remarks, 'it is incumbent on the system as a whole to ensure that what has been provided to date is working effectively'.

We see deputy principalship as central to that discussion. In this short article, we wish to flag some emerging issues and to put them in the context of other recent work.

Survey of deputy principals

Our exploratory, interpretivist research project sought to explore the hidden potential in the role of deputy principal. The case study used a mixed-methods design, sending questionnaires to a wide population of deputy principals through networks, social media, and school emails.

Inductive analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) of 121 responses (49 primary, 72 post-primary) was used to generate questions for semi-structured interviews, which

Gerry Jeffers
Education Department, Maynooth University

Carmel Lillis
Education Department, Maynooth University

Majella Dempsey
Education Department, Maynooth University

This article offers a snapshot of current research into the position of deputy principals in Irish primary and post-primary schools. It describes findings from a recent survey of deputy principals, reporting their insights into the nature and reality of the role and assessing these issues in the context of other research on school leadership.

are currently being undertaken. Themes identified from analysing the questionnaire data include:

» Most deputy principals indicate high levels of professional commitment to 'making a difference' in their school and, in particular, to the students in their care.
» Respondents see an ability to communicate effectively with all stakeholders and to develop positive professional relationships with them as critically important in the role.
» The role of deputy principal is often poorly defined; the tasks associated with it can vary greatly from school to school and are often extensive. Under-definition of the role is generally most pronounced in smaller schools. In post-primary schools the clearest role definition is evident where there is more than one deputy principal.
» In the extensive lists of tasks associated with the role, 'timetabling' features in many. At post-primary level, many also see involvement with students as central, particularly in relation to their behaviour, discipline, wellbeing, and pastoral needs.
» Insufficient time to complete a multiplicity of tasks can be a frustrating feature of the position. At primary level, 42 of the 49 deputy principals also had full responsibility for teaching a class every day.
» The relationship between principal and deputy principal(s) is critically important and can play a major role in shaping overall school culture as predominantly positive or negative. Serious difficulties and tensions can arise in a school when these relationships malfunction.
» Many deputy principals at primary level act as special education needs co-ordinators (SENCOs) with responsibility for the administration, management, and leadership of all aspects of the schooling of the most vulnerable children, in addition to many other tasks.
» Respondents report satisfaction deriving from their role, as well as tensions, frustrations, and even contradictions arising from expectations, overload of tasks, time management, occasionally limited responsibilities, mediation and conflict resolution, and particular school contexts.

Policy and practice

Fresh thinking about deputy principalship is evident, even if at times implicitly, in some recent policy documents and in valuable articles written by practitioners. All of these resonate with our findings so far.

The publication in 2016 of *Looking at Our School* (LAOS) (DES 2016a, 2016b) was an important milestone in clarifying an understanding of school leadership in Ireland. The vision and thrust of its update six years later (DE 2022b, DE 2022c) are broadly similar, though reference to 'deputy principal' is notably more

frequent (62 compared to 23 in 2016 for post-primary; 61 compared to 3 for primary and special schools).

One illustration of how the leadership that is aspired to in LAOS works in practice appears in Rafferty et al. (2021). Four leaders in a large post-primary school explain how they have an effective senior management team 'mainly because there is clarity about our roles, informed by great discussion and collaboration' (p.184). The deputy principal says, 'When I became a DP, the clarity on our roles allowed a focus that could have been lost in the firefighting of daily school life but presented opportunities to grow and to adjust our roles as needed' (p.185). An assistant principal (AP1) says: 'The culture is key, cultivating the conditions by design or intent to nurture leadership at all levels. There is no blueprint for this journey. It is unique for each school, but it starts with a vision of where you would like to go' (p.189).

As we have stated elsewhere (Jeffers & Lillis, 2021), recognising each school's context as different, with consequent variations in vision, priorities, and the working out of relationships through professional conversations, is vital for effective schooling. The evidence from our current research suggests that many deputy principals can and wish to play a critical role in initiating, encouraging, nurturing, and sustaining professional conversations about a school's mission, values, vision, and context encouraging, nurturing, and sustaining professional conversations about a school's mission, values, vision, and context. even though these conversations are often fractured, incomplete, and interrupted by the immediate demands of daily school life. Openness to learning in the role, so clearly visible in Rafferty et al. (2021), appears vital.

In contrast to Rafferty et al. – and in some ways complementary – is Snow et al.'s (2021) highlighting of 'an emergence of toxic leadership experiences' with 'negative consequences for the teaching professionals who took part'. These included decreased job satisfaction, professional agency, and staff morale; reduced performance; increased attrition; and increased negative behaviours, including incivility.

Thus, in each school, leaders can and do shape the culture. Careful reading and understanding of that culture is a critically important skill for leaders prior to shaping a more positive culture (Barth, 2001). The potential of deputy principals to be central to nurturing positive cultures may be underestimated as they become overextended in devoting time to administrative and maintenance tasks rather than enabling genuine leadership. This seems like a lost opportunity, a case of unrealised potential.

Co-leadership

At primary level, Lynskey and O'Connor (2023) – a principal and deputy principal – offer a clear picture of how the thinking that informs LAOS (DE, 2022b) can translate into co-leadership: 'For us, co-leadership means leading our school together. This is achieved by sharing key responsibilities including decision making, planning, ownership of our school vision, problem solving, coaching and development and inclusion of our school community' (p.5). They note, critically, 'We are collaborators, thinking partners and peer mentors. Our model is about collaboration, not delegation' (p.5).

The disconnect between notions of distributed leadership among middle leaders and principals that Lárusdóttir and O'Connor (2017) identified in both Irish and Icelandic schools appears also problematic for some deputy principals in our study. A key issue, as they remark, arises when distributed leadership is seen 'strictly at the gift of the principal rather than a reciprocal relationship' (p.423).

A way ahead

Evidence in our research project points to strong desire among deputy principals to be more centrally involved in the leadership of the school community. The relationships between principals and deputy principals are pivotal to nurturing a culture of collaboration throughout a school. Obstacles to realising this include structures and policies that restrict deputies to tasks that are primarily administrative or allow insufficient time for meaningful leadership.

Even without structural reform, deputy principals can, as eloquently recounted in research from some schools, be vitally involved in participating in – and in some cases initiating – the professional conversations about context, values, vision, and goals associated with reflective practice. Indeed, the new emphasis on collaboration, particularly in the policy shifts articulated in *Looking at Our School,* suggests that reflective practice in schools has to be collective as well as individual.

REFERENCES

Barry, G., Walsh, C., Ó Gallchóir, C., and Mannix-McNamara, P. (2022) 'School self-evaluation and empowering leadership in *DEIS* schools: An exploration of success', *Irish Educational Studies*. DOI: 10.1080/03323315.2022.2135569

Barth, R. (2001) *Learning by Heart*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2021) *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide*. London: Sage.

Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2016a) *Looking at Our School: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools*. Dublin: DES.

Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2016b) *Looking at Our School: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools*. Dublin: DES.

Department of Education (DE) (2022a) *Chief Inspector's Report, 2016–2020*, Dublin: Department of Education Inspectorate.

Department of Education (DE) (2022b) *Looking at Our School: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools and Special Schools*. Dublin: Department of Education.

Department of Education (DE) (2022c) *Looking at Our School: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools*. Dublin: Department of Education.

Hargreaves, A. and O'Connor, M. (2018) *Collaborative Professionalism: When Teaching Together Means Learning for All*. Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Press.

Jeffers, G. and Lillis, C. (2021) 'Responding to educational inequality in Ireland: Harnessing teachers' perspectives to develop a framework for professional conversations', *Educational Studies*. DOI: 10.1080/03055698.2021.1931043

Lárusdóttir, S.H. and O'Connor, E. (2017) Distributed leadership and middle leadership practice in schools: A disconnect?, *Irish Educational Studies*, 36(4), 423–438. DOI: 10.1080/03323315.2017.1333444

Lynskey, A. and O'Connor, A. (2023) 'Co-leadership in practice', *Leadership+*, 128. Cork: Irish Primary Principals' Network.

Pollock, K., Wang, F., and Hauseman, D.C. (2017) *The Changing Nature of Vice Principals' Work. Final Report for the Ontario Principals' Council*. Toronto: Ontario Principals' Council.

Rafferty, N., Hayes, R., O'Connor, J., and Sheehan, M. (2021) 'Distributive leadership'. In: B. Mooney (Ed.) *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2021*, pp. 184–191. Dublin: Education Matters. https://irelandseducationyearbook.ie/downloads/IEYB2021/YB2021-Second-Level-10.pdf.

Snow, N., Hickey, N., Blom, N., O'Mahony, L., and Mannix-McNamara, P. (2021) 'An exploration of leadership in post-primary schools: The emergence of toxic leadership', *Societies*, 11(2), 54. DOI: 10.3390/soc11020054

Exploring the Experiences of LGBT+ Secondary School Students in South–East Ireland

Realisation of 'difference' and the impact on experiences in education and beyond

Introduction

Over the past 20 years the number of second-level students identifying as LGBT+ has increased substantially. Guidelines published by the Department of Education (DoE) in conjunction with the Gay and Lesbian Equality Network (GLEN) were intended to assist schools in safeguarding everyone in educational organisations to support LGBT+ students. However, many LGBT+ students in Ireland have a negative experience of school, do not reach their full potential, have low self-esteem, and often are early school leavers (Mayock et al., 2009; Higgins et al., 2016).

A recent study by the present authors (forthcoming) examined eight people's experiences of being LGBT+ in a secondary school environment. All were students between 1991 and 2014, were aged 24–42, had varying sexual orientations, and had studied under different patronages in the south-east of Ireland.

Fieldwork consisted of interviews 45–75 minutes long, and the transcripts were returned to participants for member checking. Eight pen pictures offer particularly vivid written summaries that elucidate the participants' secondary school experiences. The entire data set was also analysed using inductive coding and the constant comparative method. Five recurring themes emerged:

» LGBT+ realisation and its impact
» experiences of extracurricular activities
» teacher and peer relationships
» school attitude towards LGBT+ issues and perceived attitudes today
» opinions on policy/procedural best practice in second-level schools.

Maurice O'Toole
Deputy Principal, Gorey Community School

Anne Graham Cagney
Senior Lecturer, South East Technological University

LGBT+ students often experience secondary education in a very different way, despite recent advances and the current debates on equality, diversity, and inclusion. This study examined former second-level LGBT+ students' experiences with their realisation of 'difference' and the impacts on their educational experiences, extracurricular activities, and peer and teacher relationships, during and after their school years.

Discussion

Various factors (personal, psychosocial, and environmental) appear to have a fundamental influence on LGBT+ students' second-level school experiences. Many participants reported that their realisation of 'difference' increased their tendencies towards introversion, and they adopted strategies of 'flying under the radar' in school in order to simply get through the day; a similar strategy is reported by Payne and Smith (2014).

BelongTo (2020) found that victimisation is an ongoing issue in secondary schools, with 73% of LGBT+ students saying they felt unsafe there. Our findings indicate a high level of verbal and physical bullying during class and also during extracurricular activities. Verbal and relational bullying was most prevalent, followed by physical bullying.

In the LGBTIreland Report, study participants (aged 14–25) who experienced LGBTI bullying in school 'had significantly higher scores on the depression, anxiety, stress, and alcohol use scales . . . and significantly lower self-esteem' (Higgins et al., 2016, p.24). The consequences of homophobic bullying experienced by participants in our study were social isolation, depression, self-consciousness, shyness, and disruption of their personal and social development. Some said they still feel the effect of being LGBT+ in school into their adulthood.

While the participants in our study were secondary students between 1991 and 2014, our findings raise questions about what current LGBT+ secondary-school students are being subjected to and highlight the impact that these experiences may have on their education and life contexts now and in the future.

Teacher and school attitudes evidenced a lack of educator and student understanding and awareness. Many participants felt they did not receive the same positive experiences of education as their heterosexual counterparts. The feeling of intimidation restricted LGBT+ students from positively accessing the school curriculum, both in the classroom and with extracurricular opportunities.

Participants in our study identified that interactions between members of the school community determine a person's quality of learning and overall successful transition from second level to the rest of their lives. They suggested several initiatives to improve awareness of LGBT+ issues for the whole school community, for example Pride Week, LGBT+ society, curriculum change, and teacher and student education.

'I was never physically bullied, thankfully. I was tall, skinny, and fast, so I was all right.'

'To this day, in the gym, I still stare straight ahead, get changed against the wall, and hope that nobody thinks that I am looking at them.'

'Gay marriage is okay, but same-sex couples should not have children' [teacher]

Final thoughts

Creating a successful, inclusive, high-quality school environment for LGBT+ students with respect to teacher–student and peer–peer interactions is challenging. It will require unwavering commitment from leaders and managers alike, as Neary and Cross (2018) found that school staff 'heard worrying stereotypes being reinforced by staff' (p.17). It is difficult to come to terms with the fact that LGBT+ students experience this in schools, and even more so that the sexual orientation or gender identity of a child can evoke feelings of fear in educators.

More must therefore be done to create school classrooms that are inclusive spaces of learning that allow all students to access the full range of the curriculum. Findings from this study confirm the immediate need to restructure secondary-school resources and supports, to adapt current school rules and procedures in order to promote a progressive and inclusive school culture that supports and encourages the personal and academic development of its LGBT+ students.

It is only when unique student voices are heard that steps can be taken to create more-inclusive school environments and ensure that the type of negative experiences reported by the participants in this study are not repeated.

A 2018–19 review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in primary and secondary schools identified, as a priority, the need to update the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum (NCCA, 2023). The increase from 70 to 100 hours of learning in SPHE over a three-year period at Junior Cycle offers opportunities particularly in RSE. The current curriculum provides opportunities for students to informally reflect upon and discuss relationships, sexuality, and healthy sexual expression.

Although we welcome these changes, they represent just the beginning of the significant change needed for the future wellbeing of all our students. We must challenge our thinking and consider whether this increase in SPHE hours is enough to alter people's perceptions. We must question whether the changes are prominent enough to support and encourage new ways of communicating in our schools in order to transform current school cultures into spaces of learning that are fully progressive and inclusive. The question remains: How can we, as educators of future generations, ensure that our schools offer an educational setting that is well-balanced, successful, and progressive?

It is only when unique student voices are heard that steps can be taken to create more-inclusive school environments.

Recommendations

The two most important recommendations to emerge from the findings of this study are:

» Conduct a whole-school inclusive review with particular focus on strategies to prevent homophobic bullying, in which all parties have the opportunity to contribute feedback and opinions.

» Engage with the organisational changes necessary to create an inclusive and respectful environment, in which all students can develop personally and academically, and where classrooms, corridors, and extracurricular facilities become places of respect for and tolerance of sexual orientation and gender identity.

REFERENCES

BelonG To (2020) *LGBTI+ Life in Lockdown: 1 Year Later: Key Findings: The Impact of Covid-19 Restrictions on LGBTI+ Young People in Ireland*. Dublin: BeLonG To. www.belongto.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/LGBTI-Life-in-Lockdown-1-Year-Later_BeLonG-To-Youth-Services.pdf.

Higgins, A., Doyle, L., Downes, C., Murphy, R., Sharek, D., DeVries, J., Begley, T., McCann, E., Sheerin, F., and Smyth, S. (2016) *The LGBTIreland Report: National study of the mental health and wellbeing of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people in Ireland*. Dublin: GLEN and BeLonG To. www.belongto.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/LGBT-Ireland-Full-Reportpdf.pdf.

Mayock, P., Bryan, A., Carr, N., and Kitching, K. (2009) *Supporting LGBT lives: A study of the mental health and well-being of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people*. Dublin: Gay and Lesbian Equality Network.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2023) 'Updated Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum'. 24 May. Dublin: NCCA. https://ncca.ie/en/updates-and-events/latest-news/2023/may/updated-junior-cycle-sphe-curriculum/.

Neary, A. and Cross, C. (2018) 'Exploring gender identity and gender norms in primary schools: The perspectives of educators and parents of transgender and gender variant children'. University of Limerick. http://hdl.handle.net/10344/6889.

Payne, E. and Smith, M., (2014) 'The big freak out: Educator fear in response to the presence of transgender elementary school students', *Journal of Homosexuality*, 61(3), 399–418.

Inclusion as Lived and Felt in the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme

A case study exploring spatial discourses of inclusion

Introduction

Parity of esteem has long been an enduring theme of educational discourses of inclusion. This article examines parity of esteem through the lens of the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme by focusing on spatial discourses of inclusion. For this article, parity of esteem relates to issues of value and recognition of difference and the resulting experience of inclusion as something that is lived and felt in school contexts. The article draws on research conducted by the author over a 10-month period with four case-study schools in the north-west of Ireland.

The LCA programme is a distinct, modular, self-contained, two-year Leaving Cert pre-vocational programme. It 'emphasises forms of achievement and excellence which the established Leaving Certificate has not recognised in the past. It offers a specific opportunity to prepare for and progress to further education and training'. (PDST, 2019, p.7).

The programme incorporates work experience and learning that takes place outside the classroom. It is ring-fenced, meaning it is separate from but equal to the Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) programme and is not part of the CAO points system. However, recent changes announced as part of Senior Cycle redevelopment mean that since September 2022 LCA students 'have the opportunity to take Leaving Certificate Mathematics and, where possible, a Leaving Certificate Modern Language' (DoE, 2022).

Dr Annmarie Curneen
Lecturer in Education

This article aims to highlight the importance of the affective nature of inclusion as something that is lived and felt. When analysing policy, we must remain cognisant of its embodied experience, and place student voices at the heart of analysis. Examining the Leaving Certificate Applied programme and listening to LCA student voices allows us to interrogate practices that are taken for granted and to rethink inclusion.

The embodied nature of policy

Contexts are multidimensional, and space is just one dimension of context. These spaces are not neutral, and the ways in which students are deployed in space speak to issues central to inclusion, value, and recognition. Matters such as programme aims and objectives do not remain static in policy documents but rather are lived out and embodied in schools' emotional landscapes (Youdell & Armstrong, 2011).

Policies are experiences in practice, and so we should be responsive to the 'material and emotional truths and must approach these pedagogical considerations as a political project' (Hickey-Moody, 2017, p.1086). Spatial discourses are value laden and reflect a hierarchy of values in schools: some students, subjects, and programmes are front and centre, while others are backgrounded. This, one may argue, is an expression in physical or material terms of the hidden curriculum: the unspoken, taken-for-granted practices in schools. Spatial discourses are therefore discourses of power.

> In the announcement, it says 6th years come to the hall for assembly, but that's not us; even though we are 6th years, we are LCA, but we are different to them. That's the downfall of it, really. We are separate to them. That's really a downfall. So, if there was something I could change, well, that'd be it. (LCA student, School D)

For LCA students, this is the main issue with the LCA programme – separation from peers. This separation is physical and discursive and involves the construction of an 'us' and 'them' rhetoric. Students following the LCA programme see themselves as different from students completing the 'normal' Leaving Cert and identified this as a reason for separation from their peers.

As stated, the LCA programme is ring-fenced and as such requires a certain amount of separation. The curricular subjects on offer in LCA are designed and taught differently to the LCE. Assessment of LCA is also different, and it is not part of the CAO points system. The focus on work experience and out-of-school learning also necessitates some separation. However, the ways this separation is lived and experienced speaks to our conceptualisation of inclusion and certain practices taken for granted in schools.

The policymakers I spoke to as part of my study had a vision for the LCA programme that was based on a strong commitment to equality and a positive conception of difference. The decision to ring-fence the programme was based on a desire to offer a meaningful alternative to the LCE and the points system. As such, the LCA may be an example of the unintended consequences of policies and the complexity of policy enactment when it comes to be lived out in the spaces of schools. What was conceived of as an inclusive policy has become, at times, a form of exclusion in practice.

In the announcement, it says 6th years come to the hall for assembly, but that's not us; even though we are 6th years, we are LCA, but we are different to them.

The LCA space

LCA in many ways is a wonderful programme: it has allowed many students to experience success in school and has certainly helped keep students in school who were at risk of dropping out. The goal of access to education and the right to participation is crucial. But we cannot let this overshadow our conceptualisation of inclusion. Students may be in school but experience forms of othering or exclusion. The spatial separation experienced by LCA students gives them a status of outsiders (Youdell, 2006), outsiders on the inside. As one student puts it, 'It's like we are here, we are in the school and all, but we are just kinda looking in on the rest of them' (LCA student, School C).

There are many ambiguities and tensions apparent in the students' lived experiences of the LCA programme. In many ways LCA students like being in their own room and doing their own work, but they feel they are not perceived as being as important or as valued as their LCE counterparts – either by the schools, the Department of Education, the media, or employers.

The spatial separation experienced by LCA students gives them a status of outsiders (Youdell, 2006), outsiders on the inside. As one student puts it, 'It's like we are here, we are in the school and all, but we are just kinda looking in on the rest of them' (LCA student, School C).

For students, LCA was simultaneously a 'safe space' (hooks, 1989) and a place of containment. It represented a place and a way of learning where they felt accepted and accomplished. It was a place of collaboration and collegiality between students and between students and teachers. The LCA programme as such represents an emotional space quite different from students' previous schooling experiences. However, students were very aware of their spatial and discursive alienation and separation, and this had very real effects on their feeling included, valued, and recognised.

Inclusion

Examining the lived experiences of LCA students offers us a different way of thinking about inclusion. Dussel (2010) advises us to think from the other side, opening up a space for the voices, stories, and experiences of those who have been marginalised. Entering into dialogue with quieted voices allows us to think or rethink of inclusion as an emotional endeavour, as something that is lived and felt. The ways that students are recognised, misrecognised, or not recognised affect their emotions and their construction of self.

Inclusion is therefore very much tied up with student well-being, voice, identity, and agency. We don't just learn with our heads but also with our hearts. As one student put it, 'When I'm old, like 40 or 50, I won't remember half of what I learned in class, but I'll remember how I felt' (LCA student, School A). Some curricular changes have been made to the LCA programme as part of Senior Cycle redevelopment. This is to be welcomed, but let us also remain cognisant of the embodied nature of policy when it comes to be lived out in practice.

The LCA programme teaches us that spatial discourses of inclusion and the resulting feelings of recognition and value should be at the forefront of our considerations when redeveloping programmes and curricula. The lessons learned from listening to LCA students are applicable when thinking about inclusion for all students. The ways in which students are visible or invisible, heard or silenced impact on their lived experience of inclusive practices and their subjective construction of self.

REFERENCES

Department of Education (DoE) (2022) 'Senior Cycle Redevelopment – what it means for me'. 20 September. Dublin: Government publications. www.gov.ie/en/publication/45b09-senior-cycle-redevelopment-what-does-this-mean-for-me/.

Dussel, I. (2010) 'Foucault and education'. In: M. Apple, S. Ball, and L. Gandin (Eds.) *The Routledge International Handbook of Sociology of Education*, pp. 27–36. Abingdon, OX: Routledge.

Hickey-Moody, A. (2017) 'Arts practice as method, urban spaces and intra-active faiths', *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 21(11), 1083–1096.

hooks, b. (1989) 'Choosing the margin as a space of radical openness', in *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*. Boston MA: South End Press.

Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) (2019) *Leaving Certificate Applied Teacher Handbook*. Dublin: PDST. www.pdst.ie/post-primary/post-primary-programmes/lca.

Youdell, D. (2006) I*mpossible Bodies, Impossible Selves: Exclusions and Student Subjectivities*. Dordrecht: Springer.

Youdell, D. and Armstrong, F. (2011) 'A politics beyond subjects: The affective choreographies and smooth spaces of schooling', *Emotion, Space and Society*, 4, 144–150.

Activating Social Empathy – A Junior Cycle SPHE Resource

Introduction

Empathy – the ability to understand others' perspectives and share their feelings – is a key social-emotional competency which is associated with positive health, social, and academic outcomes for young people. Activating Social Empathy (ASE), a programme developed by a team at the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre in the University of Galway, aims to promote social-emotional development in adolescents by teaching core empathy skills and fostering a connection between empathy, social responsibility, and civic action.

The ASE programme has been introduced to 120 second-level schools in Ireland to date and was recently adapted for inclusion in the new Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) toolkit at Junior Cycle. This article provides an overview of the ASE programme and emphasises the importance of such resources in contemporary educational contexts.

What is empathy?

The teenage years are pivotal for the development of empathy, because this is a time when there are significant leaps in processes such as being able to take another's perspective (Santrock, 2022). Adolescence is a time of deep identity exploration and development. If empathy-related values become integrated into this emerging identity, this lays the foundation for lifelong prosocial and civic behaviour (Hope & Jagers, 2014; Malti et al., 2016). School settings, with their diverse learning communities, can present rich opportunities for modelling, teaching, and practising dispositions and skills related to empathy.

The term empathy is often used to describe our ability to understand others' perspectives and share their emotions, and our willingness to use these understandings and feelings to engage in active, helping

Emer Davitt
Lecturer in Education, University of Galway

Niamh Flynn
Lecturer in Educational Psychology, School of Education, University of Galway

Charlotte Silke
Postdoctoral Researcher, UNESCO Child & Family Research lca Centre, University of Galway

Clíona Murray
Lecturer, School of Education, University of Galway

Róisín Hanley
Research Assistant, UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, University of Galway

This article describes the Activating Social Empathy (ASE) programme for Junior Cycle developed at the University of Galway. It outlines the nature and importance of empathy and empathy education, and it details the findings of evaluation of the ASE programme for teachers and students alike.

behaviours. Research indicates that empathy is not a fixed trait but rather a set of skills that can be learned and enhanced over time (Davis & Begovic, 2014). Empathy is an important skill for young people to learn, as it is intricately connected to their personal and social wellbeing. For example, it is linked to more positive peer relationships, greater mental wellbeing, improved school engagement, and fewer bullying incidences (Zych et al., 2019). Promoting greater empathy at individual level can help create more inclusive communities and foster greater altruistic values (Malti et al., 2016).

Empathy education at post-primary level

Internationally, findings from numerous empirical studies indicate that empathy can be strengthened through social and emotional learning (SEL) programmes. Under the umbrella of wellbeing education, educators in Ireland have started to explore the benefits of empathy education for students through the implementation of SEL curricula and programmes.

One such initiative is the Activating Social Empathy (ASE) programme, a research-based, practice-oriented resource to support teaching and learning for Junior Cycle SPHE. As part of the SPHE toolkit, it presents a unique option in the domain of social and emotional learning by specifically targeting the enhancement of empathy in young people aged 12–16.

The four ASE sessions are directly aligned to learning outcomes in the recently redrafted Junior Cycle SPHE specification. During the sessions, teachers facilitate learning aimed at deepening students' understanding of empathy, developing their empathy skills, helping them respond with empathy, and empowering them to address barriers to empathy. It is envisaged that these sessions would be used by SPHE teachers as an introduction to empathy for First Year students and as a springboard for empathic relationships at this crucial time in their lives. The sessions are accompanied by a teacher manual that includes all necessary materials to aid implementation.

ASE programme evaluation

The original ASE programme, from which the introductory sessions for SPHE were developed, underwent rigorous evaluation over a number of years. Findings indicated that students who took part showed increases in empathy, social responsibility, emotional competence, and helping behaviours.

The most recent phase of our research has focused on teacher and student voice to explore the delivery and effectiveness of the programme in schools. Data from participating schools indicated that the ASE programme was well received, with the active learning elements particularly boosting student

Findings from numerous empirical studies indicate that empathy can be strengthened through social and emotional learning (SEL) programmes.

Students noted that when their teachers were open to listening, had a good understanding of empathy themselves, and were kind and considerate, this increased students' interest in the programme, and their perceived value of it.

interest and engagement. Increases in the understanding of empathy were reported by teachers and students, with students reporting that they felt more self-aware, more responsive to others, more confident in their communication skills, and more tuned in to helping others.

Students also noted that when their teachers were open to listening, had a good understanding of empathy themselves, and were kind and considerate, this increased students' interest in the programme, and their perceived value of it. Interestingly, teachers also reported that facilitating the programme had positive outcomes for them professionally, prompting them to reflect on their teaching, adopt a more empathic approach to communicating with students, and try to be more understanding of reasons behind students' poor behaviour. Teachers reported that pre-existing familiarity with students enabled them to select and tailor programme materials and activities based on their students' strengths and interests.

The research uncovered some challenges relating to programme delivery, including difficulties with timetabling, a lack of training in the social-emotional learning domain, and a lack of protected time for planning. Our research indicates that despite the centrality of wellbeing in the Junior Cycle curriculum and in school policy, it is still deemed as a less valued and less supported area of learning. One key issue is the lack of mandated training in this area for teachers and the challenges this creates, as many recently qualified teachers are timetabled for this area of learning.

Conclusion

Teachers and students were, on the whole, very positive about the implementation of the ASE programme in their schools. Many noted the importance of such a programme as it increased understanding of empathy, promoted prosocial behaviour, and improved peer relationships. There was a strong indication that teachers would continue with the programme, and students felt that it was worth developing these skills further.

With these promising findings on usability and relevance, we

218

IRELAND'S
2023 EDUCATION
YEARBOOK

IRELAND'S
EDUCATION 2023
YEARBOOK

219
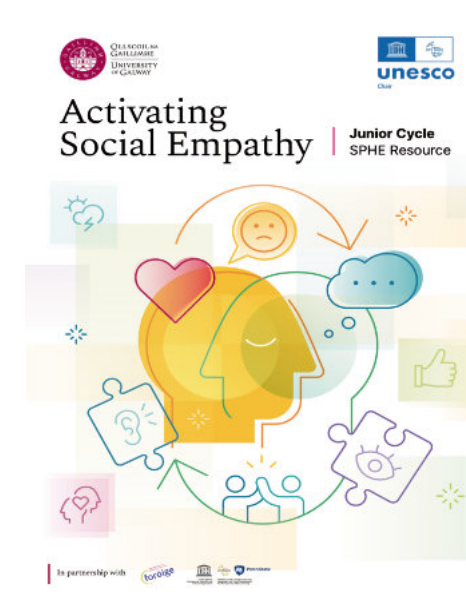
are hopeful that the ASE SPHE resource will provide further impetus in the effort to create an empathy ripple effect from schools to society, led by the wonderfully capable young people of Ireland.

The Activating Social Empathy sessions are available on the Junior Cycle SPHE toolkit at www.curriculumonline.ie and at www.universityofgalway.ie/cfrc/unesco-chair/activatingsocialempathy/asejuniorcycle/. Schools that complete all four ASE sessions and provide feedback can receive a UNESCO Certificate of Completion. Tá an acmhainn seo ar fáil trí mhéan na Gaeilge.

The QR code below also points to ASE programme resources on the University of Galway website.

REFERENCES

Batson, C.D. (2011) *Altruism in Humans*. Oxford University Press.

Davis, M.H. and Begovic, E. (2014) 'Empathy-related interventions'. In: A.C. Parks and S.M. Schueller (Eds.) *The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Positive Psychological Interventions*, pp. 111–134. Wiley Blackwell. DOI: 10.1002/9781118315927.ch6

Demetriou, H. (2018) *Empathy, Emotion and Education*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Eisenberg, N., Spinrad, T.L., and Morris, A. (2014) 'Empathy-related responding in children'. In: M. Killen and J. Smetana (Eds.) *Handbook of Moral Development*, 2nd edn., pp. 184–207. Psychology Press.

Hope, E.C. and Jagers, R.J. (2014) 'The role of sociopolitical attitudes and civic education in the civic engagement of Black youth', *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 24(3), 460–470. DOI: 10.1111/jora.12117

Malti, T., Chaparro, M.P., Zuffianò, A., and Colasante, T. (2016) 'School-based interventions to promote empathy-related responding in children and adolescents: A developmental analysis', *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*, 45(6), 718–731. DOI: 10.1080/15374416.2015.1121822

Santrock, J.W. (2022) *Essentials of Life-span Development*, 7th edn. McGraw-Hill.

Weisz, E. and Zaki, J. (2017) 'Empathy-building interventions: A review of existing work and suggestions for future directions'. In: E. Seppälä, E. Simon-Thomas, S.L. Brown, M.C. Worline, C.D. Cameron, and J.R. Doty (Eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Compassion Science*, pp. 205–218. Oxford Library of Psychology.

Van de Sande, M.C., Fekkes, M., Kocken, P.L., Diekstra, R.F., Reis, R., and Gravesteijn, C. (2019) 'Do universal social and emotional learning programs for secondary school students enhance the competencies they address? A systematic review', *Psychology in the Schools*, 56(10), 1545–1567.

Zych, I., Ttofi, M.M, and Farrington, D.P. (2019) 'Empathy and callous-unemotional traits in different bullying roles: A systematic review and meta-analysis', *Trauma, Violence, Abuse,* 20(1), 3–21. DOI: 10.1177/1524838016683456

Transition Year Mathematics – The Forgotten Middle Child?

Understanding mathematical preparedness in Transition Year using a Delphi study methodology

Research topic

Richard Burke, the father of Transition Year, was a visionary of his time – a man who encouraged students to 'stop and stare' on their academic journey (Jeffers, 2011). This innovative former Minister for Education wanted to travel off the beaten track in education and hoped to avoid its 'increasingly academic tread-mill' nature (ibid.).

Transition Year (TY) is nestled between Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate education, an internationally unique middle-year programme (Smyth et al., 2004, p.7). Its mission is to 'promote the personal, social, educational and vocational development of pupils', away from the academic pressures of examinations and competition (DES, 1993, p.3).

In Ireland, the Department of Education and its subsidiaries are responsible for producing curriculum guidelines, but it is up to classroom teachers to convert the theory into practice. Burke acknowledged the vital role that teachers play in developing this programme, stating that the success of Transition Year would depend solely on 'teachers' imagination and commitment'. He viewed TY as an opportunity for the teaching profession to engage in education in the strictest sense of that term.

Maths education in Ireland: stay static or reform?

Ireland's recent large-scale reforms to mathematics education were influenced mainly by the OECD's PISA report and the 21st-century mathematics economy (NCCA, 2012; Shiel & Kelleher, 2017). These reformed curricula, titled Project Maths, aimed to address 'issues in syllabuses, teaching, learning and assessment of post-primary mathematics' (NCCA, 2012, p.5). Project Maths

Derek Maher

Deputy Principal, Mathematics Teacher, and Doctorate of Education Candidate, Trinity College Dublin

Dr Aibhín Bray

Assistant Professor in Mathematics Education, School of Education, Trinity College Dublin

Mathematics education at Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate levels has experienced major reforms over the last decade, largely influenced by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). However, Transition Year has remained largely unreformed and unaltered since its introduction in 1974. This article aims to understand mathematical preparedness in Transition Year using a Delphi study methodology.

was followed by further Junior Cycle curriculum reforms in 2015. Unfortunately, while Ireland overhauled its lower- and upper-secondary maths curricula, Transition Year has received only minor alterations since its inception, remaining largely static since 1974 (Shiel & Kelleher, 2017).

The mission of Transition Year is to 'prepare students for their role as autonomous, participative, and responsible members of society' (DES, 1993, p.3). This raises the questions of what it means to be prepared and how teacher education can be used to prepare students. Our research study explores just that, by using a Delphi study methodology to address a complex research question: What does it mean to be mathematically prepared?

Methodological design

A Delphi study, wrote Dalkey and Helmer (1963), is a means of 'obtaining the most reliable consensus of a group of experts' (p.458). Linstone and Turoff (1975), as cited in Okoli and Pawlowski (2004), offer a similar definition: 'a method for structuring a group communication process so that the process is effective in allowing a group of individuals, as a whole, to deal with a complex problem' (p.16).

The complexity of this research study lies in the fact that Transition Year is unique to Ireland and is defined as a 'domesticated' programme. Jeffers (2011) used the term 'domestication' to refer to the challenges that each school faces in integrating the official TY guidelines within the parameters of the school's characteristic spirit, ethos, and vision, with the purpose of creating its own distinctive programme.

The complexity of this research study lies in the fact that Transition Year is unique to Ireland and is defined as a 'domesticated' programme.

Essentially, Transition Year maths acts as a blank canvas for each school to plan, implement, and assess its own school-based curriculum. This can lead to inequalities in the content studied and the opportunities provided to students. Furthermore, some schools operate TY as an additional year of study for the high-stakes Leaving Cert Mathematics exam, while other schools focus on revising basic mathematical concepts. This results in unequal opportunities for students, though the question remains the same: What does it mean to be mathematically prepared?

Delphi study characteristics

A Delphi study is characterised by four elements: anonymity, iteration, controlled feedback, and statistical group response (Landeta & Barrutia, 2011). Each is fundamental to the overarching process in answering a complex question. Our study followed this structured approach, starting with the selection of multiple experts from different backgrounds.

Selection was aided by the use of a Knowledge Resource Nomination Worksheet (KRNW). Okoli and Pawlowski (2004) outlined a five-step process using the KRNW to prepare, populate, and nominate experts to participate in the Delphi study (Figure 1), before ranking their expertise and inviting them to participate.
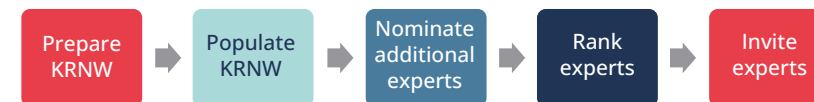
Figure 1: KRNW adapted from Okoli and Pawlowski (2004): developing the field of experts

The 1993 TY Guidelines state that 'schools should involve parents, work providers, and the wider community as educational partners in all aspects of the programme' (p.2). When preparing the KRNW, the wider community was interpreted to include career guidance counsellors, curriculum experts, members of relevant organisations, parents, government officials, and practising teachers from the different post-primary school sectors in Ireland. In total, 20 potential participants were identified and 14 were contacted, with 11 participating in the Delphi study.

A Delphi study is characterised by four elements: anonymity, iteration, controlled feedback, and statistical group response (Landeta & Barrutia, 2011).

The use of anonymity, along with iterated rounds, empowered the experts to unreservedly articulate their stance on mathematical preparedness in Transition Year. The controlled feedback enabled the responses to be objectively summarised by each group, through a spokesperson, and evaluated on merit (Chedi, 2017). Figure 2 provides a graphical overview of the experts and their different representative backgrounds.
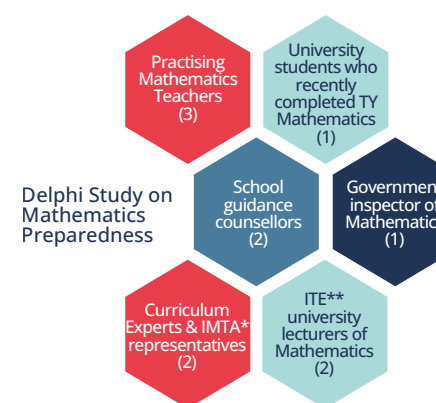
Figure 2: The categories of nominated experts for the Delphi study [* Irish Mathematics Teachers' Association; **Initial Teacher Education]

Early conclusions

From the Delphi study, the researcher captured the suggestions and feedback of all experts into a student-friendly quantitative questionnaire. The questionnaire was then distributed to three post-primary schools in Ireland, with 248 responses. While this paper forms part of a larger ongoing study, the early conclusions have led to the development of a definition for Mathematics Preparedness, based on four quadrants of preparedness: Academic, Social, Emotional, and Skills-Based Preparedness (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Early emerging graphic of the Four Quadrants of Mathematics Preparedness

Each quadrant refers to numerous related subsections. Quadrant One, Academic Preparedness, encompasses the wide range of curriculum content and knowledge, centred on algebra and other fundamental areas of mathematics. Quadrant Two, Social Preparedness, refers to students' self- and social confidence, knowledge and use of mathematical literacy, and academic self-image.

Quadrant Three, Emotional Preparedness, refers to the emotional learning factors of mathematics preparedness, including motivation and resilience, enjoyment, and mathematical relevance. Lastly, Quadrant Four, Skills-Based Preparedness, refers to the processing of information, independent learning skills, and the ability to be critical and creative.

REFERENCES

Chedi, J.M. (2017) 'A preliminary review on needs analysis and Delphi technique: Effective tools for data collection', *Journal of Asian Vocational Education and Training*, 10, 44–52.

Dalkey, N. and Helmer, O. (1963) 'An experimental application of the Delphi method to the use of experts', *Management Science*, 9(3), 458–467.

Department of Education and Science (DES) (1993) *Transition Year Programmes – Guidelines for Schools.* Dublin: Government Publications.

Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2010) *Report of the Project Maths implementation support group.* Dublin: Government Publications.

Jeffers, G. (2011) 'The Transition Year programme in Ireland: Embracing and resisting a curriculum innovation', *The Curriculum Journal*, 22(1), 61–76.

Landeta, J. and Barrutia, J. (2011) 'People consultation to construct the future: A Delphi application', *International Journal of Forecasting*, 27(1), 134–151.

Linstone, H.A. and Turoff, M. (eds.) (1975) *The Delphi Method*, pp. 3–12. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2012) *Project Maths: Responding to current debate.* Dublin: Government Publications.

Okoli, C. and Pawlowski, S.D. (2004) 'The Delphi method as a research tool: An example, design considerations and applications', *Information & Management*, 42(1), 15–29.

Schmidt, R.C. (1997) 'Managing Delphi surveys using nonparametric statistical techniques', *Decision Sciences*, 28(3), 763–774.

Shiel, G. and Kelleher, C. (2017) *An evaluation of the impact of Project Maths on the performance of students in Junior Cycle mathematics.* Dublin: Educational Research Centre on behalf of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

Smyth, E., Byrne, D., and Hannan, C. (2004) *The Transition Year Programme: An Assessment.* Liffey Press.

***

Kevin Magee, Freelance Journalist and Presenter/Producer of Iniúchadh TG4 Investigates.

According to new figures obtained by TG4's current affairs programme Iniúchadh TG4, the number of host families in the Gaeltacht has fallen by 30 per cent since 2018.

The increasing age profile of "mná tí", changing social habits, a move out of the sector into self-catering, and insufficient pay for keeping students are among the reasons given.

The fall in host families means thousands of students are being turned away from summer colleges in the Gaeltacht because there is nowhere to house them.

SUSI

National Student Grant Awarding Authority

About SUSI

SUSI (Student Universal Support Ireland) is Ireland's single national awarding authority for all higher and further education funding. SUSI offers support to all types of students, from school leavers to mature students returning to education.

What funding is available?

Course Type	Postgraduate Course	Undergraduate Course (in the EU/UK)	Undergraduate Course	PLC Course
Maintenance Grant	✓	✓	✓	✓
Student Contribution and/or Fees	✓		✓	

Eligibility Criteria

To be eligible for a grant, the applicant must meet all of the following criteria:

Nationality and Residency:
· Applicants must be an Irish, EU, EEA, UK or Swiss national or have specific leave to remain in the State as granted by the Department of Justice.
· Applicants must also be ordinarily resident in Ireland, the EU, EEA, UK or Switzerland for 3 of the last 5 years.

Course:
· Applicants must be progressing in education and increasing their National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) level.
· Applicants must be attending an approved course in an approved institution.

Income:
· The reckonable income, as calculated for grant purposes, must fall under specific thresholds.
• This income will be a factor in determining what type of funding applicants may receive.
• Applications are assessed with regard to gross household income from the previous year.

HOW TO APPLY

Applications can be made online at www.susi.ie

Step 1
• The applicant registers a SUSI account online at www.susi.ie
• The applicant completes and submits the application.
• Applicants must apply each year to renew their application.

Step 2
• Based on the information provided in the application, the applicant will receive either a decision letter or a letter requesting documentation so that SUSI can complete its assessment of the application.

Step 3
• Once the supporting documents have been reviewed, the applicant will be advised of the decision on their grant application by post.

Step 4
• To receive payment, awarded students will need to have:
  • Registered with their college for the new academic year;
  • Been confirmed by their college as registered/attending;
  • Submitted their bank details through their online SUSI portal.

Contact us:

✉ support@susi.ie   f /susisupport

☎ 0818 888 777   𝕏 @susihelpdesk

Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

City of Dublin
Bord Oideachais agus Oiliúna
Education and Training Board

School Placement in Initial Teacher Education: Partnership or Paralysis

Introduction

The concept of partnership in school placement is not new to the initial teacher education (ITE) reform agenda (Furlong et al., 2000). Despite its prevalence in the rhetoric on placement, the *nature* of partnerships, the definition of partners, and the extent to which partnerships are voluntary or enforced are all far from universally accepted facts. Harford and O'Doherty (2016) argue that the partnership metaphor has been applied very loosely to describe collaboration and consensus, without any real definition of what is meant by it.

Partnership in school placement is often discussed in policy documents and guidelines as a fait accompli, but when we probe the use of the word, we find it can be applied to many ways of organising collaboration between higher-education institutions (HEIs) and schools (Gorman & Furlong, 2023). It can vary in meaning depending on who uses it, whether site of practice, HEI, professional body, or student teacher. It can also be used to reflect distinct interpretations and motivations (Stuart & Martinez-Lucio, 2004).

If we cannot agree on what partnership is, how can we hope to understand who the partners are and how they should fulfil their roles? This article posits that the confusion around partnership has hindered the development of school placement into a meaningfully experienced first step in the continuum of professional development, resulting in a paralysis of reform in school placement.

True partnership

In its revised Guidelines on School Placement (2021), the Teaching Council presents a shared vision of school

Elva Casey
College Registrar, Hibernia College

This article explores the vision of school placement presented in the Teaching Council's revised Guidelines on School Placement (2021) and asks: Who are the real partners in placement, and how do they impact on its effectiveness as the first step in the continuum of professional development? The article considers the spaces inhabited by partners – higher-education institutions and host schools – and how perceptions of roles and responsibilities can affect the student teacher experience.

placement as something that can be taken for granted as a universally accepted practice. However, does sector-wide agreement exist on what constitutes partnership? It can be reasonably argued that true partnership occurs only where is equality of responsibilities, of risk, and of reward. In the current school placement system, can this be said to be the case, or is partnership more aspirational than reality-based?

While the Sahlberg Report (Sahlberg et al., 2012) notes the need for stronger partnership between HEIs and sites of practice to support the delivery of higher-quality placement, the review of the Teaching Council's Guidelines on School Placement (2021) can be argued to reflect a failed opportunity to give more nuance and specific details to the definition of roles and responsibilities in such a partnership model.

For example, the Guidelines introduce the Irish term for guide, *treoraí* (plural *treoraithe*), to refer to the role of the co-operating teacher. The Council makes the highly refutable claim that this term more accurately reflects the nature of the role. Let us consider that word 'guide' further. A guide is a more knowledgeable other who has the purpose of directing or indicating the correct path to take. This clearly gives the co-operating teacher a role of authority and assumes they should direct a student teacher down a specific pathway. Does this interpretation run the risk of paralysis? In other words, does it encourage student teachers to continue to replicate the methodologies of co-operating teachers and the status quo rather than engaging in critical reflective practices? In addition, the use of the Irish language to refer to key roles – common practice with the Teaching Council – runs the risk of acting as a barrier to inclusivity.

Taking a closer look at the partner roles, the traditional view of a triad of school placement comprising the student teacher, co-operating teacher, and school placement tutor represents a narrow vision of partnership in placement. Who are the real partners, and how do they impact on the effectiveness of placement? The 'shared vision' of school placement is defined in the Teaching Council's Guidelines (2021) as one where student teachers are welcomed and supported by a network of tutors, principals, class teachers, and the school community – but how this is to be implemented is not articulated clearly, nor are there specifics on fulfilling these roles.

The contributions of student teachers are to be 'recognised and celebrated', while the student teacher reflects on their developing professional identity in an atmosphere of shared professional understanding and collaboration (Teaching Council, 2021). For these ideals to be met, certain conditions need to be expressed and negotiated, including a recognition that partners have different work norms, allocating time for collaboration and engaging in sustained work to promote partnership (Bain et al., 2017).

> *The use of the Irish language to refer to key roles – common practice with the Teaching Council – runs the risk of acting as a barrier to inclusivity.*

Back to basics

The ideal of a collaborative and welcoming environment presented by the Teaching Council is not always supported by the evidence. The status of the student teacher in the school is complex, as teachers and learners negotiate their professional spaces; there is tension for student teachers in how they self-define as they participate in school placement (Hall et al., 2012). This can impact on how newly qualified teachers negotiate power (Long et al., 2012) and position in schools.

A picture emerges of partnership in school placement in Ireland characterised by a volunteer approach rather than formal partnership, despite the existence of the Teaching Council as a professional body. Does this speak to a lack of efficacy on the part of the Council, or is it a reflection of a less restrictive or authoritarian approach to the profession than could be taken by a professional body?

Smith (2016) poses an interesting question: Is partnership between ITEs and schools true partnership between equals, or are there hidden power struggles over issues such as who leads the partnership and who makes assessment decisions? There is a need for a 'back to basics' approach of articulating a clear vision of partnership in placement, including roles, responsibilities, and the promotion of equality, if partnership is not to end in paralysis.

REFERENCES

Bain, Y., Bruce, J., and Weir, D. (2017) 'Changing the landscape of school/university partnership in Northern Scotland', *Professional Development in Education*, 43(4), 537–555.

Furlong, J., Barton, L., Miles, S., Whiting, C., and Whitty, G. (2000) *Teacher Education in Transition: Reforming Professionalism.* Buckingham: Open University Press.

Gorman, A. and Furlong, C. (2023) 'Partnership or prescription: A critical discourse analysis of HEI–school partnership policy in the Republic of Ireland', *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education,* 51(2), 198–212.

Hall, K., Conway, P.F., Murphy, R., Long, F., Kitching, K., and O'Sullivan, D. (2012) 'Authoring oneself and being authored as a competent teacher', *Irish Educational Studies*, 31(2), 103–117.

Harford, J. and O'Doherty, T. (2016) 'The discourse of partnership and the reality of reform: Interrogating the recent reform agenda at initial teacher education and induction levels in Ireland', *Center for Educational Policy Studies Journal*, 6(3), 37–58.

Long, F., Hall, K., Conway, P., and Murphy, R. (2012) 'Novice teachers as "invisible" learners', *Teachers and Teaching*, 18(6), 619–636.

Sahlberg, P., Furlong, J., and 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, July 2012.

Smith, K. (2016) 'Partnerships in teacher education: Going beyond the rhetoric, with reference to the Norwegian context', *Center for Educational Policy Studies Journal*, 6(3), 17–36.

Stuart, M. and Martinez-Lucio, M. (2004) 'Where next for partnership?' In: M. Stuart and M. Martinez-Lucio (Eds.) *Partnership and Modernisation in Employment Relations*, pp. 266–273.

Teaching Council (2021) *Guidelines on School Placement: Revised edition 2021.* Maynooth: Teaching Council.

✳ ✳ ✳

Speaking at the launch of **SciFest 2023** at Clogher Road Community College in Dublin, Minister for Education, Norma Foley TD, said: "I am delighted to join the SciFest team to celebrate the launch of SciFest 2023. Initiatives such as SciFest cultivate a genuine curiosity for science and STEM from an early age."

Scifest announced Climate Action as its theme for 2023 and also announced EirGrid as a new project partner.

SciFest is Ireland's largest and most inclusive STEM fair programme for second-level students. The competition attracts 10,000 student participants annually.

In SciFest, second-level students showcase STEM projects at a series of one-day science fairs held locally in schools, and regionally at venues in the Technological Universities, Dundalk Institute of Technology, DCU and St. Mary's College, Derry.

Report on the 'Big Pictures of the Past' Research Project

Investigating young teachers' and students' perceptions of history

This article aims to draw attention to a significant research project that sought to identify the kinds of overarching views of the past that young teachers and young students possess. A commitment to the principles of 'student voice' underlay the project, a collaboration between the NCCA and UCD School of Education. We outline the scope and nature of the research and conclude with some key findings.

John Dredge

Lecturer in History Methods, School of Education, University College Dublin

Ruth Ferris

Lecturer in History Methods, School of Education, University College Dublin

Gerard O'Sullivan

Acting Director, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

On 4 October 2023, the Minister for Education, Norma Foley TD, launched a report on a new area of focus in History education at second level. Since the beginning of the school year 2018/19, a number of learning outcomes set down in the Junior Cycle History specification (DES, 2017) are grouped under the heading 'Developing the Big Picture'. For the classroom teacher, these learning outcomes require that students be assisted in developing more robust and more coherent 'big pictures' of the past, using overarching frameworks that help them make connections between 'then' and 'now'.

The inclusion of these new learning outcomes prompted a group of researchers to investigate the kinds of 'big picture' that are available to first-year History students. Since two of the researchers are involved in teacher education in University College Dublin (UCD), the researchers also wished to assess the readiness of young History teachers on the Professional Master of Education (PME) programme to help their first-year students develop stronger 'big pictures'.

The research was undertaken collaboratively by UCD School of Education and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). The project was driven by a strong awareness of, and commitment to, the important role of student voice in deliberation on matters affecting students' current and future educational experiences. The ideas and views of students in this report offer many insights that may help curriculum planners and classroom teachers as they seek to develop courses of study that reflect awareness of learners' needs and the underlying understandings that may block or facilitate deep and meaningful learning in the present. The students here include student teachers, whose ideas and views may also help shape the programmes of study that they encounter in teacher education courses.

Since there is some evidence that teacher- or educationalist-designed 'frameworks' can be helpful to students' learning, the researchers designed their own experimental framework – titled 'Our History Scaffold' – to be used by the student teachers and discussed with the first-year students towards the end of the school year 2019/20. Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic intervened and plans had to be curtailed: the student teachers had limited opportunities to use the framework, and it was not possible for the researchers to meet students. It was decided to extend the research into a second year, 2020/21. Despite the challenges presented by pandemic restrictions, internet-hosted encounters with students took place and some interesting data were gathered on the use of the framework.

Fifteen schools took part in the project: eight in 2019/20 and seven in 2020/21. First-year History students completed 257 student tasks, and 15 student focus groups met with the researchers. Focus groups had up to 10 students and were chosen at random from those who had completed the student task. In 2020/21, a second round of focus group meetings sought to assess the impact of using the framework.

While the initial focus group meetings with students were face to face, all encounters with students in 2020/21 took place remotely. Nine student teachers were also interviewed, and valuable data were gathered on their state of readiness to address 'big picture' issues in the classroom. Neither first-year second-level History students nor student teachers are *tabulae rasae,* and we have much to learn from the ideas and thoughts they bring to their engagements with history in the classroom, including lessons about how more robust 'big pictures' may be nurtured and maintained.

One of our findings with the first-year second-level students – and it is one borne out by research elsewhere, such as the *Usable Historical Pasts* report (Foster et al., 2008) – is that most tend to see the history they study as a set of unconnected events. For instance, one student's identification of their 'big picture' was 'Ancient Rome, WWI and WWII, the Moon landing, the Big Bang, the dinosaurs, the Irish War of Independence, and the Irish Civil War' – in that order, with no apparent connecting strands, no apparent understanding of the processes that work their way through historical time. In all settings, however,

The ideas and views of students in this report offer many insights that may help curriculum planners and classroom teachers as they seek to develop courses of study...

there were students who had an awareness of processes at work over time; for example:

We learned to live in caves, leading to building houses. We learned to live together as a community, leading to civilisation, made money to buy and sell things, making an economy . . .

These examples help identify the nature of the challenges for teachers, for example, to help students see the processes at work in history over time, processes that underlie and may drive or impede the more eye-catching events that capture the headlines.

Another significant finding – one with clear implications for how history teachers approach their classes – is that 'big picture' thinking is closely connected with disciplinary understanding; that is, students are more likely to have 'big pictures' that are usable in their daily lives if they have an understanding of how history works. That is why strand 1 of the Junior Cycle specification is titled 'The Nature of History': students need to know not only *what* we know – or think we know – but also *how* we know what we know. Historical knowledge is not inert, and its very dynamism – and the questions that dynamism generates – is one of the ways we can excite interest among our students. And exciting of interest is key: No curiosity, no learning.

REFERENCES

Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2017) *Junior Cycle History.* Dublin: DES.

Dredge, J., Ferris, R., and O'Sullivan, G. (2023) *Big Pictures of the Past research project: An investigation into the kinds of 'big picture' that young teachers and young students possess and how these 'big pictures' may be made more robust.* Dublin: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and School of Education, University College Dublin.

Foster, S., Ashby, R., and Lee, P. (2008) *Usable Historical Pasts: A Study of Students' Frameworks of the Past.* Swindon, UK: Economic and Social Research Council.

Student Absenteeism: Time for a Rethink

Background

Arrangements for implementing legislation on compulsory school attendance remained unchanged in the Republic of Ireland for most of the 20th century. The structure devolved responsibility for enforcing the legislation, the School Attendance Act (1926), mainly to An Garda Síochána, with a school attendance service operating in a limited number of county borough areas, including Dublin, Cork, Limerick, and Waterford. School principals were required to make weekly attendance returns identifying absentees. If visits to the family did not secure improvements, provision was made for enforcement, including committing the child to an industrial school if the problem persisted.

These arrangements reflected the view that irregular school attendance arose because of parental negligence. Enforcement was largely punitive, and welfare issues were largely disregarded. In due course, this approach began to be questioned. A committee chaired by District Justice Eileen Kennedy reported on the operation of reformatory and industrial schools in 1970. Because some students in these institutions arrived there as a result of the school-attendance legislation, the Kennedy Report addressed that issue:

The School Attendance system is not working satisfactorily and requires re-examination. The School Attendance Acts should, therefore, be reviewed and revised where necessary. (Kennedy, 1970, p.82)

The Conroy Commission reported on the role of the Gardaí in that year also. It recommended that enforcement of school-attendance regulations was not an appropriate function for the organisation. Other than those few areas with a school attendance service, the legislation was rarely implemented in the latter half of the

Brian Fleming
Independent Researcher

This year is the 125th anniversary of the introduction of compulsory school attendance into Irish education. Despite three policy iterations in that period, statistics show high levels of student absenteeism currently in many schools. It is a complex problem that is difficult to tackle effectively, and it has serious implications also for these students' peers. This article examines the phenomenon in the light of research and the response of the Irish education system to it over the years.

20th century. Various groups produced suggestions for reform, and, eventually, important legislation emerged.

The Education Welfare Act (2000)

The Education Welfare Act incorporated a move away from the punitive approach, though the possibility of legal action remained as an option. All children aged 6–16 were obliged to attend school or otherwise receive an education in the form of homeschooling or in a place other than a formally recognised school. Provision was made for establishing a National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB) to be responsible for implementing the legislation and to appoint educational welfare officers (EWOs).

Parents were required to explain absences, whether full-day or partial. Schools were required to keep records of attendance, as was the norm, and to supply detailed returns to the NEWB. Also addressed were admissions policies and arrangements for student suspension or expulsion. The vision was articulated clearly by the Minister for Education, Micheál Martin, when he introduced the Bill in Seanad Éireann in 1999. He stressed that the focus was on addressing the causes of non-attendance rather than applying sanctions:

> The general aim of the Bill is to provide for a comprehensive, national system for ensuring that children of compulsory school-going age attend school or, if they do not attend school, that they receive at least a minimum education. (Seanad Éireann, 1999)

A complex problem

Erratic school attendance has been widely researched in various jurisdictions. The complexity of the problem is underlined by the fact that scholars from such a range of disciplines – including education, social work, sociology, law, criminology, psychology, psychiatry, and medicine – have chosen to research the issue.

Schools' annual statistical returns include details of the number of days 'lost' by their student cohort. They also specify the number of students who were absent for 20 days or more in any given year, usually described in research as 'chronic' absentees. The national picture that emerges is disappointing. Over the decade to 2017/18 there was an insignificant change in the number of days lost and a small reduction in the percentage of chronic absentees.

The figures also give us a useful insight into the impact of poverty and disadvantage on school-attendance patterns. Chronic absenteeism tends to be about twice as prevalent in DEIS post-primary schools compared with non-DEIS ones.

The Education Welfare Act incorporated a move away from the punitive approach, though the possibility of legal action remained as an option.

Recently, Tusla released figures for school attendance in 2019–2022, which suggest that the unavoidable move to online learning may have impacted negatively on many students. In that context the Minster's decision to drop the Covid Learning and Supports Scheme (CLASS) after one year will prove to have been a very retrograde step. However, the disruption caused by Covid-19 means that interpreting patterns might prove unreliable. So instead I am relying on the summary of the 2017/18 figures produced by Denner and Cosgrove (2020).

Resources

The very limited progress in tackling this issue highlights its complexity but also raises questions about the resources provided to tackle it. In 2001, research was commissioned on the NEWB's organisational and staffing needs. The report (Rochford, 2002) recommended that a staff complement of 360 would be necessary, 300 of them EWOs. Former NEWB board and senior staff members, interviewed in the course of researching this issue, all maintain that from the start there was no real commitment on the part of the Department of Education to provide the necessary resources.

Certainly, the resources provided never even came close to those identified as necessary by the Rochford report. To put it in context, the current staffing level is fewer than 150 EWOs: one for about every 30 schools, on average. The latest figure for chronic absentees is over 113,000 children and young people between primary and post-primary (Denner & Cosgrove, 2020, p.10). That represents 750 chronic absentees, on average, for each EWO. There are also thousands more, in any given year, who don't reach the 20-day threshold, whose absenteeism is problematic and where intervention is needed before it escalates.

Of course, school personnel, home school community liaison officers (HSCLs), and others are also working on the issue. Again, for context, this time with a DEIS post-primary school of say 700 pupils: Denner and Cosgrove's (2020) research suggests that such a school will have 165 chronic attenders. Can it be seriously argued that one HSCL, with some help from colleagues filling part-time roles as year heads, together with an EWO who has an unrealistic workload, is in a position to bring about significant change?

Since the Act became law there have been notable changes in how it is administered. Nine years after the NEWB was established in 2002, it was placed under the aegis of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs; in 2014 its functions were assigned to Tusla, whose budget was determined by the Department of Children. Early in 2021, responsibility for legislation, policy, and budgetary matters was assigned to the Department of Education, but operationally the service remains under Tusla, and all its employees are Tusla staff members.

Recently, Tusla released figures for school attendance in 2019–2022, which suggest that the unavoidable move to online learning may have impacted negatively on many students.

The whole saga seems like a game of pass-the-parcel. Taking that together with the failure to provide the necessary resources, it is reasonable to ask whether the government is serious about addressing this problem.

Conclusion

We know that failure to address school absenteeism effectively can have serious consequences. Firstly, irregular attendance at school can have a lifelong impact on those involved under various headings (Darmody et al., 2008). Secondly, often overlooked is the negative impact on peers. If erratic attendance is pervasive within a group of students, at a minimum the rhythm of teaching is disrupted, to the detriment of regular attenders. The impact of absenteeism in DEIS school communities is clear from recent research (Fleming, 2020).

Finally there is the point made in the Kennedy report, and by many working in schools, that erratic attendance may in some cases be a symptom of complex problems that need to be addressed urgently. There is evidence, anecdotal and otherwise, to suggest that our current cohort of younger citizens are more prone to suffering from mental health challenges than previous generations. More than two decades after the Education Welfare Act was enacted, an independent evaluation and reform are overdue.

REFERENCES

Conroy, C. (1970) *Commission on the Conditions of Service of An Garda Síochána.* Dublin: Stationery Office.

Darmody, M. and Thornton, M. (2015) 'What predicts disaffection in Irish primary schools?', *Educational Studies*, 41(1–2), 29–46.

Darmody, M., Smyth, E., and McCoy, S. (2008) 'Acting up or opting out? Truancy in Irish secondary schools', *Educational Review*, 60(4), 359–373.

Denner, S. and Cosgrove, J. (2020) *School Attendance Data: Primary and Post-Primary schools (2017/18).* Dublin: Tusla.

Fleming, B. (2020) *The Lived Reality of Educational Disadvantage.* ISBN: 978-1-78605-115-8.

Kennedy, E. (1970) *Report on the Reformatory and Industrial Schools System.* Dublin: Stationery Office.

Rochford, D. (2002) *The Rochford Report.* Dublin: SES Services.

Seanad Éireann (1999) Seanad Éireann debate, vol. 159, no. 10. Dublin: Houses of the Oireachtas, 19 May. www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/seanad/1999-05-19/7/.

Thornton, M., Darmody, M., and McCoy, S. (2013) 'Persistent absenteeism among Irish primary school pupils', *Educational Review*, 65(4), 488–501.

Exploring School Conditions to Support Teacher Professional Learning

Introduction

Teacher learning is personal, unique to individuals, and context specific (Hargreaves, 2001; George et al., 2006; Collinson et al., 2009; Hargreaves & Fink, 2012; Hall et al., 2015; Fullan, 2016). To be effective, it can't be confined to what occurs in a workshop: we must also attend to what happens when a teacher returns to school to implement the new teaching practice.

To make teacher learning more sustainable, sufficient, and continuous, support from schools is critical for teachers to successfully incorporate professional learning into their teaching practice (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Fullan, 2016). School context is therefore a significant element of professional learning.

The Instructional Leadership Programme (ILP) is a two-year professional learning programme designed to extend and refine the instructional practices of post-primary teachers in Ireland. Teachers attend four sessions, each lasting two and a half days. It is facilitated by Professor Barrie Bennett through Education and Training Boards Ireland. This article outlines how the ILP was designed and implemented to support teachers in changing or refining their practice.

Sharon Coffey
Principal, Coláiste Aindriú, Co. Carlow

School context is important to support teacher professional learning. This article outlines the experiences of 15 teachers from five schools engaged in the Instructional Leadership Programme. It looks at the school conditions that supported the teachers in implementing new or refined strategies on their return to school. Two school conditions that support teacher professional learning are the engagement and support of school leadership, and supportive collaboration among teachers.

School conditions

The phrase 'school conditions' refers here to school factors that are critically important to support teachers to implement their learning after attending a professional learning programme or event. Unfortunately, we too often ignore the obvious and forget that school context differs from school to school. Specific sets of school conditions to support teacher professional learning in

one school context can have different effects in another, even though the aim is to achieve a similar outcome (Opfer and Pedder, 2011).

This article reports two school conditions, highlighted by the teachers in this study, that supported them in implementing their new learning in their specific school contexts. The conditions are: the engagement and support of school leadership, and supportive collaboration among teachers.

Engagement and support of school leadership

School leaders have an important role in shaping teachers' learning and practice. They contribute to teachers' learning directly through actions they take to shape school conditions, and they influence learning indirectly by giving teachers access to learning opportunities, such as sending them to attend the ILP. Positive school conditions for professional learning are facilitated by principals who can plan and provide a wide range of opportunities and supports focused on teachers' improvement.

School leaders experience difficulty supporting instructional change if they do not understand the new innovation. They must therefore attend and complete the ILP with the teachers. This ensures they have the knowledge and understanding to support teachers with a change of teaching practice upon return to school.

A school leader selects and sends a team of three, including themselves, to the ILP. It is naïve for leaders to assume that a team of teachers will work successfully together and form supportive relationships to navigate change. They need to be aware of the individuals' personality and professional traits. The team need to be able to work together and form positive relationships to support each other with implementation upon return to school (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Gore & Rosser, 2020). Educational change is a complex process with little attention focused on the interpersonal relationships between teachers during educational change (Hall & Hord, 2015).

The school leaders in the schools that informed this article support teachers to establish collaborative mechanisms to support implementation of new practices. The collaborative structures give leaders the opportunity to plan, reflect on, and implement innovation from professional learning that will provide sustainable professional learning for teachers.

Supportive collaboration among teachers

Teachers learn in ways that are professional, personal, singular, and collaborative; they return to school to implement their learning both

Positive school conditions for professional learning are facilitated by principals who can plan and provide a wide range of opportunities and supports focused on teachers' improvement.

individually and collectively with colleagues. Providing teachers with a desire to sustain and share practice from professional learning through collaborative cultures can move them from the isolation that may make them resistant to change.

Three collaborative structures emerged from the schools in this study.

Teaching and Learning Club

Schools that established Teaching and Learning Clubs provided opportunities for the teachers to share their learning from the ILP. Teachers were motivated to present at the club through their willingness to engage with their professional learning and share their experiences. Presenting at the Teaching and Learning Club had a positive outcome for teachers. They had the opportunity to receive constructive feedback from colleagues, which supported them in developing their learning and practice.

Peer observation

Providing teachers with a desire to sustain and share practice from professional learning through collaborative cultures can move them from the isolation that may make them resistant to change.

Teachers need support from colleagues to sustain their learning and practice. Some schools initiated peer observation so that teachers could view each other using ILP strategies. These schools developed open-door procedures among teachers to invite their colleagues in to share their practice, providing an opportunity for positive feedback. Positive relationships emerged as a key influence in teachers' developing support networks in this area.

Developing shared reflective practice

One school created Cosán workshops to encompass professional learning and reflection. Similarly to the Teaching and Learning Club, teachers shared their ILP learning with colleagues but with the added element of structured reflection on their learning and practice. This allowed them to assess the strengths and weaknesses of using the new ILP strategies.

Conclusion

Professional learning does not happen in isolation or just during a workshop. Positive school conditions are equally important for supporting teachers in developing their learning upon return to school. The insights generated from this study are important, because they highlight conditions at school level that support teacher learning. The engagement and support of school leaders, combined with supportive collaboration among teachers, provide positive school conditions to support teachers to implement their learning.

REFERENCES

Collinson, V., Kozina, E., Kate Lin, Y.H., Ling, L., Matheson, I., Newcombe, L., and Zogla, I. (2009) 'Professional development for teachers: A world of change', *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 32(1), 3–19.

Darling-Hammond, L. and McLaughlin, M.W. (1995) 'Policies that support professional development in an era of reform', *Phi Delta Kappan*, 76(8), 597–604.

Darling-Hammond, L. and Richardson, N. (2009) 'Research review/teacher learning: What matters', *Educational Leadership*, 66(5), 46–53.

George, A.A., Hall, G.E., and Stiegelbauer, S.M. (2006) *Measuring Implementation in Schools: The Stages of Concern Questionnaire*. Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

Fullan, M. (2016) *The New Meaning of Educational Change*. Teachers College Press.

Gore, J. and Rosser, B. (2020) 'Beyond content-focused professional development: Powerful professional learning through genuine learning communities across grades and subjects', *Professional Development in Education*, 48(2), 218–232.

Hall, G.E. and Hord, S.M. (2015) *Implementing Change: Patterns, Principles, and Potholes*. Pearson/Allyn and Bacon.

Hargreaves, A. (2001) 'The emotional geographies of teachers' relations with colleagues', *International Journal of Educational Research*, 35(5), 503–527.

Hargreaves, A. and Fink, D. (2012) *Sustainable Leadership*. John Wiley & Sons.

Opfer, V.D. and Pedder, D. (2011) 'Conceptualizing teacher professional learning', *Review of Educational Research*, 81(3), 376–407.

***

Elaine Nevin, CEO at ECO-UNESCO, Dr Ciarán Byrne, Director of National Retrofit at SEAI

The Young Environmentalist Awards (YEA), sponsored by SEAI, accepts submissions for action projects that look at how to reduce the environmental impacts of our energy use. YEA is open to young people from all over Ireland both in formal and non-formal education settings, including schools, youth reach groups, youth organisations. Each category is linked to one or more of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) defined by the United Nations to tackle the world's biggest problems by 2030.

Registration is open at yea.ie
https://ecounesco.ie/young-environmentalist-awards/

Survival Skills for the Teacher in Uncertain Times

Introduction

An existential crisis impacts us all in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Its consequences are especially detrimental to the wellbeing of our young people and adolescents, as noted by the Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland's (ASTI, 2022) Dáil submission on mental health.

The ever-growing complexities of the modern world present all citizens, especially our youngsters, with a growing identity crisis in the context of what Bauman (2000) aptly describes as our 'liquid society'. Having spent some thirty-five years in the classroom at second level, I offer in this article some survival skills for the teacher (and, by default, the taught) in the light of these complexities.

As a lecturer in wellbeing on the B.A. and B.Ed. programme in Dublin City University, I stress the following six points, which are described in more detail below:

1. Cultivate positive healthy relationships
2. Share your knowledge: an interdisciplinary approach
3. Find a mentor and co-teach
4. Be a good leader
5. Share your story
6. Learn to belong.

Facing wicked problems

It can be disturbing for us to hear that there are no definite answers or easy solutions to complex moral, emotional, social, and political problems and crises. In this context Professor Jane Ohlmeyer, in her recent presentation at the Education Matters Summit (Ohlmeyer, 2022), alluded to what Rittel and Webber (1973, p.160) designated as 'wicked problems' to draw

Dr Tim Quinlan
Part-time Lecturer, Retired Secondary School Teacher

The ever-growing complexities of the modern world present all citizens, especially our youngsters, with a growing identity crisis in the context of what Zygmunt Bauman aptly describes as our 'liquid society'. Having spent some thirty-five years in the classroom at second level, I offer in this article some survival skills for the teacher (and, by default, the taught) in the light of these complexities.

attention to the complexities and challenges of addressing planning and social policy problems in the modern era.

While none of us has a simple answer to these complex questions, one way or another they have a way of presenting themselves in our classrooms at all levels of education. Relating positively to our students, and they to us, is crucial for both teacher and taught in their efforts to survive in ever more uncertain times. The following pointers in this task, though aimed primarily at the teacher, also promote students' wellbeing.

Survival skills for teachers

1. Cultivate positive healthy relationships

People who neglect their personal as well as professional development leave themselves open to a multitude of stressors in today's fraught world. While teachers may engage in much professional development and forget about their personal development, they do so to their own detriment. Well-adjusted professionals have learnt to develop a positive relationship with themselves, their colleagues, and their students.

While knowledge of one's subject area and the appropriate teaching methodologies are highly desired qualities in describing the professionalism of any teacher, so too is dedication to personal and professional development. Much of value has been written on self-care and mindfulness practices to aid us in this endeavour. Teachers with high self-esteem and an insight into human development will engage positively with any class.

2. Share your knowledge: an interdisciplinary approach

To return to Professor Ohlmeyer's presentation alluded to above, the 'wicked problems' of our 'liquid society', encountered by all teachers, can only be tackled by an interdisciplinary approach. While her study was mainly concerned with third level, her findings are also readily applicable to other levels.

Transition Year obviously offers much scope for an interdisciplinary approach. For example, a topic like climate change could be profitably tackled from many points of view: geography, history, the pure sciences, statistics, and moral/religious education, to name several among many. It is worth emphasising that true discipline and wellbeing are team enterprises.

3. Find a mentor and co-teach

If the school runs a mentoring system, all the better for someone starting out on their career. If not, beginner and even experienced teachers should find a

While teachers may engage in much professional development and forget about their personal development, they do so to their own detriment.

colleague or two with whom they can co-teach. Such an approach obviously needs timetabling and support from management and staff. There is much readily accessible research that backs up the efficacy of co-teaching at secondary school.

4. Be a good leader

All good teachers are good leaders. Leaders know that real power is empowering of their students and never disempowering. They don't micro-manage; they inspire initiative. The Centre for Creative Leadership (2023) underscores the fact that good leaders are also good communicators and great delegators. Most especially they show empathy and respect for their charges.

5. Share your story

The old cliché 'We are all in the one boat' is worth repeating when it comes to our mortality and humanity. At times in classrooms, sharing personal feelings is appropriate for the teacher. This requires humility: 'I cannot answer your question, but I will check that for you', or 'I too experienced that when I was your age.' This takes courage, too, and knowledge of boundaries that can be learnt only through experience and dedication to further learning.

Koole et al. (2006) showed that appropriate sharing always enhances relationships and builds up trust in any human encounter. This boils down to our native instinct to share our stories, which is at the heart of any culture. Professor Shane O'Mara (2023), a neuroscientist at Trinity College Dublin, has written a timely book on how conversation builds the world around us – and how, together, we can talk our way into a better tomorrow. Teachers are an important part of that storytelling.

6. Learn to belong

When we find a school whose ethos appeals to us and where we feel part of the community of learning and caring, we are well on the way to building up our own positive mental health and that of our colleagues and students. In Connemara, older people often ask of a person they do not know in the community, 'Cé dár díobh thú?', which translates literally as 'Whose are you?' In other words, they are trying to find out where the person belongs.

Central to Alfred Adler's theory and practice of psychotherapy is the individual's social needs, especially the need to belong. In dealing with our students and staff members, a good indication of positive wellbeing is how far they feel they belong to the community of learning that is the school.

Leaders know that real power is empowering of their students and never disempowering. They don't micromanage; they inspire initiative.

Conclusion

These six short pointers are worth considering, as is the more obvious attention we must pay to our physical health. We will then have embodied, as the old Latin adage puts it, a healthy mind in a healthy body.

REFERENCES

Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI) (2022) Youth mental health and schools. www.asti.ie/about-asti/policy/submissions/.

Bauman, Z. (2000) Liquid Modernity. Oxford: Blackwell.

Centre for Creative Leadership (2023) www.ccl.org/.

Ohlmeyer, J. (2022) 'SHAPE-ID: Shaping interdisciplinary practices in Europe'. In: 'AHSS and Societal Challenges: Peter Brown talks to Daniel Carey, Stephen Hadley, and Jane Ohlmeyer'. Education Matters Summit 2022: Research. https://educationmatters.ie/summit-2022/research-education-matters-summit-2022/.

Greenberg, J., Koole S.L., and Pyszczynski, T. (eds.) (2004) Handbook of Experimental Existential Psychology. Guilford Press.

O'Mara, S. (2023): Talking Heads: The New Science of How Conversation Shapes Our Worlds. London: Bodley Head.

Rittel, H.W.J. and Webber, M.M. (1973) 'Dilemmas in a general theory of planning', Policy Sciences, 4, 155–169.

***

The **Irish Science Teachers' Association,** *Eol Oidí na hÉireann*, is the professional association for teachers of science in the Republic of Ireland. As such it is represented on the relevant subject development groups of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. Since its foundation in 1961 it has been providing continuous professional development and support for its members at both national and branch levels.

The Association has close affiliations with the Association for Science Education in the UK and is a founding member of ICASE, the International Council of Associations for Science Education. It is also represented on SCIENTIX which promotes and supports a Europe-wide collaboration among STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) teachers, education researchers, policymakers and other STEM education professionals.

Members are also supported and informed of developments through the Association's website (www.ista.ie) and through its Journal, SCIENCE, which is posted to members three times a year.

The major national ISTA events are the Senior Science Quiz – normally held during Science Week since 1990 and the Annual Conference which provides members with the opportunity to hear and meet national and international experts in areas relevant to science education. The next conference will be held in the **Southeast Technological University** in **Waterford on 1st & 2nd March 2024**. The theme will be: *Senior Cycle Reform – Implications for Teaching, Learning and Assessment of Leaving Certificate Biology, Chemistry and Physics.*

For up-to-date information visit:
Website: www.ista.ie
Twitter/X: @IrishSciTeach
Facebook: www.facebook.com/IrishScienceTeachersAssociation
Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/irishscienceteachers

Reverse Mentoring – Digital Technologies for Education
Reversing to move forward with mentoring

David Brennan
OIDE Senior Leader, National Small Schools Project Coordinator

Reverse mentoring is a specific form of classical mentoring where the role of mentor and mentee can be flipped. In an evolving landscape, reverse mentoring may provide an opportunity for both formal and informal professional development and mutual learning as we traverse this new era of change in education.

Introduction

Reverse mentoring is a specific form of classical mentoring where the role of mentor and mentee can be flipped. Traditionally, mentoring can be viewed as somewhat hierarchical and one-dimensional, with the mentor's role as a catalyst to a mentee's professional success. Four main domains of mentoring have been identified: academic support, role modelling, psychological support, and support for career progression (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Eby et al., 2010)

Mentors have the opportunity to develop leadership skills and organisational knowledge, while mentees increase content knowledge, technical skills, and cultural insights (Murphy, 2010, using initial work by Kram, 1988), with talent management, innovation, and social equity being developed with the organisation.

In reverse mentoring this traditionally dyadic relationship of subordination changes to a more mutual sharing of ideas and specifically technological expertise. In schools, typically, a teacher with a digital specialisation (they may be less experienced, in pre-service, or newly qualified) takes on the role of mentor to a more experienced teacher, who becomes the mentee. It formalises the informal reciprocity that has occurred for years, whereby older professionals are mentored by their younger counterparts.

Development of the model

This model gained attention from American enterprise, its inception accredited to Jack Welch of General Electric. In the late 1990s, he acknowledged his own lack of technical expertise and the need for reform to adapt to

emerging innovations. To facilitate change management, he 'tipped the organization upside down'. Initially conceived for transforming technical skills, reverse mentoring has evolved to a more mutual mentoring practice in different sectors.

The Digital Learning Framework represented a key support under the Digital Strategy for Schools 2015–2020. It is adapted from the UNESCO ICT Competency Framework for Teachers (UNESCO, 2011), giving schools greater clarity on embedding digital technologies. Prior to remote emergency learning, teacher practices had undergone little change since the launch of the initial policy for schools (Cosgrove et al., 2013). Increased rates of digital adoption in the sector have highlighted the need for sustainable change and continuous reform: 'Schools have been the subject of endless improvement agendas from the incremental and emergent to the radical and revolutionary' (NCCA, 2021).

In the advent of Industry 4.0 and Education 4.0, there will be a need for ongoing synergy, agility, and relationship-building in education, which reverse mentoring may encourage. This transformation focuses on smart technology, artificial intelligence, and robotics, all of which now affect our everyday lives.

Based on the framework developed in Schools of the Future (World Economic Forum, 2020), the Education 4.0 initiative aims to better prepare the next generation of talent by transforming primary and secondary education. It will drive impact through four interconnected interventions:

1. implementing new measurement mechanisms for Education 4.0 skills
2. mainstreaming technology-enhanced Education 4.0 learning experiences
3. empowering the Education 4.0 workforce
4. setting Education 4.0 country-level standards and priorities

A recent report highlights that to maximise the potential of new technologies, 'organizations must put humans in the loop – reconstructing work, retraining people, and rearranging the organization' (Deloitte, 2018).

Many definitions of mentoring have been developed, reflecting the many contexts where it is used. A standard definition is elusive, which poses a challenge to establishing the structure of reverse mentoring. But common elements can be found when analysing mentoring practice (Haggard et al., 2011):

1. reciprocity of the social relation between mentor and mentee
2. developmental benefits related to the mentee's work or career, and benefits for mentors profiting by the learning partnership
3. regular/consistent interaction between mentor and mentee.

Initially conceived for transforming technical skills, reverse mentoring has evolved to a more mutual mentoring practice in different sectors.

Collaboration and crosspollination of ideas encourage educational organisations to envision new possibilities.

In education

Reverse mentoring may empower both emerging and established leaders. Teachers can gain important leadership skills if they can navigate these situations well (Leavitt, 2011). Reverse mentoring aligns with the theory that personal development relates to leadership development (Parker et al., 2008).

School culture may also be enhanced and plays a large role in whether the adoption of reverse mentoring is successful. Collaboration and cross-pollination of ideas encourage educational organisations to envision new possibilities. It may be instrumental in school re-culturing (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2000). The relationship can empower mentees to create change from within and move away from the 'conservative approach of socialisation that tries to maintain the prevailing situation and compel the newcomer into those circumstances' (Tynjälä et al., 2019).

Tensions can also arise from reverse mentoring, due to 'personal issues, pedagogical issues and professional issues' (Hudson & Hudson, 2017). Before implementing such a programme, Chen (2013) writes, 'organizations should take great effort to prepare employees psychologically for the experience of learning' from a colleague who may be new to an educational institute.

Growing awareness of mindsets and the emergence of social-emotional learning are areas of further consideration for educators (Markowitz & Bouffard, 2020). According to CASEL (2020), 'Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.' It is an important part of a well-rounded education. The reciprocal nature of reverse mentoring may further cultivate an environment of mutual learning and empathy-building.

Relationships

Professional relationships in an educational organisation are key. There is a wealth of research on the importance of connectedness in schools and on the qualities of in-school relationships that promote effective education. In reverse mentoring, trust and respect were identified as relational obligations of the relationship (Haggard & Turban, 2012). This entwines with human-resource management, where work relations and change management have come to the fore in the educational landscape; topics such as employee wellbeing, workplace equity, employee participation, joint decision-making, and social legitimacy are increasingly important (Thornthwaite & Balnave, 2016).

Reverse mentoring has benefits and challenges when there is focused consensus on an area such as digital technologies. If it is implemented as part of a regular mentoring programme, rather than by itself, this may mitigate some of these challenges and enable a more balanced approach to the professional relationship, whereby both parties share knowledge and contribute.

Kram (1988) identified four stages of mentoring relationships: initiation, cultivation, separation, and redefinition. Essentially, the development of mentoring relationships is based on the needs of both parties. Initial training for all participants is important: 'just one-third of mentor–mentee relationships are successful without training' (Brad Johnson et al., 2020).

Challenges and prospects

Unfamiliarity with the role or structure of the relationship can prove challenging, while job security and the need for a safe environment also need consideration. A mentor in a reverse mentoring programme may experience vulnerability, particularly when mentors are critical (Ehrich et al., 2004). Acceptance is a relational obligation for mentors (Haggard & Turban, 2012).

Potential challenges to formal implementation of mentoring that encompasses reverse mentoring include the following (Jones, 2012):

» Mentoring needs support at a high organisational level.
» The mentoring programme needs to fit into the running of the organisation.
» Flexibility is required in time management and availability.
» The mentoring programme needs to be promoted.
» Mentors and mentees need to be strategically matched.

Current research has focused on traditionally aligned mentoring programmes. Peer coaching is also referenced, as a more balanced and less hierarchical approach. Few studies examine reverse mentoring's existence in education; further empirical studies and theoretical approaches would need to be conducted and developed to bring its significant potential for education into practice.

Reverse mentoring, implemented as part of a structured mentoring programme, may offer both parties the opportunity to grow professionally by exchanging teaching experiences and pedagogical tools in an atmosphere of trust. Outside of digital technologies, it may offer another strategy to ensure exposure to and awareness of new methodologies. It may help identify emerging areas of need, ultimately improving collegial collaboration and

Reverse mentoring, implemented as part of a structured mentoring programme, may offer both parties the opportunity to grow professionally by exchanging teaching experiences and pedagogical tools in an atmosphere of trust.

building trust and commitment to creating a digitally receptive educational environment and dynamic learning community.

REFERENCES

Brad Johnson, W., Smith, D.G., and Haythornthwaite, J. (2020) 'Why your mentorship program isn't working', *Harvard Business Review*, 17 July. https://hbr.org/2020/07/why-your-mentorship-program-isnt-working.

Chen, Y.C. (2013) 'Effect of reverse mentoring on traditional mentoring functions', *Leadership and Management in Engineering*, 13(3), 199–208. DOI: 10.1061/(ASCE)LM.1943-5630.0000227

Clutterbuck, D. (2017) *Sage Handbook of Mentoring*. Los Angeles: Sage.

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (2021) 'What is SEL?' https://casel.org/what-is-sel/.

Cosgrove, J., Butler, D., Leahy, M., Shiel, G., Kavanagh, L., and Creaven, A.-M. (2013) *The 2013 ICT Census in Schools Summary Report*. Dublin: Educational Research Centre. www.erc.ie/documents/ict_cencus2013_summaryreport.pdf.

Crisp, G. and Cruz, I. (2009) 'Mentoring college students: A critical review of the literature between 1990 and 2007', *Research in Higher Education*, 50(6), 525–545. DOI: 10.1007/s11162-009-9130-2

Deloitte (2018) 'Introduction: The rise of the social enterprise'. London: Deloitte LLP. www2.deloitte.com/uk/en/insights/focus/human-capital-trends/2018/introduction.html.

Eby, L.T., Butts, M.M., Durley, J., and Ragins, B.R. (2010) 'Are bad experiences stronger than good ones in mentoring relationships? Evidence from the protégé and mentor perspective', *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 77, 81–92. DOI: 10.1016/j.jvb.2010.02.010

Ehrich, L.C., Hansford, B., and Tennent, L. (2004) 'Formal mentoring programs in education and other professions: A review of the literature', *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 40(4), 518–540. DOI: 10.1177/0013161X04267118

Haggard, D.L. and Turban, D.B. (2012) 'The mentoring relationship as a context for psychological contract development', *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 42(8), 1904–1931. DOI: 10.1111/j.1559-1816.2012.00924.x

Haggard, D.L., Dougherty, T.W., Turban, D.P., and Wilbanks, J.E. (2011) 'Who is a mentor? A review of evolving definitions and implications for research', *Journal of Management*, 37, 280–304. DOI: 10.1177/0149206310386227

Hargreaves, A. and Fullan, M. (2000) 'Mentoring in the new millennium', *Theory into Practice*, 39(1), 50–56. DOI: 10.1207/s15430421tip3901_8

Hudson, P. and Hudson, S. (2017) 'Mentoring preservice teachers: Identifying tensions and possible resolutions', *Teacher Development*, 22(1), 16–30. DOI: 10.1080/13664530.2017.1298535

Jones, J. (2012) 'An analysis of learning outcomes within formal mentoring relationships', *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*, 10(1), 57–72.

Kram, K.E. (1988) *Mentoring at Work: Developmental Relationships in Organizational Life*. University Press of America. DOI: 10.2307/2392687

Leavitt, C.C. (2011) 'Developing leaders through mentoring: A brief literature review'. Capella University. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED517965.

Markowitz, N.L. and Bouffard, S.M. (2020) T*eaching with a Social, Emotional, and Cultural Lens: A Framework for Educators and Teacher Educators.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Murphy, W.M. (2010) 'Reverse mentoring at work: Fostering cross-generational learning and developing millennial leaders', *Human Resource Management,* 51, 549–574. www.academia.edu/25362802/Reverse_mentoring_at_work_Fostering_cross_generational_learning_and_developing_Millennial_leaders.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2021) 'Innovation happens: Classrooms as sites of change'. Dublin: NCCA. https://ncca.ie/media/2098/innovation_happens_classrooms_as_sites_of_change.pdf.

Parker, P., Hall, D.T., and Kram, K.E. (2008) 'Peer coaching: A relational process for accelerating career learning', *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 7(4), 487–503. DOI: 10.5465/amle.2008.35882189

Thornthwaite, L. and Balnave, N. (2016) 'Building sustainable workforce futures', *Labour & Industry*, 26(3), 157–164. DOI: 10.1080/10301763.2016.1222484

Tynjälä, P., Pennanen, M., Markkanen, I., and Heikkinen, H.L. (2019) 'Finnish model of peer-group mentoring: Review of research', *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences.* DOI: 10.1111/nyas.14296

UNESCO (2011) *UNESCO ICT Competency Framework for Teachers.* Paris: UNESCO. https://iite.unesco.org/pics/publications/en/files/3214694.pdf.

World Economic Forum (2020) Schools of the Future: Defining New Models of Education for the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Geneva: WEF. www.weforum.org/reports/schools-of-the-future-defining-new-models-of-education-for-the-fourth-industrial-revolution.

Zauschner-Studnicka, S. (2017) 'A model for reverse-mentoring in education', *International Journal of Social, Behavioral, Educational, Economic, Business and Industrial Engineering,* 11(3), 546–553. DOI: doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1129019

***

Transition Year students at Drimagh Castle Secondary School took part in the climate education programme 'Rewrite'. One of Rewrite's core philosophies is to infuse optimism and positivity into the understanding of climate change. Sonya Murray, Rewrite Schools Coordinator said: "We can't change what's been done in the past, but we can re-imagine the future."

Challenges Facing Voluntary Secondary Schools

Takeaways from a large–scale study of the sector

Introduction

The Value of the Voluntary Sector in Irish Education, a study by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), explored the immediate issues facing voluntary secondary schools and longer-term questions around teaching and learning, school ethos, and school gender mix. The research, commissioned by the Joint Managerial Body (JMB), was conducted in March–April 2023 in 21 schools chosen to reflect the diversity of the sector.

In each school, Second and Fifth Year students were surveyed and participated in focus groups. Also interviewed were school leaders, guidance counsellors, special educational needs (SEN) coordinators, teachers, members of the board of management, parents, and key stakeholders in the wider second-level system.

More than 2,000 survey responses and more than 100 interviews yielded a wealth of data on important topics. The full findings will be published in 2024; in the meantime, this article will outline the main takeaways and point to immediate policy recommendations. First, it will briefly discuss what the voluntary sector looks like.

The voluntary secondary sector

The voluntary secondary sector includes roughly half of Ireland's second-level students (215,955 of 406,392) and schools (384 of 727). It is an incredibly diverse sector: there are schools with just over a hundred students, schools with well over a thousand, and everything in between. There are urban schools, rural schools, DEIS schools, and Gaelcholáiste: the full spectrum of Irish education. A study of the voluntary sector is therefore also a study of Irish second-level education more broadly.

Dr Eamonn Carroll
Post-Doctoral Research Fellow in Education, Economic and Social Research Institute

This article outlines key findings from an ESRI study, *The Value of the Voluntary Sector in Irish Education*, and highlights some of the main challenges facing Irish secondary schools in engaging students. It also provides an overview of the sector and makes immediate policy recommendations.

Yet key distinctions set the voluntary sector apart from the other sectors in Ireland, and in some cases from international norms. Almost all voluntary schools have an explicitly religious ethos, the vast majority Catholic (339 out of 384), with the Church of Ireland and other minority faiths like the Quakers and Judaism also represented. Even the growing number of non-denominational voluntary schools (mostly under the patronage of Educate Together) attach great importance to their secular ethos. Voluntary secondary schools are also split between co-educational (40%), all-girls (27%), and all-boys (33%) schools, while the other sectors are effectively entirely co-educational.

Finally, while voluntary schools have a broad socioeconomic profile, historically they have drawn more from middle-class families (Smyth, 2017), and the sector includes all of Ireland's fee-charging second-level schools. The most recent data from the Growing Up in Ireland study suggests that the cohort attending each sector is converging over time, but that voluntary schools still enrol a slightly more socioeconomically advantaged cohort in terms of parental education and household income.

Funding and finance

There is a widespread feeling among voluntary school leaders and other stakeholders that this historic gap is still being used by the Department of Education to justify what they perceive to be lower levels of funding compared to other sectors. Capitation funding was seen as nowhere near the level needed, leaving schools reliant on voluntary contributions and constraining what they could offer students. The exact level of funding received by schools across the sectors is difficult to calculate, with an opaque system further obscured by differences in what schools are actually responsible for providing, depending on which sector they are in.

In Education and Training Board (ETB; formerly vocational) schools, for example, running costs like insurance, human resources, and infrastructure are centralised, whereas in the voluntary sector they are the responsibility of individual schools or patronage bodies. The complexity of funding mechanisms is a result of the ad hoc way they have evolved in response to schools' needs and the other funding streams available: historically, patronage bodies funded their schools in various ways, but this is largely no longer the case.

Replacing current funding mechanisms with a centralised, universal formula does not seem likely or particularly desirable. However, there is clearly a need for greater consultation and communication with schools, patronage bodies, and the JMB over the exact mechanisms used and the potential for centralising and thus reducing costs like insurance.

The exact level of funding received by schools across the sectors is difficult to calculate, with an opaque system further obscured by differences in what schools are actually responsible for providing, depending on which sector they are in.

The area where voluntary school finances were most under pressure was infrastructure, with many schools unable to finance needed expansions or renovations. There are, of course, budgetary constraints on what can be funded in any given year, but greater transparency and clarity on how decisions are made would be welcome, while more joined-up thinking when completing multiple jobs at once or replacing facilities that require frequent costly repairs would make budgets go further in the long run. Of particular concern were inadequate facilities for STEM subjects and physical education – central features of what schools offer in 2023.

School offerings

The question of what schools offer was at the heart of this study, and in reporting our results we aim to show the full breadth of what schools are now expected to provide and the challenges they face in doing so. The 'core business' remains teaching and learning, but there is a widespread understanding that learning needs to be underpinned by a wide range of other offerings and supports, inside and outside the classroom. Some of these, like extracurricular activities, are straightforward and have been provided by schools for decades, but many teachers felt they were under more pressure than ever to provide a wide enough range to engage all students and to juggle extracurricular activities with the curriculum.

The supports most urgently needed and most difficult to provide were for student mental health and wellbeing. Guidance counsellors in many schools were overwhelmed by the level of support that students needed – a difficulty compounded by the fact that outside agencies like Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) are also overwhelmed, with significant waiting lists in most areas. This leaves schools to deal with cases far beyond a guidance counsellor's training, as well as increasing numbers of less-severe cases.

Many school staff felt that while mental health issues had been increasing for some time, these had surged after the Covid-19 pandemic. In response, a small number of schools had hired, self-funded, a part-time psychologist, and all who did so saw it as hugely positive. This approach should be seriously considered on a national level, as mental health issues in young people show no sign of subsiding, with a clear impact on students' ability to engage fully in their education.

Two other key areas where schools felt unable to fully support students' engagement were around SEN and socioeconomic disadvantage. Existing supports – especially for special classes, special needs assistants and resource hours, and DEIS funding and posts – were extremely welcome, but for many schools they did not meet the level of need that exists in the classroom. In particular, differentiation in mainstream classrooms was made difficult or

The 'core business' remains teaching and learning, but there is a widespread understanding that learning needs to be underpinned by a wide range of other offerings and supports, inside and outside the classroom.

impossible by the number of students in the class and the pressure to cover material for state examinations, again compounded by the pandemic and uneven coverage of curricula during the school building closures.

Suitable curricula for students with complex learning needs were a significant issue. The common-level curriculum for Junior Cycle was seen to exclude some students, who previously would have taken foundation or ordinary level, while the lack of a Senior Cycle course to follow on from Junior Cycle L1 and L2 learning programmes made it extremely challenging for schools to provide suitable learning opportunities for students who completed these programmes.

The lack of dedicated funding to support students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds in non-DEIS schools was another issue undermining schools' ability to fully engage all their students. While the level of need in the DEIS schools in our study was on a different level to that in non-DEIS schools, there are many students in non-DEIS schools who would greatly benefit from supports like a home school community liaison or free school meals. If all schools are to be open to and inclusive of all students, they must be properly resourced to fully support all students, whatever their needs or background.

There are many students in non-DEIS schools who would greatly benefit from supports like a home school community liaison or free school meals.

Conclusion

There is not space here to explore the study's findings further, especially as their scale yielded nuanced results in areas like teaching and learning in the classroom and beyond; how well Irish schools prepare young people for their adult lives; staffing challenges; stakeholder perceptions of school gender mix; and the role of ethos in the 21st-century school. The results, when published, will provide a broad and deep snapshot of the current voluntary sector, with many findings speaking to the Irish second-level system more broadly.

But the overwhelming message of the data is clear: schools are being asked to do ever more for more students. While the supports available to them have grown significantly over recent decades, they have not kept pace with the responsibilities given to schools. If Ireland wants to keep giving its young people a world-class education, and especially if it wants this education to be available to all of its young people, it needs to match aspiration with action.

REFERENCE

Smyth, E. (2017) *Working at a Different Level? Curriculum Differentiation in Irish Lower Secondary Education.* London: Centre for Longitudinal Studies. www.esri.ie/system/files/media/file-uploads/2017-07/OPEA157.pdf.

JP McManus, Brian Mooney, and Gerald Boland pictured at the All Ireland Scholarships Alumni Christmas Party in the Shelbourne Hotel, Dublin 2, in December 2023.

The annual event celebrates scholars who have achieved the JP McManus Scholarship Award since its inception in 2008.

Each year, 125 students from across the island of Ireland receive the Award. The scholarships provide funding for the duration of the undergraduate programmes chosen by the scholarship winners.

Participation in the scholarship scheme is confined to those who attend non-fee paying schools and are in receipt of a third level of education maintenance grant from SUSI, or are in receipt of the Educational Maintenance Allowance in Northern Ireland. In excess of €42 million has been disbursed to scholarship recipients to date; over 1,600 scholarships have been awarded and over 1,300 All Ireland Scholarships winners have already graduated from university.

www.allirelandscholarships.com

léargas

Explore a world of opportunities.

Help your staff and learners develop new skills and experience through European exchanges and cooperation projects. Contact Léargas to find the programme suitable for you.

YouthWiki

eTwinning

EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY CORPS
THE POWER OF TOGETHER

EPALE
Ireland

Visit leargas.ie

Erasmus+
Enriching lives, opening minds.

Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

Youth, Volunteering and Sport

School Education

Online Learning Communities

Adult Education

Vocational Education and Training

Professional Development of Educators

Learner Mobility

Further Education & Training

YES SHE CAN!

Hazel Johnston is the first ever female Apprentice of the Year.

Out of 222 nominees put forward, Hazel came first, scooping the prestigious #GenerationApprenticeship Apprentice of the Year Award 2023.

A Year of Incredible Growth and Transformation in Further Education and Training

Introduction

In the early days of SOLAS and the Education and Training Boards (ETBs), with the newly created 'further education and training' sector in its infancy, there was a lot of debate about how we market, promote, and develop that sector, and indeed about whether it was possible to even define the sector as a distinct entity.

The two very distinct legacy systems (overseen by FÁS and the Vocational Education Committees, from which the sector was born), the 34 legacy programmes that comprised the total offering across both, and the range of provision – from basic literacy support to high-end technical education and apprenticeship offerings – meant there was real doubt about whether FET, the immediate acronym for the new sector, could ever be something that would stand on its own as a valued and impactful learning pathway.

However, during the consultation in developing the new FET strategy throughout 2019, it started to become clear that the diversity of FET was exactly what made it so special and unique. As the *Transforming Learning* strategy put it when it was launched the following year, what made FET distinct – and what we could be loud and proud about – were the facts that it was for everyone regardless of level of formal education, it was available in every community in Ireland, and it would offer you a pathway to take you as far as you wanted to go.

The ambitious strategy seemed to resonate with most people, and there seemed to be increasing awareness among the public of the great opportunities that FET and apprenticeship had to offer. This was helped by initiatives

Andrew Brownlee
CEO, SOLAS

This article offers an overview of further education and training (FET) in Ireland and details a year of incredible growth and transformation for the sector. It describes the key achievements in FET and apprenticeship in 2023 and looks ahead to 2024 as we deliver our final year of the current FET strategy: *Future FET: Transforming Learning.*

such as including FET and apprenticeship choices alongside higher education on the options landing page of the CAO website.

Meeting the challenge

By that point, though, Covid-19 was upon us. With FET providing access to education for those most at risk of exclusion, and offering technical and practical education that could only be delivered effectively onsite, demand inevitably suffered. In 2020 and 2021, the FET learner base contracted by 10%–15% as a result of the pandemic. There was real concern that, despite more people talking about FET and apprenticeship options, translating this into an expanded learner and apprentice base was proving impossible, particularly as restrictions continued to blight our society and economy. As these restrictions eased from early 2022, there were positive signs of FET bouncing back, and by the end of 2023, levels of demand for FET were approaching pre-pandemic levels, which was a relief to all across the sector.

The challenge then was to really see if FET could realise the potential which was seen in 2019, and start attracting a greater share of school leavers, serve as a resource for everyone to upskill and reskill throughout lifetimes and careers, and become the go-to place for the development of specialist skills for some of Ireland's critical industries.

Now, on the cusp of 2024, the incredible news is that FET and apprenticeships are growing like never before, with people of all ages turning to it for the learning they need. The challenge is to grow its contribution and impact in the way that *Transforming Learning* foresaw.

With 2023 not yet complete, we already know that one in ten people aged over 15 in Ireland – over 400,000 people – benefited in some way from FET and apprenticeships in 2023. This includes:

» Over 150,000 undertaking construction safety training via the Construction Skills Certification Scheme, the Quarries Skills Certification Scheme, and Safe Pass, with a new online renewal system introduced in January, fuelling the workforce required for this critical industry and driving the delivery of Housing for All. Added to this, almost 5,000 people trained in essential nearly zero-energy building (NZEB) and related skills needed to retrofit 500,000 homes by 2030, and the construction of a new modern methods of construction (MMC) demonstration park at Mount Lucas by Laois and Offaly ETB.

» An apprenticeship population of over 27,000, with registrations on course to hit their highest annual number ever, and up 7% on 2022 at the time of writing. There are now 73 different apprenticeship offerings, and over 9,000 employers with apprentices working for them.

In 2020 and 2021, the FET learner base contracted by 10%–15% as a result of the pandemic.

Now, on the cusp of 2024, the incredible news is that FET and apprenticeships are growing like never before, with people of all ages turning to it for the learning they need.

» Around 217,000 unique learners taking other FET courses, with some 371,000 places taken up during the year (many of our courses are short, and many FET learners take more than one in a year). This is up around a fifth on 2022 levels – an amazing achievement.

» Trends in FET underline its growing importance to everyone across our communities. Post–Leaving Certificate course enrolments (a prime destination for school leavers) are up 11% year-on-year, the sector is supporting over 20,000 Ukrainians in English-language and other skills, and over 21,000 employees are upskilling via the Skills to Advance initiative, up over a quarter on 2022.

» Participation on our eCollege courses has grown by around 20% to 22,500, growing gradually back to the mass demand seen during the height of the pandemic, when we opened up the online resource to everyone. This has been fuelled by diversifying the offering, with green skills now part of the portfolio, and further plans to develop it as a gateway into FET in 2024.

These numbers will only rise further as year-end totals are confirmed, but already they have surpassed expectations and provided an inkling of the fantastic further potential of this young and vibrant sector. It represents a major achievement for SOLAS and the ETBs, and a pivotal milestone as we marked 10 years since our establishment in October of this year.

Growth and impact

It is a story not only of growth but of real impact, as our national FET system performance targets were also all delivered in 2023. This included widening participation, where more people from key target cohorts than ever before took FET courses, progression within FET as people moved along learning pathways, and higher certification rates for transversal skills and key skills needs, ensuring that learning undertaken had a currency and relevance for industry and beyond.

This should give us an exciting platform for further development in 2024. The continued development of 12 exciting FET College of the Future projects, supported by a capital budget which invested a record €53 million in the sector in 2023, will help to change hearts and minds across the country, as these colleges become beacons of learning in their communities. They build on the many initiatives across ETBs to build college identities for FET, ensuring it becomes equally, if not more, valued as a closeknit college experience for those lucky enough to choose it. Reform of the funding model continues apace, linking FET and apprenticeship resourcing to outcomes and needs in the respective regions.

Links between FET and higher education continue to be built through government commitment to tertiary education policy, with new tertiary education programmes commencing in September 2023, allowing students to start degrees in FET and finish them in higher education. This is a real milestone, building on the 5,000 people who already progress from FET to higher education every year. It moves us away from the either/or sense which blights the ability to make smart learning choices, and opens up new and exciting pathways.

Community education is also a key aspect of FET, with investment having grown beyond recognition in recent years, learner numbers expanding rapidly, and a new community education framework on the horizon early in 2024 to solidify progress and ensure a more consistent approach to this critical driver of access to education. ETBs are also increasingly developing specialist centres of skills development, with initiatives around advanced manufacturing in Dundalk, construction in Mount Offaly, hospitality in Limerick, and biopharma in Cork.

So while 2023 was a year of incredible success, there is so much more to look forward to. We look forward to sharing the journey with you all, and if you haven't done a FET course yet, please make it your resolution for 2024.

* * *

Anna Durkan, Chair of An Cosán's Board of Directors, pictured with Miriam O'Callaghan at An Cosán's International Women's Day celebration in The Intercontinental Dublin in March 2023. Two An Cosán graduates received a standing ovation at the event after Miriam interviewed them about their achievements, which they attributed to An Cosán's unique learner-centred approach to adult community education.

Transformational Opportunities for Adult Education

The Further Education and Training Strategy and the implications for adult education and training

The ongoing structural reforms in further education and training (FET) and the implementation of SOLAS policies present an exciting phase in the transformation of FET in Ireland. Connecting a broad range of adult education and training programmes together under the umbrella of FET in Education and Training Boards (ETBs) involves a fusion of differing principles, philosophies, and practice approaches.

This article considers this transformation from an adult education perspective, identifies the contribution that adult-centric principles and philosophies have made in addressing barriers for adult learners, and considers how to bring the best of this contribution forward into the revised model.

The adult-centric programme embraces a philosophy and ethos (hereinafter referred to as values) that tends to the entire person, and addresses the psychological and social aspects to overcome dispositional, situational, and institutional barriers to facilitate access, participation, and progression in learning. Adult education programmes developed and evolved in response to a range of needs, including educational disadvantage caused by barriers to lifelong learning. Cross (1981) noted three major barriers for adult learners: having little confidence in their ability to learn and succeed, or having a sceptical mindset about opportunities (dispositional); lack of support for their own development (situational); and barriers of cost, timetabling, location, lack of pathways, and the type of curriculum, teaching, and assessment processes (institutional).

An adult-centric programme takes cognisance of the major difference between adult learners and second-level students, by building on adults' motivation and their desire to participate and succeed. A second difference is

Aislinn Brennan

Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme Coordinator, Enniscorthy FET Centre, Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board

Maeve O'Grady

Retired Senior Lecturer, School of Education & Lifelong Learning, South East Technological University

The ongoing structural reforms in further education and training (FET) and the implementation of SOLAS policies present an exciting phase in the transformation of FET in Ireland. Connecting a broad range of adult education and training programmes together under the umbrella of FET in Education and Training Boards (ETBs) involves a fusion of differing principles, philosophies, and practice approaches. This article considers this transformation from an adult education perspective.

a strengths-based approach used by practitioners to counteract the dispositional barriers created by earlier negative experiences of formal education. The adult-centric practitioner leverages learners' intrinsic motivation and catalyses their strengths, thus cultivating learning and growth in confidence. This creates optimal conditions for learners to benefit from the learning and progression opportunities afforded by FET. Progression and inclusion in FET requires the retention and expansion of responsive and flexible adult-centric values in any FET reform to enhance the learning experience and outcomes for adult learners.

The landscape for adult learners is undergoing transformation as the FET Strategy implementation processes strive to harmonise provision and pathways. Harmonisation is a challenge because three distinct strands have evolved and come under the umbrella of FET. The adult education programmes currently on offer in FET, delivered by the ETBs, evolved as predominantly adult-centric and voluntary. These combine part-time and full- time options, including Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS), Back to Education Initiative (BTEI), English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), Adult Literacy Schemes, and Community Education, as described in *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2022* (Craddock & Burke 2022).

In the main, eligible participants qualify for free fees due to their social welfare status or low levels of formal educational qualifications. Post–Leaving Certificate Courses (PLCs) developed primarily in second-level school settings as a progression route for students, and are underpinned by that value system. Other full-time options such as Local Training Initiatives and contracted training evolved from FÁS training provision, funded under a labour-market activation agenda, with adults mandated to attend. In some instances, this continues to retain the value system of training. These three strands of FET provision differ tacitly in their value systems and approaches.

Concerns about eroding adult-centric values in a climate of rationalisation and neoliberalism were raised when the first FET Strategy was being prepared nearly 10 years ago (Murray et al., 2014), and concerns remain. We can now see the impact of the two FET Strategies on adult education in ETBs. While all programmes can be learner-centred, not all programmes are adult-centred. There are still opportunities to embed adult-centric values at funder and provider level, and at teaching and learning level (practitioner and learner).

At funder and provider level, Strategic Performance Agreements (SPAs) are made with each ETB, outlining how they will achieve the strategic aims of Creating Pathways, Fostering Inclusion and Building Skills (SOLAS, 2020). However, absent from the structure of the SPA is any requirement to describe shared values or of the processes by which goals and targets will be achieved (Brennan & O'Grady, forthcoming).

Harmonisation is a challenge because three distinct strands have evolved and come under the umbrella of FET.

At teaching and learning level, harmonisation of FET offerings needs to align with adult-centric values in the teaching and learning environment (Brennan & O'Grady, forthcoming).

The existing method to collect data, Programme and Learner Support System (PLSS), while able to provide reliable information to the funder, is restrictive in that there is an overemphasis on achieving qualifications to the detriment of the requirements of meaningful engagement and participation. The gap in recording the achievement of softer skills is acknowledged, and opportunities to extend it are being explored (SOLAS, 2020, pp. 26, 53). It is also the theme of *The Adult Learner* 2022 (AONTAS, 2022).

At organisational level, new roles and associated contracts and conditions are emerging. This could be a welcome development for practitioners who have hitherto been in very tenuous arrangements. New contracts for practitioners in adult education do not require a particular amount of Professional Learning and Development (PLD) points. Neither does annual renewal of Teaching Council registration. This is a wasted opportunity for maintaining and creating adult-centric practices that require knowledge and reflection.

At teaching and learning level, harmonisation of FET offerings needs to align with adult-centric values in the teaching and learning environment (Brennan & O'Grady, forthcoming). The type of setting is a critical aspect in ensuring adult-centric values. Careful consideration needs to be given to appropriate selection of venues in any harmonisation process. While all learners will be able to reap the benefit of applying these values, not all adult learners are able to benefit from second-level and training type provisions and settings. At curriculum level, there is a risk that learning outcomes could be dominated by the cognitive and psychomotor domains and corresponding assessment, to the exclusion of the affective domain. Being adult-centric requires that a curriculum attend to the affective domain. It is essential that time be allocated to facilitate the processes that will underpin progression for educationally disadvantaged adults (Brennan & O'Grady, 2022).

The absence of specific values being identified in SPAs can be addressed by SOLAS restructuring the format of the SPA and thereby asking each ETB to specify the values; staffing, contracts, and Teaching Council registration renewal need to reflect a requirement for practitioners to engage in ongoing continuous professional development; and PLD offerings need to provide a space for practitioners to reflect on adult-centric values in curriculum development and assessment, and how they model lifelong learning themselves as they are part of a learning organisation.

Settings and environment need to be checked that they are addressing barriers to participation for adults. Adult learners are willing to offer their opinions on what works for them and what inhibits their participation and can be active partners in co-constructing this knowledge about the environment. The under-use and neglect of formative assessment (QQI, 2018) needs to be addressed to maximise its potential.

Addressing the neglect of the affective domain in curriculum development and provision means challenging the normative power of the status quo to undo the over-prioritisation given to cognitive and psychomotor objectives. Measures addressing affective needs, while valuable, are add-ons rather than being integrated into curriculum as they have been by adult-centric practitioners before the transition to FET: their adult-centric classroom experience and models of good practice should be leveraged to be shared and extended rather than eroded. What gets measured matters. Both The Wider Benefits of Learning work in Community Education led out by the ETBI Inclusion Unit, and research on psychological capital (Brennan & O'Grady, 2022), offer scope to capture and report on relevant data on PLSS.

Adult-centric values align with the strategic values of FET. We believe that prioritising and making these values explicit across all FET programmes will yield desirable outcomes for learners, practitioners, providers, and funders and will support the realisation of policy objectives.

REFERENCES

AONTAS (2022) *The Adult Learner: The Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education.* Dublin: AONTAS.

Brennan, A. and O'Grady, M. (2022) 'Psychological capital: The missing link', *The Adult Learner*, 1(1), 54–75. Dublin: AONTAS.

Brennan, A. and O'Grady, M. (forthcoming) 'Reading between the lines: Exploring the implementation of Irish further education and training policy at practice level', *The Adult Learner.* Dublin: AONTAS.

Craddock, F. and Burke, N. (2022) 'Towards the development of a community education framework'. In: B. Mooney (Ed.) *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2022.* Dublin: Education Matters.

Cross, K.P. (1981) *Adults as Learners.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Murray, M., Grummel, B., and Ryan, A. (Eds.) (2014) *Further Education & Training: History, Politics and Practice*, pp. 122–136. Maynooth: MACE Press.

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) (2018) *Green Paper on Assessment of Learners and Learning.* www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/media/file-uploads/Green%20Paper%20Assessment%20of%20Learners%20and%20Learning%20March%202018.pdf.

SOLAS (2014) *Further Education & Training Strategy 2014–2019.* Dublin: Government publications.

SOLAS (2020) *Future FET: Transforming Learning.* www.solas.ie/library/.

SOLAS (2022) *Strategic Performance Agreement 2022–2024.* www.solas.ie/library/.

The Health Benefits of Lifelong Learning

Pathways to promoting better wellbeing among older adults

Introduction

When the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science was introduced in 2020, further education appeared in the title of a government department for the first time, giving visibility to its important role in Ireland. Simon Harris, the department's first minister, has on many occasions highlighted the relevance of further education and training (FET), calling the sector 'one of our greatest national strategic assets' (Harris, 2022).

A key strategy of the department is to develop innovative pathways between further and tertiary education to promote the employability of graduates. This continues to be an integral aim of both third-level education and the FET sector. Lifelong learning is also integral to the strategy, to promote the inclusion and diversity of learners.

Lifelong learning, also called adult education, is defined broadly as 'any learning activity undertaken throughout life in a formal, non-formal or informal setting which results in improving knowledge, know-how, skills, competences and qualifications for personal, social or professional reasons' (UNESCO, 2023).

Ireland's population is growing older, with one in four adults today aged 60 or more (Age Action Ireland, 2022). They want to remain healthy and active not despite but because of retirement and ageing. In 2008, the Aontas report 'Don't Stop Me Now!' recommended that government policy ensure lifelong learning as a priority. It advocated for greater investment, development, and research in this sector.

Dr Trudy Corrigan

School of Policy and Practice, Institute of Education, Dublin City University

Lifelong learning is integral to government strategy on education, and there is great diversity of courses available, though also barriers to participation. This article explores the health benefits of lifelong learning among older adults, and the different forms of intelligence that it fosters. It concludes by outlining the opportunities that our new understanding presents for the FET sector and tertiary education.

Access and participation

Realising the potential of lifelong learning 'requires political commitment and the development of cross-sectoral and multi-level policies' (UNESCO, 2023). Creating systems that realise the right to education for people of all ages contributes to social justice, sustainable development, and global citizenship (ibid.). Speaking at the World Higher Education Conference in 2022, David Atchoarena, director of the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, highlighted the need for higher-education institutions to create opportunities for non-traditional students to participate in lifelong learning in their local communities, colleges, and universities.

Today, the variety of courses available for older adults in Ireland is as diverse as this population itself. Some courses are non-accredited and not listed in the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). Their real value is that they often represent learning for the love of learning across the life course. Many are more widely accessible through online media such as massive open online courses (MOOCs) or other flexible programmes. Some offer opportunities to avail of micro-credentials.

Access to this form of learning can be difficult for some, because of barriers such as a lack of information-technology skills. Social interaction is an important part of learning. Researchers in anthropology and sociology have emphasised the importance of social interaction for learning and development (De Felice et al., 2022). Many learners like to interact with other learners and tutors face to face.

Other barriers persist for older learners, such as lack of transportation, lack of mobility, and financial constraints. Some barriers are psychological, for instance difficult experiences of school in the past. Some adults believe their level of knowledge is inadequate for lifelong learning. These are just some of the barriers identified through research in Ireland and globally (Gibney et al., 2018; Moustakas, 2018; Meyler et al., 2023).

Health benefits

Participation in lifelong learning in Ireland is also important because of the health benefits for an increasing ageing population (Cabeza et al., 2018; Irish & Ramanan, 2021). The field of cognitive neuroscience and ageing explores the biological processes that underlie cognition, focusing on neural connections in the brain, while cognitive science explores how the human mind processes experience and information.

A landmark study found that lifelong learning can be associated with delay in the onset of age-related mental decline (Vemuri et al., 2014). People who took

Researchers in anthropology and sociology have emphasised the importance of social interaction for learning and development (De Felice et al., 2022). Many learners like to interact with other learners and tutors face to face.

adult education classes between middle and older age were less likely 'to experience cognitive decline' later in life (Berman, 2023). De Felice et al. (2022) evaluated how social interaction benefits learning for adults across various domains, such as language skills, motor skills, and conceptual knowledge.

Conceptual knowledge, which allows us to collect facts and ideas and group them into clusters, is developed through reading, viewing, listening, experiencing, or reflecting thoughtfully. It contributes to fluid intelligence: the ability to learn new information, think abstractly, and problem-solve in new situations (Almeida-Meza et al., 2020). Crystallised intelligence is the knowledge, facts, and skills accumulated throughout life. Ageing affects fluid intelligence and crystallised intelligence in different ways (Bajpai et al., 2022; Tucker-Drob et al., 2022).

Keeping the brain active as we age improves fluid intelligence. While it is not yet clear how lifelong learning may affect the risk of dementia, its benefits are clear for fluid intelligence (Vemuri et al., 2014), one standard by which cognitive performance can be measured. What these studies highlight is that 'intellectual lifestyle enrichment throughout life is increasingly viewed as a protective strategy against commonly observed cognitive decline in the older population' (ibid.).

While it is not yet clear how lifelong learning may affect the risk of dementia, its benefits are clear for fluid intelligence (Vemuri et al., 2014), one standard by which cognitive performance can be measured.

An opportunity

Not only does staying involved in lifelong learning help develop new knowledge and skills, but it can contribute to overall mental stimulation as we age. This relatively new understanding of the health benefits of lifelong learning presents a new opportunity for the FET sector and tertiary education in Ireland.

While current government policies in this sector have been developed to promote pathways to employability, there is an opportunity to develop strategies to promote pathways to health and well-being through FET and higher education. This benefits all learners but especially older learners, who have much to contribute to this sector. Their participation can promote social cohesion and intergenerational engagement that helps the wider community. Their lived experience, knowledge, and skills can be shared as a valuable knowledge base for a younger generation in formal and informal learning.

Lifelong learning brings with it the potential to promote health benefits to the growing numbers of adults who participate. This can add value to our education system, which is maximised when the learning takes place through social engagement with tutors and other learners.

Wider participation in lifelong learning requires that existing barriers for older adults be addressed. The National Training Fund, with its focus on employment

and upskilling, could be one pathway at government level to ensure that funding is available for the development and sustainability of lifelong learning programmes at community level and in tertiary education. This would encourage greater participation by a wider population of older adults now and in the future.

Developing a clear rationale to promote health benefits through lifelong learning as we age would be a good investment for the department. To deliver on these innovative initiatives would be a watershed moment in defining the role and benefits of education in Ireland.

REFERENCES

Age Action Ireland (2022) *Reframing Ageing: The State of Ageing in Ireland 2022.* Dublin: Age Action Ireland. www.ageaction.ie/reframing-ageing-state-ageing-ireland-2022-1.

Almeida-Meza, P., Steptoe, A., and Cadar, D. (2020) 'Markers of cognitive reserve and dementia incidence in the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing', *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 218(5), 243–251. DOI: 10.1192/bjp.2020.54

Aontas (2008) *Don't Stop Me Now! A Report on the Lifelong Learning Needs of Older People in Ireland*. Dublin: Aontas. www.aontas.com/assets/resources/AONTAS-Research/dont_stop_me_now_final_smaller.pdf.

Atchoarena, D. (2022) 'The rationale for HEI-LLL and recent findings from the global survey on the contributions of HEIs to LLL'. UNESCO World Higher Education Conference, Barcelona, 18–22 May.

Bajpai, S., Upadhayay, A.D., Banerjee, J., Chakrawarthy, A., Chatterjee, P., Lee, J., and Dey, A.B. (2022) 'Discrepancy in fluid and crystallized intelligence: An early cognitive marker of dementia from the LASI-DAD cohort', *Dementia and Geriatric Cognitive Disorders Extra,* 12(1), 51–59. DOI: 10.1159/000520879

Berman, R. (2023) 'Taking adult education classes linked to lower dementia risk in later life', *Medical News Today*, 29 August. www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/taking-adult-education-classes-lower-dementia-risk.

Cabeza, R., Albert, M., Belleville, S., Craik, F.I.M., Duarte, A., Grady, C.L., Lindenberger, U., Nyberg, L., Park, D.C., Reuter-Lorenz, P.A., Rugg, M.D., Steffener, J., and Rajah, M.N. (2018) 'Maintenance , reserve and compensation: The cognitive neuroscience of healthy ageing', *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, 19, 701–710. DOI: 10.1038/s41583-018-0068-2

De Felice, S., Hamilton, A.F., Ponari, M., and Vigliocco, G. (2022) 'Learning from others is good, with others is better: The role of social interaction in human acquisition of new knowledge', *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B*, 378. DOI: 10.1098/rstb.2021.0357

Gibney, S., Moran, N., and Shannon, S. (2018) *Barriers to lifelong learning: Results from the HaPAI Survey.* Dublin Healthy & Positive Ageing Initiative led by Department of Health with Health Services Executive, Age-Friendly Ireland Programme, and Atlantic Philanthropies.

Harris, S. (2022) 'Towards a new unified tertiary system for learning, skills, and knowledge'. In: B. Mooney (Ed.) *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2022.* Dublin:

Education Matters. https://irelandseducationyearbook.ie/downloads/IEYB2022/YB2022-FET-02.pdf.

Irish, M. and Ramanan, S. (2021) 'The ageing brain in contexts: Towards a refined understanding of social cognition in ageing and dementia'. In: H.J. Ferguson and E.E.F. Bradford (Eds.) *The Cognitive Basis of Social Interaction across the Lifespan*, pp. 177–200. Oxford University Press.

Meyler, A., Lovejoy, J., and Swan, L. (2023) *Lifelong Learning Participation in Ireland: A focus on marginalised and vulnerable groups.* Aontas Research Report, with SOLAS and Learning and Work Institute. Dublin: Aontas.

Moustakas, L. (2018) 'Motivation and obstacles to adult participation in lifelong learning programs: The effect of gender and age', *Open Journal for Educational Research*, 2(1), 45–56. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1225908.

Tucker-Drob, E.M., De La Fuente, J., Köhncke, Y., Brandmaier, A.M., Nyberg, L., and Lindenberger, U. (2022) 'A strong dependency between changes in fluid and crystallized abilities in human cognitive ageing', *Science Advances,* 8(5). DOI: 10.1126/sciady.abj.2422

UNESCO (2023) 'Lifelong Learning'. Learning Portal, UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning. https://learningportal.iiep.unesco.org/fr/node/5455.

Vemuri, P., Lesnick, T., Pryzbelski, S., Machulda, M., Knopman, D.S., Mielke, M.M., Roberts, R.O., Geda, Y.E., Rocca, W.A., Petersen, R.C., and Jack, C.R., Jr. (2014) 'Association of lifetime intellectual enrichment with cognitive decline in the older population', *JAMA Neurology*, 71(8), 1017–1024. DOI: 10.1001/jamaneurol.2014.963

✱✱✱

Minister Harris launches Ireland's first Civil Engineering Apprenticeships at ATU

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Simon Harris TD, launched new civil engineering programmes at Atlantic Technological University (ATU) recently, which will provide an opportunity for apprentices to earn and learn, and gain a higher education qualification. These apprenticeships based at ATU's Sligo campus are led by the Civil Engineering Apprenticeship Consortium made up of the Civil Engineering Contractors Association (CECA), the Construction Industry Federation (CIF), Association of Consulting Engineers of Ireland (ACEI), Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), Uisce Éireann, the Local Government Management Association (LGMA), Engineers Ireland (Advisory capacity only) and Atlantic Technological University.

Transformation through Tertiary

Facilitating student transition and promoting educational equity in a unified tertiary system

The tertiary tenet

The creation of a unified tertiary system has been a key priority of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, and Science. A central component of this vision was the establishment of the National Tertiary Office (NTO) in 2022. The NTO is tasked with ensuring that a strategic and cohesive approach underpins the development of joint further and higher education or tertiary degree programmes that result in the learner having the best opportunity to avail of pathways that are clearly defined and easily accessed. The first tranche of unified tertiary degree courses opened for student application in July 2023 and commenced in September.

Underpinning the ambition of the tertiary degree is a commitment to the universal design approach, in which we proactively design, develop, and deliver our tertiary degree programmes with the broad palette of human diversity as a central theme. Students of the tertiary degree route will be enabled to bring more of themselves into their various learning environments. The learner-centric focus of the tertiary degree route gives students the opportunity to pursue a degree and a career that they want, through an alternative route to the CAO.

Tertiary degree programmes are to be strategically developed across disciplines and specialisms focused on meeting skill needs, collaboratively designed and delivered in shared spaces providing a seamless student experience and transition from further education to higher education. Thus, they guarantee not only seamless progression and transition but also access for students to the full range of supports and services from the Education and Training Board (ETB) and higher education institution

Fiona Maloney
Director, National Tertiary Office

The introduction of the new tertiary degree route from further education and training to higher education was a historic reform by the Minster and his department. The purpose was to provide another route to degree-level education that is not dependent on Leaving Cert results, points, or lottery access based on QQI results. Tertiary degrees offer students seamless transition from further to higher education, underpinned by collaborative programme design and teaching collaboration in shared spaces and shared student experiences.

It is time to challenge old habits and beliefs about the relationship between FET and Higher Education.

(HEI), including academic, health and wellbeing supports, libraries, and sports facilities.

Tertiary degrees include a structured step-back/embedded award process so that students withdrawing from a programme, for any reason, can be supported to transition into further education and training (FET) to continue their studies. This will help ensure that the student is appropriately scaffolded through their learning journey to achieve key outcomes, rather than focusing solely on entry.

Additionally, students on a tertiary degree will not have a tuition fee or student contribution fee applied for the duration of their tertiary tuition with the ETB. The Free Fees Initiative and student contribution arrangements apply to the duration of the tuition delivered by the HEI on the tertiary programme.

Progressing pathways

The claim that a range of routes and pathways already exists between FET and higher education is not unfounded. The links scheme has supported this transition for many students. But the nature of these linkages is varied, limited, outdated, imbalanced, and often dependent on local arrangements and relationships. So it was long past time that these pathways were rewired and reframed.

It is time to challenge old habits and beliefs about the relationship between FET and higher education. The introduction of the tertiary degree route matters. It matters because without it, access to higher education and careers can continue to be unequally distributed. Factors such as poverty, location, gender, language, disability, ethnicity, religion, migration, and displacement status can continue to dictate and limit educational opportunities. It is incumbent upon us to ensure that the human right to access quality education throughout life is achieved.

In the joint tertiary degree model, the five regional partnerships* agree to pursue cooperation under the terms and conditions identified in data-sharing agreements and a memorandum of agreement. The memorandum is based on the principles of equality and reciprocal benefit, and sets out broad cooperative arrangements and specific areas of academic cooperation to support a more unified tertiary system. Such arrangements may include structures to support the delivery of new joint FET and higher education programmes, the enhancement of recognition of FET credits in higher education, the adaptation or realignment of existing programmes, and joint programme delivery models.

The NTO provides a structured approach to addressing matters that may arise during local partnership discussions. It also supports the tertiary coordinators

in their role with joint programme development proposals, validation and approval processes, their engagement with all FET and higher-education partners in the broader tertiary landscape, and stakeholder engagement as part of joint tertiary degree development.

Achieving ambitions

As the ambitions of a more unified tertiary system are advanced through this initiative, with joint tertiary degrees co-developed, co-designed, and co-delivered by the partnerships, it is anticipated that this process may also yield the following sectoral benefits:

» strengthened local and regional relationships between HEIs and ETBs which will enhance the provision available to students and communities
» increased diversity of the higher-education population, which in turn will impact on the expectations of young children from a diversity of communities and backgrounds
» encouragement of innovative approaches that support the co-development, co-design, and co-delivery of tertiary programmes that will increase access and support successful participation and retention in higher education by the target groups
» prioritisation of the development of tertiary courses that address identified future skills needs for the geographical area served by the partnership and meet local economic and social requirements.

The NTO commissioned the first phase of evaluation of the pilot or proof-of-concept stage that will inform and shape future iterations of the joint tertiary degree offerings. This review focuses on the engagement of each partnership and on tertiary programme design, development, implementation, and management, in order to identify:

» examples of good practice and transformative tertiary initiatives
» potential new areas for tertiary degree expansion
» feasibility of delivering tertiary degrees
» extent to which the initiative has contributed to the key objectives of achieving a unified tertiary system.

As we consider the outcomes of the pilot stage, we will also examine the impact of this approach to collaboration in the advancement of a unified tertiary system that champions a strength-based approach to education focused on overcoming barriers to progression.

In the joint tertiary degree model, the five regional partnerships agree to pursue cooperation under the terms and conditions identified in data-sharing agreements and a memorandum of agreement.

FOOTNOTES

* The five regional partnerships are:

1. Institute of Art, Design and Technology (IADT), Kildare Wicklow ETB (KWETB), and City of Dublin ETB (CDETB).
2. South East Technological University (SETU) and Laois and Offaly ETB (LOETB).
3. Limerick and Clare ETB (LCETB) and Technological University of the Shannon (TUS): Midlands Midwest.
4. Atlantic Technological University (ATU), Galway Roscommon ETB (GRETB), Mayo Sligo Leitrim ETB (MSLETB), and Donegal ETB.
5. Cork ETB (CETB), Kerry ETB (KETB), University College Cork (UCC), and Munster Technological University (MTU).

***

Pat O'Doherty, Chair of the National Apprenticeship Alliance (NAO), pictured with Dr Mary Liz Trant, NAO Director, and Hazel Johnson, MAMF Apprentice at Du Puy Synthes and winner of the 2023 Apprentice of the Year Award.

SOLAS Marks 10-Year Anniversary

SOLAS, the further education and training (FET) authority, is marking 10 years since its establishment in 2013, alongside 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) across Ireland.

FET has become a more strategic, visible, and integrated sector, offering opportunities for everyone and driving economic development and social cohesion. It is available in every community in Ireland, supporting over 230,000 learners in 2022.

Minister Simon Harris said:

SOLAS stands at the forefront of transformation in FET and has made significant contributions to improve and broaden FET provision. The wide range of opportunities now available across the country include adult literacy, community education, green skills provision, apprenticeships, traineeships, and PLC courses. SOLAS supports upskilling for employees and skills training for those entering the labour market.

SOLAS has taken major steps in key areas, including the development of a unified tertiary education system and the National Apprenticeship Office, and projects supporting the evolution of FET facilities and provision into FET Colleges of the Future, which provide community-based learning centres of excellence.

Andrew Brownlee, CEO at SOLAS, said:

Over the last 10 years, SOLAS, along with ETBs and other key partners, has made big strides in transforming the FET sector, including its planning, delivery, and funding. Current provision offers a clear pathway for learners and a route back to education for all. We have ensured that FET can meet the changing needs of Irish society by responding to demand in key skills areas, including construction, technology, and the green economy. Flexible options offer a range of accessible pathways in every community, ensuring a more consistent learner experience.

SOLAS greatly values the role of community education, which offers a local and welcoming opportunity to achieve personal, social, and educational goals. SOLAS is developing a framework to record and recognise the diverse nature of community education.

SOLAS offers upskilling and reskilling opportunities in green skills, including in construction, giving people the knowledge to develop sustainability practices.

FET learner Stephanie shared her positive experience:

Having left school early, I thought all the doors had closed for me in education. When I started my FET journey, all these pathways opened up. The support I received from tutors encouraged me to continue with my education. I am now studying a PhD at Maynooth University. Without FET, I don't know where I would be; it literally saved my life.

SOLAS will begin developing a new FET strategy in 2024. This will be underpinned by a commitment to respond to the future growth of the economy and support social inclusion, providing accessible and flexible pathways back to education.

Reimagining Academic Integrity in Irish Further Education and Training

Introduction

The idea for this article resulted from a series of modules taken as part of a postgraduate research project. The modules addressed ethics and academic integrity in higher-education research, which led to the question of the role of academic integrity and what it means for learners in further education and training (FET): What might academic integrity look like in a context such as FE or FET?

This article takes academic integrity to mean a set of moral, social, and educational principles that fosters ethical conduct. It takes the view that the journey of exploring academic integrity for learners in FE/FET settings begins by instilling academic integrity principles from a non-punitive perspective, preparing learners for future skills and the world of work, and fostering a culture of social responsibility as a fundamental part of supporting transitions from education to employment.

An established field of study

Academic integrity publications can be traced to the early 1900s and cover a range of disciplines (Barnes, 1904; Lancaster, 2021). The emergence of 'academic integrity' as a field of scholarly research in the early 1990s was attributed to Donald McCabe ('the grandfather of academic integrity', according to the International Centre for Academic Integrity). Searches conducted for this article yielded a predominant focus on higher education; research exploring the subject in Irish FET, FE, or tertiary education remains limited.

FET provision offers diverse programmes to a wide spectrum of cohorts. *Future FET: Transforming*

Touria Jouilla McKee

FET Quality Development Officer, Education and Training Boards Ireland

This article looks at the understudied topic of academic integrity in further education and training and tertiary education in Ireland. It highlights the educational and personal importance of integrity, and it describes how a culture of integrity could be instilled and advanced in the sector.

Learning, the FET strategy for 2020–2024, is framed around providing pathways that support social mobility, lifelong learning, and skills, and is a blueprint for driving economic and social development through education. Integrity is an essential element in the learning journey, because it is an indicator for the future self, and this in turn aligns it with FET strategic goals.

Prospects of gaining currency in FET

In order for academic integrity to gain currency in FET, there must first be an established awareness-raising construct that approaches it from a non-punitive angle by showing its benefits to the learner's journey. Despite many studies on the subject, much of the research in the last 20 years has been on academic misconduct, plagiarism in particular (Mahmud & Ali, 2023), due to concerns about widely available services that encourage misconduct, such as cheating services and essay mills. In particular, forms of misconduct or dishonesty have been observed as a serious concern during the Covid-19 pandemic, when the world unexpectedly moved to virtual learning environments (Hidalgo, 2022). On the risks associated with misconduct, Carruthers (2019) goes as far as suggesting that 'Academic integrity appears fragile in our era, and frequently the Internet is held responsible' (p.1).

The focus on the risks of cheating or plagiarism is not new, however, as shown by an early work by Earl Barnes (1904). Barnes discussed a case in which students were asked their views on misconduct, specifically exam cheating. He made reference to social responsibility and how it collides with self-interest. His article discusses dilemmas that students ponder against moral judgement and societal obligations, subjects that continue to resurface in literature on academic integrity today.

Other research suggests that appropriate conduct is associated with honourable behaviour (Hidalgo, 2022), a way of acting, a code or set of codes to be upheld. Creating a culture of social responsibility can be a rewarding step in developing learner identities: 'One of the best ways to uphold academic integrity is to create a culture of academic integrity throughout the school' (Çelik & Razı, 2023, p.3). In particular, before addressing cheating or misconduct, learners should first and foremost be oriented towards a culture of integrity to establish and build upon a mental and moral framework.

Instilling and developing a culture of integrity

The value of instilling ideals of appropriate conduct, if aligned with realistic 'messages' (McCabe, 2005, p.31), can have an impact on learners because it can orient them towards social responsibility. For example, where a career path leads to a profession that relies strongly on trust and ethical values, a learner

The value of instilling ideals of appropriate conduct, if aligned with realistic 'messages', can have an impact on learners because it can orient them towards social responsibility.

could be presented with messages that emphasise the implications of integrity when it comes to the job of a carer, a medical practitioner, a social worker, etc. In fact, integrity is part of every profession, and for programmes with practical or work-based components, for instance, professional integrity intersects with academic integrity.

Relating appropriate learner conduct to professions can evoke considered thought on the part of the learner. Imagine a house built by a professional: if the skill involved in building its foundation came into question, one might think twice about credentials, honesty, and accountability. Or imagine a surgeon who may have cheated in exams; would you trust them to perform a life-saving operation on you?

Other approaches to putting this message across can involve trialling good practices as a support for transitions into industry. For example, Ruddy and Ponte (2019) discuss the value of an micro-credential on academic integrity that prepares new university entrants for academic and employment transitions. One such micro-credential was trialled in the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in 2019, aiming to align the course with the provider's 'emphasis on providing industry connections and experience'. Though this example refers to a university, it also offers vocational training.

The integration of academic integrity as a micro-credential builds on the support for industry and learners with a skill that not only applies to learning but equips people with attributes and knowledge that prepare them for the world of work. This approach reflects unique foresight and takes a meaningful step towards aligning integrity with the learning journey. One might consider it a leap towards repositioning academic integrity, fitting it around the learner and the context of learning.

Developing a culture that upholds academic integrity benefits learners not only in their studies but also in their role as future professionals and members of society.

Conclusion

The Irish FET sector serves a large and diverse learner population. It is a context in which professional and academic conduct intersect, and it is a conduit for pathways spanning an impressive spectrum of disciplines and awards. The reimagining of academic integrity might involve considerations for apprenticeship and traineeship programmes, work placements, or skills demonstration. In fact, it is an essential part no matter what the level of study or subject.

Research on academic integrity in tertiary and FE/FET contexts has yet to progress in terms of raising awareness of its benefits to learners. Integrity is not an element that can operate in isolation from career pathways. It is important for learner identities, and it follows individuals through every facet in their careers and lifelong learning. This is why developing a culture that upholds

academic integrity benefits learners not only in their studies but also in their role as future professionals and members of society.

REFERENCES

Barnes, E. (1904) 'Student honor: A study in cheating', *International Journal of Ethics*, 14(4), 481–488.

Carruthers, J. (2019) 'Academic integrity', *South African Journal of Science*, 115(11–12), 1. DOI: 10.17159/sajs.2019/7439

Çelik, Ö. and Razı, S. (2023) 'Facilitators and barriers to creating a culture of academic integrity at secondary schools: An exploratory case study', *International Journal for Educational Integrity*, 19(4). DOI: 10.1007/s40979-023-00125-4

Hidalgo, E.G. (2022) *Education in the Time of COVID-19: The Improvised Experiment of Virtual Assessments.* NY: Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press.

Lancaster, T. (2021) 'Academic dishonesty or academic integrity? Using natural language processing (NLP) techniques to investigate positive integrity in academic integrity research', *Journal of Academic Ethics*, 19(3), 363–383.

Mahmud, S. and Ali, I. (2023) 'Evolution of research on honesty and dishonesty in academic work: A bibliometric analysis of two decades', *Ethics & Behavior*, 33(1), 55–69.

McCabe, D.L. (2005) 'It takes a village: Academic dishonesty and educational opportunity', *Liberal Education*, 91(3), 26. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ720381.pdf.

McCabe, D.L. and Pavela, G. (2004) 'Ten (updated) principles of academic integrity: How faculty can foster student honesty', *Change*, 36(3), 10–15.

Ruddy, C. and Ponte, F. (2019) 'Preparing students for university studies and beyond: A micro-credential trial that delivers academic integrity awareness', *Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association*, 68(1), 56–67.

***

The 'Skills for Jobs' seminar and panel discussion 'Skills for Jobs' took place at Europe House in Dublin on 22 November 2023.

External Authentication – An Overview

Influence from a FET perspective

Introduction

A recent Insights report by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI, 2020) identified that the Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) FET Directors Quality Strategy group had led the recruitment of a new national panel of external authenticators for education and training boards (ETBs). It noted that national training was being developed which had been delivered face-to-face until early 2020, then an online iteration was developed and rolled out in 2021.

The national training also involved professional development in authentication in an online environment, authentication for recognition of prior learning (RPL), and other specific methodologies, including the integration of universal design for learning (UDL) practices and principles that enhance the teaching and learning experience in the learning environment.

This article will briefly explore the impact of the online training programme, the professional development series, and the influence on best practice for creating a culture of engagement and enhancement in the learning environment. It will highlight specific nuances and challenges of external authentication and its role in the further education and training (FET) sector.

The F factor: 'To fear or to flourish'

The impact of external authentication, with all its permutations and implications, can vary considerably with the situation and placement of the individual. If you are on the ground, working with and assessing learners' achievements, it can strike fear into your marrow. Questions such as 'Will the work hit the mark?', 'Is it good enough?', 'Does it clearly evidence learners' attainment

Patricia Hehir
EdD, Further Education and Training Development Officer

This article explores the impact that an effective and robust external authentication process can have on assessment and on teaching and learning practice. It also considers its influence on the creation of a culture of engagement in the learning environment of further education and training.

and progress?', and 'Will the external authenticator get it?' are interrogations that take place internally and externally for us as FET assessors.

Centre coordinators, managers, and principals can get caught up in the frenzy of meeting deadlines for internal verification, hosting centre results meetings with course teams, and ensuring that everything is organised for the onslaught of the dreaded external authenticator (EA) visit. For quality-unit personnel and senior management, there is the pressure of ensuring that standards are being met, that results approval meetings are carried out effectively with enhancements to the processes explored for future authentication periods, that submissions for certification for all learners are submitted on time, and that the all-important feedback is conveyed to assessors and relevant centre personnel. This can also be used for future monitoring and self-evaluation.

Centre coordinators, managers, and principals can get caught up in the frenzy of meeting deadlines for internal verification, hosting centre results meetings with course teams, and ensuring that everything is organised for the onslaught of the dreaded external authenticator (EA) visit..

For EAs themselves, there is the responsibility of ensuring that they carry out their role objectively and fairly using their professional knowledge and experience, completing a comprehensive, constructive, and detailed report, and communicating clearly to relevant assessors, centre staff, and quality personnel, while ensuring that award standards are maintained and the integrity of the process is upheld.

It is little wonder, then, that the key authentication periods are often fraught with anxiety, tension, and high expectations. Authentication is not unlike an iceberg, whose tip is visible above the waterline but whose bulk remains hidden beneath. The finality of the assessment piece is what is evident as an end product of the teaching and learning, but the greater substance and often extraordinary efforts involved in getting to that stage can be subsumed by the end goal and rendered invisible and inconsequential. One aspect that can be overlooked is the support and training of EAs themselves.

Preparation and training supports

In order for EAs to undertake their responsibilities and fulfil their role to the utmost of their professional capabilities, they must have engaged with the briefing process, inducting them into the initial stages, and participated in a comprehensive training programme. Since the new ETBI EA National Directory was initiated in 2019, this training had been facilitated face to face by ETB and Further Education Support Service (FESS) colleagues. By mid-2020, the briefing and the training programme had moved online. This has allowed for a full and robust training rollout, with learning material accessed asynchronously, interspersed with engagement in live online sessions, reinforcing the learning and allowing opportunities for questions and lively discussion.

Building collaborative relationships

From a quality-assurance viewpoint, the value of engagement and building relationships with EAs is multifaceted. As a small or medium-sized enterprise in their specific field, with an understanding of assessment delivery and relevant teaching or industry experience, an EA can collaborate with a provider and become involved in pre-assessment engagement, helping to ensure that before delivery the assessment instruments are purposeful and relevant, allowing learners to show and evidence their learning within the standards set by the award. This can help dispel any potential discord over assessment briefs or the application of assessment instruments when the authentication period rolls around. As an invaluable 'guide on the side', the objectivity, experience, and constructive support provided by an EA is worthy of merit.

The FET sector recognises the impact of a well-designed and fully scaffolded training programme for EAs, one that is supported by the provision of ongoing relevant professional development with the intention of reinforcing and enhancing the existing skill set of participants. Among the topics that have been broached with EAs in the recent past are remote authentication, practical approaches in the field, what UDL-based assessment can look like, and assessment of RPL.

Conclusion

Building a community of practice among external authenticators, and enhancing the capacity and effectiveness of the role they can play in assessment and authentication, is an ongoing and continuously evolving journey. It is linked inextricably with a robust, holistic, and supportive quality process, where an ETB's quality-assurance system is also supported to facilitate a two-way dialogue that is enabled to equally challenge what an EA may state in their report, and also to collaborate with, in order to advance the quality agenda of the ETB FET sector. Such engagements and interactions will ensure the continued flourishing and enrichment of the authentication process.

Enhancing the capacity and effectiveness of external authenticators in assessment and authentication is an ongoing and continuously evolving journey..

REFERENCES

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) (2020) *Quality in Irish Further Education and Training 2020.* Dublin: QQI. www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2021-11/2020-etb-quality-reporting.pdf.

Transforming Education: Education's role in the Sustainable Development Goals

SDG Summit

The United Nations SDG Summit on 18–19 September 2023 marked the midway point of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN, 2015a). Seven and a half years into the UN's Agenda 2030 (UN, 2015b), only 15% of the Goals have been achieved. Bringing together heads of state and government from UN members, the summit aimed to galvanise action on the transformative approaches needed to achieve the Goals by 2030.

António Guterres, UN secretary-general, urged leaders to deliver a 'Rescue Plan for People and Planet' (UN, 2023a). Member states were encouraged to make forward-looking national commitments on priority transitions and areas for investment to drive progress across the Goals. One of these priority transitions was the Transforming Education initiative, which aims to further SDG4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

This initiative began in September 2022 at the Transforming Education Summit (UN, 2023b). The summit's aim was to tackle the twin crises in education – equity and access; quality and relevance – and to mobilise solutions to accelerate national and global efforts to achieve SDG4. Five Thematic Action Tracks were identified as 'key levers to transform education' (UN, 2022):

» inclusive, equitable, safe, and healthy schools
» learning and skills for life, work, and sustainable development
» teachers, teaching, and the teaching profession
» digital learning and transformation
» financing of education.

Frank Geary
Director, Irish Development Education Association

The United Nations SDG Summit in 2023 marked the midway point of the Sustainable Development Goals, just 15% of which have been achieved to date. This article sounds a note of optimism and pragmatism, urging focus on action that will help transform education in Ireland and beyond. It stresses the need to make global citizenship education and education for sustainable development central to government policy.

Like the SDGs, these tracks apply to all countries. The first two are particularly relevant to Ireland. There have been important policy developments on this in recent years, with the adoption of 'ESD to 2030: the National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development' (Department of Education, 2022) and the Irish Aid Global Citizenship Education Strategy (Irish Aid, 2021): policy developments that build on decades of work by Irish educators working in development education (UNESCO, 2022).

The Transforming Education Summit underlined the importance of national-level action, policy change, and scaling-up of good practice. It represented a significant development in prioritising education and recognising it as an enabler of all the SDGs. It also recognises that: 'Transforming education means empowering learners with knowledge, skills, values and attitudes to be resilient, adaptable and prepared for the uncertain future while contributing to human and planetary well-being and sustainable development' (UN, 2022).

This requires more support for holistic learning that includes global citizenship education, education for sustainable development, socio-emotional learning, civic education, and peacebuilding. Transforming education requires a power shift and significant investment along with the meaningful participation of learners in decision-making and accountability processes. Education needs to become radically inclusive and prioritise the knowledge, skills, and competencies that matter most to learners as they fight for a more sustainable, equal, and just world. In Ireland, this requires us to scale up and build on existing good practice, and to prioritise transforming education.

Action and initiatives

The work of the summit was furthered during the SDG Action Weekend, which took place immediately before the SDG Summit and was attended by 5,000 representatives from member states, civil society, education, academia and science, local authorities, business, farmers, and many other groups, all working to deliver the SDGs. The Action Weekend events highlighted the UN's High-Impact Initiatives, which aim to achieve transformative progress and mobilise leadership and investment to scale up progress between now and 2030.

Transforming Education was one of these initiatives. It was addressed by Leonardo Garnier, UN secretary-general's special representative on transforming education, who spoke at the Irish Development Education Association (IDEA) conference in 2023, and Stefania Giannini, UNESCO assistant director-general for education. The SDG Action Weekend provided a foundation for upcoming conversations while providing greater visibility for youth, teacher, and civil society movements.

'Transforming education means empowering learners with knowledge, skills, values and attitudes to be resilient, adaptable and prepared for the uncertain future while contributing to human and planetary well-being and sustainable development' (UN, 2022).

The initiative is aiming to increase the number of member states with: demonstrated progress delivering on SDG4 and transforming education; larger, more equitable, and more efficient educational budgets; and whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches to education decision-making, including the voices of youth, teachers, and civil society (UN, 2023c). These commitments made by our governments at the UN provide an important opportunity for educators to advocate for policies, funding, and action to make the changes needed to transform education, in Ireland and globally.

Ireland's role

Ireland has played a hugely important role in the SDGs, co-chairing the initial negotiation of the Goals, and co-chairing the UN process to develop and agree the Political Declaration adopted at this year's summit, aimed at accelerating their delivery. At UN level, we have consistently been global leaders for the SDGs. Our challenge now is to be global leaders in their implementation, especially in education.

Educators in Ireland have the expertise and experience needed in formal, informal, and non-formal education to be leaders in the transforming education movement. Education has been central to the formation of our society and worldview, going back to the idea of hedge schools and Thomas Davis's famous imprimatur, 'Educate that you may be free.' Ireland supports transformative education globally through the work of Irish NGOs and the Department of Foreign Affairs. We are a respected political voice for education internationally, and our policies, both domestic and international, are informed by the rich expertise of educators, civil society, and learners in Ireland.

At national level, we need to take collective, focused, and urgent action and prioritise funding for transformative education.

At national level, we need to take collective, focused, and urgent action and prioritise funding for transformative education. As António Guterres said, we must elevate transformative education to the top of the political agenda. To do this, policies on transformative education, particularly global citizenship education and education for sustainable development, must be central to government policy, ensuring a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to achieving the SDGs. We need to scale up existing global citizenship education and education for sustainable development, building on the work and expertise of Irish educators throughout lifelong and life-wide learning.

We need to celebrate and share our excellence internationally. As well as great expertise, and even greater potential, in delivering transformative education, Ireland's expertise is respected, heard, and acted upon internationally. This voice comes from the state, from civil society, from educators and academics. If we can match Ireland's political leadership at the UN with action on transforming education, we can make a huge contribution to achieving the SDGs in Ireland and globally.

At previous meetings on the SDGs, such as the High Level Political Forum, I have often come away feeling despondent. The SDG Summit and Action Weekend, despite the stark figure that only 15% of the goals have been achieved, had the opposite effect. There was a palpable sense of focus and of pragmatism, underlined by the seriousness of the threats and the disastrous impact of the lack of progress on the Goals.

There is a vital role for education at this crucial moment. If we can focus our attention on that role, and focus our actions clearly, we can and will have a major impact. At the SDG Action Weekend, Fergal Mythen, Irish ambassador to the UN, called on us to make change and not give in to despondency. That sense of active hope, that is pragmatic and laser-focused on change and action, will enable educators in Ireland to transform education and society.

REFERENCES

Department of Education (2022) '2nd National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development – ESD to 2030'. 29 June. Dublin: Government publications. www.gov.ie/en/publication/8c8bb-esd-to-2030-second-national-strategy-on-education-for-sustainable-development/.

Irish Aid (2021) 'Global Citizenship Education Strategy'. 2 December. Dublin: Irish Aid. www.irishaid.ie/news-publications/publications/publicationsarchive/2021/november/global-citizenship-education-strategy.html.

UNESCO (2022) 'The turning point: Why we must transform education now'. 27 June. Paris: UNESCO. www.unesco.org/en/articles/turning-point-why-we-must-transform-education-now.

United Nations (UN) (2015a) 'The 17 Goals'. New York: UN. https://sdgs.un.org/goals.

United Nations (UN) (2015b) 'Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development'. New York: UN. https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda.

United Nations (UN) (2022) 'Thematic Action Tracks'. New York: UN. www.un.org/en/transforming-education-summit/action-tracks.

United Nations (UN) (2023a) 'National Commitments to SDG Transformation: Towards a rescue plan for people and planet'. New York: UN. https://sdgs.un.org/SDGSummitActions/National.

United Nations (UN) (2023b) 'Report on the 2022 Transforming Education Summit'. New York: UN. www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/report_on_the_2022_transforming_education_summit.pdf.

United Nations (UN) (2023c) 'Transforming Education: Learning to build a better future for all'. High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. New York: UN. https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/Transforming%20Education%20Brochure.pdf.

Losing the Momentum

Exploring the narratives of disabled students during and after 'lockdown learning'

Introduction

Dr Richard Healy
Research and Policy, AHEAD

The effects of Covid-19 on the experiences and narratives of students who engaged with higher education in Ireland during lockdown has been exhaustively researched (AHEAD, 2020; QQI, 2020; Doyle et al., 2021). Across this literature, the general consensus is that both students and educators navigated the challenges and emerged relatively unscathed, (Timonen et al., 2021; AHEAD, 2023).

During this time, AHEAD published three research reports that examined the experiences of disabled students as they engaged with 'lockdown learning' (AHEAD, 2020, 2021, 2023). The first two examined how this cohort managed the many restrictions that became synonymous with the period, using year-on-year benchmarking to monitor, track, and compare how disabled students navigated the Covid period. Our final report strove to identify if changes that emerged from the pandemic had advanced any meaningful and permanent transition in teaching and learning practice.

This article synopsises some the principal outcomes of this period for disabled learners. Although the lockdown period is routinely framed as an arduous time, educators, in overcoming the uncertainties, often showed innovation, flexibility, and greater emphasis on accessibility. Students became more comfortable engaging with their studies from home, with many reporting they had developed self-regulatory skills and structure because of the absence of ubiquitous oversight.

To this end, there are positives that may alleviate some of the more pressing issues in Irish tertiary education. This article examines these positives and suggests that many have been overlooked as lockdown restrictions have subsided.

Research findings by AHEAD suggest that blended learning can be beneficial for disabled students, primarily because of the autonomy, agency, and choice it offers. Many students with disabilities prospered during 'lockdown learning', and the return to in-person learning has affected this. The benefits and innovative teaching practices that became normative during lockdown learning should be incorporated into how Ireland responds to the continuous increase in disabled students accessing tertiary education.

Gathering momentum

Students' changing preferences for how they engage with learning was arguably the most important finding in our lockdown research. The societal restrictions that prevented on-campus learning led to the introduction of online and blended learning for many students. Though our initial research showed that many disabled students struggled with online learning, in our next report many indicated that they were coping better, finding online learning more accessible, and developing autonomy and agency in how they studied.

Year-on-year comparison suggested that educators were placing more emphasis on accessibility and pivoting away from end-of-term, memory-based assessments as the dominant indicator of progression, a move that was resonating with many students (AHEAD, 2021, 2023). Many of the changes to teaching and learning practices were also argued to be consistent with the principles of universal design for learning (UDL). For many students, the flexibility and choice that underpin UDL fostered a learning landscape in which they prospered:

> There was one module I got an A in . . . it was a lecturer who was really involved with UDL. She gave a lot of freedom in our topics and the ways we were assessed, the formats we used. And it really, really suited me. I really excelled; I would have liked more choice around everything else. (Research participant, Final Report 2021/22)

Many practices that became common during lockdown learning have the potential to transform learning for disabled students. Our final examination of Covid-19, disability, and tertiary education was crucial, as it explored whether any of the changes that were advantageous for disabled students were incorporated into meaningful and lasting change (AHEAD, 2023).

Findings

In this research, which captured the narratives of disabled students in the academic year 2021/22, the data showed that blended learning – a mode that includes both on-campus and online learning – was now the preferred learning mode for 56% of disabled students, with 51% identifying it as the most accessible mode (Figure 1).

Blended learning, increased use of UDL, and increased emphasis by educators on accessibility, all have the potential to foster inclusive and equitable learning environments for disabled students.

Preference for Future Learning Mode - difference between 2021 and 2022
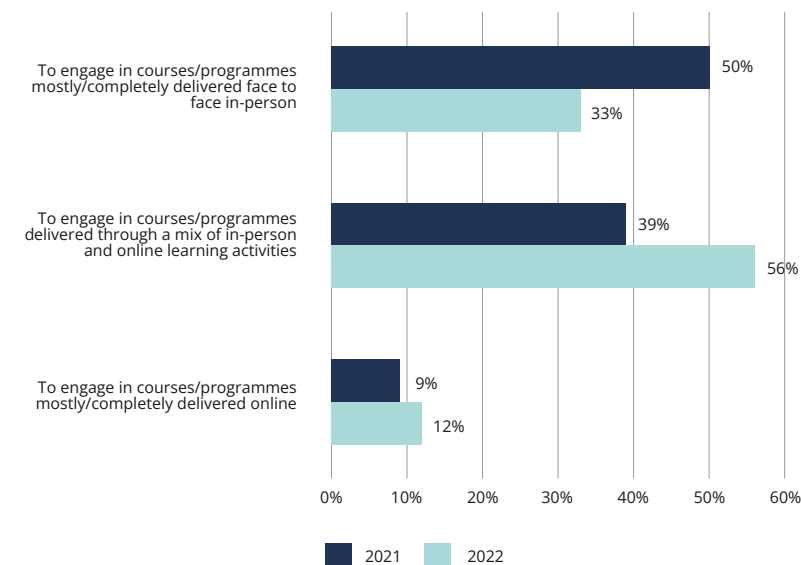
Figure 1: Students' changing preferences for how they learn

Blended learning, increased use of UDL, and increased emphasis by educators on accessibility all have the potential to foster inclusive and equitable learning environments for disabled students. However, an unfortunate outcome of post-lockdown learning was the incremental shift back to pre-Covid-19 norms. Our research suggests that many of these benefits, which are particularly valuable to disabled students, are now being abandoned, as educators regress to full on-campus learning and teaching strategies with less emphasis on accessibility.

Despite most students' preference for blended learning, most educators (53%) had returned to full on-campus delivery of teaching. The percentage of students who said that accessibility had been considered in the provision of learning materials fell from 47% in 2020/21 to 30% in 2021/22 (Figure 2).

Which of the following best describes how your course/ programme has been delivered recently?
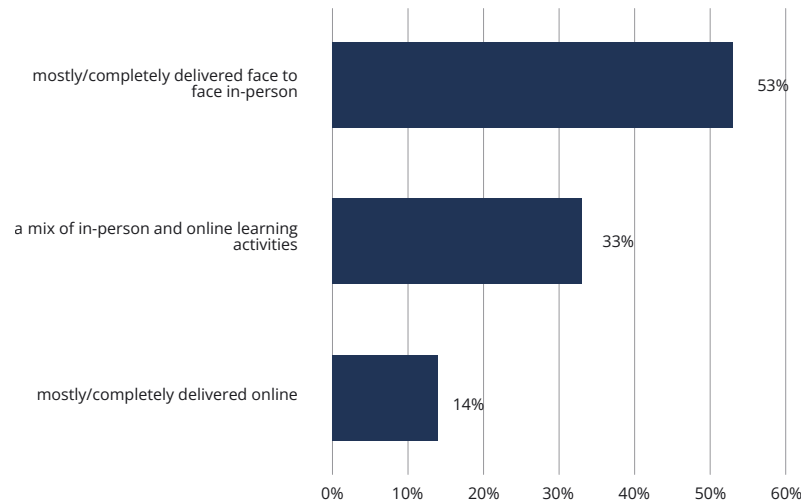
Figure 2: Participants describe how courses/programmes were delivered post-lockdown

Finally, when students were asked about their choice in how their course was delivered post-lockdown, a disappointing 55% said they were offered no choice, and just 8% said they were offered full choice (Figure 3).

In recent months, have you had any choice in whether you attend your classes/learning activities online or face to face in-person?
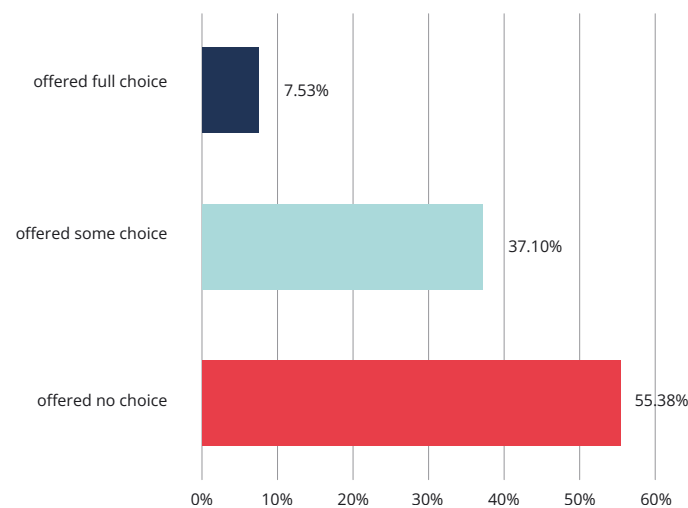
Figure 3: Students' responses about choice in how they learned post-lockdown

Conclusion

Our data shows unequivably that any lessons that might have been elicited from lockdown learning have not fostered meaningful change.

Our data shows unequivocally that any lessons that might have been elicited from lockdown learning have not fostered meaningful change. Covid-19 precipitated challenges and difficulties for all of society. While much of the tertiary education sector in Ireland adapted, and emerged from the crisis with credit, the many benefits that could advance a more equitable and accessible environment for disabled students have unfortunately been overlooked.

The number of students with disabilities engaging with higher education in Ireland has increased by 256% in the last 12 years (AHEAD, 2022). The student body in Ireland is not only rapidly diversifying but also continuously increasing, with current estimates of almost 400,000 students and learners enrolled in higher and further education (Healy et al., forthcoming). Disability supports in higher education are currently over-burdened and under-resourced (AHEAD, 2022), and the increase in student numbers and diversity requires a meaningful response from stakeholders. UDL, choice, flexibility, and blended learning are the backdrop for this response.

REFERENCES

AHEAD (2020) *Learning from Home During Covid-19: A Survey of Irish FET and HE Students with Disabilities.* Dublin: AHEAD Educational Press.

AHEAD (2021) *Learning from Home During Covid-19 2020/21: A Survey of Irish FET and HE Students with Disabilities.* Dublin: AHEAD Educational Press.

AHEAD (2022) *Students with Disabilities Engaged with Support Services in Higher Education in Ireland 2020/21.* Dublin: AHEAD Educational Press.

AHEAD (2023) *Changing Landscapes.* Dublin: AHEAD.

Doyle, A., Treanor, D., and Reilly, D.O. (2021) *Towards Inclusion – Impacts, Responses and Resources: The Experiences of Students with Disabilities on Learning from Home during Covid-19 – Trinity College Dublin.* Dublin: Trinity College Dublin.

Healy, R., Ryder, D., and Banks, J. (forthcoming) 'Universal design for learning policy in tertiary education in Ireland: Are we ready to commit?' In: J. Madaus and L. Dukes III (Eds.) *Handbook on Higher Education and Disability.* Edward Elgar Publishing.

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) (2020) *The Impact of COVID-19 Modifications to Teaching, Learning and Assessment in Irish Further Education and Training and Higher Education: A QQI Evaluation.* Dublin: QQI.

Timonen, V., Greene, J., and Émon, A. (2021) '"We're meant to be crossing over . . . but the bridge is broken": 2020 University graduates' experiences of the pandemic in Ireland', *YOUNG*, 29(4), 349–365. DOI: 10.1177/11033088211004792

Breaking Barriers: Women Championing the OEM Engineering Apprenticeship

Engineering can be a very fulfilling career, with countless opportunities to learn, grow, and succeed. In a groundbreaking shift, women are making significant strides in the traditionally male-dominated field of engineering apprenticeships.

As industries strive for diversity, an increasing number of women are embracing apprenticeship opportunities, challenging stereotypes, and forging new paths in the world of engineering.

This is no different for the OEM Engineering Apprenticeship programme (OEM = original equipment manufacturing), which recently celebrated its first two female graduates, Alana Kernan from Combilift and Caoimhe Dennehy from Dennehy's Garden and Construction Machinery.

At the OEM Engineering Apprenticeship graduation event on 9 November 2023, Alana Kernan received an Academic Excellence award for consistently achieving outstanding results in all of her assignments and projects, achieving the highest overall grade in her class. When asked about her experience as a woman in engineering, Alana replied:

Working in the engineering industry for the last five years has truly been an eye-opener for me. The stigma that is wrapped around women working in engineering needs to become a thing of the past – there are many brilliant female engineers. In a way I am thankful for the myth that women can't work in engineering, as it has made us even more determined to prove that we belong here. It has inspired our creativity and made us bold in putting ourselves into situations that show off our knowledge and dedication.

Claire Rushe

Administration – OEM Engineering Apprenticeship, Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board

Women are increasingly embracing apprenticeship opportunities and forging new paths in the world of engineering. This short article shines a light on two such women, the first female graduates of the OEM Engineering Apprenticeship in Ireland. It highlights women's strengths in a male-dominated discipline, the challenges they face, and the importance of opening up engineering as a career option for more young women.

Everyone has their strengths and weaknesses, whether you are a man or woman, so we need to separate this issue with genders in this role and start looking at engineers as individuals. Having female engineers helps companies to think outside the box; they are risk-takers who are eager to take on new projects, as they believe they have so much to prove and especially with the fact that women are excellent at problem-solving. Now that I am a graduate of the OEM Apprenticeship, I am even more confident in my capabilities as a female engineer, and my future is limitless.

Having female engineers helps companies to think outside the box; women are risk-takers who are eager to take on new projects, they believe they have so much to prove...

Caoimhe Dennehy, who works for her family business in County Clare, also thrived during her time on the OEM Engineering Apprenticeship. Michael Dennehy, who is Caoimhe's father and employer, said:

Caoimhe possesses a natural curiosity, enthusiasm, and a willingness to challenge traditional methods. As a graduate of the OEM Apprenticeship, Caoimhe is now equipped with the latest knowledge and practical skills gained through her three years of training and is bringing fresh perspectives and insights to the business.

The first two female graduates of the Original Equipment Manufacturing (OEM) Engineering Apprenticeship Programme: **Alana Kernan** from Combilift and **Caoimhe Dennehy** from Dennehy's Garden and Construction Machinery.

The graduation event was also attended by three current female OEM Engineering Apprentices from Irish Rail, Moffett Automated Storage, and Johnson & Johnson, along with a female workplace mentor from Tanco.

The OEM Engineering Apprenticeship graduation event on 9 November 2023.

AnnaMarie Woods, OEM Apprenticeship programme manager; Grace Hickey, Irish Rail; Alana Kernan, Combilift; Karolina Tomczak, mentor, Tanco; Isabella Antonio, Moffett Automated Storage; Caoimhe Dennehy, Dennehy's Garden and Construction Machinery; Damian Walshe, National Apprenticeship Office. Missing from photo: Tatjana Udovicenko, Johnson & Johnson.

Programme manager AnnaMarie Woods said:

The OEM Engineering Apprenticeship is committed to increasing female intake on the programme. Despite much progress, female engineers represent only 12% of the profession in Ireland, so we must use positive role models such as Alana and Caoimhe to help young women in Ireland recognise engineering as a possible and very worthwhile career.

Although significant progress is being made, challenges persist, highlighting the importance of fostering inclusivity and supporting women who pursue careers in engineering. The shortage of women working in engineering roles is a global challenge, and Ireland is no exception. The engineering sector needs more women like Alana and Caoimhe: women with fresh ideas, new perspectives, varied experiences, and different approaches to innovation.

Career guidance counsellors are key in promoting engineering to young girls, and it is important that they are more aware of the range of engineering paths available, such as the OEM Engineering Apprenticeship. Female engineers need

Career guidance counsellors are key in promoting engineering to young girls, and it is important that they are more aware of the range of engineering paths available.

to be celebrated and could be brought into schools to inform students of the many routes and opportunities available in engineering. They could also show that engineering is an attractive and fulfilling choice of career for both male and female candidates.

The OEM Engineering Apprenticeship is a three-year QQI level 6 programme. It is suitable for those currently employed in OEM companies (manufacturing, servicing, commissioning, and installation), school leavers, career switchers, and mature applicants wishing to pursue a career as a qualified OEM engineering technician.

On-the-job learning takes place within the company, and the learner also attends off-the-job education and training on a block release basis at either Cavan Monaghan Education and Training Board's (ETB) Monaghan Institute Campus or Limerick Clare ETB's Raheen Training Centre in Limerick.

For more information on the OEM Engineering Apprenticeship, please visit https://oemapprenticeship.ie/.

How Apprenticeships Are Bridging the Skills Gap in Industry

Background

The benefits of apprenticeships are something Combilift is very passionate about. Apprenticeships have significant value in the upskilling of our workforce, while providing local employment and training opportunities to our employees who choose to work and live locally.

The OEM (original equipment manufacturing) Engineering Apprenticeship is currently in its fifth year and is going from strength to strength. Its concept was formed when industries in the manufacturing sectors in Ireland came together to address the skills shortages in the OEM niche.

Companies such as Combilift, Dennison Trailers and Dairymaster formed a consortium and, in collaboration with Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board (CMETB), devised the OEM Engineering Apprenticeship, which commenced in Monaghan Institute in 2019.

The apprenticeship was initially devised based on the skills needed in the manufacturing industry; however, as the apprenticeship evolved, there was an appetite across other sectors, such as after-sales, service, and maintenance. Companies including Jungheinrich, Johnson & Johnson, and Irish Rail came on board.

Because of its success and the evident demand across Ireland, the apprenticeship was also rolled out in Limerick and Clare ETB, whose first cohort of OEM apprentices graduated in November 2023. It has become an apprenticeship of choice among school leavers and the workforce in the manufacturing, service, and installation industries, with more than 40 companies registered to employ OEM engineering apprentices.

Martin McVicar
Managing Director, Combilift

The OEM (original equipment manufacturing) Engineering Apprenticeship is currently in its fifth year and is going from strength to strength. This article describes its origins and development to date, and outlines its key attractions for school leavers, industry workers, and employers.

Christopher Gibson, OEM apprentice

Mentors have an integral role in ensuring the apprentices succeed, supporting them with coursework and on-the-job training which complements the classroom-based element of the apprenticeship.

Meeting industry needs

For Combilift, the OEM Engineering Apprenticeship has enabled our employees to progress and achieve a QQI level 6 qualification in an industry-led curriculum with up-to-date modules, reflecting current industry needs such as industrial robotics and PLCs, electrical and electronic technology, mechatronics, engineering drawing, and a capstone project. We are delighted that 100% of OEM engineering apprentices in Combilift remained in full-time employment after graduating.

Combilift has had nine OEM engineering apprentices graduate over the last two years. We have had one female graduate, Alana Kernan, who was nominated as Apprentice of the Year in the Generation Apprenticeship awards 2023 and is a valued member of our team. Mentors have an integral role in ensuring the apprentices succeed, supporting them with coursework and on-the-job training which complements the classroom-based element of the apprenticeship.

Our team value the importance of apprenticeships, and this year three Combilift employees were nominated as Generation Apprenticeship Workplace Champions. Minister Simon Harris announced Combilift as winner in the Large Company category in the 2020 Generation Apprenticeship Employer of the Year, a testament to the support of our entire team.

Appeal of the OEM Engineering Apprenticeship

If you are a parent, guidance counsellor, or current student pondering if apprenticeship is the right career path, I can say that the new-generation apprenticeships have opened up doors to many students who don't wish to or are unable to move away from home to go to college or university.

The ideal candidate to join the OEM Engineering Apprenticeship programme would be someone who enjoys problem-solving, practical hands-on work, troubleshooting, and working in multifaceted teams. With the apprenticeship being only three years rather than four, it means we can produce highly skilled technicians in a shorter timeframe, who can then join our existing team in the Design, Manufacturing, and Engineering departments, helping deliver successful, customised products to our customers worldwide.

Apprentices are rotated across the various departments to gain exposure to all elements of the business. This ensures that each apprentice is given the best opportunities to become well-rounded, experienced, and valuable employees.

The OEM Engineering Apprenticeship, managed nationally by CMETB, is a three-year QQI level 6 programme consisting of both on-the-job and off-the-job blocks. It is suitable for those currently employed in OEM companies, school leavers, career switchers, and mature applicants wishing to pursue a career as a qualified OEM engineering technician. On-the-job learning takes place in the company, and off-the-job education and training take place on an annual 16-week block release basis at either the Monaghan Institute campus or Raheen Training Centre in Limerick.

On completion of the programme, learners receive a QQI level 6 Advanced Certificate in OEM Engineering and are qualified as OEM engineering technicians, with a widely sought-after skill set in the manufacturing, installation, servicing, and commissioning sectors, both nationally and globally.

Looking ahead

The OEM Engineering Apprenticeship, developed by industry to address the current requirements and dynamic nature of the sector, is constantly reviewed by the programme steering committee to keep it relevant and up to date with

Apprenticeships ensure that we future-proof the skill set of our workforce, attract new talent, help retain employees, and improve our competitiveness in today's ever-evolving environment.

emerging trends and technologies. Combilift values the contribution that OEM engineering apprentices make to the company and considers them a key asset to its future success and expansion.

Findings from the 2023 national survey of apprenticeship employers, released by the National Apprenticeship Office, show this career path to be hugely popular, with almost 27,000 apprentices currently in training. Graduates are job-ready in a diverse range of engineering skills.

Apprenticeships ensure that we future-proof the skill set of our workforce, attract new talent, help retain employees, and improve our competitiveness in today's ever-evolving environment. More information is available at: https://oemapprenticeship.ie/.

Martin McVicar, Managing Director, Combilift

OEM ENGINEERING APPRENTICESHIP

MANUFACTURING | INSTALLATION | SERVICE

GENERATION APPRENTICESHIP
www.apprenticeship.ie
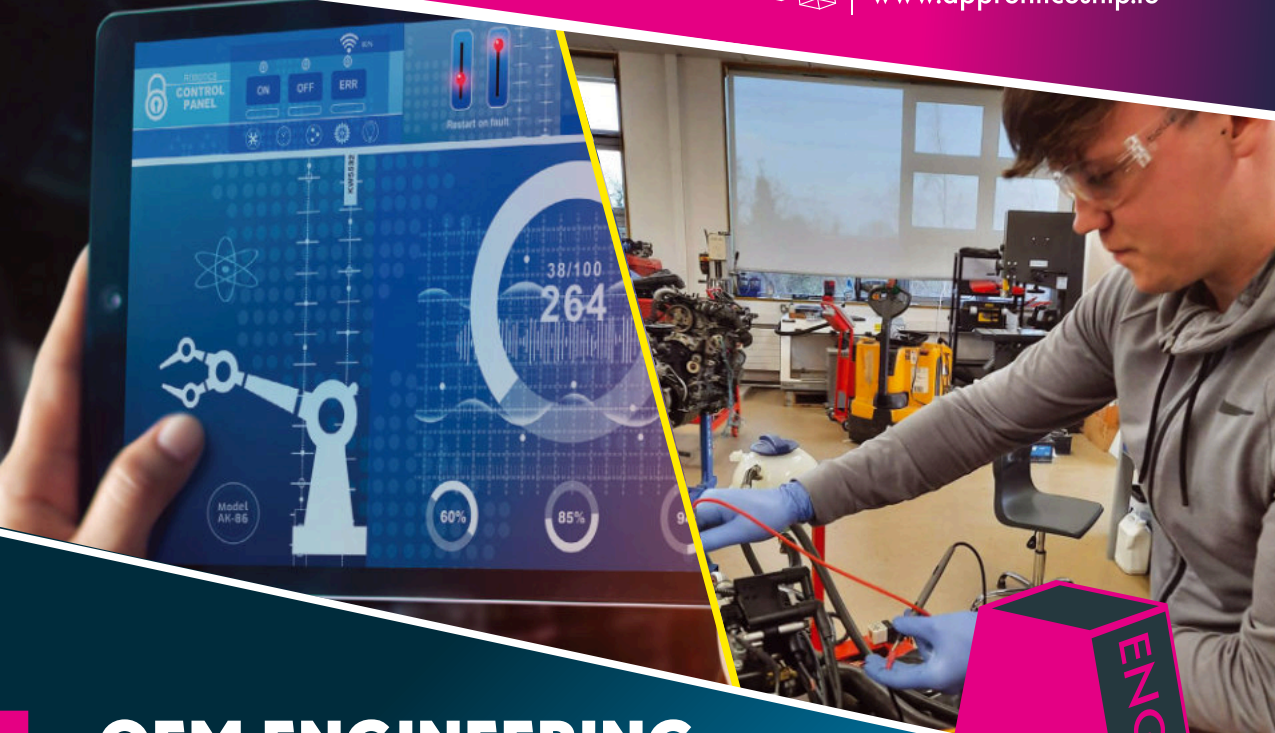
ENGINEERING

OEM ENGINEERING TECHNICIAN

Become job-ready in a diverse range of engineering skills that are needed in growing service and manufacturing areas.

www.oemapprenticeship.ie

Higher Education

'Giving while Living' was the motto of the great American philanthropist Chuck Feeney who died in 2023.

As the son of Irish-American parents, it is no surprise that over €1 billion of philanthropic support was directed to Ireland.

Professor Kerstin Mey pays tribute to the world-renowned benefactor in the Introduction chapter.

It's All About the People

It was George Orwell who once said: 'Sometimes the first duty of intelligent men is the restatement of the obvious.' His wise words come to mind when considering the challenges and opportunities that our universities now face. There is a plethora of such formidable challenges, and substantive opportunities, that are shared across the leadership teams of Irish universities.

There is the knotty challenge of dealing with artificial intelligence and the great opportunities to advance knowledge that it might throw up. The ever-evolving advancements arising from digitalisation for both teaching and research. The shifting profile of students and their demands for greater flexibility. The growing appetite for lifelong learning and the role that universities will play in that. The existential challenges of the climate crisis and its implications for research, teaching, and universities themselves, not to mention the other major societal challenges such as housing, healthcare, and social cohesion.

On the face of it, these diverse challenges and opportunities may, in some respects, have limited shared dimensions. But, on closer analysis, there is a somewhat obvious common denominator in how universities respond to those diverse issues. That is their people!

People are at the very heart of everything that universities are about. Students, in all of their increasingly diverse forms, are at the epicentre of the university system. The thirst for knowledge, its creation and dissemination, is no less unquenchable than at any time in the past, albeit that the pace for sating that thirst may be accelerating. That thirst for knowledge is expanding well beyond the traditional undergraduate or postgraduate degree as we embrace the full thrust of lifelong learning throughout the lifetime of virtually all students and across all disciplines. Our universities are working hard to respond to these rapidly changing students' needs.

Jim Miley
Director General, Irish Universities Association

This overview of higher education in Ireland outlines the major challenges facing the sector and identifies some specific steps to progress. It centres on people, who are at the heart of everything that universities are about and must be given every opportunity to realise their potential and that of the nation.

307

The expansion of our research capacity, a crucial foundation stone for the creation of new knowledge and innovation, is, likewise, people-centred. Ireland has enjoyed a couple of decades of building a valuable base for our research and innovation capability. That now needs to be taken to the next level if we are to compete effectively with other knowledge economies in Europe and beyond. The new research agency – to be formed by an amalgamation of the Irish Research Council and Science Foundation Ireland – provides a refreshed structure to enable future growth and development. But such a structure can only deliver if there is the appropriate investment in the people who are at the forefront of scientific discovery and research in our universities.

Our academic staff straddle both the teaching and research activities across the university system. Their track record in delivering world-class graduates and research has been quite remarkable, particularly in recent years. We're now approaching a 40% growth in student numbers over the last decade and a half. At the same time, the choice of courses available to students has been dramatically expanded. No other country in the world has experienced such a level of growth in both student numbers and variety of courses. And this has been delivered against considerable odds.

That is best exemplified by the worsening student–staff ratios in our university system. The latest OECD Education at a Glance report cites the Irish higher education student–staff ratio at 23:1, against an OECD average of 17:1 and an EU27 average of 15:1. In perhaps obvious terms, as Orwell recommended, this simply means that our students are not getting the care and attention that are needed to deliver and maintain an internationally competitive education.

Our dedicated staff have managed to keep up our standards to date, but we are at serious risk of losing our competitive edge for globally recognised talent if the current imbalance in student–staff ratios is not addressed. There are two clear pathways to delivering this.

Firstly, more investment is needed. In recent budgets, the government has made positive moves to redress the massive fall-off in higher-education funding between 2008 and 2015. Yet we are still in a position where the direct State funding per student in higher education is roughly €2,000 less than it was a decade and a half ago. The government itself has recognised this and identified what it needs to do to close the gap. This investment needs to be accelerated, not on the basis of the needs of universities as institutions, but because such investment is of fundamental importance to produce the talent and innovation to tackle our major national societal challenges into the future.

Secondly, the unnecessarily restrictive controls on universities under the Employment Control Framework need to be removed. The artificial limits imposed on universities to hire permanent staff take no account of the explosion in student numbers over recent years or of the increasing demands

People are at the very heart of everything that universities are about. Students, in all of their increasingly diverse forms, are at the epicentre of the university system.

The thirst for knowledge is expanding well beyond the traditional undergraduate or postgraduate degree as we embrace the full thrust of lifelong learning throughout the lifetime of virtually all students and across all disciplines.

to expand courses and offer more flexible options to students of all ages. Indeed, it has resulted in universities having to hire more people on short-term contracts in order to plug gaps in resources in an effort to maintain a quality service for students. It is a crude measure originally introduced as a cost-saving instrument that has long outlived its usefulness. It has no role in helping our universities to deliver the much-needed talent of the future and should be scrapped forthwith.

Our future health and prosperity as a nation are wholly dependent on the capacity of our people. And, in turn, the capacity of our universities to support the delivery of major national priorities is totally people-dependent. Maintaining a relentless focus on those people – students and staff – will ensure that we, as generators of talent and innovation, can deliver for Ireland.

The government must ensure that its approach to supporting and developing higher education in Ireland is people-focused. If they do that successfully, they will, as another line by Orwell puts it, ensure that 'we shall meet in a place where there is no darkness'.

***

STEM scholarships for women awarded at Trinity College Dublin
Emily Profir, Computer Science, Linguistics and Spanish (formerly St Oliver's Community College, Drogheda Co. Louth),
Neasa Nic Corcráin, Environmental Science and Engineering (formerly Loreto Convent Secondary School, Co Wexford),
Emma Burgess, Chemical Sciences (formerly Wesley College, Dublin),
Manpreet Kaur, Chemical Sciences (formerly Coláiste Chill Mhantáin, Co Wicklow),
Claire McCooey, Computer Sciences (formerly St Joseph's Grammar School, Donaghmore, Tyrone, Northern Ireland).

Who Commutes to College, and Why It Matters

Supporting commuter students for a better college experience

Introduction

Ireland is far from unique in having a high proportion of college students living at home with their parents while participating in higher education. Two in five (40%) students do so, a little higher than the European average (34%), but similar to countries such as the Netherlands (43%), Slovenia (42%), and Portugal (37%) (Hauschildt et al., 2021). Students in Ireland also spend a lot of time commuting to college, though again this is not unusual. The median one-way commute time in 2019 for those living at home was 45 minutes, compared to a European median of 40 minutes.

But there are also important areas where Ireland diverges and stands out. For example, students living at home with their parents tend to have relatively high rates of dissatisfaction with their location (27% vs European average of 15%) and commute time (41% vs 32%) (Hauschildt et al., 2021). In addition, those living in student accommodation in Ireland have by far the highest rates of dissatisfaction with accommodation costs (60% vs 24%). It is also notable that the mean one-way commute time for students living with their parents in Ireland in 2022 was 52 minutes, compared to 28 minutes for those who did not (Erskine & Harmon, 2023).

Who commutes to college?

Defining a 'commuter student' can be tricky. Previous research has focused on students living at home, usually with their parents, and distant from their place of study (Maguire & Morris, 2018). In the Irish context, students who are full-time, are male, are younger, have a disability or impairment, study at institutes of technology or technological universities (TUs), and are based in Dublin

John Cullinan

Professor in Economics, University of Galway

The number of students with long regular commutes to college is growing. Reasons include an increasing number and changing mix of students participating in higher education, a shortfall in appropriate and affordable student accommodation, and the recent cost-of-living crisis. But does it matter and, if so, what can and should be done to address it?

are all more likely to live with their parents or guardians (Erskine & Harmon, 2023). There is also evidence that, contrary to the US and UK, students who live with their parents and commute to college rank higher on a range of socioeconomic indicators (Gormley, 2016; Hauschildt et al., 2021).

A new study profiling college student commuters reveals striking patterns in commute time. Analysing Eurostudent data for 2019, and focusing on full-time undergraduate students, Cullinan (2023) shows that one-third of students faced one-way commutes of 40 minutes or more, while almost one in six had a one-way commute of at least 1 hour. The research also reveals important differences across a range of dimensions, including demographic and higher-education characteristics, institutions, geography, and socioeconomic background.

A key result in the paper relates to socioeconomic disparities in commute time. Among students living at home, the least well-off had one-way commutes that were 18 minutes longer on average than the most well-off. In terms of differences by higher education institution (HEI) and geography, average daily commutes varied from just 11 minutes on average at St Angela's College to almost 1 hour at TU Dublin, with average one-way commutes of 45 minutes across all Dublin-based HEIs.

International evidence shows that commuting to college has a negative effect on campus participation, student engagement, and academic achievement.

Why it matters

Long commutes should be a concern to HEIs and policymakers for several reasons. International evidence shows that commuting to college has a negative effect on campus participation, student engagement, and academic achievement (Kobus et al., 2015; Allen & Farber, 2018; Coutts et al., 2018; Webb & Turner, 2020). Maguire and Morris (2018) state that commuter students obtain poorer outcomes from their higher education and are less satisfied with their overall academic experience. They also note that while many commuters will see advantages in living at home while studying, those living far from college are at 'higher risk' in terms of student success.

This is a result of both increased travel disruption and lower potential for social engagement. Commuter students can be more isolated from other students outside formal classes. This can adversely affect their out-of-class interactions, participation in group work, integration with fellow students and academics, and ability to participate fully in extracurricular opportunities typically considered a core part of the college experience (Maguire & Morris, 2018).

Another new study considers the relationship between living arrangements, commute time, and student wellbeing (Cullinan & Flannery, 2023). The authors find that living at home reduces student wellbeing on average, but that these effects are driven almost entirely by female students. Long commutes are

related to very large increases in poor wellbeing for female students living at home (ibid.). The findings suggest that for female students living far from campus, any benefits from living at home are significantly outweighed by the negative effects of commuting. Female students with long commutes also express relatively high rates of dissatisfaction with aspects of their general college experience, including friendships, and aspects of their programme, such as the organisation of their studies and timetable (ibid.).

What to do

Given the drivers of levels and changes in commuting in Ireland, the likelihood is that both short- and longer-term solutions are required. A shortfall of suitable and affordable student accommodation is an obvious challenge, particularly given the socioeconomic disparities in commute time identified in Cullinan (2023). In simple terms, the fact that many less-well-off students face very long commutes could exacerbate inequalities in student outcomes. While some HEIs are making good progress in developing more on-campus accommodation, making this affordable is crucial – particularly in the current context of a general accommodation shortage in many urban areas in Ireland.

There is no shortage of practical actions that HEIs can consider to help commuter students in the shorter term. These are likely to be context-specific but could include adjustments to timetables to include later starts, or blocked timetables to reduce the number or timing of days that commuter students need to be on campus (Cullinan & Flannery, 2023).

In terms of social integration, holding more events during the day and creating commuter common rooms could be considered. Maguire and Morris (2017) discuss other possible measures, such as adapting welcome and induction activities, providing better advice and guidance about commuting, matching the curriculum and assessment models to commuter students' needs, and creating online commuter support communities with activities close to commuter students' homes. While some HEIs in Ireland are already implementing such initiatives, much more needs to be done.

The findings suggest that for female students living far from campus, any benefits from living at home are significantly outweighed by the negative effects of commuting.

REFERENCES

Allen, J. and Farber, S. (2018) 'How time-use and transportation barriers limit on-campus participation of university students', *Travel Behaviour and Society*, 13, 174–182.

Coutts, S., Aird, B., Mitra, R., and Siemiatycki, M. (2018) 'Does commute influence post-secondary students' social capital? A study of campus participation at four universities in Toronto, Canada', *Journal of Transport Geography*, 70, 172–181.

Cullinan, J. (2023) 'A profile of college student commuters in Ireland', Centre for Economic Research on Inclusivity and Sustainability (CERIS) Working Paper Series, 2023/03.

Cullinan, J. and Flannery, D. (2023) 'The commuting paradox for female college students', Centre for Economic Research on Inclusivity and Sustainability (CERIS) Working Paper Series, 2023/02.

Erskine, S. and Harmon, D. (2023) *Eurostudent Survey VIII: Report on the social and living conditions of higher education students in Ireland.* Dublin: Higher Education Authority.

Gormley, B. (2016) 'Commuting versus resident students: Differences in Irish student engagement, social and living conditions based on place of residence'. Doctoral thesis, University of Sheffield.

Hauschildt, K., Gwosć, C., Schirmer, H., and Wartenbergh-Cras, F. (2021) *Social and economic conditions of student life in Europe: EUROSTUDENT VII synopsis of indicators 2018–2021.* Bielefeld: DZHW.

Kobus, M., Van Ommeren, J., and Rietveld, P. (2015) 'Student commute time, university presence and academic achievement', *Regional Science and Urban Economics,* 52, 129–140.

Maguire, D. and Morris, D. (2018) *Homeward Bound: Defining, Understanding and Aiding Commuter Students.* UK: Higher Education Policy Institute.

Webb, O. and Turner, R. (2020) 'The association between residential arrangements and academic performance in UK university students', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 44, 1320–1334.

***

An internal survey of students and staff at Trinity College Dublin (30.11.2023) found that students and staff are less likely to walk or cycle to the university than before COVID-19, with just 9% currently cycling.

Micro-credentials, Maximum Impact

Opportunities and challenges for higher-education providers

Micro-credentials have the potential to address the lifelong learning needs of the Irish workforce, where over half of 25–34-year-olds already have a third-level qualification, allowing institutions to provide affordable, stackable, and focused awards to address the rapidly changing needs of technological, economic, and social transformations. This article reflects on current developments of micro-credentials across the sector and explores their potential to support the workforce of the future.

Elva Casey
Registrar, Hibernia College

Mary Doyle
Head of Quality and Enhancement,
Griffith College

Lorraine Halpin-Foley
Director of Quality and Academic Affairs,
SQT Training

Steve Welsh
Instructional Designer, St Nicholas
Montessori Society of Ireland

Introduction

Micro-credentials are small, stand-alone, accessible, and accredited courses designed to meet the demands of learners, employers, and support organisations. They provide an agile approach for learners to upskill and re-skill, and for providers to support that objective, and they are often designed in consultation with employers.

According to Quality and Qualification Ireland (QQI, 2021b), micro-credentials 'demonstrate that a learner has mastered a certain skill-set or demonstrated a level of achievement in a particular area'. The European Commission described it as follows:

> A micro-credential is a proof of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a short learning experience. These learning outcomes have been assessed against transparent standards. (European Commission, 2020, p.10)

For private or independent higher-education providers, including HECA members,* QQI facilitates the validation of micro-credential programmes, arising from one or more modules of both previously validated programmes

and newly created special-purpose awards (5–30 credits in European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System, or ECTS). Validation is facilitated through a streamlined approach, for a shorter validation period (maximum three years), and attracts a smaller validation fee.

Skillnet Ireland (2021, citing Oliver, 2019), identified seven components of a micro-credential descriptor that need to be considered in its design, development, and delivery, along with current variations in each component:
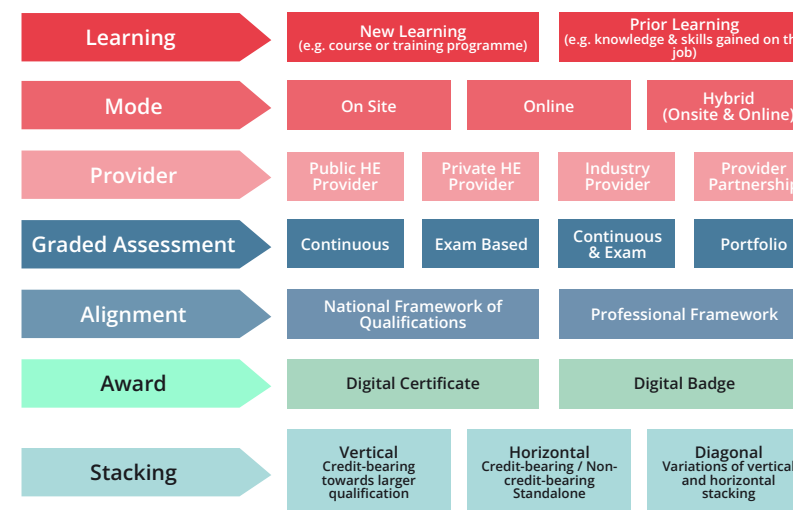
Seven components of a micro-credential descriptor (Skillnet Ireland, 2021)

This provides an effective overview of the sectoral oversight, and structural and operational considerations, to support institutions in their engagement with micro-credential design, development, and delivery.

In seeking micro-credential validation, a provider must identify why the programme is being proposed.

To be or not to be a micro-credential?

In seeking micro-credential validation, a provider must identify why the programme is being proposed as such. The rationale normally centres on responding to stakeholder need and the efficiency of validation, reflecting the assertion that 'labour market relevance is a key driver for microcredentials' (Walsh, 2022).

The 25–34-year-old age group has the highest level of third-level attainment, at 63%, followed by 35–44-year-olds, at 58%, with women across all age groups (25–64 years) having higher levels than men (CSO, 2022). This supports the need to provide flexible, affordable, stackable, and focused supplementary awards to address rapidly changing needs through upskilling and re-skilling.

Micro-credentials in practice

Micro-credentials provide opportunities for learners (both employed and those seeking employment) to access government-funded education and training through programmes such as SpringBoard, Skillnet Ireland, and Skills to Advance, enhancing the skills and knowledge of the future workforce.

QQI had been approving further education and training micro-credential programmes as minor and special-purpose awards for several years. There are currently 2,217 programmes listed in the Irish Register of Qualifications (IRQ) (https://irq.ie/) in the classifications minor, special-purpose, or supplemental awards, bearing 30 ECTS or less, across all Irish providers; 167 of those are QQI awards, up from 108 in 2020.

Opportunities

In 2020, QQI introduced a process (initially on a pilot basis) to enable validation in the higher-education and training sector. In December 2020, QQI's Programmes and Awards Executive Committee approved six micro-credential programme validations, five of which were proposed by HECA colleges. HECA members have embraced the opportunity to develop micro-credentials: 116 HECA-member-based minor, special-purpose, or supplemental awards, bearing 30 ECTS or less, are now listed in the IRQ.

The transformative impact is evident in the following quotes:

The industry project forced me to review current practices in my own organisation and consider how the adoption of MMC [Modern Methods of Construction] could improve performance and efficiency and reduce time and waste. I might not have undertaken this review without the project and the guidance and learning from the programme. It is a real tangible benefit for me and my organisation. (Graduate of the Certificate in Strategic Co-ordination and Collaboration for MMC at Griffith College, developed in collaboration with Construction Professional Skillnet)

I think there need to be more professional development opportunities, whether it's micro-credentials or short courses or upskilling, in a peer-support manner. (HECA educator, quoted in HECA, 2021)

The flexible and responsive nature of micro-credentials enables learners to efficiently upskill and gives colleges the opportunity to customise programmes to meet emerging challenges, such as generative artificial intelligence. Micro-credentials are attractive to learners as an alternative or supplement to more traditional pathways, and they have the potential to expand traditional

The flexible and responsive nature of micro-credentials enables learners to efficiently upskill and gives colleges the opportunity to customise programmes to meet emerging challenges, such as generative artificial intelligence.

HECA providers have an opportunity to collaborate with industry stakeholders to ensure their micro-credentials align with and support current job-market needs.

offerings, thus supporting the creation of a diversified student population (McGreal & Olcott, 2022).

A recent report (Skillnet Ireland, 2021) examined how micro-credentials can contribute to upskilling and re-skilling demands from both industry and employees. It offers recommendations including improving stakeholder understanding of micro-credentials and fostering cross-sector collaboration. It proposes mapping existing continuing professional development (CPD) programmes in Skillnet organisations to identify opportunities for micro-credentials. It also recommends that national funding should support research and validation of work-based learning, and that pilot co-design and co-delivery models be created with educational providers and Skillnet Networks.

Building on these recommendations, HECA providers have an opportunity to collaborate with industry stakeholders to ensure their micro-credentials align with and support current job-market needs. By forging strong partnerships with stakeholders, institutions can enhance the perceived value of their micro-credential course offerings and continue to gain industry recognition for these portfolios.

Challenges

The proportional cost of validating micro-credentials remains prohibitive for smaller providers. Validating a single-module micro-credential (5 ECTS) for a maximum validation period of three years costs €200 per credit per year of validation, versus a cost per credit of €16.66 for a 60-ECTS minor, special-purpose, or supplemental award (over 5 years).

The lack of consensus on what does or does not constitute a micro-credential is an additional challenge. It creates complexities in assessment and comparison of values for learners and industry (Varadarajan et al., 2023).

Clarity is required on how platforms for collaborative promotion of micro-credentials are best utilised, to enhance the credibility and recognition of micro-credentials offered by all institutions. Effective promotional and communication strategies about the quality and relevance of micro-credentials, across the HET landscape, are crucial to ensure that employers and learners understand and recognise new and diverse education pathways and credentials.

There are many non-accredited programmes offered by colleges across the country that are promoted as micro-credentials. Where the programme is not placed on the National Framework of Qualifications, the ability to stack these micro-credentials towards a larger, more valuable qualification will need to be defined for learners and employers:

The value that micro-credentials, and indeed other qualifications, have for stakeholders is linked to the trust given to the credential and to the provider who offers it. It is also linked to the 'recognition' mechanisms between the education and training system and the labour market. (Walsh, 2022)

Conclusion

Public awareness and marketing of micro-credentials present a challenge for providers, as highlighted throughout the institutional submissions to the government's public consultation (DFHERIS, 2022). But there is a great opportunity for institutions to provide learners with the knowledge, skills, and competences they need for their personal and professional development, by completing stand-alone, compact, accessible, flexible, targeted, and responsive accredited programmes. Micro-credentials hold the potential to support the re-skilling and upskilling of the workforce of today and into the future.

REFERENCES

Central Statistics Office (CSO) (2022) *Educational Attainment Thematic Report 2022.* Cork: CSO. www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-eda/educationalattainmentthematicreport2022/keyfindings/.

Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) (2022) *Progressing a Unified Tertiary System for Learning, Skills and Knowledge: Public Consultation – List of Submissions Received.* Dublin, Ireland: Government of Ireland. Dublin: Government publications. https://assets.gov.ie/245235/38370c6a-3d9b-4c08-8ffd-ce122f8c9136.pdf.

European Commission (2020) 'A European approach to micro-credentials: Output of the micro-credentials higher education consultation group'. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. DOI: 10.2766/50302

Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA) (2021) *Connected Conversations: The Teaching, Learning and Assessment Practices Experienced in Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA) Colleges during the COVID-19 Pandemic.* Dublin: HECA. https://heca.ie/wp-content/uploads/NextSteps-HECA-Report-compressed.pdf.

McGreal, R. and Olcott, D. (2022) 'A strategic reset: Micro-credentials for higher education leaders', *Smart Learning Environments*, 9(9). DOI: 10.1186/s40561-022-00190-1

Oliver, B. (2019) *Making Micro-Credentials Work for Learners, Employers and Providers.* New Zealand: Deakin University.

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) (2021a) *QQI early exploration into Micro-credentials in Higher Education, 2014–2020.* Dublin: QQI. www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2021-10/early-exploration-into-micro-credentials-in-higher-education-2014-20.pdf.

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) (2021b) *Putting Micro-credentials on the Agenda.* Dublin: QQI. www.qqi.ie/news/Putting-Micro-credentials-on-the-Agenda.

Skillnet Ireland (2021) *A Micro-Credential Roadmap: Currency, cohesion and consistency.* Dublin: Skillnet Ireland. www.skillnetireland.ie/publication/a-micro-credential-roadmap-currency-cohesion-and-consistency/.

Varadarajan, S., Koh, J.H.L., and Daniel, B.K. (2023) 'A systematic review of the opportunities and challenges of micro-credentials for multiple stakeholders: Learners, employers, higher education institutions and government', *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, 20(13). DOI: 10.1186/s41239-023-00381-x

Walsh, P. (2022) 'Microcredentials: Hope or hype? A look at the growing interest in and opportunities offered by micro-credentials in Ireland and internationally'. In: B. Mooney (Ed.) *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2021.* Dublin: Education Matters.

FOOTNOTES

* The Higher Education Colleges Association (www.heca.ie) is the representative body of Ireland's independent higher-education sector. HECA serves as a representative voice for 12 established and state-accredited privately funded providers of higher education, advocating on behalf of and supporting its members in achieving their strategic goals. In 2019, HECA members hosted over 27,000 students from 172 countries studying for a higher-education qualification in Ireland.

✳✳✳

First cohort of Student Nurses from Hibernia College are welcomed by Drogheda and Cavan/Monaghan Hospitals.

Autistic Students' Engagement and Participation in Higher Education

An exploration through research, observations, and experiential evidence

Introduction

Significantly fewer autistic students engage in Ireland's higher education system compared with other disability types (AHEAD, 2021). Autistic students are eligible for disability and learning support services in higher education institutions, but the level or type of support allocated does not always meet their needs. Diagnosis of a specific learning disability, such as dyslexia, is more clear-cut when providing reasonable accommodations for a student. They can then avail of supports such as assistive technology, additional time with assignments, or a scribe for examinations (ibid.).

Around one-third of autistic people present with an intellectual disability (AsIAm, 2021). Autistic students without a specific learning difficulty may therefore be ineligible for traditional learning supports. The challenges they experience are often due to executive dysfunction or impaired social development (White et al., 2016). With this in mind, we need to ask: Are disability and learning services the appropriate route for autistic students to access accommodations, or do higher-education support systems need to evolve to meet the more diverse needs of autistic students?

Autism spectrum disorder in Ireland

In 2013, 1% of Irish people were reported to be autistic (Boilson et al., 2013; DCU, 2013). In 2023 that figure was approximately 3.3% (AsIAm, 2023). This represents an increase of 120,000 autistic people in Ireland over the 10-year period to today. In a recent study by AsIAm (2023), Ireland's national autism charity, examining the life experiences of 1,603 autistic adults and children, 61%

Michelle Kenny
Lecturer at Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest, and PhD researcher at Lancaster University

This article gives a brief overview of autistic student engagement in mainstream higher education: the challenges they experience and the support they receive. Are autistic students receiving the support they need? Is it enough? Anecdotal and observational evidence indicates that autistic students do not feel fully supported, which impacts on their learning experience.

said they did not find the education system to be inclusive or accessible. A concerning 86% believe they do not have the same chance in Irish society as their non-autistic peers. This suggests that as a nation we still have a long way to go before we can claim to be truly inclusive.

Autism spectrum disorder in higher education

A historic review of students with disabilities attending higher-education settings revealed a lower number of autistic students than any other disability type (AHEAD, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020). But in 2022, AHEAD's annual report for the 2021/22 academic year showed an increase in the number of autistic students attending higher education.

A historic review of students with disabilities attending higher-education settings revealed a lower number of autistic students than any other disability type.

The graph below, extracted from AHEAD's (2023) statistical data, shows that in 2007 autistic students represented 1.3% of students with disabilities in higher education, but that by 2020 this had increased significantly to 7.6%. With increasing numbers of autistic people in Ireland, it is essential that their experiences, engagement, and progression in higher education be adequately supported.
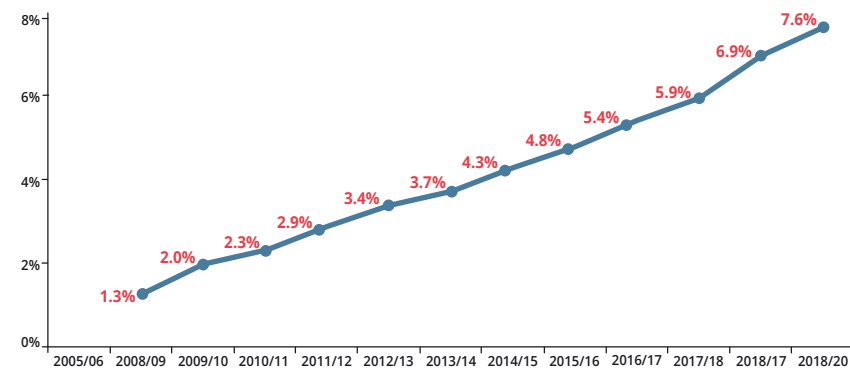
Figure: Percentage of students with autism within the disabled student population, 2006/07–2019/20

Disability and learning support services

Discussions about diversity, students' needs, and disability type have become a more integrated part of the higher-education landscape today. Neurodiversity has become a buzzword for how humans are all different and learn in unique ways. Disability and learning support services have a responsibility to students with certain disability types, with a focus on academic needs.

For a student with intellectual or learning difficulties, the allocation of support is more straightforward, as it is generally learning- and teaching-related (AHEAD, 2021). For a student with a physical disability, supports are made through ensuring accessibility to the built environment. For an autistic student, identifying what is needed to allow them to experience higher education is not always apparent, and the provision of support is often difficult to measure and allocate. Academically the student may be intellectually able, and they may not have a specific physical disability. This places them outside the remit for traditional disability and learning support services.

Challenges for students with autism spectrum disorder

From personal experience as an autistic person, a higher-education lecturer, and a PhD student, the challenges of navigating day-to-day academic life are much more than what disability and learning support services can provide. Before an autistic person can even begin to engage with learning, there are many barriers to overcome, such as sensory overload, poor executive functioning, and unaccommodating built environments (White et al., 2016).

Higher education provides a space for students to become independent learners (McKendry & Boyd, 2012). Academic progression is evident through learning, teaching, and assessment, and as students become integrated into the higher-education system, they continue with social and personal development as young adults. For autistic students, the expectation to become an independent learner is not as definite as with their neurotypical peers.

Unfortunately, there is minimal research available on how autistic students experience higher education, but from an observational perspective, the struggle is evident. The lower rates of autistic and neurodiverse students attending higher education indicates an underlying issue, which needs further investigation. There is also a lower rate of progression to postgraduate level for this cohort (AHEAD, 2021). Working with autistic students, my understanding is that challenges are less academic and more concerned with day-to-day functioning amid the chaos of academic life.

What needs to change

Evidentially there is a research gap related to students with autism spectrum disorder in higher education, and a more concerning absence of studies carried out with autistic participants. To get an authentic perspective on the lives of autistic students in higher education, we need to ask them about their experiences. For too long, preconceived ideas have led the way in policy development for disability and learning support services. It is time to ask

There is minimal research available on how autistic students experience higher education, but from an observational perspective, the struggle is evident.

autistic students what supports they need, so that they can become fully immersed in all aspects of higher-education life, both academic and social.

I acknowledge that some the anecdotal sources in this paper are only one perspective, my own. However, this is all evidence based on my work with autistic students, asking questions and listening. I hear their anxieties and stresses regarding timetables, deadlines, misplacing assignments. It all sounds so familiar to my own experiences.

If a supportive environment is created, in consultation with autistic people and students, there is huge potential for higher-education institutions to take on board and further develop the work carried out by Dublin City University when it became Ireland's first autism-friendly campus (Sweeney et al., 2018). Policy needs to change, because societal needs change. With increasing numbers of autistic and neurodiverse students attending higher education, embedding accessibility and inclusion in higher-education policies is essential to ensure an equitable, engaging, and enhanced learning experience for all.

REFERENCES

AsIAm (2021) 'If I am autistic, can I be diagnosed with co-occurring conditions?' https://asiam.ie/about-autism/autism-spectrum-related-conditions/.

AsIAm (2023) *Same Chance Report 2022.* https://asiam.ie/wpcontent/uploads/2022/03/Same-Chance-Report-2022-digital-version.pdf.

Association for Higher Education Access & Disability (AHEAD) (2016) *Numbers of Students with Disabilities Studying in Higher Education in Ireland 2014/15.* Dublin: AHEAD Educational Press. www.ahead.ie/userfiles/files/shop/free/ParticipationRatesReport2014-15.pdf.

Association for Higher Education Access & Disability (AHEAD) (2017) *Numbers of Students with Disabilities Studying in Higher Education in Ireland 2015/16.* Dublin: AHEAD Educational Press. www.ahead.ie/userfiles/files/shop/free/Rates%2015-16%20Online.pdf.

Association for Higher Education Access & Disability (AHEAD) (2018) *Numbers of Students with Disabilities Studying in Higher Education in Ireland 2016/17.* Dublin: AHEAD Educational Press. www.ahead.ie/userfiles/files/shop/free/Rates%202016-17%20-%20ONLINE.pdf.

Association for Higher Education Access & Disability (AHEAD) (2019) *Numbers of Students with Disabilities Studying in Higher Education in Ireland 2017/18.* Dublin: AHEAD Educational Press. www.ahead.ie/userfiles/files/shop/free/Numbers%20of%20Students%20with%20Disabilities%20Studying%20in%20Higher%20Education%20in%20Ireland%202017-18.pdf.

Association for Higher Education Access & Disability (AHEAD) (2020) *Students with Disabilities Engaged with Support Services in Higher Education in Ireland 2018/19.* Dublin: AHEAD Educational Press. www.ahead.ie/userfiles/files/shop/Students%20with%20Disabilities%20Engaged%20with%20Support%20Services%20in%20Higher%20Education%20in%20Ireland%20201819.pdf.

Association for Higher Education Access & Disability (AHEAD) (2021) *Your Disability or Access Service.* www.ahead.ie/yourdisabilityoffice.

Association for Higher Education Access & Disability (AHEAD) (2023) AHEAD data centre. www.ahead.ie/datacentre.

Boilson, A., Staines, A., Ramirez, A., and Sweeney, M. (2013) *Implementation of A European Protocol for Autism Prevalence.* Dublin City University.

Dublin City University (DCU) (2013) 'DCU report estimates autism prevalence'. www.dcu.ie/news/news/2013/04/dcu-report-estimates-autism-prevalence-at-1.

McKendry, S. and Boyd, V. (2012) 'Defining the "independent learner" in UK Higher Education: Staff and students' understanding of the concept', *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 24(2), 209–220. www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/detail?accno=EJ996267.

Sweeney, M.R., Burke, T., Quinn, K., and Harris, A. (2018) *Living with Autism as a University Student at Dublin City University: Developing an Autism Friendly University.* www.dcu.ie/sites/default/files/president/autsim_friendly_report_no_crops.pdf.

White, S., Elias, R., Salinas, C., Capriola, N., Conner, C., Asselin, S., Miyazaki, Y., Mazefsky, C., Howlin, P., and Getzel, E. (2016) 'Students with autism spectrum disorder in college: Results from a preliminary mixed methods needs analysis', *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 56, 29–40. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/27262124/.

***

SETU is overall winner of the European SMILE Diversity and Inclusion Award
Roisin Shanahan, SETU's Sexual Violence and Harassment Prevention and Response Manager; **Carme Royo,** Managing Editor European Journal of University of Lifelong Learning Balmes, Barcelona; **Allison Kenneally,** Vice President for Equality, Diversity & Inclusion at the SMILE Awards at the Eucen Conference held in Barcelona

The Looking Glass: How Irish Female Professors Perceive Their Informal Leadership Roles

Our study explores the perspectives of female professors in Irish business schools, emphasising their crucial informal leadership roles. These professors, having risen through the academic ranks, become role models for junior female academics. The study shows they feel a deep responsibility to mentor younger academics, especially women, and to challenge and change established norms in academia. They not only support their mentees but also actively work towards creating a more inclusive and gender-balanced academic environment.

Dr Patrick Buckland
Teaching Fellow Business Studies, Mary Immaculate College

Dr Chris O'Riordan
Lecturer in Accounting, South East Technological University

Prof. Felicity Kelliher
Professor of Management Practice, South East Technological University

Insights from female professors

Demographic diversity among senior academics, though improving, remains a challenge in Ireland. One highlighted difference between genders is that female professors tend to use informal and distributed forms of leadership more than their male counterparts. The subtle guidance and influence of this form of leadership have the potential to encourage other women to pursue senior roles, ultimately enhancing diversity and inclusion in professorial communities.

To fully comprehend the breadth and depth of this transformative influence, it is imperative to delve into the perceptions that Irish female professors have about their informal leadership roles. In our study, we captured the perspectives of 13 full professors from university business schools in Ireland. We found that their experiences as they moved up the ranks of academia greatly influenced their leadership beliefs and what they felt was important as leaders. The findings offer insight into the intrinsic values motivating the professors' activities and the profound implications of informal leadership, as perceived by these participants.

Having reached the professoriate, participants suddenly found themselves embodying the aspirations of junior female academics. They were seen as role models and beacons of hope that it is possible to reach this pinnacle as a female academic. Women expressed admiration, creating an unexpected duty as informal role model. One of the professors recounted her experience:

I remember at the time people saying, 'I don't think you realise the significance people attached to your gender.' The number of women that wrote to me and just said, 'We never thought we'd see this because it's like 30 years and there's never been a woman in that job.' You don't sign up to be a role model of any kind, but just because you occupy a role, that then happens or shows people what's possible.

From this elevated stance, participants began to realise the significant influence they held. They recognised the opportunity and the imperative to enact positive change. They felt a profound responsibility to advocate for and support other women traversing the paths they once navigated, using their experiences and influence to pave the way for the success of other women. The recognition of this power to effect meaningful change brought with it a deep-seated commitment to actively champion the advancement and empowerment of women in academia. As one participant said, 'My role as a professor is to support other colleagues; I really see that as kind of the basis of what I do.'

Our findings reveal that nearly every professor perceived the nurturing and mentoring of less-experienced academics, particularly women, as their paramount responsibility in their roles as professors and leaders. Their motivations appear to have partly originated in their knowledge of women's disadvantage in career advancement compared to men. Based on their experience, participants sought to mentor others, in an attempt to 'level the playing field'. One professor said mentoring was 'critically important, particularly if you're female'. When asked why women in particular, she responded: 'Because our opportunities haven't been as great as for men; the figures are there to show it, and I think the men very often look after themselves.'

These professors view their informal leadership efforts as a vital support system, enabling junior faculty members to navigate the academic landscape, overcome challenges, and achieve their full potential. The interaction and connection, developed through mentorship, are seen as enriching, fostering personal and professional growth for both mentors and mentees.

Challenging the status quo

As many female professors are acutely aware of the difficulties and biases present in academia, they see their informal leadership role as essential not only in helping others navigate these intricate landscapes but also in reshaping the very landscape that perpetuates inequality and hinders progress for women. They believe in the importance of questioning established norms, addressing gender disparities, and promoting systemic changes to create a more equitable academic landscape. One professor illustrates this point:

I was talking about my family and that I find night-time work very difficult because of two small kids at home. Surprisingly, a male colleague said to me, 'I'll give you advice never to mention your kids again, because such and such a professor comes in here every Saturday; obviously they wouldn't take well to you talking about your kids and how that impacts your work.' I did follow his advice for a long time, and sort of almost made people forget that I had three kids at home. But since, I've sort of grown out of that kind of complex. I mentioned my kids at every point because I want to encourage others to do the same, because they're just a fact of life, you know, and women work harder because they have kids.

Female professors' resilience and determination in confronting these challenges exemplify their commitment to fostering positive change in academia. For example, embedding reference to life beyond academic walls encourages those who may be reluctant to apply for more senior roles due to family commitments. By leveraging their experiences and insights in a positive way, female professors endeavour to cultivate an academic environment where diversity is embraced and equitable opportunities are accessible to all, irrespective of gender.

Conclusion

Having reflected on how these extraordinary women lead informally, it is clear that they have a deeply impactful influence in academia. They see themselves as mentors, advocates, change agents, and role models, challenging the gendered nature of academia in favour of a more diverse and equitable academic world.

Acknowledging and better understanding their perceptions and values is crucial in recognising the significant and transformative impact of their leadership approach. It also provides insights into how academia can support and leverage these informal roles for the betterment of the academic community and society at large.

"My role as a professor is to support other colleagues; I really see that as kind of the basis of what I do."

"I mentioned my kids at every point because I want to encourage others to do the same, because they're just a fact of life, you know, and women work harder because they have kids."

Designing a New Academic Council

A conceptual framework to reshape governance structures in a higher education institution

The article proposes a conceptual framework to guide the development of governance structures as part of designing a new academic council in an Irish technological university. The framework addresses the different academic activities that take place, risk levels, decision-making uncertainty, and responsibility. It may be of interest to other universities and institutions looking to examine or reshape their governance structures.

Dr Chris O'Riordan

Academic Quality Integration Lead, South East Technological University

Dr Derek O'Byrne

Vice President for Academic Affairs, South East Technological University

Dr Paul O'Leary

Head of Quality Promotion, South East Technological University

Introduction

The Technological Universities Act 2018 provides the legislative basis for establishing technological universities (TUs) in Ireland (Government of Ireland, 2018). There are currently five TUs, which were formed by mergers of institutes of technology. These IOTs – along with the traditional universities – had mature and well-developed academic governance structures, typically built around a governing body (GB), an academic council (AC), and associated committees.

These governance bodies still form part of the new TU legislative context (chapters 3 and 5 of the 2018 Act), with GBs responsible for corporate governance, ACs for academic governance (Advance HE, 2018). Section 9 of the Act sets out wide-ranging functions of a TU, which (under section 11(1)) are to be performed by its GB. The GB may delegate functions to the AC, which itself has identifiable functions: the academic council 'shall control the academic affairs of the technological university, including the curriculum of, and instruction and education provided by, the technological university' (section 17).

This gives a clear sense of the AC's academic (as opposed to corporate) focus but also its strategic and leadership role. There is a strong and overlapping relationship between the GB and AC, which is vital to institutional success, but it is also important to maintain separation and delineated responsibility for both corporate and academic strands of governance. This paper focuses on academic governance.

Context

South East Technological University (SETU) was established in May 2022 from the merger of Carlow and Waterford institutes of technology. The two IOTs had broadly similar governance structures, but the decision was taken to relook at this in developing a new AC model for the new university. The SETU GB appointed a working group to advise on the design of a new AC, to follow on from the existing council. The group produced a conceptual framework to guide the development of governance structures as part of the new design, before addressing more detailed tasks such as membership and committee roles.

This article does not address the detailed tasks but presents and explains the conceptual framework developed, which may be of value to other institutions in examining their governance structures.

"We contend that appropriately managing different levels and types of risks, and ensuring that effective decisions are made by the right people or bodies, are key governance contributions from any structures that are put in place."

Proposed conceptual framework

The proposed conceptual framework is not a radical shift, as the core elements of structures and approaches from the pre-merger IOTs remain. It is rather a clarification of who does what in the context of risk (specifically in academic terms) and decision-making uncertainty.

Following from McDonald et al. (2020), we contend that appropriately managing different levels and types of risks, and ensuring that effective decisions are made by the right people or bodies, are key governance contributions from any structures that are put in place. Thus, these feature prominently in the framework and should influence what structures are adopted, where activities take place, and who is ultimately accountable. See the figure for a diagrammatic representation.
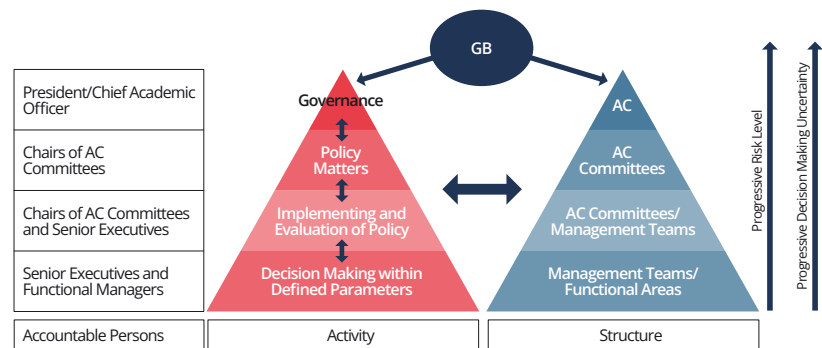
Proposed conceptual framework

Looking first at the left-hand pyramid, we propose four overall layers of academic activity: academic governance at the top, filtering down through academic policy matters (including their development), implementing and evaluating policy, and decision-making within parameters dependent on the policies in place.

As one moves up the pyramid, the volume of governance-related decisions decreases, but their associated academic risk and complexity increase. For example, relatively routine decisions that require judgement to be made within parameters set down by established policy (such as the admission of students to programmes) carry limited risk and uncertainty, because the requirements to follow in making such decisions are set down by the university.

Council does not generally need to be consulted on such standard decisions, but rather needs to know that these decisions are being made and in an appropriate academic manner. By contrast, decisions that are complex and less certain and which may present academic risk to the university if poorly made (such as establishing strategic long-term academic partnerships with other organisations) represent high-level governance choices that may not have pre-established parameters to follow.[1]

Thus, responsibility for decisions and academic risk management needs to vest with the appropriate university body, and this is where the right-hand pyramid is relevant. At the top of this pyramid is council, which needs to address matters of core and strategic academic governance in conjunction with GB, which embeds and instils broader university priorities. If council's time is spent on academic policy development or implementation, this limits its time and resources for strategic matters, so the detailed work on policy should be delegated to committees.

---

[1] Decisions may have other risks for the university as well, including financial and reputational. These are beyond the scope of this article.

Responsibility for decisions and academic risk management needs to vest with the appropriate university body"

To understand the effectiveness of policies and ensure that policies are understood by stakeholders, information must flow from all areas that action the policies.

These committees report directly to council, they act in accordance with council priorities, and their outputs require council approval. But they are also given space and appropriate freedom to explore or research policy areas and to propose enhancements to what exists. In tandem with management across academic and non-academic areas, the committees take responsibility for implementing academic policies and evaluating their effectiveness on an ongoing basis, which means that those involved in policy formulation and policy actions are in active communication.

To understand the effectiveness of policies and ensure that policies are understood by stakeholders, information must flow from all areas that action the policies. This is highlighted by the two-way arrows in the activity pyramid, though policy priorities are ultimately determined by council based on its interactions with GB.

Bringing this all together, it is vital that clear accountability is established. This ensures that decisions are made at the most appropriate level and that sufficiently senior personnel take responsibility for this and for reporting. This may take the form of aggregated reporting of items for approval and/or information, and escalation of decisions when necessary.

Thus, functional managers in conjunction with senior executives manage and report more-routine decisions but, at the other extreme, highly complex decisions must involve the president and/or chief academic officer (in discussion with others). Across the different levels, there is crossover of personnel to allow for consultation, consideration, or escalation, but also to ensure they report on their decisions. An effective governance structure should allow organisational members to proceed with their work without unnecessary hindrance, but also to ensure there is appropriate oversight.

A further consideration is establishing a secretariat role to assist council and, more specifically, the committees. In traditional academic governance structures, committees can represent the 'squeezed middle', as they strive to manage the time-consuming, detailed scrutiny of routine requests for approval on behalf of council with the more pivotal work on policy. Anyone who has been a member of such committees will attest to the challenge of balancing these within the available time, which may act as a disincentive to being a committee member.

We propose that allocating resources to committees – in the form of personnel – to undertake such scrutiny under the direction of the committee could pay dividends. Having specific people allocated to this, who possess the necessary policy knowledge and experience, can speed up this work as they become more proficient at identifying issues that the committee primarily needs to adjudicate on.

The necessary skill sets for such work should exist in universities; it is then a case of setting clear boundaries for the role which is advisory to committees who make the decisions. This arrangement should also encourage those who wish to volunteer and contribute to academic governance activities on committees, as they see higher value-add to their time commitment.

Concluding thoughts

This article proposes a conceptual framework that underpins the design of a new academic council. The structures put forward here are not a radical departure from previous approaches, but they do give greater clarity on where responsibility for core activities lies. Accountability for decisions and actions is stated at each level, which recognises and addresses the types of risks and decisions that exist. Including a secretariat role is more novel and should be a valuable addition to the structure, particularly in allowing committees more time for policy matters.

This framework has informed the development of the new academic council design in SETU and may be of interest to other universities and institutions in examining and possibly reshaping their governance structures as well.

REFERENCES

Advance HE (2018) 'Governance briefing note 4: Academic governance and quality'. Cork: Advance HE. www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/governance-briefing-note-4-academic-governance-and-quality.

Government of Ireland (2018) Technological Universities Act 2018. Electronic Irish Statute Book (eISB). www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2018/act/3/enacted/en/html.

McDonald, T.J., O'Byrne, D., O'Leary, P., and O'Riordan, C. (2020) 'Development of an Academic Risk Model to support Higher Education Quality Assurance'. Presentation at Sixth International Conference on Higher Education Advances (HEAd'20), Valencia, June.

The Student Experience of Online Assessment

How third-level students managed a changed academic environment

Introduction

Assessment is a principal activity in higher education (Stödberg, 2012), both measuring and contributing to learning (Huba & Freed, 2000). The education sector is traditionally one of the least digitised sectors of the economy (Gallagher & Palmer, 2020), so when Covid-19 arrived, students experienced a seismic shift from traditional paper-based assessments to one where online assessment prevailed.

In May 2020 the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education published the findings of the Irish National Digital Experience (INDEx) Survey, giving an insight into the digital engagement, experiences, and expectations of students and staff who teach in Irish higher education. The survey was conducted in late 2019, before the pandemic, which was a very different learning and teaching environment. Interestingly, it contained little about assessment.

Jisc, a not-for-profit organisation for digital services and solutions in the higher and further education and skills sectors in the UK, outlines many advantages of undertaking assessments online (Jisc, 2009). These include more efficient management of assignment submissions, better engagement from students, increased motivation, and the convenience of not having to travel to submit an assignment.

However, lack of access to appropriate IT equipment and infrastructure is a particular challenge. In Ireland, all students (both full- and part-time) in one of the largest schools at Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT) were surveyed to understand their experiences of undertaking

Emer McKenna (FCA)
Lecturer in Accounting, Dundalk Institute of Technology

The Covid-19 pandemic affected 1.2 million students in Ireland, with almost a quarter of a million in higher education studying remotely. It caused a shift in assessment design, from predominantly invigilated final exams to online assessment. Students at Dundalk Institute of Technology took part in a study to explore the student experience of undertaking final assessments online. This article outlines the key findings.

online summative assessments and how this information may be used in the future.

Positive and negative aspects of online assessments

The students surveyed had experience of many different methods of online assessment. The most frequent was open-book timed exams, followed by Moodle quizzes and online presentations. Many positives were identified in relation to undertaking final assessments online, but there were also significant negatives.

Undertaking assessments remotely can reduce students' stress levels (Rolim & Isaias, 2019), a finding reiterated by 40% of the student respondents of the survey. This appeared to be aligned with the increased flexibility and ease of access. The less formal nature and lack of invigilation also had a positive impact on stress levels for many students; however, a substantial cohort said that online assessments had no impact on their stress levels.

Flexibility and accessibility were overarching advantages. Students could undertake assessments in their own home, at a time that suited their schedule, and they saved time and money from not having to travel to a physical exam centre. However, not all students have the luxury of such peaceful accommodation. The catchment area of students surveyed is in a border area which, according to recent deprivation indices, includes some of the most disadvantaged parts of the country. In DkIT, 14% of enrolments are from disadvantaged backgrounds (HEA, 2019). It is therefore likely that some students live in accommodation that may not be suitable for undertaking assessments, such as flat shares, rented accommodation, and direct provision centres.

A key theme in the analysis of responses was the correlation of online assessments with practical application in 21st-century Ireland. Students identified the modern approach of this method, the use of up-to-date technology to undertake such assessments and the transferable skills learned that could be applied in employment settings. They recognised the importance of these practicalities, though it appears there is a dearth of information in the literature on the benefits to an employment setting.

Most students found that online assessments helped them engage, study, and revise more with the module, helping them build overall knowledge of the subject. These findings strongly support the work of Marriott and Lau (2008), who write that online assessments have an important role in teaching and learning, as they can enhance student engagement, student progress can be monitored easily, and poor student performance and instant feedback can motivate students to work harder.

Undertaking assessments remotely can reduce students' stress levels (Rolim & Isaias, 2019), a finding reiterated by 40% of the student respondents of the survey.

Students can be resistant to change and reluctant to embrace the change from traditional to online exams.

However, there were also some starkly negative experiences. One of the main areas of concern for students is the potential for technology failure (Kearns, 2012; Khan & Khan, 2019). Lack of appropriate IT infrastructure was cited by the INDEx survey as a major problem experienced by students nationally. Although speed and reliability of broadband, lack of computer hardware, and technology failures were identified as real problems and concerns, most students felt comfortable using IT for assessments and were not worried about the risk of IT failure occurring during that period.

When undertaking assessments online, students can feel isolated by the lack of physical contact with teachers and peer students (Kearns, 2012; Khan & Khan, 2019). Online group work can be difficult, increasing stress. Difficulties with maintaining concentration and focus meant that students were easily distracted, largely caused by operating in an isolated setting. These feelings can increase stress, which impacts on health, specifically mental health. Lack of contact can lead to misunderstandings and missed opportunities and can leave students with feelings of deflation and lack of motivation and morale.

Where to for the future?

The results of this study suggest that undertaking final assessments online can have huge benefits for students. While this was a small-scale study in a single school of a higher education institute, the findings provide insights into students' experiences of being assessed in an online environment. They may provide insights that inform programme teams and individual academics in the design of online assessments going forward. In particular, academic and programme teams might consider a blended model of assessment. Additional consideration should be given to the type of online assessments used, and institutions should promote places on campus with high-speed broadband, accessibility from other IT devices, and additional skills-based training.

Students can be resistant to change and reluctant to embrace the change from traditional to online exams (Khan & Khan 2019). However, it appears that DkIT students did not experience this resistance, perhaps due to the lack of options during the pandemic. Educational institutions and students alike were forced to switch immediately from face-to-face to online teaching and assessments.

The majority of respondents said they would prefer that most final assessments be held online in a post-Covid-19 era. Unfortunately, the increased use of artificial-intelligence tools such as ChatGPT could have an impact on this. What can we learn as educators from this experience? Any proposed changes to assessment structures in the future should include student inputs. In the words of Benjamin Franklin, 'Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn.'

REFERENCES

Gallagher, S. and Palmer, J. (2020) 'The pandemic pushed universities online. The change was long overdue'. *Harvard Business Review*, 29 September. https://hbr.org/2020/09/the-pandemic-pushed-universities-online-the-change-was-long-overdue.

Higher Education Authority (HEA) (2019) *A Spatial & Socio-Economic Profile of Higher Education Institutions in Ireland. Using Census Small Area Deprivation Index Scores derived from Student Home Address Data, Academic Year 2017/18*. Dublin: HEA.

Huba, M.E. and Freed, J.E. (2000) *Learner-Centered Assessment on College Campuses: Shifting the Focus from Teaching to Learning*. Allyn and Bacon.

JISC (2009) *Effective Assessment in a Digital Age: A Guide to Technology-Enhanced Assessment and Feedback*. Bristol: Jisc.

Kearns, L.R. (2012) 'Student assessment in online learning: Challenges and effective practices', *Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 8(3), 198.

Khan, S. and Khan, R.A. (2019) 'Online assessments: Exploring perspectives of university students', *Education and Information Technologies*, 24(1), 661–677.

Marriott, P. and Lau, A. (2008) 'The use of on-line summative assessment in an undergraduate financial accounting course', *Journal of Accounting Education*, 26(2), 73–90.

National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Education (2020) *Irish National Digital Experience (INDEx) Survey*. Dublin: National Forum. https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/index/.

Rolim, C. and Isaias, P. (2019) 'Examining the use of e-assessment in higher education: Teachers and students' viewpoints', *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 50(4), 1785–1800.

Stödberg, U. (2012) 'A research review of e-assessment', *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 37(5), 591–604.

* * *

On 10 February 2023, Jörg Widmann, former principal guest conductor of the Irish Chamber Orchestra, was conferred with an honorary degree of Doctor of Letters by the University of Limerick.

.

The Online Doctoral Community of Practice
Sustaining the doctoral experience in the 21st century

Introduction

The contemporary doctorate in any discipline requires significant scholarly research and intense dedication and time commitment. Developing mutual understanding between supervisor and student is critical to navigate the journey to dissertation defence (Reis & Grady, 2020). In today's learning environment, fostering peer or student–student learning may be more critical to successful completion of a doctoral programme than we previously understood. Yet specifics on these types of relationships and structures are lacking in the literature (Berry, 2017).

Doctoral students must acquire high levels of knowledge, critically reflect on information, and engage others in discussion, including experts from across the discipline and indeed the world (Martinsuo & Turkulainen, 2011). Thus, participation in a community of practice (CoP) can play a crucial role in providing a more holistic and significant doctoral experience (Cai et al., 2019).

Literature

Doctoral education varies significantly across disciplines, institutions, and countries (Reis & Grady, 2020; Wisker et al., 2021). Nonetheless, every doctoral learning process demands that the student transform from a learner of knowledge to a leader in learning and research. Doctoral students must achieve synergy between high levels of research competence, deep discipline knowledge, and competence in presenting their argument to demonstrate 'doctorateness' and achieve the PhD (Trafford & Leshem, 2009, p.305).

Extant literature identifies many factors influencing and contributing to progress and completion of the doctoral degree, impacting in particular on students' experiences,

Anne Graham Cagney
Senior Lecturer, South East Technological University

Leslie A. Cordie
Associate Professor, Auburn University, Alabama

This article discusses how participation in an online community of practice (CoP) can play a crucial role in doctoral student support and provide a transformative learning experience that supports degree progress and completion. We share examples based on perspectives from Irish and American doctoral programmes. Engaging doctoral students in an online CoP may create better learners and leaders to navigate the complexities of life and work.

persistence, and degree completion. Belonging to a doctoral CoP supports students in three ways: belonging to a specific community, academic development, and peer support (Lahenius, 2012; Wisker et al., 2021). Characteristics of doctoral CoPs have been identified: self-selection of members; a group focus on identity and skills development; and participation influenced by level of engagement, discipline, and expertise both within and outside the doctoral institution (Cai et al., 2019). Thus, identification with and commitment to the CoP may support the doctoral journey by bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practice.

However, the research literature is lacking on student-driven activities (Flores-Scott & Nerad, 2012) and online community support in doctoral education. We propose in this article that participation in an online community of learners can play a crucial role in doctoral student progress and provide a more transformative experience that supports degree progress and completion.

Methodology

Practitioner research is understood to be a form of inquiry that supports educators during periods of external reform that destabilise previous ways of working and contribute to the development of 'adaptive expertise' (Menter et al., 2011). Gregson et al. (2019) make the case that practitioners interested in improving educational practice should begin with themselves and value their direct experiences of practice for learning.

In 2019, before the Covid-19 pandemic, two independent online CoPs were created in the US and Ireland. In March 2020, both had to adapt to the new online world. Each supervisor was a member of their own CoP, not its owner or controller (beyond having the university Zoom or Teams account). The CoPs did not replace normal one-to-one doctoral supervision meetings. US CoP members were doctoral students registered on differing programmes, while Irish CoP members were a more diverse group of PhD registered students, and master's students, some of whom had completed their programme of study and were interested in continuing their research journey.

As participant researchers, we sought to answer our guiding research question: What components of our online doctoral CoP experiences support the learners, the learning process, and their degree progress during the research? In this way, a theory of action was developed and provided insights into ways of improving practice, the understanding of practice, and an epistemology of practice (Raelin, 2007).

Belonging to a doctoral CoP supports students in three ways: belonging to a specific community, academic development, and peer support.

Findings

Eight conditions supported the doctoral digital CoP spaces of learning:
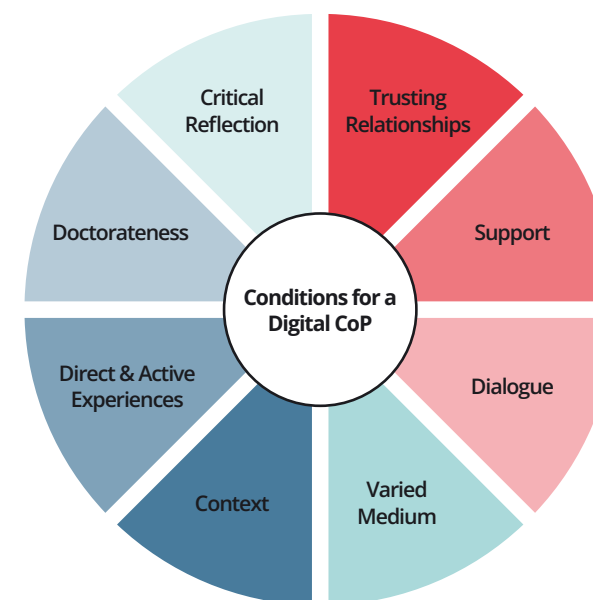
Conditions for a digital CoP space of learning (adapted from Graham Cagney, 2011)

The three most important conditions arising from our data were:

Trusting relationships: Listening, respectful interactions, rapport, and authenticity combined to create a psychologically safe learning space where members shared their challenges and concerns, such as 'not knowing' disciplinary knowledge or research-related skills.

Support: Increased personal engagement, based on meaningful social and technological support, led to the acquisition of new online collaborative working practices. Also, part-time students felt more in control, not 'missing out' compared to their full-time peers.

Dialogue: Profound discourse on particular topics took place after presentations and informal group discussions. These ranged over areas of disciplinary and interdisciplinary knowledge and research expertise.

The remaining five conditions related predominantly to the design of the digital space of learning, use of tools, platforms and online facilitation techniques, the

Increased personal engagement, based on meaningful social and technological support, led to the acquisition of new online collaborative working practices.

cross-programme mix of participants, and access/sharing of resources and literatures on the university learning platforms.

Discussion

Being a doctoral supervisor requires ongoing development of oneself as an adaptable, self-reliant learner, with a concurrent commitment to supporting and facilitating a high-quality learning environment for one's doctoral students. The research development (hard skills) and interpersonal skills (soft skills) that are critical components of the PhD programme can be developed and enhanced through doctoral CoPs (Berry, 2017).

In both CoPs, participants reported experiencing new and different opportunities to learn and collaborate. They pursued (online) professional learning and development as researchers through formal, informal, and non-formal opportunities (Watkins & Marsick, 1992). In many cases, students learned things they were unaware they did not know before taking part in the CoP, and that would only have come to light through the online CoP learning space (Bastalich, 2017). For some, the learning curve was steep and frightening: learning to learn and conduct research-related activities online, while also learning how to use the technology itself. Exploring this further in future research is a must for support of online peer learning.

Creating digital spaces and connections for graduate students is challenging, particularly with respect to their peer online interactions, which is one of the most important parts of a successful digital learning space (Flores-Scott & Nerad, 2012). Consistent with Berry (2017), students in our CoPs identified that the interaction between group members determined the quality of learning and the knowledge produced.

The organic and emergent CoPs on which this article is based were created at a specific time in response to a mutual need to create knowledge collaboratively. While individual motivations may have differed, both groups continued learning and working together and in this way worked to 'learn from and with one another as they pursue interests, opportunities, and challenges' (Watkins & Marsick, 1992, p.66).

Thus, we argue that the online doctoral CoP creates a peer learning space that strengthens professional identities and promotes successful progress toward the degree. This short article provides a guiding lens towards understanding how the online CoP can be sustained and grow critically reflective doctoral digital practitioners.

We argue that the online doctoral CoP creates a peer learning space that strengthens professional identities and promotes successful progress toward the degree.

Conclusion

Developing a doctoral CoP supports the graduate student and practitioner to manage the process from learner to leader. CoPs provide recognition for doctoral work, support from peers, and access to resources. They increase the skills of members and create an environment where people will share authentic personal and professional experiences.

This article provides support for the best-practices literature on how CoPs can create a more positive experience for doctoral students and their successful progress. Creating these high-quality learning experiences for doctoral (or indeed any graduate) students can mitigate the diversity of student experiences and enhance interdisciplinary influences. The doctoral CoP supports students in becoming practitioner-researchers, building their scholar identity, and moving towards successful degree completion. Engaging doctoral students in an online CoP may thus provide the world with better learners and leaders, no matter the discipline, career, or country.

REFERENCES

Bastalich, W. (2017) 'Content and context in knowledge production: A critical review of doctoral supervision literature', *Studies in Higher Education*, 42(7), 1145–1157. DOI: 10.1080/03075079.2015.1079702

Berry, S. (2017) 'Student support networks in online doctoral programs: Exploring nested communities', *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 12, 33–48. DOI: 10.28945/3676

Cai, L., Dangeni, D., Elliot, D.L., He, R., Liu, J., Makara, K.A., Pacheco, E.-M., Shih, H.-Y., Wang, W., and Zhang, J. (2019) 'A conceptual enquiry into communities of practice as praxis in international doctoral education', *Journal of Praxis in Higher Education*, 1(1), 11–36. DOI: 10.47989/kpdc74

Flores-Scott, E.M. and Nerad, M. (2012) 'Peers in doctoral education: Unrecognized learning partners', *New Directions for Higher Education*, 157(spring), 73–83. DOI: 10.1002/he.20007

Graham Cagney, A. (2011) 'Finding the red thread: Toward a theory of transformative learning in executive education'. PhD thesis, Trinity College Dublin.

Gregson, D., Gregson, M., and Spedding, R. (2019) 'Top-down and outside-in: Breaking boundaries between research, theory and practice in education', *Journal of Management Policy and Practice*, 20(3), 36–52.

Lahenius, K. (2012) 'Communities of practice supporting doctoral studies', *International Journal of Management Education*, 10(1), 29–38. DOI: 10.1016/j.ijme.2012.02.003

Martinsuo, M. and Turkulainen, V. (2011) 'Personal commitment, support and progress in doctoral studies', *Studies in Higher Education*, 36(1), 103–120. DOI: 10.1080/03075070903469598

Menter, I., Elliot, D., Hulme, M., Lewin, J., and Lowden, K. (2011) *A Guide to Practitioner Research in Education.* Sage.

Raelin, J.A. (2007) 'Toward an epistemology of practice', *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, 6, 495–519.

Reis, T. and Grady, M. (2020) 'Doctoral advising in COVID-19: Opportunity for change', *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Perspectives in Higher Education*, 5(1), 136.

Trafford, V. and Leshem, S. (2009) 'Doctorateness as a threshold concept', *Innovations in Education and Teaching International,* 46(3), 305–316. DOI: 10.1080/14703290903069027

Watkins, K.E. and Marsick, V.J. (1992) 'Towards a theory of informal and incidental learning in organizations', *International Journal of Lifelong Education,* 11, 287–300.

Wisker, G., McGinn, M.K., Bengtsen, S.S., Lokhtina, I., He, F., Cornér, S., Leshem, S., Inouye, K., and Löfström, E. (2021) 'Remote doctoral supervision experiences: Challenges and affordances', *Innovations in Education and Teaching International,* 58(6), 612–623. DOI: 10.1080/14703297.2021.1991427

✳ ✳ ✳

Atlantic Technological University launches ATU Global at European Association for International Education (EAIE) in Rotterdam

Cleo Devaney, ATU Marketing Manager; Brendan Rogers, Ambassador to the Kingdom of the Netherlands; Prof Frances Lucy, ATU Lead for EU GREEN University Alliance, John Joe O'Farrell, Director, International Engagement at ATU Galway/Mayo.

Teacher Professional Development for Parent Engagement

Meeting the Teaching Council's Céim requirements

Introduction

Research for many decades has shown that students whose parents or family members are involved in their learning have better academic and life outcomes (Epstein et al., 2019) and that 'high-quality and high-performing schools have strong partnerships with their students' families and communities' (Sheldon, 2019, p.40).

Yet despite the strong evidence and increased legislation worldwide requiring schools and teachers to adopt a partnership approach in their work, as well as changing accreditation requirements for teachers, most teacher education programmes do little to prepare teachers to build relationships with parents (Willemse et al., 2016; Ryan & Lannin, 2021). Very little attention is paid to the place and voice of parents in their children's schooling (Pushor & Ciuffetelli Parker, 2013). Teachers report high levels of anxiety in their encounters with parents, and establishing relationships with families is the most significant challenge encountered when entering the profession (Evans, 2013).

Legislation and accreditation

Increasingly, legislation in many countries requires schools to communicate effectively with families and to organise programmes and practices that involve families in their children's school learning. The role of parents as primary educators is enshrined in the Constitution of Ireland (1937), and working in partnership with parents is specified throughout the Education Act (1998).

Several other Department of Education and Skills (DES) policies and curriculum frameworks also refer to

Dr Sandra Ryan
Mary Immaculate College

Despite increased legislation and accreditation requirements for teachers, most teacher education programmes do little to prepare teachers to build relationships with parents. This article contributes to this under-researched area. Findings inform how we could expand support for beginning teachers to develop their family engagement practices and the development of initial teacher education and continuing professional development courses to meet the new Céim standards.

encouraging parental involvement. Partnership with parents is a core aspect of the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme, and the DEIS Action Plan (DES, 2017) requires school planning for parent involvement.

Recent reaccreditation of all teacher education programmes in Ireland has been guided by *Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education* (Teaching Council, 2020). Notably, 'Professional Relationships and working with parents' (p.14) is identified as a compulsory area of study for all initial teacher education (ITE) programmes and as an important aspect of graduate teachers' professional values, skills, knowledge, and understanding.

Research

Ryan (2019) surveyed the knowledge, skills, beliefs, and attitudes of third-year bachelor of education students towards parent engagement before and after undertaking a module on the topic. Overall, in line with international findings (Morris & Taylor, 1998; Uludag, 2008), student teachers acquired important skills and understanding about their role as teachers in working with parents, and the benefits of involving parents in their children's school learning. After the module, all respondents reported a more positive attitude towards engaging parents and felt better prepared to do that.

For a majority, their greatest fears about working with parents (before the module) related to creating good working relationships and professional boundaries, communication difficulties (including language barriers), and understanding cultural differences. A small number identified fears about dealing with aggressive, angry, or upset parents. After the module, the majority said these issues had been addressed.

Key learning included being aware and open to their role of involving parents, and having skills and attitudes to do this work. Students felt equipped to make parents feel welcome and agreed that parents had valuable insights to share with them about their children. Other learning included understanding parents' possible fears about schools, and a broader perspective on parents' role in education, particularly fathers'. Respondents understood the learning benefits for children, particularly of initiatives with a curricular focus. All agreed that all student teachers should undertake a course on parent engagement.

Many researchers have highlighted the importance of providing focused education and high-quality experiences to prepare student teachers for their work with families (e.g., Baum & McMurray-Schwarz, 2004; Graue, 2005). In addition to developing specific skills and strategies, it is important to nurture essential dispositions such as positive attitudes towards families and an empowerment perspective that views parents as partners, values and supports

Many researchers have highlighted the importance of providing focused education and high-quality experiences to prepare student teachers for their work with families.

Lack of awareness of social inequalities associated with social class can lead pre-service teachers to hold deficit perspectives and to blame families for children's poor school performance.

cultural and social diversity, and is committed to communicating effectively and to ongoing learning about family engagement (Swick, 2004).

Family, community, culture

Much research worldwide indicates that pre-service teachers have limited experience of families and children from social, cultural, racial, and linguistic backgrounds that differ from their own (Bleicher, 2011). Kidd et al. (2008) posited that many pre-service teachers hold assumptions about and lack general awareness of other cultures, including the influence that culture can have on a family's values, beliefs, and childrearing. Teachers tend to be judgemental of parents whose class, culture, race, or language is different from their own dominant white middle-class norm and view them with hostility and deficit-based thinking (Noguera, 2011). Another concern is that lack of awareness of social inequalities associated with social class can lead pre-service teachers to hold deficit perspectives and to blame families for children's poor school performance (Kidd et al., 2008).

Graue and Brown (2003) suggested that many pre-service teachers perceive some parents as not caring about their children or about school, rather than reflecting on existing differences between school and home practices. One survey of pre-service teachers found that almost a third were fearful about 'trying to relate to people who are not like me' or 'who come from a different background' (Bleicher, 2011, p.1174). Some student teachers, based on their experience of 'curriculum of parents', had begun to see themselves as part of the parent community rather than being outside it (Pushor, 2014).

Teacher competences

Westergård (2013) proposed the following competences as central:

1. *Relational competence* refers to the teacher's ability to build connections with parents, to be welcoming and kind and develop good relationships as well as strategies for dealing with conflict and criticism.

2. *Communication competence* relates to the teacher's ability to communicate openly, positively, and respectfully and to encourage two-way communication with parents. Hornby (2011) extends this to include skills in listening (including active listening), counselling, assertiveness, and group leadership.

3. *Context competence* refers to teachers' self-efficacy regarding their work, and knowing how to handle difficult situations in class and how to discuss challenging issues with parents.

Course content and methodologies

Research and experience indicate that interactive, discursive, and reflective approaches are most effective with student teachers requiring time to reflect on often strongly held beliefs and practices, as well as time for transformation to occur (Ryan & Lannin, 2021). Patte (2011) suggests that coursework should include developing a philosophy of working with diverse families, designing family action plans and analysis of teaching cases. The importance of interaction with successful educators and practical experiences with families and communities is also clear, in line with international research (Uludag, 2008), but this presents many practical challenges when dealing with large cohorts of students.

The timing of such a module within ITE programmes is important, as greater maturity and school-based experience help student teachers understand the complexities of family contexts and backgrounds and the possibilities of parent roles. While initial training and education are important, one course alone cannot address the necessary knowledge, skills, and strategies, and there is a need for integration across programme areas (Morris & Taylor, 1998).

Conclusion

All initial teacher education programmes must now address parent engagement, but this should be followed by ongoing training and support so that it becomes a core part of the work of all teachers in all schools.
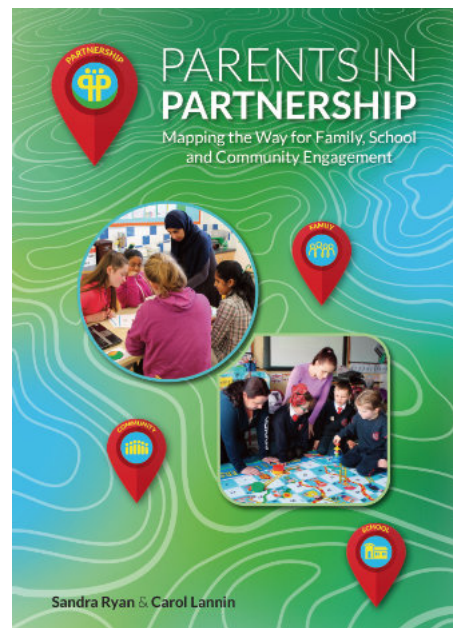
REFERENCES

Baum, A.C. and McMurray-Schwarz, P. (2004) 'Preservice teachers' beliefs about family involvement: Implications for teacher education', *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 32(1), 57–61.

Bleicher, E. (2011) 'Parsing the language of racism and relief: Effects of a short-term urban field placement on teacher candidates' perceptions of culturally diverse classrooms', *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 27(8), 1170–1178.

Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2017) *DEIS Plan 2017: Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools.* Dublin: DES.

Epstein, J.L. (2018) 'School, family, and community partnerships in teachers' professional work', *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 44(3), 397–406.

Epstein, J.L., Sanders, M.G., Sheldon, S.B., Simon, B.S., Clark Salinas, K., Rodriguez Jansorn, N., Van Voorhis, F.L., Martin, C.S., Thomas, B.G., Greenfeld, M.D., Hutchins, D.J., and Williams, K.J. (Eds.) (2019) *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action*, 4th edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Evans, M.P. (2013) 'Educating preservice teachers for family, school, community engagement', *Teaching Education*, 24(2), 123–133.

Graue, E. (2005) 'Theorizing and describing preservice teachers' images of families and schooling', *Teachers College Record*, 107(1), 157–185.

Graue, E. and Brown, C.P. (2003) 'Preservice teachers' notions of families and schooling', *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 19, 719–735.

Hornby, G. (2011) *Parental Involvement in Childhood Education: Building Effective School–Family Partnerships.* Springer.

Kidd, J.K., Sanchéz, S.Y., and Thorp, E.K. (2008) 'Defining moments: Developing culturally responsive dispositions and teaching practices in early childhood preservice teachers', *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 24(2), 316–329.

Morris, V.G. and Taylor, S.I. (1998) 'Alleviating barriers to family involvement in education: The role of teacher education', *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 14(2), 219–231.

Noguera, P. (2011) 'Urban schools must start empowering parents', *City Limits*, 11 April.

Patte, M.M. (2011) 'Examining preservice teacher knowledge and competencies in establishing family-school partnerships', *School Community Journal*, 21(2), 143–159.

Pushor, D. (2014) 'Teachers' narrative understandings of parents: Living and reliving "possible lives" as professionals', *Journal of Family Diversity in Education*, 1(1), 40–57.

Pushor, D., and Ciuffetelli Parker, D. (2013) 'Reformation of storied assumptions of parents and poverty', *International Journal about Parents in Education*, 7(2), 164–176.

Ryan, S. (2019) 'Pre-service teacher attitudes to and sense of efficacy in relation to family engagement'. Paper presented at the European Research Network About Parents in Education (ERNAPE), Gdansk, Poland.

Ryan, S. and Lannin, C. (2021) *Parents in Partnership: Mapping the Way for Family, School and Community Partnerships.* Limerick: Curriculum Development Unit, Mary Immaculate College.

Sheldon, S.B. (2019) 'Improving student outcomes with school, family, and community partnerships. A research review'. In: J.L. Epstein et al. (Eds.) *School,*

Family, and Community Partnerships. Your Handbook for Action, 4th edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Swick, K. (2004) *Empowering Parents, Families, Schools and Communities During the Early Childhood Years.* Champaign, IL: Stipes.

Teaching Council (2020) *Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education.* Maynooth: Teaching Council.

Uludag, A. (2008) 'Elementary preservice teachers' opinions about parental involvement in elementary children's education', *Teaching and Teacher Education,* 24(3), 807–817.

Westergård, E. (2013) 'Teacher competencies and parental cooperation', *International Journal about Parents in Education,* 7(2), 91–99.

Willemse, T.M., Vloeberghs, L., de Bruïne, E.J., and Van Eynde, S. (2016) 'Preparing teachers for family–school partnerships: A Dutch and Belgian perspective', *Teaching Education,* 27(2), 212–228.

✳ ✳ ✳

Mature Student Keith graduates from SETU

It's never too late to be what you want to be and, for many, it takes thought, time, and a little innovation to realise their dream.

This is especially true for Keith Tracey, for whom SETU was pivotal in "opening his eyes to what was possible in the 3D printing world."

Having discovered 3D printing 22 years after leaving secondary school, Keith now fronts additive manufacturing start-up XYZ3D.

Keith says he always had "an itch to go into some form of engineering". That ambition was put on ice when he failed to get sufficient Leaving Certificate points for his top choice, so the resourceful teen chose a more hands-on route where he "developed a vast array of skills, even if none of them were certified".

Keith was among the first cohort of students to study additive manufacturing at SETU. Now, scroll in hand, Keith Tracey, BSc in Additive Manufacturing, is pictured here on graduation day in SETU Arena in Waterford.

Strengthening Trauma–Sensitive Education

Developing accredited training based on evaluations from primary, post–primary, and tertiary educators

Introduction

Between May 2022 and June 2023, trauma awareness sessions were delivered to several primary, post-primary, and tertiary education settings across Cork city and county. A post-training survey (n = 248) was distributed to the participants that would inform the development of forthcoming trauma-informed training. Ethical approval was obtained from Munster Technological University (MTU) Cork.

The survey data revealed that 69% (n = 171) of participants had not received any trauma training during their initial teacher training or continuing professional development (CPD) courses. Ní Chorcora and Swords (2022) highlight teachers' potential to identify students' mental health issues, but inadequate training can hinder effective classroom interventions.

In Ireland, the pandemic has highlighted the exacerbation of pre-existing inequalities, intensifying economic, social, and psychological pressures on children (Mulholland and O'Toole, 2021, p.329). There is a rising presence of children in Irish classrooms who have experienced war and displacement (DoE, 2023). As Delaney (2022) posits, however, children and adults with trauma experiences are not a novel phenomenon in education settings. Drawing on data from the Growing Up in Ireland study, Gardner et al. (2019) found that more than 75% of children had experienced at least one adverse experience before the age of nine.

The prevalence of trauma has prompted concern among some NGOs in Ireland, such as Mental Health Ireland and Alcohol Action Ireland (2020), leading them to advocate for the immediate implementation of trauma-informed practices (TIPs). Given the prevalence of trauma in our

Dr Annie Cummins
Lecturer and Researcher, Department of Sports, Leisure, and Childhood Studies, Munster Technological University, Cork

Dr Judith Butler
Lecturer and Researcher, Department of Sports, Leisure, and Childhood Studies, Munster Technological University, Cork

Trauma awareness sessions were recently held in Cork, followed by a post-training survey. The study, approved by MTU Cork, found that 69% of participants lacked trauma training during initial teacher training or continuing professional development. Based on the data, a framework for trauma training was devised. This work aims to better support students with trauma experiences.

classrooms, teachers must recognise and respond to the needs of children who have experienced trauma (SAMHSA, 2014).

A trauma-informed approach

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), an organisation with a trauma-informed approach, 'acknowledges the far-reaching effects of trauma and comprehends potential routes to recovery; identifies the indications and manifestations of trauma . . .; and takes action by seamlessly incorporating awareness about trauma into policies, protocols, and actions, while actively striving to prevent re-traumatisation' (ibid., p.9). SAMHSA outlines six principles that underpin TIP in an organisation:

» Safety: promoting a sense of physical and psychological safety
» Trustworthiness and transparency: building and maintaining trust with everyone involved in the organisation
» Peer support: enabling opportunities for trauma survivors to 'come together to build relationships in which they share their strengths and support each other's healing and growth' (Blanch et al., 2012, p.13)
» Collaboration and mutuality: Healing in relationships can only come through responsive relationships (Butler et al., 2022). TIP emphasises building strong partnerships with 'meaningful sharing of power and decision-making' (SAMHSA, 2014, p.11)
» Empowerment, voice, and choice: focusing on a strengths-based approach to support and enable self-advocacy and promote recovery
» Cultural, historical, and gender issues: reflective practice in relation to cultural stereotypes and biases. Implementation of policies and procedures that are responsive to individuals' needs.

These principles provide a baseline for considering how organisations can effectively adopt a trauma-informed practice (Sharkey et al., 2023). However, the lack of specific evidence-informed training programmes for education settings may result in an ad hoc approach to the implementation and delivery of TIP in schools.

Developing a trauma-informed framework for education settings

While 94% of participants in the survey in Cork were interested in more training, Thomas et al. (2019) confirm that there is no dominant framework for trauma-informed education and care. The research team sought to develop a toolkit for future trauma training from the data gathered from this research. They identified five core elements that will form the basis for a trauma training course:

The lack of specific evidence-informed training programmes for education settings may result in an ad hoc approach to the implementation and delivery of TIP in schools.

'I won't forget that relationships are built in the small moments. I've been thinking about this... I know I'm going to be a better teacher who offers a more compassionate classroom as a result.'

» Evidence-based information about adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and the impact of trauma across the life course: Berger et al. (2020) found that trauma-informed training enhances student engagement; reduces distress, suspensions, and post-traumatic stress; and alleviates youth depression. It also builds teachers' confidence and effectiveness when supporting students. Some respondents suggested that training should be made available to everyone who works at the school, including 'all staff, teachers, secretaries, cleaners, and caretakers' (adult education respondent).
» Practical interventions that support healing in the classroom: 27% of respondents highlighted the need for future training to include a toolkit of practical strategies. Specific issues were noted, including good practices in teaching about mental health; specific supports for special educational needs; and ways to address distressed behaviour, support war-experienced or displaced people, address drug use, and implement restorative practice. This list, though not exhaustive, encapsulates several challenges that are affecting children's engagement in the classroom.
» Building a culture of positive and respectful relationships in schools: According to Butler et al. (2022, p.150), 'key relationships with key people are the intervention' for toxic stress. Strong and supportive bonds can help de-escalate stress responses and help create a safe and successful learning environment (Willoughby, 2016). The importance of cultivating strong relationships that foster co-regulation was aptly captured by one respondent: 'I won't forget that relationships are built in the small moments. I've been thinking about this since I finished on Friday. I know I'm going to be a better teacher who offers a more compassionate classroom as a result.'
» Shifting from a deficit- to a strengths-based approach: Some respondents expressed concerns about distinguishing between trauma-related and disruptive behaviour. The deficit model pathologises students for their behaviour, whereas a strengths-based approach understands the underlying factors that drive behaviour. Trauma-informed educators practice self-reflection, examining biases and beliefs while being sensitive to trauma's impact on the mind, body, and relationships (Butler et al., 2022). This approach focuses on students' strengths and acknowledges coping mechanisms developed in response to trauma, empowering learners to regain control and agency in their learning journey.
» Self-care for school staff: Vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, and burnout can impact teachers' capacity to support students (Ní Chorcora & Swords, 2022). As one respondent noted, 'I often find myself responding in a negative way, and I see now that I need to first regulate my response before I can help someone else regulate.' It is therefore essential that organisations develop clear protocols on training, supporting, and supervising staff.

Conclusion

While there is increased advocacy for implementing trauma-informed practice, there is a lack of empirical evidence on educators' understanding of TIP and its impact, and on the perceived facilitators and barriers to implementing effective programmes in education settings (Donisch et al., 2016; Maynard et al., 2019; Thomas et al., 2019). This research goes some way towards addressing this lacuna in scholarship by identifying teachers' and school staff's perspectives on the perceived tools required to support the implementation of TIP in schools. The information garnered aims to support the development of future trauma-informed training for teachers and school personnel.

REFERENCES

Berger, E., Bearsley, A., and Lever, M. (2020) 'Qualitative evaluation of teacher trauma knowledge and response in schools', *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 30(8), 1041–1057.

Blanch, A., Filson, B., and Penney, D. (2012) *Engaging Women in Trauma-Informed Peer Support: A Guidebook*. US: Center for Mental Health Services, National Center for Trauma Informed Care.

Butler, J.E., Clerkin, F., and Cummins, A. (2022) 'Grounded in love, rooted in relationships: Building trauma-sensitive approaches in Early Childhood Education and Care', *An Leanbh Óg: the Irish Journal of Early Childhood Studies*, 15. OMEP Ireland.

Costa, D.A. (2017) 'Transforming traumatised children within NSW Department of Education schools: One school counsellor's model for practice: REWIRE', *Children Australia*, 42(2), 113–126.

Delaney, M. (2022) 'Trauma-informed schools: Tackling the impact of trauma on teaching, learning, and behaviour'. In: B. Mooney (ed.), *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2022*. Dublin: Education Matters.

Department of Education (DoE) (2023) 'Department of Education confirms 15,625 Ukrainian Pupils enrolled in Irish Schools at the end of school year 2022/2023'. Press release. Dublin: Government publications.

Donisch, K., Bray, C., and Gewirtz, A. (2016) 'Child welfare, juvenile justice, mental health, and education providers' conceptualizations of trauma-informed practice', *Child Maltreatment,* 21(2), 125–134.

Gardner, R., Feely, A., Layte, R., Williams, J., and McGavock, J. (2019) 'Adverse childhood experiences are associated with an increased risk of obesity in early adolescence: A population-based prospective cohort study'. *Pediatric Research*, 86, 522–528.

Maynard, B., Farina, A., Dell, N., and Kelly, M. (2019) 'Effects of trauma-informed approaches in schools: A systematic review', *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 15, 1–18.

Mental Health Ireland (MHI) and Alcohol Action Ireland (AAI) (2020) 'Trauma-informed front-line services essential for the new shape of society and life post-COVID'. https://alcoholaction.wpengine.com/download/publications/Trauma-informed-care-position-paper.pdf.

Mulholland, M. and O'Toole, C. (2022) 'When it matters most: A trauma-informed, outdoor learning programme to support children's wellbeing during COVID-19 and beyond', *Irish Educational Studies*, 40(2), 329–340.

Ní Chorcora, E. and Swords, L. (2022) 'Mental health literacy and help-giving responses of Irish primary school teachers', *Irish Educational Studies*, 41(4), 735–751.

Sharkey, C., Elkins, J., and Johnson, Z. (2023) Field note: Creating trauma-informed library spaces: Lessons learned from a pilot program', *Journal of Social Work Education*, 59(2), 583–590.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) (2014) *SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach.* U.S. Department of Health and Human Resources.

Thomas, M.S., Crosby, S., and Vanderhaar, J. (2019) Trauma-informed practices in schools across two decades: An interdisciplinary review of research', *Review of Research in Education*, 43, 422–452.

Willoughby, M. (2016) *Quality Early Years Care and Education: What to Look for in Early Years Service.* Dublin: Barnardos.

✳✳✳

Traveller women hailed as changemakers

Five inspirational women from the Traveller community were hailed as "changemakers" and "role models for future generations" when presented with level six certificates by South East Technological University (SETU).

The women received certificates at a special award ceremony, held at SETU's College Street Campus in Waterford.

All five women are education and community development workers with Mincéirí Port Láirge's Brighter Futures Club.

Engaging Family Carers Across Ireland in Higher Education: A Case Study

Introduction

In 2018, the Faculty of Lifelong Learning in South East Technological University (SETU) set about working in partnership with Family Carers Ireland (FCI), aiming to create a transformative and holistic educational experience for family carers across Ireland. Together, SETU and FCI co-created and delivered a level 6 (10-credit) Certificate in Family Caring, to formally recognise the role that family carers play in the lives of their loved ones.

Irish Health Survey figures indicate that one in eight people in Ireland aged over 15 are family carers (Central Statistics Office, 2019). Extrapolating to current estimates of the national population suggests that some 516,594 people provide regular unpaid care. FCI is a national charity that supports these family carers, who care for loved ones such as children or adults with disabilities, frail older people, terminally ill people, and those suffering from chronic illnesses or addiction (FCI, 2022b).

The project

SETU sought out and fostered a rewarding partnership with local, regional, and national family carers through FCI. The aim of the project was to support family carers across Ireland to engage effectively in educational equality by providing access to a fully funded Certificate in Family Caring. It was funded by the Dormant Accounts Fund administered by Pobal, a state-sponsored organisation with responsibility for administering and managing government and EU funding aimed at supporting social inclusion.

Access to a third-level programme was provided to family carers, who are often pushed into low-income brackets because they had to leave the paid workforce and

Lindsay Malone

Director of Further Education and Training, Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board, and Associate Lecturer, South East Technological University

Catherine Cox

Head of Communications, Family Carers Ireland

This article provides a case study about what works in co-creating an innovative, accredited programme between higher education and the voluntary sector. It shares examples of good practice in improving accessibility to higher education for first-generational learners. It analyses practical aspects of the partnership and summarises the outcomes of the co-created programme.

because of the high costs of their caring roles (FCI, 2022c). Funded part-time third-level opportunities, such as the Certificate in Family Caring, are therefore a viable and attractive higher-education option for many family carers.

The SETU–FCI project began in 2018 through a shared interest in developing an innovative and bespoke programme for family carers. The profile of learners is presented in Table 1. Of particular note is that the project enabled 94% of learners (162) to enter higher education (HE) for the first time.

DESCRIPTION	METRIC
Percentage of participants on a higher education course for first time	94%
Total number of participants completing the course	162
Number completing the course in face-to-face format	61
Number completing the course in online format	101
Female : Male ratio	156 : 6

Table 1: Profile of learners

The learners who engaged in this project reflect the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population. They are family carers providing intimate, physical, and emotional care to loved ones with acquired brain injuries, dementia, and mental health problems, and to their own children with special needs.

Irish Health Survey figures indicate that one in eight people in Ireland aged over 15 are family carers.

This project addresses areas identified in an independent review of access to higher education, which focused on 'extending the existing special provision for carers to lone parents caring for someone other than their child' (Byrne & Murray, 2017, p.31). The review did not report on any targeted mechanism for mature carers in HE, but it noted that 'part-time/flexible provision is likely to facilitate increased participation in HE for lone parents' (ibid., p.32).

Delivery

The delivery schedule for the Certificate in Family Caring was agreed with FCI, and the locations were based on the Health Service Executive's model of Community Health Organisations (CHO) (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Location of delivery

The FCI advertised the programme directly to the family carers. The six-week programme was delivered nine times between December 2019 and July 2020. When the Covid-19 pandemic began, SETU recognised the value of continuing the programme and pivoted to online delivery. This meant the mode of delivery varied (see Table 2). A total of 162 people completed the course, 61 in face-to-face format and 101 online.

DELIVERY NO.	AREA	LOCATION	MODE OF DELIVERY
1	CHO 3	Limerick	In person
2	CHO 7	Kildare	In person
3	CHO 6	Wicklow	In person
4	CHO 4	Cork	In person
5	CHO 9	Dublin North Central	50:50 in person & online
6	CHO 1	Cavan	Online
7	CHO 8	Laois	Online
8	CHO 2	Roscommon	Online
9	CHO 5	Clonmel	Online

Table 2: Programme delivery

Outcomes

FCI and SETU acknowledged the importance of engaging learners in evaluation, seeking qualitative and quantitative feedback throughout the project.

From a quantitative perspective, evaluation forms were returned by 36 face-to-face course participants (59%) and 40 online participants (39.6%). Over 83% rated the course as excellent on four key aspects in both modes (Figures 2, 3). Almost all agreed or strongly agreed that the programme met their expectations and gave them new skills or insight.
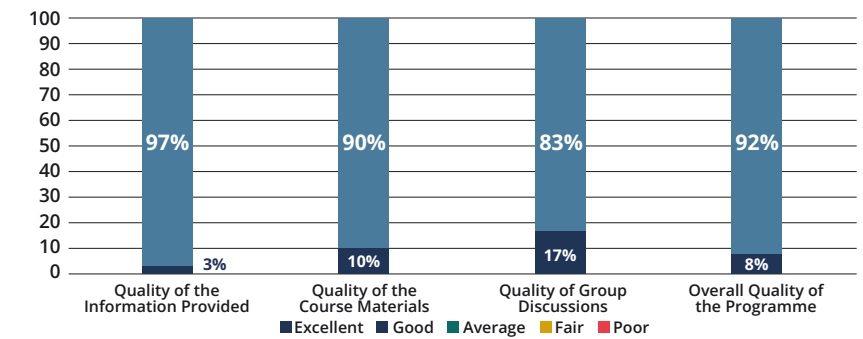
Figure 2: Face-to-face satisfaction levels

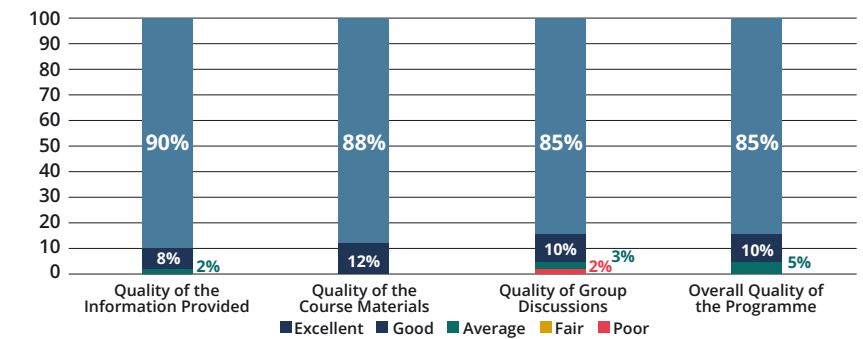**Figure 3: Online satisfaction levels**

From a qualitative perspective, feedback showed that the project has fostered an inclusive and positive environment that valued and supported learners in achieving their highest potential:

I also loved checking in with everyone, as it made me feel like I wasn't alone. We all connected, and for me the course was a safe place to speak and not feel judged.

Social integration was a key theme. Participation in the course reduced social isolation for family carers and gave them self-care techniques to support them in their role:

I felt it gave me a better understanding of how to incorporate the needs as well as the aspirations of the people I care for, to provide the best care now and moving forward in their future through understanding legislation and advocacy, and the importance of my own self-care to ensure I can provide the best care for them.

Another participant said:

I enjoyed the honesty of the participants in sharing what their daily life was like as a carer. It brought a solidarity. There was a solidarity in hearing about the challenges and rewards in carrying out this role.

Co-creation in higher education

This project focused on increasing family carers' access to higher education through innovative, agile, and flexible provision. There is minimal literature on how best to achieve co-creation between higher-education institutes (HEIs) and industry, despite growing recognition that industry involvement can, and should, play an integral role in higher education (Shrivastava et al., 2022).

A primary concern was to ensure development of a suitable and relevant module for family carers while marrying academic rigour to caring relevance and application of theory to practice (ibid.). This meant the content needed to be constructively aligned to a level 6 certificate on the National Framework of Qualifications, while maintaining significant focus on the learning that occurs outside the conventional classroom and within the communities in which family carers care for loved ones.

This project shows the merit of HEIs proactively seeking collaborations with charities and other organisations that represent sections of the population who are underrepresented in higher education or have a high proportion of first-generation learners. It reflects the importance of designing programmes specific to the needs of learners, not just offering generic programmes. Lastly, it shows the importance of creating connectedness with the community, as this is vital for a programme's long-term success through the communities of practice established throughout the project.

Conclusion

This project took a partnership approach to creating a transformative, holistic educational experience for family carers across Ireland. This article has illustrated how the project is reflective of an innovative approach to co-creating programmes with the voluntary sector to support some of the more marginalised groups in Irish society.

It shows how both organisations – South East Technological University and Family Carers Ireland – fostered a positive environment that valued and supported learners in achieving their highest potential. It exemplifies an inclusive approach: all learners, irrespective of where they accessed the course, had the full SETU student experience, with a consistent and supportive learning environment throughout.

Participation in the course reduced social isolation for family carers and gave them self-care techniques to support them in their role.

REFERENCES

Byrne, D. and Murray, C. (2017) *An Independent Review to Identify the Supports and Barriers for Lone Parents in Accessing Higher Education and to Examine Measures to Increase Participation.* Dublin: Department of Education and Skills. www.gov.ie/en/publication/165200-an-independent-review-to-identify-the-supports-and-barriers-for-lone/.

Central Statistics Office (2019) *Irish Health Survey.* www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-ihsc/irishhealthsurvey2019-carersandsocialsupports/carers/.

Dempsey, M., Collins. S., and Malone, L. (2022) 'Communities of practice and communities in practice: A case study of the co-creation of an adult education family support network programme', *Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education.* www.aontas.com/assets/resources/Adult-Learner-Journal/ALJ%202022/15838_AdultLearnerJournal_2022_V6_FINAL-compressed.pdf.

Family Carers Ireland (FCI) (2021) Counting Carers: Carer Prevalence in Ireland Working Paper 1. https://familycarers.ie/media/2381/counting-carers-carer-prevalence-in-ireland.pdf.

Family Carers Ireland (FCI) (2022a) 'Who are we?' https://familycarers.ie/.

Family Carers Ireland (FCI) (2022b) 'Caring by Numbers'. https://familycarers.ie/about-us/family-caring-in-ireland/caring-by-numbers.

Family Carers Ireland (FCI) (2022c) *The State of Caring.* https://familycarers.ie/media/2545/family-carers-ireland-state-of-caring-2022.pdf.

Higher Education Authority (2022) *National Access Plan: A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022–2028.* https://hea.ie/policy/access-policy/national-access-plan-2022-2028/.

Lafferty, A., Phillips, D., Dowling-Hetherington, L., Fahy, M., Moloney, B., Duffy, C., Paul, G., Fealy, G., and Kroll, T. (2021) 'Colliding worlds: Family carers' experiences of balancing work and care in Ireland during the COVID-19 pandemic', *Health & Social Care in the Community*, 30(3), 1133–1142.

Phillips, D., Paul, G., Fahy, M., Dowling-Hetherington, L., Kroll, T., Moloney, B., Duffy, C., Fealy, G., and Lafferty, A. (2020) 'The invisible workforce during the COVID-19 pandemic: Family carers at the frontline', *HRB Open Research*, 3(24). DOI: 10.12688/hrbopenres.13059.1

Shrivastava, S., Bardoel, E.A., Djurkovic, N., Rajendran, D., and Pleuckhahn, T. (2022) 'Co-creating curricula with industry partners: A case study', *International Journal of Management Education*, 20(2).

The Crucial Role of Recruitment and Selection Policies at Technological Universities

Introduction

Academics are vital for higher-education institutions' (HEIs) global competitiveness. This article addresses the necessity of a robust recruitment policy at technological universities (TUs), emphasising their role in ensuring both professional and ethical faculty selection. Irish HEIs recognise the significance of attracting qualified academics, who have a profound impact on teaching, research, and community service (Berry et al., 2011; Munyoro et al., 2016; Odor et al., 2019).

Inadequate recruitment policies can harm a HEI's image, reputation, and faculty retention (Crothall et al., 1997, p.99; Henningsson & Geschwind 2021, p.2). These concerns are particularly relevant to HEIs in Ireland. Munyoro et al. (2016, p.15) argue that one of the most imperative procedures driving higher education is the recruitment and selection of academics (French & Rumbles, 2010), while Henningsson and Geschwind (2018) highlight varied stakeholder views and the European Commission's promotion of transparency through its Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers.

Strategic human resource management

International HEIs often adopt tenure-track systems for clarity, but in-house hiring remains common (Henningsson & Geschwind, 2021). Allui and Sahni (2016, p.361) suggest that research on the relationship between faculty satisfaction and retention is scarce, which is a concern for HEIs, and sadly Ireland is no different. Inadequate strategic human resource management (SHRM) programmes for faculty satisfaction may stem

Dr Noëlle O'Connor

Senior University Lecturer (N-TUTORR), Researcher, and Educational Developer, Technological University of the Shannon

Irish higher-education institutions (HEIs), including technological universities, recognise the significance of attracting qualified academics, who have a profound impact on teaching, research, and community service. TUs should investigate the influence of the UK's Further and Higher Education Act (1992) on HEIs in Ireland, especially regarding their human resources management systems since British polytechnics became universities from 1992.

from misinformation, highlighting the potential benefits of SHRM-aligned recruitment and selection policies.

TUS, which opened on 1 October 2021 and was formed by the merging of Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT) and Limerick Institute of Technology (LIT) under the Technological Universities Bill (2018), faces the challenge of attracting and retaining top talent. It is therefore essential to develop recruitment and selection policies that prioritise fairness, thoroughness, transparency, and effectiveness (UCD, 2001, p.3). Despite a strong theoretical foundation for SHRM, practical research on its implementation in HEIs is lacking (Allui & Sahni, 2016), as they must optimise limited resources to address talent shortages and enhance efficiency.

A rigorous selection process ensures that the best candidates are hired (Conroy, 2021, p.5), so Irish academics have a better understanding of their employer's working conditions and contributions to human-capital improvement. HEIs in Ireland should provide top-quality training, flexible payment systems, and results-driven performance evaluations, involving faculty in decision-making. To link compensation to academic performance, HEIs must implement performance rating and pay systems, fostering a conducive context.

Better collaboration of human-resource departments across faculties is essential for a harmonised appraisal system. Strengthening SHRM helps HEIs navigate a dynamic environment (Allui & Sahni, 2016). Both theoretical and practical research on SHRM in higher education lacks depth, although Mohammad (2020) identifies valuable research on recruitment and selection. A substantial knowledge gap exists on the impact of SHRM implementation on student achievement, despite its importance in labour-intensive higher education.

A rigorous selection process ensures that the best candidates are hired.

Changing landscape

In Ireland, academic career structures have evolved significantly in the last three decades, bringing uncertainty, competition, and limited opportunities for tenure (EUI, 2021). Job demand exceeds supply, with Irish HEIs favouring flexibility and short-term contracts, which diminishes job security. Rising student enrolment is putting increasing pressure on academics to prioritise teaching over research (EUI, 2021).

Odor et al. (2019, p.38) emphasise the importance of merit-based recruitment and selection policies in HEIs, promoting competent, knowledgeable, and well-developed SHRM practices. These policies should include best practices and equal-opportunity guidelines. Scott (2012) points out the need to address concerns about inequality stemming from the transformation of UK polytechnics into universities, something that may also apply to TUs in Ireland.

Valenzuela (2019, p.11) highlights the significance of HEIs monitoring SHRM changes to improve long-term recruitment and selection policies, given the strict standards and procedures that managers must follow in academic recruitment. Future studies should encompass academic culture, organisational climate, the labour market, and the legal/regulatory environment before HEIs can develop recruitment and development policy documents. With this in mind, TUs should:

» continue to advertise in newspapers and online for skilled employment
» assess position necessity to align human-resource management skills with HEI priorities
» commit to equal opportunity in recruitment, adhering to Equality Acts (1998–2015)
» develop SHRM policies compliant with equality laws for quality personnel selection to meet strategic goals
» review recruitment and selection policies in HEIs both at home and abroad
» develop a deep understanding of the criteria for policy creation.

Finally, TUs should investigate the influence of the UK's Further and Higher Education Act (1992) on HEIs, especially regarding their HRMS (recruitment and selection policy documents) in the British polytechnics that became universities over 20 years ago (Pearson, 2015).

Job demand exceeds supply, with Irish HEIs favouring flexibility and short-term contracts, which diminishes job security.

REFERENCES

Allui, A. and Sahni, J. (2016) 'Strategic human resource management in higher education institutions: Empirical evidence from Saudi Prince Sultan University, Riyadh', *ArabiProcedia: Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 235, 361–371. DOI: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2016.11.044

Berry, A.B., Petrin, R.A., Gravelle, M.L., and Farmer, T.W. (2011) 'Issues in special education teacher recruitment, retention, and professional development: Considerations in supporting rural teachers', *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, 30(4), 3–11. DOI: 10.1177/875687051103000402

Conroy, P. (2021) *Recruitment and Selection Guidelines.* Dublin: Enterprise Ireland. www.enterprise-ireland.com/en/events/ourevents/finance-for-growth/recruitment-and-selection-guidelines.pdf.

Crothall, J., Callan, V., Charmine E., and Härtel, J. (1997) 'Recruitment and selection of academic staff: Perceptions of department heads and job applicants', *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 19(2), 99–110. DOI: 10.1080/1360080970190202

European University Institute (EUI) (2022) 'Ireland, academic career structure: Barriers to career advancement'. Florence, Italy: EUI. www.eui.eu/ProgrammesAndFellowships/AcademicCareersObservatory/AcademicCareersbyCountry/Ireland#BarriersforCareerAdvancement.

French, R., and Rumbles, S. (2010) 'Recruitment and selection'. In: R. French and G. Rees (Eds.) *Leading, Managing and Developing People,* 3rd ed. UK: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

Higher Education Authority (HEA) (2022) *Application for designation as a technological university.* Dublin: HEA. https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2021/06/2.-AIT-LIT-TU-Application.pdf.

Henningsson, M. and Geschwind, L. (2021) 'Recruitment of academic staff: An institutional logic perspective', *Higher Education Quarterly.* DOI: 10.1111/hequ.12367

Mohammad, A. (2020) 'A review of recruitment and selection process'. www.researchgate.net/publication/341787517_A_Review_of_recruitment_and_selection_process.

Munyoro, G., Nyandoro, Z., and Guti, N. (2016) 'Recruitment and selection of academic staff and students' learning experience in private Christian universities in developing countries: A case study of Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University (ZEGU)', *Africa Development and Resources Research Institute Journal,* 25(8), 14–28.

Odor, H.O., Martins-Emesom, J.N., and Bakwuye, C.O. (2019) 'Recruitment and selection practices in higher institutions of learning in Nigeria', *International Journal of Research in Business Studies and Management.* 6(10), 31–39.

Pearson, R.W. (2015) 'Academic identity in a performative and marketised environment: A comparative case study'. Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Nottingham. http://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/30612/1/R%20Pearson%20Thesis%20December%202015.pdf.

Scott, P. (2012) 'It's 20 years since polytechnics became universities – and there's no going back'. T*he Guardian*, 3 September. www.theguardian.com/education/2012/sep/03/polytechnics-became-universities-1992-differentiation.

University College Dublin (UCD) (2021) *Recruitment and selection policy.* www.ucd.ie/t4cms/Recruitment%20and%20Selection%20Policy.pdf.

Valenzuela, A. (2019) 'Recruitment and selection process of Faculty in Higher Education Institutions in the Philippines'. DOI: 10.2139/ssrn.3445566

✱✱✱

Every Branch of the Healing Art

RCSI is delighted to announce the launch of *Every Branch of the Healing Art: A History of the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland* by Dr Ronan Kelly.

This book tells the story of a small group of Irish surgeons that broke ranks with the Guild of Barber-Surgeons in 1784 to form the Royal College of Surgeons.

Every Branch of the Healing Art charts the journey of RCSI in its contributions to a near-quarter-millennium of surgical, medical and societal change.

From 19th-century body-snatchers to the 1916 Rising, through two pandemics and two world wars, with a vivid cast of characters, and reaching right to the present day, the book is a fast-moving, lavishly-illustrated narrative of a great Irish – and now global – institution.

Embedding Wellbeing into the Curriculum

Introduction

Students entering third-level education are going through a time of significant personal transition and disruption, moving from the highly structured, closely monitored, and familiar secondary school system to a new environment that offers both welcome advantages and unexpected challenges. Students relish their newfound independence; the opportunity to study in an academic area of their choice, often with like-minded people; and the liberation from daily homework and strictly supervised projects. But this freedom demands that they quickly learn self-direction, motivation, discipline, organisation, and time management.

All of this is going on while they adjust to the other changes involved in becoming a third-level student: living away from home for the first time, missing old friends and trying to make new ones, managing finances, and so on (Fox et al., 2020). Mature students have their own challenges, perhaps juggling education with family life, or dealing with additional financial pressures of car loans or mortgage payments, and learning how to fit in with younger classmates. International students grapple with the practical difficulties of moving to a new country while navigating culture shock and language barriers.

Mental health in higher education

In recognition of this, and acknowledging a duty of care to students, a lot of work is being done to drive proactive mental-health initiatives in higher education institutes (HEIs) globally. The recent *National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework* reminds us that 'the HEI environment is distinct in that it provides a single setting where work and social life as well as health services and other supports are integrated. Institutions are well positioned to develop, evaluate, and disseminate best practice in support of students with mental ill health' (Fox et al., 2020; see also Callendar et al., 2011).

Paula Mullen

Lecturer in Public Relations, Communication, and Life Skills, Dundalk Institute of Technology

Much work is being done to drive mental-health initiatives in higher education institutes. This article assesses the challenges and enablers of such an approach, considers its feasibility, and makes the case for embedding mental health across the curriculum at higher level in Ireland.

But shouldn't our attention to mental health go beyond offering support to those experiencing mental ill health – those already in crisis? True mental health, or mental 'fitness', involves proactive interventions and initiatives to help students 'not just survive but thrive' and improve their wellbeing so they may be more resilient to inevitable stressors (O'Brien et al., 2020). Universities UK's (UUK) strategic framework *Stepchange: Mentally Healthy Universities* calls on universities to take a whole-university approach to mental health, meaning that it is considered across every aspect of the university and is part of all practices, policies, courses, and cultures (UK Healthy Universities Network, 2020).

As educators, our purpose is to create a range of learning opportunities for students to enable them to achieve explicit learning outcomes and develop skills and attributes that will stand to them upon graduation. We work hard to use the most effective teaching and learning techniques along with creative and level-appropriate assessment methodologies to help students work successfully towards their qualification. We now know that students' academic success is largely influenced by their mental health and wellbeing (Chu et al., 2023). Feedback from industry tells us that desirable graduate attributes include things like resilience, confidence, ability to work in teams, and effective communication, as well as more specific and perhaps more easily measured hard skills. So the question becomes: Should we, and can we, include mental health and wellbeing in the curriculum itself?

A joint report from the Union of Students in Ireland and National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Ireland makes a direct call to action to HEIs to embed wellbeing across the curriculum, reporting that 'where institutions do provide students with mental wellbeing knowledge and skills through academic courses, the positive effects on students are evident' (Byrne & Surdey, 2021). The UUK Stepchange framework also urges 'curricular infusion' of mental health across all academic disciplines. I strongly advocate this approach for several reasons:

» Campus wellbeing programmes that are optional supports often only reach people currently in crisis or already convinced of the need to take care of their mental health. Including wellbeing and resilience education in the curriculum means that this important knowledge and training will reach every student on those programmes.
» Embedding wellbeing in the curriculum is a clear demonstration of a HEI's commitment to mental health and wellbeing as a strategic priority.
» Including wellbeing in a credit-bearing module with specific learning outcomes ensures academic rigour and the use of quality material that is evidence-based and research-based.
» Inclusion in the curriculum as a full-semester module allows more time to properly cover each topic and tailor the material to different groups of students. This enables deeper learning and an opportunity for experiential learning and reflection.

Student wellbeing has always been an important consideration in Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT), and we recognise the importance of meaningful efforts to support and encourage our students' positive mental health. As far back as 2015, we included a full, credit-bearing mandatory module on resilience and wellbeing in three programmes in the School of Business & Humanities, and as an elective module on a further three programmes.

The module covers goal-setting, habit formation and modification, fixed vs growth mindset, time management, signature strengths, and stress management. The teaching-and-learning approach is a combination of theory, experience, and reflection. Students are assessed through several projects that challenge them to further investigate, experience, and reflect on the research and recommendations explored in class. Their feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, particularly in response to the assessment methods used.

Challenges

For those HEIs considering embedding wellbeing into the curriculum, the biggest challenge is the competition for space in a programme, particularly for a mandatory module. There are a limited number of modules, and every academic will be vying for space for their own subject, as they believe passionately in its value and importance. The ability to introduce a new module or course also depends on the system of programmatic review and development practised in each institute.

But there are creative ways to address this challenge. While in many ways a standalone module is ideal, some of these topics can be 'infused' into existing modules across the programme. For example, in DkIT, the material on habits and stress management has been added to several modules such as those on leadership and sustainable entrepreneurship in programmes in the Science Department, while mindset is taught as part of a module on organisational behaviour in another Business programme.

Another challenge is the criticism that positive education lacks rigour, is an easy or less demanding option for students, or is a waste of precious academic time (White, 2015).

Enablers

To successfully embed wellbeing in the curriculum, there are several enablers – first and foremost strong leadership. At an institute level, if senior management explicitly includes wellbeing and mental health in its strategic plan, this paves

Students relish their newfound independence... But this freedom demands that they quickly learn self-direction, motivation, discipline, organisation, and time management.

It is not only desirable but very feasible to embed wellbeing into the curriculum as a credit-bearing, academically sound area of third-level education.

the way for embedding wellbeing into the curriculum, as those strategic priorities inform objectives, translating into tactics and a call to action for curriculum development. At a programme level, if there are wellbeing and mental health champions among the academic staff, they can argue the case for making space in each programme and negotiate with colleagues on the most effective way to do this.

Another enabler is the societal shift from avoiding mental health discussions, because of the stigma, to a more accepting and positive view. When we began work on this module ten years ago, there was little discourse in the Irish media about mindfulness, mindset, habits, or signature strengths. But what was once the domain of the psychologist and psychiatrist is now more mainstream, and people are more open and willing to engage with these ideas. This familiarity with and acceptance of the material is coming through in student feedback.

So it is not only desirable but very feasible to embed wellbeing into the curriculum as a credit-bearing, academically sound area of third-level education. As educators, we have options in how we can accomplish this and contribute to the ongoing work of HEIs to fully support the development of students both academically and socially throughout their college years.

REFERENCES

Byrne, D. and Surdey, J. (2021) *Embedding wellbeing across the curriculum in higher education.* Union of Students in Ireland, and National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. https://usi.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Supporting-Wellbeing-in-Practice-October-2021.pdf.

Callender, J., Fagin, L., Jenkins, G., Lester, J., and Smith, E. (2011) *Mental Health of Students in Higher Education: College Report CR166.* London: Royal College of Psychiatrists.

Chu, T., Liu, X., Takayanagi, S., Matsushita, T., and Kishimoto, H. (2023) 'Association between mental health and academic performance among university undergraduates: The interacting role of lifestyle behaviours', *International Journal of Methods in Psychiatric Research.* DOI: 10.1002/mpr.1938

Fox, T., Byrne, D., and Surdey, J. (2020) *National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework.* Dublin: Higher Education Authority. https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2020/10/HEA-NSMHS-Framework.pdf.

O'Brien, N., Lawlor, M., Chambers, F., and O'Brien, W. (2020) 'State of mind Ireland–higher education: A mixed-methods longitudinal evaluation of a positive mental health intervention', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(15). DOI: 10.3390/ijerph17155530

UK Healthy Universities Network (2020) *Stepchange: Mentally Healthy Universities.* https://healthyuniversities.ac.uk/news/stepchange-mentally-healthy-universities/.

White, M. (2015) 'Where is the education in positive education?' *Psychology Today*, 11 November. www.psychologytoday.com/ie/blog/positive-education/201511/where-is-the-education-in-positive-education

The National Disabled Postgraduate Advisory Committee: Working for Change in Higher Education

Introduction

In Ireland in 2023, disabled postgraduates, despite having seen a year-on-year increase since 2018, represent 3% of the total postgraduate population and are under-represented across higher education (HE) (figure based on AHEAD, 2023). This compares to 8.1% representation at undergraduate level (AHEAD, 2023). Policies have primarily focused on pathways and funding to disabled-undergraduate education; there has been less research and practice focusing on the postgraduate experience (Grant-Smith et al., 2020, Guigui et al., 2023).

A postgraduate qualification is a key indicator of a higher standard of living and a better quality of life, with disabled postgraduates earning more than those with an undergraduate qualification (HEA, 2023). Ireland's strategic direction has focused on expanding its research capability by developing its research talent pool through postgraduate research, but we may be losing out on talented disabled researchers due to this under-representation (HEA & NDPAC, forthcoming).

Engaging in postgraduate study and research can be both an extremely rewarding and a lonely experience for many (Algeo, 2021). Disabled postgraduates, while they face many similar barriers to undergraduates, also face a range of unique barriers. Awareness of the impact of these barriers on the participation of disabled postgraduates is scant.

This lack of understanding has been linked to a failure to include disabled postgraduates in decision-making processes that profoundly affect their lives (Rath & McCarthy, 2021). Barriers for disabled postgraduate students can occur at all points of the typical

Dr Vivian Rath

Lecturer and Researcher; Co-Chair and Founder, National Disabled Postgraduate Advisory Committee

Postgraduate research can be both rewarding and lonely, and disabled postgraduates – who are under-represented in higher education – face unique barriers. Awareness of the impact of these barriers on disabled postgraduates' participation is scant. This article details how a committed group have come together to increase the representation of disabled people at postgraduate level. It presents the elements that are needed to amplify the collective marginalised voice to enable change.

postgraduate life cycle (see figure) (Rath et al., 2021). Although some supports do exist, these are often fragmented and fail to address key issues facing disabled postgraduate students.
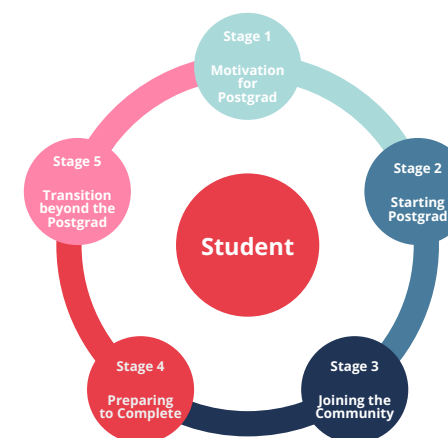
Postgraduate life cycle as identified by the Trinity College Dublin Forum for Disabled Staff and Postgraduates

This experience can be made lonelier when you feel like you don't belong, your voice is not being heard, or you are not receiving the right supports. To date, hearing the lived experience of disabled postgraduate students has not figured prominently in decision-making, though there are encouraging signs of change through the recent engagement of the National Disabled Postgraduate Advisory Committee (NDPAC) with government agencies. Some of the main barriers include:

Pathways: Although there are pathways to HE at undergraduate level, like the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE), there aren't similarly transparent and defined pathways and support mechanisms at postgraduate level (Rath et al., 2023).

Funding: Many funding schemes are not disability-aware and do not build in the extra cost of disability support, requirements for extra time, and extra costs for attending academic and professional development opportunities such as conferences or seminars (ibid.).

Isolation: Disabled postgraduate students often experience disconnection from the rest of the postgraduate community, as their needs are not being recognised and met, which limits their capacity to engage with opportunities in the postgraduate environment (ibid.)

Lack of awareness: There is a lack of awareness that postgraduates may require different types of supports, and college administrators and supervisors may not be aware of how to effectively support disabled researchers (ibid.).

A catalyst for constructive action

A committed group of disabled postgraduate leaders established the National Disabled Postgraduate Advisory Committee (NDPAC) in 2020. They were

determined that the voice of disabled postgraduates and early career researchers would be heard at the national HE decision-making table. NDPAC is established as a Disabled Person's Organisation (DPO), which means it is led by disabled people and is rooted in the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

With the support of the Higher Education Authority, AHEAD, and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, NDPAC has begun to bring about change through amplifying and channelling the collective lived experience of disabled postgraduates, to inform and shape decision-making in higher education. NDPAC has:

» postgraduate representation across disciplines from each of the universities, and plans to expand to include the technological universities

» a three-year plan to work in partnership with AHEAD to create a national disabled postgraduate community.

Hearing and acting on the lived experience of disabled students is essential to developing a more inclusive environment for all (NDA, 2022).

Central to creating a sense of belonging and connection is developing an identity and a voice as a postgraduate and early career researcher. Connection is 'the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued' (Brown, 2021). Engagement in peer groups is associated with a range of benefits, including social development, physical health, and psychological well-being.

NDPAC offers disabled people a safe space to share experiences of barriers such as institutional ableism and discrimination and to develop strategies for overcoming these. It offers a place to work as a collective to bring about meaningful change in the disabled postgraduate environment. Belonging is inseparably linked to inclusion, equity, and diversity, and all four in tandem act to improve student success. NDPAC creates spaces to foster social connections and communication that in turn nurture creativity, innovation, and success (West, 2022). Of course, not all disabled people may wish to participate in a group, but just knowing it exists builds confidence (Rath, 2020).

Elements for success

NDPAC has shown that the key elements essential for success include the following:

Fostering the emergence of leaders from non-traditional backgrounds is essential, and these leaders may face many extra challenges associated with their lack of

Hearing and acting on the lived experience of disabled students is essential to developing a more inclusive environment for all.

NDPAC offers disabled people a safe space to share experiences of barriers such as institutional ableism and discrimination, and to develop strategies for overcoming these.

social capital. Higher education institutions must recognise and nurture these leaders.

Senior leaders in higher education can play a significant role in ensuring that their institutions are proactive in creating accessible environments that welcome and value disabled postgraduates and early career researchers.

Respecting the community: There must be a positive campus climate, which appreciates the value of hearing the lived experience of disabled postgraduates and acts to address their concerns.

Accessing support: Disabled postgraduates will probably require access to reasonable tailored accommodations in the postgraduate environment to enable full participation.

Building capacity: It can often be difficult to understand how things get done, especially if you are from a group that is outside the ruling class. Capacity-building on how to prepare proposals or presentations and arrange meetings is important.

Creating collegial relationships is central to making change happen. These relationships should be built on respect and trust, so take the time to build them. For our group, being able to bring solution-focused proposals forward acted to build respect.

Locating knowledgeable mentors who guide as opposed to direct the group is essential to ensuring that the change process is owned and shaped by the disabled postgraduates.

Conclusion

The National Access Plan 2022–2028 established key performance indicators for postgraduate study for selected priority groups, including disabled students. The UNCRPD requires state parties to work with DPOs, including disabled people in all decisions that concern them. We as educators have a responsibility to ensure that all students have the opportunity to engage in postgraduate study – but inclusion alone is not enough. We must cultivate an environment in which students can create meaningful connection, feel like they belong, have the tools to succeed, and have their voice heard.

What steps are you taking to increase representation of disabled postgraduates and early career researchers in your decision-making structures, and to creating a culture where all disabled students feel like they belong?

REFERENCES

AHEAD (2023) *Students with Disabilities Engaged with Support Services in Higher Education in Ireland 2021/22*. Dublin: AHEAD Educational Press.

Algeo, N. (2021) *Postgraduate Student Engagement in Decision-Making: Fostering Connected Learning Communities.* Dublin: National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP).

Brown, B. (2021) *Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience.* UK: Penguin Random House.

Grant-Smith, D., Irmer, B., and Mayes, R. (2020) 'Equity in postgraduate education in Australia: Widening participation or widening the gap'. Research report. Perth: National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE). www.ncsehe.edu.au/publications/widening-participation-or-widening-the-gap-equity-in-postgraduate-study.

Guigui, D., Faas, D., Darmody, M., and Fhlannchadha, S.N. (2023) '(No) time to engage: An exploratory mixed-method study into factors predicting the engagement of postgraduate research students in Ireland', *Higher Education*, 1–21. DOI: 10.1007/s10734-023-01103-y

Higher Education Authority (HEA) (2023) *Graduate Outcomes and Disability Report.* Dublin: HEA.

Higher Education Authority (HEA) and National Disabled Postgraduate Advisory Committee (NDPAC) (forthcoming) 'Summary report of joint online event hosted by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and National Disabled Postgraduate Advisory Committee (NDPAC): Experiences of and challenges faced by disabled postgraduate students'. Ireland.

National Disability Authority (NDA) (2022) *Participation Matters: Guidelines on Implementing the Obligation to Meaningfully Engage with Disabled People in Public Decision Making*. Dublin: NDA.

Rath, V. (2020) 'Social engagement experiences of disabled students in higher education in Ireland'. Unpublished doctoral thesis, Trinity College Dublin.

Rath, V. and McCarthy, P. (2021) *Ableism in Academia in Ireland: Experiences of Disabled Academics & Recommendations for the Future.* Dublin: Trinity College Dublin.

Rath, V., McCarthy, P., Hassett, A., Gallagher, C., Loughrey, D., Shiels, T., and Price, A. (2023) *The National Disabled Postgraduate Advisory Committee (NDPAC): Unifying the national disabled postgraduate voice. Unity: How staff and learner communities drive inclusion in tertiary education.* Dublin.

Rath, V., Patricia, M., and Brook, C. (2021) 'Hearing the voice of disabled staff, PhD and postdocs with disabilities in Trinity College Dublin'. Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD) Conference: *Reconnection: Placing Inclusion at the Heart of Online Learning and Support*. Dublin.

West, J. (2022) 'Belonging: Why it is the next step on the equity, diversity and inclusion ladder'. *Times Higher Education*, 28 April.

Technological Innovation and Disruption in Education

Ensuring equitable and inclusive education in the AI era

Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) represents a generational shift in technology. In that respect it is reminiscent of other historic shifts, such as the development of the printing press, the introduction of electricity, the emergence of computers in the 1960s, and the introduction of the internet. It is reasonable to argue that such a transformative shift opens an option for generational cohorts heretofore excluded from traditional technology to leapfrog into the new technological dispensation.

Typically, those advantaged in the past retain their advantages in the new era. But many others can also benefit. Mass literacy would never have been possible without the printing press, even if the monasteries maintained their hold on the written word for centuries after its emergence.

In reality, even if the rising tide lifts all boats, the big boats don't get any smaller by virtue of a new technology. Privilege tends to persist and to transfer between generations. So in Ireland, just as the big farmers of the 1950s tended to stay big as tractors displaced horses, we now ponder what AI will do for educational attainment among disadvantaged groups or those previously least successful in the education stakes.

Biases and inclusivity

The likelihood is that AI, left to itself, will further advantage the already advantaged. Each time we design or create, the seed originates from one's lived experience. As AI begins to infiltrate our educational system, there must be a cultural focus on equity and inclusivity. Neutrality in technology, and in programming specifically, is a myth. Data biases are present, and humans who

Cornelia Connolly
Associate Professor, University of Galway, and Visiting Fellow, Yale University

Tom Collins
Professor of Education (Emeritus), Maynooth University

Inclusive and equitable access in education has been much discussed in recent years. At the same time, many technological challenges are affecting education, particularly developments in artificial intelligence. Building technological and educational solutions for historically marginalised groups can only result in better outcomes for everyone. This article explores challenges and opportunities we are encountering in preparing for inclusive innovation and designing educational solutions for all.

program have cultural biases – all of which inherently affects the algorithm and propagates societal biases. Education policymakers must therefore ask what intervention, on their part, might level the playing field or support marginalised people to enhance their opportunities.

Key to this is understanding that inclusivity results in better outcomes for everyone. This holds true when designing and building solutions – technological or educational. A simple example is closed captioning. Originally developed for those with hearing impairment, it is now also used by many of us when following colloquial conversations, when others are in the room, or when we can't listen to the audio. Another example is the drop in a footpath designed into pedestrian routes since the 1970s and intended for wheelchair users: it is now essential for baby buggies, skateboards, suitcases, shopping carts, and so on.

AI past and future

In 2023 there has been much conversation about how ChatGPT and AI may affect our education system. AI in education is not new, however. As early as 1966, a program called ELIZA, developed by Joe Weizenbaum, took a line of typed text, looked for certain patterns, and replaced one set of words with another. Nevertheless, we currently teach in an environment surrounded by AI and technology, and as educators we need to be more aware and pay closer attention to the ecosystem of platforms and technologies in which we work. The Academic and Research Integrity Conference this year (University of Galway, 2023) is an example of how we can prepare for the change.

AI is hungry for data and dependent on the algorithm and data for its effectiveness. The integrity of assessment practices that have evolved – in some cases over centuries, such as the literature review in a PhD thesis – must now be open to different requirements of verification and authentication. We need to plan and compensate for how AI will increasingly become the engine of education, with student data the oil.

AI is undoubtedly a challenge for educators, but it is forcing us to look for creative and original thought, and not emulate what these systems do – rewording and regurgitating the sources they have been fed. Ultimately the challenge may make our education and academic institutions better in how we empower our students to be more robust thinkers. It may make us more responsive to difference and marginalisation among learners.

When it comes to education for the digital world, policy often confuses computing with computers. Children need to know about computing before they know about computers. If they don't, they assume that computing is what computers do, rather than what humans do, increasing the likelihood that

As educators we need to be more aware and pay closer attention to the ecosystem of platforms and technologies in which we work.

In the future, it is likely that differentiating factors between employees will hinge on personality traits, interpersonal skills, and the application of problem-solving skills to fluid or otherwise uncertain contexts.

people will be relegated in a world where AI is preeminent. This thinking most likely underpins Elon Musk's recent statement that AI will create a future where 'no job is needed' and that 'AI will be able to do everything' (Browne, 2023).

AI certainly has the capability to greatly disrupt some of the most elite professions in the Western world, including law, accounting, and medicine. A different set of skills will underpin these professions into the future, skills which could theoretically be more democratically distributed. The purely cerebral knowledge associated with a high-points Leaving Certificate might have less of a premium in a world where AI can do much of what the cerebral disciplines once did. In the future, it is likely that differentiating factors between employees will hinge on personality traits, interpersonal skills, and the application of problem-solving skills to fluid or otherwise uncertain contexts.

Conclusion

Our education system is progressing through an era of increasing vulnerability and accountability, aligned with the expectation that all students have equitable and inclusive experiences. A proactive policy focusing on the risks and opportunities posed by AI in the world of education, including access to it, will be necessary if advantages or disadvantages of personal background are not to persist.

Such an approach is likely to emphasise data, digital, and computing literacy from preschool through to post-primary. This can be embedded in the existing curriculum but must be buttressed by a clear, holistic learning pathway on computer science and AI literacy within our ecosystem and at the core of education attainment. We need to develop a shared understanding and strengthen the acceptance of computer science and AI literacy as key competencies for every child, irrespective of race, gender, or socioeconomic background – enabling all the young people of today to become active participants in the digital society of tomorrow.

REFERENCES

Browne, R. (2023) 'Elon Musk says AI will eventually create a situation where "no job is needed"', *CNBC*, 2 November. www.cnbc.com/2023/11/02/tesla-boss-elon-musk-says-ai-will-create-situation-where-no-job-is-needed.html.

University of Galway (2023) Academic and Research Integrity Conference Ireland 2023. 4–6 October, Galway. www.universityofgalway.ie/centre-excellence-learning-teaching/newsevents/integrity-conference/.

Level 8 Degree Courses

Design + Visual Arts
Technology
Film + Media
Business
Humanities
Psychology

Create your future

Institute of Art, Design + Technology Dún Laoghaire

iadt.ie/future

Paul Dower gains a Master of Science in Digital Marketing Practice from South East Technological University (SETU)

Paul joins a cohort of over 2,100 graduates to celebrate their academic achievements at SETU in Waterford and Carlow.

"Getting your final results is an amazing feeling, but there is nothing like graduation day and that feeling of achievement that you can celebrate with your peers," Paul said.

Reflecting on his unconventional educational journey, Paul shared how, after facing setbacks in his Leaving Certificate, he relocated to Munich, Germany, where he worked as an industrial painter for over 14 years.

"When I returned home with my wife and two kids, the opportunity arose to start a business course at the Adult Education Centre then based in College Street. From there I went to WIT, now SETU, where I successfully completed a BA in International Business," Paul explained.

Graduating with a BA (Honours) in International Business in 2009 was a defining moment in Paul's life.

"Here was a 36-year-old who had failed his Leaving Cert and yet I was walking out the door with a degree. It changed my life. It changed the way I looked at things, how I tried to understand things, and most of all it taught me that what you are looking for is out there - just go get it," said Paul.

In 2013, Paul established Waterford In Your Pocket, an enterprise that has gone from strength to strength.

"I started using social media when it was in its infancy, writing articles on the subject and giving workshops through the LEOs of Waterford and further afield," Paul explained.

However, at this time there were no formal accreditations in the subject.

"Slowly, courses became available and when the MSc in Digital Marketing Practice became available, I jumped on board," he said.

Reflecting on his time at SETU, Paul said:

"Everyone at SETU was just amazing. Even when I was having health issues, they were all approachable and understanding. The lecturers were so kind with their time and their patience.

"I've met so many new people in my time at SETU, for which I am grateful. It is network building that has been most rewarding and is such an important part of life."

National College of Ireland is in the heart of Dublin's International Financial Services Centre. We are a learning community of over 6,500 students and staff. This year, we are proud to have expanded our facilities with the opening of our new Spencer Dock building.

Talk to us about full- and part-time accredited programmes in business, management, HR, finance, accountancy, marketing, computing, data analytics, psychology and education.

Programmes in Learning and Teaching
- MA in Educational Practice
- Postgraduate Diploma in Educational Practice in Teaching for Further Education
- Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Early Childhood Education and Care
- Certificate in Learning and Technology
- Certificate in Technology-Enhanced Learning
- Microcredentials in Technology-Enhanced Learning
- Postgraduate Programmes in Business and Computing

Full-Time Programmes
- BA (Honours) in Business
- BA (Honours) in Marketing Practice
- BA (Honours) in HRM
- BA (Honours) in Accounting and Finance
- BA (Honours) in Psychology
- BSc (Honours) in Computing
- BSc (Honours) in Data Science
- Higher Certificates in Business or Computing

National College of Ireland
Mayor Street, IFSC, Dublin 1 Phone: 01 4498500
www.ncirl.ie

Research

Irish Research Council Director, Peter Brown, speaking at the SFI-IRC Research Summit, November 2023

Research Overview

A new agency

The key national focus for the research system in Ireland in 2023 has been the development of legislation that will provide for a new agency, whose name was announced as *Taighde Éireann – Research Ireland* by Minister Simon Harris TD in November. Drafting of the legislation has continued apace in the second half of the year after publication of the Heads of Bill in May. At the time of writing, the bill is being finalised for cabinet approval.

There is considerable anticipation in the research system of the possibilities for the future that the new agency presents, and this has been reflected in the initial stages of consultation. There is a notable sense of ambition among stakeholders and a desire for Ireland to build on the foundations and successes achieved to date and boldly progress to the next level. This drive is fuelled both from a perspective of the talent in the system across disciplines and its potential, and also from the perspective of the research system as a strategic national resource in the face of uncertainty and enormous global challenges.

The Irish Research Council (IRC) looks forward to the opportunity for our elected representatives in the Houses of the Oireachtas to consider the legislation in detail and engage with key stakeholders in the research and innovation community. While the scope of the Higher Education Authority Act 2022 includes research, recognising the full spectrum of the HEA's activity, the legislation to establish *Taighde Éireann – Research Ireland* is the first for some time in which research takes centre stage.

The period ahead will, I hope, be an opportunity for our TDs and senators, in addition to their legislative role, to reflect more broadly on the strategic value and contribution of our national research and innovation system. Landmark social and economic policies and decisions taken decades ago have been critical to shaping

Peter Brown
Director, Irish Research Council

With the Irish Research Council and Science Foundation Ireland soon to merge to become Research Ireland, the research sector in the country is at a critical and exciting juncture. This overview article takes stock of the work and achievements leading up to this point and looks ahead to a collaborative future in research activity both nationally and internationally.

the Ireland of today. In the same way, public investment in research across disciplines today has the potential to have a profoundly positive impact on the Ireland of tomorrow and its place in the world.

Research summit

The possibilities now and into the future were at the core of a research summit jointly hosted by Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) and the IRC in Cork in late November 2023. The IRC was very pleased to collaborate with SFI on the summit this year, particularly in advance of the two agencies merging to form Research Ireland. Delegates heard from a range of inspiring speakers, and both agencies used the event to make their annual awards to researchers who are making an exceptional contribution in their respective fields.

This year, it was particularly welcome to see the summit coalesce around all disciplines, including the arts, humanities, and social sciences (AHSS). Where the disciplines intersect – that is, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research (ITDR), a truly exciting field of endeavour – was the topic of a keynote from Professor Jennifer Richards of the University of Cambridge. How Research Ireland builds on current support and further develops this area will be a very interesting agenda in the years ahead.

The STEAM agenda has seeded many exciting projects, typically where artists or designers have 'added value' to a science-led project; less attention has been paid to projects where this dynamic is flipped: where scientists work collaboratively within an AHSS-led project. It was fascinating to hear Professor Richards' perspective on the impact of this project on the skills and knowledge of participating scientists and the collaborative dynamic more broadly. The IRC encourages this potential in a systematic way, in particular through its COALESCE scheme, which includes a strand dedicated to interdisciplinary research led by AHSS with STEM collaboration.

One of a number of excellent panel discussions at the summit focused on artificial intelligence (AI) and its impact on academia. Professor Barry O'Sullivan and Dr James Cuffe of University College Cork joined Professor John Kelleher of Maynooth University and Dr Abeba Birhane of Mozilla Foundation and adjunct assistant professor in Trinity College Dublin. Delegates also heard a 'research short' presentation from IRC laureate Professor Taha Yasseri, of the School of Sociology and the Geary Institute in University College Dublin, on the sociology of humans and machines in the digital age. Key topics in the 'AI and academia' agenda were covered in the panel discussion, providing a really useful opportunity for reflection and stock-taking, not least for the funding agencies in the room.

The IRC was very pleased to collaborate with SFI on the summit this year, particularly in advance of the two agencies merging to form Research Ireland.

This year, it was particularly welcome to see the Research summit coalesce around all disciplines, including the arts, humanities, and social sciences (AHSS).

Accountability and responsibility are central to academic integrity, and among the highly problematic aspects of AI highlighted during the panel discussion was the practice of academic journal article submissions attributing co-authorship to generative AI models such as ChatGPT. Accountability or responsibility cannot be enforced against a large language model (LLM) tool, and it is therefore no surprise that journals (such as *Nature*) have started to take action to rule out LLM tools in authorship. The risks of the use of generative AI in peer review were also highlighted, not least the need to protect the confidentiality of applicants' research proposals.

A funders' network has been formed, chaired by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, to consider AI in research and to develop common approaches. The network is agreed that the use of generative AI in peer review is not appropriate, and the IRC has already taken action to update its peer reviewer guidelines. More broadly, and as noted in the panel discussion, it is clear that research on AI in society will require a variety of disciplinary perspectives and interdisciplinary approaches.

Collaboration

Consultation on the new agency commenced in the last quarter of 2023 and is led by the CEO-designate, Professor Philip Nolan, with representation from SFI and IRC. It has included discussion with a range of institutions and bodies. There is a desire among stakeholders for opportunities for interdepartmental and interagency collaboration to be further developed and exploited. This will be an area where Research Ireland can make a real difference, and the opportunities also extend beyond our borders into the international domain.

The IRC will be bringing to the new agency a range of very successful national and international partnerships comprising fellow funding agencies, government departments, and UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). These partnerships address a spectrum of differing but complementary priorities, including capacity-building (boosting the early-career pipeline), developing the evidence base for policy, and exploiting particular strengths. The SFI–IRC Pathway Programme, designed to bridge the gap between the postdoctoral and early principal investigator (PI) stages, has opened its third call, and SFI have a range of national and international partnerships integrated into its suite of programmes.

In this regard, a major additional strand of collaboration is the two recently announced north–south research centres, in which UKRI is a partner. The IRC's collaboration with UKRI on digital humanities, an area of strength and great potential across the two jurisdictions, is another example of the kind of international partnership which Research Ireland can usefully explore. Given the bilateral links, it is very positive that the UK has joined Horizon Europe. IRC,

SFI, and UKRI, with the support of additional agencies such as the Health Research Board and Enterprise Ireland, convened a very successful 'funders' forum' in 2018. The potential for another such bilateral initiative in the near future is worthy of consideration. Looking to the wider international arena, the IRC looks forward to the launch in January 2024 of the government's Global Citizens 2030, the international talent and innovation strategy.

For 2023–2024, this edition of *Ireland's Education Yearbook* from Education Matters sees a very full and diverse range of articles from researchers in education, which speaks to a vibrant landscape for research at present. The articles will be of interest to policymakers and practitioners across our education system, including those outside the mainstream. The articles remind us of education as fundamentally a shared space, with students and staff at the core. Myriad relationships and dynamics of power, trust, and care characterise the education system across the life cycle, topics which are ripe for ongoing exploration and study. I would like to thank all the authors who contributed to the research chapter this year.

Concluding thoughts

I conclude this overview with a look back over another busy year in the Irish Research Council, in which much was achieved. As has been the case since its establishment, and indeed for its forbears, the Irish Research Council for Humanities and Social Sciences (IRCHSS) and the Irish Research Council for Science Engineering and Technology (IRCSET), the IRC places a strong emphasis on early-career researchers, making over 340 such awards in 2023 across government and enterprise programmes.

Together with the chairperson, Professor Daniel Carey, and a number of Council members, I had the pleasure of meeting the recipients of the IRC's government of Ireland (GOI) postgraduate and postdoctoral Medal of Excellence winners in December. These are the top-ranked STEM and AHSS awardees under each of the GOI streams. It was very welcome to see the technological university sector reflected in the award of medals this year, with Aaron Maloney of the Technological University of the Shannon winning the Professor Jane Grimson Medal of Excellence for STEM (postgraduate).

Investment in PI-led research is also core to the IRC's mission, and making prestigious laureate awards for frontier basic research was a key aspect of the portfolio this year. Sixteen advanced laureate awards were made in 2023, which follows the allocation of 48 starting/consolidator laureate awards in 2022. Together, these 64 awards represent a total investment of some €40m in driving forward the boundaries of knowledge across all disciplines.

The IRC places a strong emphasis on early-career researchers, making over 340 such awards in 2023 across government and enterprise programmes.

The awards will support the further development of world-class researchers at the respective career stage and enhance their track record for success in further funding opportunities, in particular the European Research Council. Supporting researchers to exploit the quality of their work to lead progress in their disciplines, make new breakthroughs, and collectively enhance Ireland's intellectual and innovative capacity will be core to the agenda of work for Research Ireland in the years ahead.

The aforementioned programmes are part of a much broader suite of activities in the Irish Research Council, grounded in partnership and wide engagement, nationally and internationally. In closing I want to acknowledge the committed work of Professor Carey and all Council members during 2023, including in their contribution to shaping the agenda for the next phase of development of research in Ireland in the years ahead. Finally, I want to pay particular thanks to the Irish Research Council staff team, who have worked so diligently and with such good grace over the course of the year.

***
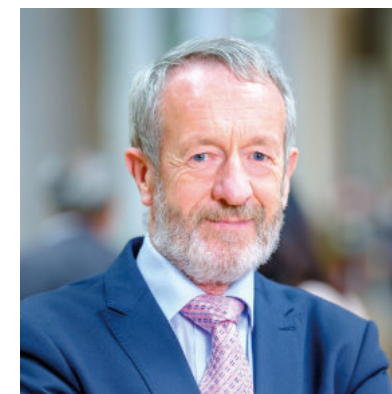
Call for EU to support young researchers across medicine, science and tech

Seán Kelly MEP has called on the EU to provide more financial and other support to young researchers, those working across vital medical, science and technology fields. MEP Kelly stressed the importance of their work for sustaining innovation in Europe and medical preparedness.

"In the ever-changing landscape of global challenges, it is the young researchers who will lead the march towards ground-breaking solutions. They are the innovators of the future. We will depend on them to find answers to the vast economic and societal issues that lie ahead", MEP Kelly said.

"Despite their undoubted contribution, young researchers often find themselves undervalued - a trend evident in Ireland. A recent report, released last summer, shed light on the disheartening reality that PhD researchers in Ireland receive a mere €18,000 to €19,000 per year. Given the prevailing cost-of-living crisis in Ireland and in Europe, the report stated that this stipend falls well short of meeting the essential needs of these young researchers. Unfortunately, this is a common trend across Europe", Kelly warned.

Mind the Ladder

Exploring the lived experiences of women in senior leadership roles in higher education in Ireland

Introduction

Despite advances of the feminist movement, and wider structural legislative interventions, women remain under-represented at senior levels in academia and continue to experience both direct and indirect forms of discrimination throughout their careers (O'Connor, 2014).

The problem that my research sought to address, using a critical feminist approach, is that there is no qualitative empirical data that looks at whether any change or movement towards gender equality has emerged as a result of the national Gender Action Plan 2018–2020. Key themes emerged and were analysed using Fraser's theory of recognition, representation, and redistribution and McNay's theory of agency.

Research methodology and findings

Using an interpretivist and phenomenological approach, this qualitative research engaged 20 women in semi-structured interviews. The table below provides a profile of the interviewees.

Lindsay Malone

Director of Further Education and Training, Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board, and Associate Lecturer, South East Technological University

Women remain under-represented at senior levels in academia and continue to experience direct and indirect discrimination throughout their careers. The problem that my research sought to address is that there is no qualitative empirical data that looks at whether any change or movement towards gender equality has emerged as a result of the Gender Action Plan 2018–2020.

Interviewee	Years of Service	Type of Role	HEI
1	20	Head of department	IoT
2	21	Professor	University
3	17	Head of function	College
4	20	Professor	University
5	19	Head of function	University
6	9	Senior Head of Function	College
7	3	Senior head of function	College
8	15	Head of function	University
9	17	Head of department	IoT
10	15	Professor	University
11	35	President	IoT
12	13	Head of function	University
13	26	Vice president	IoT
14	9	Head of function	IoT
15	5	Senior head of function	University
16	18	Vice president	University
17	34	Vice president	IoT
18	27	Professor	University
19	22	Vice dean	University
20	20	Director	IoT

Table: Profile of participants. [HEI = higher-education institute; IoT = institute of technology]

Thematic analysis was used to determine the core themes that emerged in the interviews. The theoretical lens incorporated Fraser's theory of social justice and McNay's theory of agency. The findings were analysed using both theories, which led to them being divided into the challenges women experience (Figure 1) and the supportive factors that enabled the women to progress in their careers (Figure 2).
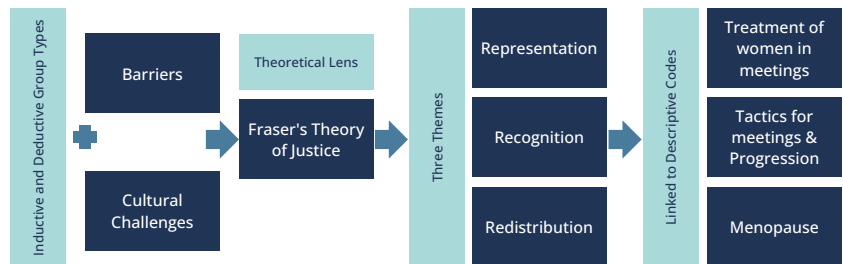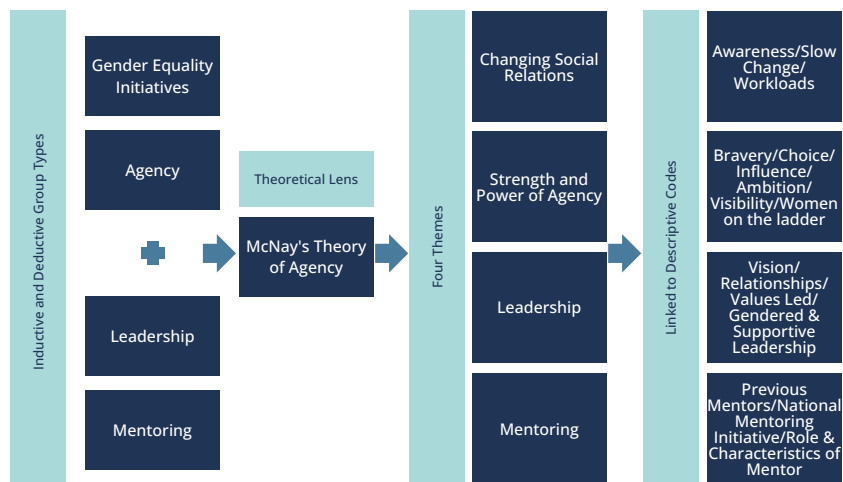
Figure 1: Thematic analysis using Fraser

Figure 2: Thematic analysis using McNay

This led to the formation of six overall thematic areas (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Themes

Discussion

For participatory parity to be upheld, at least three conditions must be met, which Fraser (2003) frames under redistribution, representation, and recognition. Firstly, using the redistribution lens, I argue that women face injustices from the patriarchal stigma associated with flexible working and leave arrangements. They experience unequal distribution of unpaid care work, and challenges that arise from menopause and social reproduction which limit their ability to have equal distribution of independence and value.

Secondly, using the representation lens, I argue that the culture of higher education is dominated by men, which creates the conditions for bullying of women; this has far-reaching consequences on women's ability to have equal respect and cultural value.

My research revealed that women continue to experience both direct and indirect discrimination throughout their careers.

Lastly, using the recognition lens, I argue that women do not have equal political voice as social actors, as they are not being heard, they lack confidence in the higher-education environment, and they find themselves in feminised EDI (equality, diversity, inclusion) roles, which reinforces the notion that equality is a woman's problem that should be fixed by women. In the modern competitive environment of higher education, without equal voice, autonomy, and status, women simply cannot compete equally, as they do not have parity of participation.

Adopting a strengths-based approach, I will now unpack the supportive factors that enabled the women in this research to overcome these challenges in order to progress in their careers.

Women used their sense of agency to navigate changes in gender relations between men and women in higher education. Because experience is essential to an account of agency, women in senior leadership roles in higher education are more focused on collective leadership, and they have articulately shared their collective experiences of developing their individual and collective sense of power, agency, and decision-making in order to advance themselves through their careers.

Though existing literature suggests that women require mentoring, as they are in need of fixing (O'Connor, 2019), I argue that mentoring is a facilitative tool for the development and advancement of women. These women's characteristics of agency have essentially enabled them to overcome the challenges so that they could progress.

388

IRELAND'S
2023 EDUCATION
YEARBOOK

IRELAND'S
EDUCATION 2023
YEARBOOK

389

Conclusion

My research set out to explore the lived experiences of women in senior leadership roles in higher education in Ireland. It revealed that women continue to experience both direct and indirect discrimination throughout their careers. Despite this, the women in this research managed to overcome these challenges and advance themselves into senior roles.

This research contributes to knowledge, as I have argued that effective leadership of modern and highly complex higher-education institutes requires a shift away from patriarchy and towards empathy, relationship-building, and collective approaches to leadership.

Though the Athena SWAN Award has been depicted as a 'silver bullet' for addressing gender equality in Irish higher-education institutes, the only real change it has led to is a raising of awareness of what gender inequality is. Instead, the contribution that Athena SWAN has made to women's experiences is an increase in their workload, a feminisation of their roles, and a tokenistic approach to valuing gender equality.

Though the number of women occupying senior roles has increased in Ireland since 2015, it is evident that the structural and cultural barriers have not automatically changed alongside this. Other feminist scholars have rightly criticised gender-equality interventions for shying away from challenging assumptions, beliefs, and biases about organisational practices, and for emphasising outcomes that focus more on measuring quotas than on addressing structural barriers.

That said, recent thought on the formation of the modern subject of gender inequality offers a one-sided or negative account of agency, which underplays the creative dimension that is present in the responses of individuals to changing social relations. In my research, I have used a more strengths-based approach to ultimately illuminate individuals' strengths – their agency, resiliency, and leadership styles – in order to inform future policies and practices to support women in higher education in Ireland into the future.

The only real change the Athena SWAN Award has led to is a raising of awareness of what gender inequality is.

REFERENCES

Fraser, N. (2003) 'Social justice in the age of identity politics: Redistribution, recognition, and participation'. In: N. Fraser and A. Honneth (Eds.) *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, pp. 7–88. Verso Books.

McNay, L. (2004) 'Agency and experience: Gender as a lived relation', *The Sociological Review*, 52(2).

O'Connor, P. (2014) *Management and Gender in Irish Education*. Manchester University Press.

O'Connor, P. (2019) 'Creating gendered change in Irish higher education: Is managerial leadership up to the task?', *Irish Educational Studies*, 1(17).

The Impact of Generative Artificial Intelligence on Teaching, Learning, and Assessment

Some of the challenges and opportunities

Introduction

If this article opened with the phrase 'As a large language model by OpenAI', you may have thought you just stumbled upon an artificial-intelligence-generated article that managed to pass by the editors of the *Yearbook*. You may still wonder, such are the times we live in, but fear not, these words are human-written by someone who is cautiously optimistic about the potential of generative artificial intelligence (AI) for teaching, learning, and assessment, while also acutely aware of the challenges it presents.

Generative AI is a type of AI capable of generating text, images, or other media, using what are known as generative models. For the uninitiated, the phrase 'As a large language model . . .' would suggest that a careless student (or indeed adult) had used ChatGPT to take a shortcut in producing some required written work and had forgotten to check the output for any obvious markers.

These types of generative AI, known as large language models (LLM), have become popularised this year by ChatGPT (from OpenAI), Bing (from Microsoft), and Bard (from Google). In simple terms, they are chatbots: programmes with which you could initially interact only through text input but which have now, in some instances, become multimodal. This means that through a combination of other techniques, they can process other types of data (image, speech, numerical) and, to varying degrees of success and accuracy, respond to a given query or task.

Keith Young
Assistant Professor in Digital Education, Maynooth University

This article offers a broad overview of some of the challenges and opportunities associated with generative artificial intelligence. Given the technology's capabilities and availability, it is incumbent on us to consider our individual and collective response to the impact it could have in both formal and informal educational contexts.

Want it to write an essay for you? It will do that. Need to write a professional email? Sure thing. Interested in learning about a new topic? It will give you an overview and answer any questions you have. But – and this is a big but – you can never be assured that the output or response you get is entirely factual. In fact, the model's capacity for 'bullshitting' (Costello, 2023) or, to use the more technical but contested anthropomorphic term (Stojanov, 2023), 'hallucinating' (Li, Du, et al., 2023), can be high.

The flurry of excitement and trepidation in their use and what they could mean for the educational landscape is reasonable. Some critics contend, understandably, that companies acted irresponsibly by releasing this technology without fully considering its ramifications, but now that the cat is out of the proverbial bag (and it is unimaginable, despite likely regulations to curtail it, that it could ever be put back in), it is incumbent on us to thoughtfully consider our individual and collective responses to it.

Challenges

To fully appreciate some of the challenges associated with this type of generative AI, in both educational and wider contexts, it's useful to have a rough understanding of how they work. LLMs are trained on vast amounts of textual data (think of it having read all the books in the library, or even all of Wikipedia). Using deep-learning techniques, they analyse the data to identify patterns of how often words or sequences of words appear together. When given a prompt, such as 'Write an essay on . . .', the model predicts a response based on the context of the words provided, generating the next word or sequence of words that have the highest likelihood based on its training. Essentially, it produces responses based on probabilities learned from the data it has been trained on.

Therein lies one of the key issues. It wouldn't be fair to say it 'knows' anything. In fact, sometimes it will just make things up or output fictitious information, particularly on complex topics. People therefore can never and should never solely rely on them as an accurate source of information.

That said, you can see their attractiveness to someone who may wish to take shortcuts with homework or an assignment. This is another valid challenge associated with the technology. How can we be sure that something submitted to us was written by the person who submitted it? This is even more problematic given that detectors designed to identify if work has been AI-generated lack reliability, have relatively easy workarounds, and disproportionately impact on non-native-English speakers (Liang et al., 2023).

It is also worth considering broader ethical (and potentially legal) issues. There are questions of consent surrounding the sources of the data these models

People can never and should never solely rely on Large Language Models (LLMs) as an accurate source of information.

were trained on (much of it scraped off the internet). If used in a school or educational context, is student data being commodified through its use in training and improving the model, thus adding value to the company? And is this okay?

Finally, we must acknowledge the valid concerns about the sustainability of this technology due to the significant resources it requires. One preprint study, awaiting peer review, suggests that it uses the equivalent of one 500 ml bottle of water for every 20–50 prompts it receives (Li, Yang, et al., 2023). This relates to broader discussions on the environmental impact of educational technologies and digital technologies (Selwyn, 2021).

In the context of these issues, along with data protection, privacy, equity, access, bias, the human cost, and potential impact on human intellectual and skill development, it's fair to say there is much to be considered by educators, policymakers, and the public.

Opportunities

Despite these challenges, and given that the technology is freely available and will be used, it is worth considering the potential it holds through some creative ways it is being implemented and applied. Even though it can be factually incorrect, you might be surprised to know just how well it can respond, even if it is just prediction based on probability.

In this context, several 'roles' have been conceptualised for LLMs (UNESCO, 2023a), such as:

Possibility engine: A student could use it to generate alternative ways of expressing an idea which could be analysed.

Guide on the side: It can be used to help brainstorm and help generate content and ideas for a lesson.

Co-designer: It can help with design, be it designing or updating the curriculum, developing rubrics and assessment criteria, or creating content for resources or worksheets.

Testing these approaches requires willingness to play around with the technology, in full acknowledgement and awareness of its limitations, while also developing effective prompting strategies. This has led to various prompting-strategy guides developed by teachers (Dunne, 2023; Herft, 2023).

The technology is being implemented in other ways. Khan Academy and Duolingo have implemented it as a personal tutor on their courses. Others have

We must acknowledge the valid concerns about the sustainability of this technology due to the significant resources it requires.

developed programmes that allow you to query information from documents or databases. And the technology is being implemented by some of the largest companies in their suites of products as AI collaborators, such as Microsoft Co-Pilot and Google Duet.

This is before we even factor in that LLMs are becoming multimodal. Combined with other techniques, they can analyse images, identifying what they contain and answering questions about them. The models will continue to improve, and while they will never be perfect, they are likely to be useful. Meta recently announced it will include its AI in its Ray-Ban smart glasses, and we are likely soon to see further use cases and implementations (rightly or wrongly).

The technology's current promise lies in the fact that it can sometimes help with the creative process, deal with mundane tasks, offer guidance and feedback, and offer people a self-directed outlet from which to learn and develop, provided they are cognisant of the limitations.

Conclusion

Whether the hype of this technology will amount to anything significant in the long run remains to be seen. But we need to consider how to respond effectively in the short and medium term. Initiatives are being undertaken to respond effectively, such as the creation of an AI advisory council here in Ireland (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, 2023), and the work being done to consider appropriate regulations around AI. The Council of Europe Standing Conference of Ministers of Education recently agreed to develop a legal instrument to regulate the use of AI systems in education to protect learners' human rights.

It is doubtful that this technology ever should or could supplant the human connection that teaching and learning are based on (UNESCO, 2023b). Yet we need to carefully consider the impact it will have. We need to consider whether and how it can be used productively and proactively for the benefit of learners in human-centred ways, and specifically what type of AI literacies are needed as this technology becomes more ubiquitous in our daily lives and the lives of our students.

Initiatives are being undertaken to respond effectively, such as the creation of an AI advisory council here in Ireland.

REFERENCES

Costello, E. (2023) 'ChatGPT and the educational AI chatter: Full of bullshit or trying to tell us something?', *Postdigital Science and Education*. DOI: 10.1007/s42438-023-00398-5

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (2023) *'Call for expression of interest – AI advisory council'*. 24 July. Dublin: Government of Ireland. www.gov.ie/en/publication/25307-call-for-expressions-of-interest-ai-advisory-council/.

Dunne, E. (2023) *ChatGPT for Teachers*. https://portlaoisecbs-my.sharepoint.com/personal/edunne_portlaoisecbs_com/_layouts/15/onedrive.aspx?id=%2Fpersonal%2Fedunne%5Fportlaoisecbs%5Fcom%2FDocuments%2FIT%20Coordinator%2FED%20%20%2D%20ChatGPT%20for%20Teachers%2Epdf&parent=%2Fpersonal%2Fedunne%5Fportlaoisecbs%5Fcom%2FDocuments%2FIT%20Coordinator&ga=1.

Herft, A. (2023) *A Teacher's Prompt Guide to ChatGPT aligned with 'What Works Best'.* https://drive.google.com/file/d/15qAxnUzOwAPwHzoaKBJd8FAgiOZYcIxq/view.

Li, Y., Du, Y., Zhou, K., Wang, J., Zhao, W.X., and Wen, J.R. (2023) 'Evaluating object hallucination in large vision-language models'. arXiv preprint arXiv:2305.10355.

Li, P., Yang, J., Islam, M.A. and Ren, S. (2023) 'Making AI less "Thirsty": Uncovering and addressing the secret water footprint of AI models'. arXiv preprint arXiv:2304.03271.

Liang, W., Yuksekgonul, M., Mao, Y., Wu, E., and Zou, J. (2023) 'GPT detectors are biased against non-native-English writers'. arXiv preprint arXiv:2304.02819.

Selwyn, N. (2021) 'Ed-tech within limits: Anticipating educational technology in times of environmental crisis', *E-Learning and Digital Media*, 18(5), 496–510.

Stojanov, A. (2023) 'Learning with ChatGPT 3.5 as a more knowledgeable other: An autoethnographic study', *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, 20(1), 35.

UNESCO (2023a) *ChatGPT and Artificial Intelligence in higher education – Quick start guide.* Paris: UNESCO. www.iesalc.unesco.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/ChatGPT-and-Artificial-Intelligence-in-higher-education-Quick-Start-guide_EN_FINAL.pdf.

UNESCO (2023b) *Technology in Schools – A tool on whose terms?* Paris: UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000385723.

***

November 2023:

Dr Brendan Jennings, Vice President for Research and Innovation presenting the Established Career Researcher Award to Economist Dr Catarina de Moura Pinto Marvão, whose research was used by the European Commission's Competition Department (DG-Competition) in designing policies to detect and deter cartels.

Care Matters in Higher Education

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the centrality of care in a profound way, in society in general and in our universities (Lynch, 2022; Tronto & Fine, 2022). Now that we have returned to 'normal' in our colleges, how can academics keep care at the centre of what we do and who we are? This is especially pertinent to reflect on as institutes of technology (IoTs) transition into new technological universities (TUs).

The role of IoTs in enabling access to higher education for non-traditional students has been well documented (Collins et al., 2020). In general, higher proportions of students from under-represented groups progress to IoTs than to universities (HEA, 2018). As the new TUs grapple with pursuing a stronger research agenda, academics' high teaching loads will be 'difficult to sustain in the context of a significant re-alignment of the sector towards research' (Collins et al., 2020, p. 39). TU lecturers teach 16–18 hours of classes per week.

There is a significant threat to care as the new TUs are expected to deliver on a research agenda while also teaching students who may need extra support to navigate their third-level journey. We are standing at a turning point for our institutions – will care be part of our new technological universities?

Research on care at third level

Care is usually not positioned as fundamental to how we teach at third level, and it has received little attention in higher-education pedagogy (Anderson et al., 2019). The relational is not seen as central to our role as lecturers (Lynch, 2010; O'Brien, 2014). By the time students reach us in the university, we have adopted a very care-less view of their educational needs.

Dr Catherine-Ann O'Connell

Senior Education Developer/Lecturer, Technological University of the Shannon

Care is usually not positioned as fundamental to how we teach at third level, but research shows that it is central to good teaching and learning, especially for students who need more support. This article looks at why care matters and how academics can keep care at the centre of what we do, creating a climate of care in our new technological universities.

Applying an ethic of care to our interactions with students increases the chance that they will stay the course in university - especially relevant as we consider the rising attrition rates in TUs.

Kathleen Lynch (2010) contends that this culture of carelessness is, in effect, a hidden doxa in higher education. But as recent research has highlighted, care has a key role in higher education, in good teaching and learning (National Forum, 2019), in postgraduate research supervision (Hawkins, 2019), and in student experience (Anderson et al., 2019).

Although care in higher education is generally under-researched, the limited literature that focuses on it supports the idea that a relationship-rich pedagogy is critical for student learning (Walker & Gleaves, 2016, p.66). Care is the 'bedrock of all successful education' (Noddings, 1992, p.27), and students will 'listen to people who matter to them and to whom they matter' (ibid., p.35).

Recent research from New Zealand confirms this, echoing Noddings: students said they cared more about learning in courses where teachers seemed to care about them (Anderson et al., 2019). They conceptualised good teachers as those who cared about them, their teaching, and their discipline. Research from the National Forum (2019), drawing on data from over 4,000 higher-education students in Ireland, lists caring as a key component of excellent teaching.

These reports are making care visible. It is crucial that we disseminate this information, to highlight the essential care work of university educators. We need to recentre relationality in our higher-education pedagogies and practice.

A climate of care

The transition to becoming a TU will entail 'a root and branch transformation of the working life of academics', according to Collins et al. (2020, p.10), who also write (somewhat contradictorily) that lecturers in the IOT/TU sector have 'spare capacity'. I would argue that any spare capacity we have can be accounted for in our relational practice, our pedagogies, supervision relationships, formal student mentoring, and informal pastoral care. We mind our students well, particularly those first-generation students who might need extra support. Research confirms that non-traditional students may need more care and support to navigate third-level education (Felten & Lambert, 2020; Motta & Bennett, 2018).

Nel Noddings (2012) suggests that we create 'a climate of care' in our classrooms which must be underneath everything we do as educators. When that climate is 'established and maintained, everything else goes better' (2012, p.777). This also creates an inclusive and accepting classroom. Lecturers might also view ourselves as 'care facilitators' (Mariskind, 2014, p.312), as we help students form caring relations with each other. This form of community-building is a key aspect of creating a climate of care.

Specific practices that encourage a climate of care include taking time to know students' names, having regular check-ins, setting out clear assessments, providing timely feedback, and allowing some discretion with coursework submission dates while also providing 'tough care' or good boundaries.

Care and rigour are not dichotomous. We can maintain standards while also allowing space for students who may need extra time or support with assessments and their learning journey. Applying an ethic of care to our interactions with students increases the chance that they will stay the course in university. This is especially relevant as we consider the rising attrition rates in TUs, which increased from 9% to 12% in some programmes between 2020 and 2021 (HEA, 2023).

Care at the centre

Michael D. Higgins, the president of Ireland, during a speech in 2021 said we are now at 'a perilous juncture in the long history of the academy'. He called on universities to 'reclaim and re-energise academia for the pursuit of real knowledge [...] and the enrichment of society'. The role of the academic, he argued, is to actively disturb the status quo and to critique the dominating ethos of its institutions.

I feel it is also our role to be more explicit about care, and to adopt a more critical stance towards care. Positioning care as central to our work in technological universities would privilege care in the same way that Cartesian rationality has historically been privileged in academia. We need to become care ambassadors in our universities. If academics do not speak up for care, who will?

In Ireland's Education Yearbook 2022, Jim Miley cautions us to avoid the 'tyranny of uniformity' as our IoTs transition to TUs (Miley, 2022). He argues that we must not lose the uniqueness and diversity of each part of the higher-education system. There is an opportunity to imagine our TUs as caring places where our students can flourish. We need to recentre what Lynch (2022, p.3) calls a 'care-centric narrative' in our institutions. Care matters in higher education.

Positioning care as central to our work in technological universities would privilege care in the same way that Cartesian rationality has historically been privileged in academia.

REFERENCES

Anderson, V., Rabello, R., and Wass, R. (2019) 'Good teaching as care in higher education', *Higher Education*, 79(1), 1–19.

Collins, T., Crowley, U., and Quinlan, K. (2020) *Review of Lecturing in Institutes of Technology/Technological Universities: International Review Module.* Dublin: Department of Education and Skills.

Hawkins, H. (2019) 'Creating care-full academic spaces? The dilemmas of caring in the "anxiety machine"', *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 18(4), 816–834. https://acme-journal.org/index.php/acme/article/view/1465.

Higher Education Authority (HEA) (2018) *HEA Key Facts And Figures 2016–17.* Dublin: HEA. http://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2018/01/HEA-Key-Facts-And-Figures-2016-17-.pdf.

Higher Education Authority (HEA) (2023) HEA Progression and Completion dashboard. Dublin: HEA. https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/students/progression-and-completion-dashboard/.

Lynch, K. (2010) 'Carelessness: A hidden doxa of higher education', *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 9(1), 54–67.

Lynch, K. (2022) *Care and Capitalism.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Miley, J. (2022) 'Avoiding the tyranny of uniformity'. In: B. Mooney (Ed.) *Ireland's Education Yearbook*, pp. 239–242. Dublin: Education Matters. https://irelandseducationyearbook.ie/downloads/IEYB2022/YB2022-Higher-Education-01.pdf.

National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (2019) *Making a Difference: A Student View of Excellent Teaching.* Dublin: National Forum. https://hub.teachingandlearning.ie/resource/making-a-difference-a-student-view-of-excellent-teaching/.

Noddings, N. (1992) *The Challenge to Care in Schools.* New York: Teachers College Press.

O'Brien, M. (2014) 'Initial teacher education (ITE) in careless times: Caring as professional ethical praxis and identity'. Association for Teacher Education in Europe. Conference, 15–17 April, Budapest. DOI: 10.13140/2.1.2033.6328

Tronto, J. and Fine, M. (2022) '"Long COVID" and seeing in the pandemic dark', *International Journal of Care and Caring*, 6(1–2), 3–12.

Walker, C. and Gleaves, A. (2016) 'Constructing the caring higher education teacher: A theoretical framework', *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 54(1), 65–76.

***

Winner of the Irish Research Council Early Career Researcher of the Year award: Professor Aisling McMahon of Maynooth University (centre), flanked by highly commended researchers Dr Natalie McEvoy, RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences (left), and Dr Amanda Drury of Dublin City University (right).

Meaningful Consultation with Autistic Children and Young People for Inclusive Education

How can autistic children and young people be supported to be truly active agents in shaping their educational experiences? Autistic students have a fundamental right to be heard in matters that concern their education, a right protected under Articles 12 and 23 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and Article 7 of the UN Convention on the Rights for Persons with Disability. Yet educational policies and research rarely include the voices of autistic children and young people. We must ask these students what they consider beneficial and meaningful in their own education, in order to identify supports that are relevant to students and their families and supports that are more likely to be translated into practice (Keating, 2021).

A growing body of research in Ireland is dedicated to including meaningful consultation with autistic children and young people about their educational experiences, from opportunities for inclusive play in early childhood education and care (ECEC) (e.g., O'Keeffe & McNally, 2023) through to equal access and inclusion in higher education (e.g., Sweeney et al., 2018).

Autistic children's right to inclusive play

Children's right to play is recognised by the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989), and play underpins curricula in ECEC, yet the play of young autistic children is often neglected in educational research. In a large-scale participatory study of the play of autistic children and neurotypical peers, children as young as five have shared their views of play and what it means to them in school (O'Keeffe & McNally, 2023). This groundbreaking research deepens our understanding of play in ECEC and prioritises autistic children's rights to express their views about this critical part of childhood experiences.

Dr Sinéad McNally

Associate Professor, Institute of Education, Dublin City University

What does meaningful consultation with autistic students look like? This article draws on contemporary research projects in Ireland which consult with autistic students about their educational experiences, from early childhood to primary and secondary school. It outlines why seeking these perspectives is critical for recognising children's rights to be heard on matters which concern them and for identifying supports that are meaningful to autistic children and their families.

Participatory research with autistic adults also challenges a deficit view of the play of autistic children. Instead it highlights the importance of the social aspects of play for autistic children, while recognising the roles of solitary and sensory play for self-regulation in busy classrooms (Pritchard-Rowe et al., 2023).

The pivotal shift to meaningful participation in research means that not only do we gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of play, but we actively show respect for children's rights in education, resulting in clear, research-based, child-centred recommendations for ECEC practice. For example, practice in early childhood settings and classrooms should recognise diversity in play while acknowledging that 'autistic and non-autistic children alike may benefit from help and strategies to support them in creating enjoyable and inclusive social play opportunities with each other' (Gibson & McNally, 2024).

Listening to and learning from all autistic students

Similarly, new participatory research with autistic children in primary and secondary schools in Ireland highlights the importance of relationships and social connection in school, and recognises the need to provide space and time to recharge and self-regulate in busy school environments (McNally et al., 2023). These initial findings are from primary-school autistic children taking part in the Autism-Friendly Schools project, a large, interdisciplinary study of primary and secondary school experiences of autistic students and their families in Ireland, funded by the Irish Research Council and in partnership with AsIAm. Participatory methods are central to meeting the policy and practice objectives of the study.

The Autism-Friendly Schools project is guided by an adult advisory group comprising autistic advocates, parents, and members of the wider school community and a child and youth advisory group (CYAG) comprising autistic students. Together they inform the study's development, including the research questions, methods, and analysis. For example, the CYAG has highlighted the potentially positive impact of increased autism awareness and advocacy (e.g., AsIAm, 2023) on the school experiences of autistic students. This has resulted in a focus in the study on the potential impact of awareness and understanding among the wider school community on students' school experiences.

Consulting with non-speaking students

A major objective of the Autism-Friendly Schools project is to include the voices of non-speaking and minimally speaking autistic children, who are persistently under-represented in educational research. We began by using more established participatory methods of photo-voice elicitation and drawing, to

New participatory research with autistic children in primary and secondary schools in Ireland highlights the importance of relationships and social connection in school.

support autistic children to share their views and experiences of school. The next step is to develop new participatory methods individualised to young children and to non-speaking and minimally speaking autistic students.

Our approach recognises that a one-size-fits-all approach does not work in autism research or practice, and we draw on the concept of ethical listening in developing new methods of data collection. Ethical listening occurs when we 'respectfully attend to multiple representations of human experience and knowledge with all of our senses' (Lebenhagen, 2020, p.129). For example, an ethical listener pays attention to body language in addition to the individual's mode of communication, such as a typed response.

This is perhaps where consultations as part of participatory research are most meaningful and pivotal in breaking through barriers. Through child-centred, individualised participatory methods, educational research can and should strive to hear the voices of all autistic children.

A major objective of the Autism-Friendly Schools project is to include the voices of non-speaking and minimally speaking autistic children.

The Autism-Friendly Schools project

The study is based at the Dublin City University Institute of Education, and the team comprises Dr Sinéad McNally (principal investigator), Professor Mary Rose Sweeney (co–principal investigator), and Dr Lisa Keenan (postdoctoral researcher). Dr Aoife Lynam is a former postdoctoral researcher on the project. The study is guided by two advisory groups comprising multiple stakeholders from the autism and wider school communities.

You can contact us at autismfriendlyschools@dcu.ie, and visit our web page at www.dcu.ie/instituteofeducation/autism-friendly-schools-project.

REFERENCES

AsIAm (2023) *Same Chance Report.* Dublin: AsIAm. https://asiam.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Same-Chance-Report-2023-for-web-1.pdf.

Gibson, J.L. and McNally, S.M. (2024) 'Play in the education and care of young autistic children'. In: B. Anderson, Z. Nikiforidou, and W. Robles-Melendez (Eds.) *Resilience and Wellbeing: Children, Families and Communities.* European Early Childhood Education Research Association.

Keating, C.T. (2021) 'Participatory autism research: How consultation benefits everyone', *Frontiers in Psychology,* 12, 713982.

Lebenhagen, C. (2020) 'Including speaking and nonspeaking autistic voice in research', *Autism in Adulthood,* 2(2), pp. 128–131.

McNally, S., Lynam, A., Keenan, L., and Sweeney, M.R. (2023) 'Consulting with young autistic children for inclusive primary school education'. Oral presentation, British Psychological Society – Psychology of Education Section Conference, 13–14 September. Liverpool John Moores University, UK.

O'Keeffe, C. and McNally, S. (2023) 'A scoping review of children's conceptualisations of inclusive play informed by children's advisory groups'. Center for Open Science. DOI: 10.17605/OSF.IO/P49EW

Pritchard-Rowe, E., de Lemos, C., Howard, K., and Gibson, J.L. (2023) 'Social play as a "double-edged sword": Exploring the experience of autistic play from the perspective of autistic adults'. PsyArXiv Preprints. DOI: 10.31234/osf.io/2gq3y

Sweeney, M.R., Burke, T., Quinn, K., and Harris, A. (2018) *Living with Autism as a University Student at Dublin City University: Developing an Autism Friendly University.* Dublin City University and AsIAm.

United Nations (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child. Geneva: UN. https://legal.un.org/avl/ha/crc/crc.html.

✳ ✳ ✳
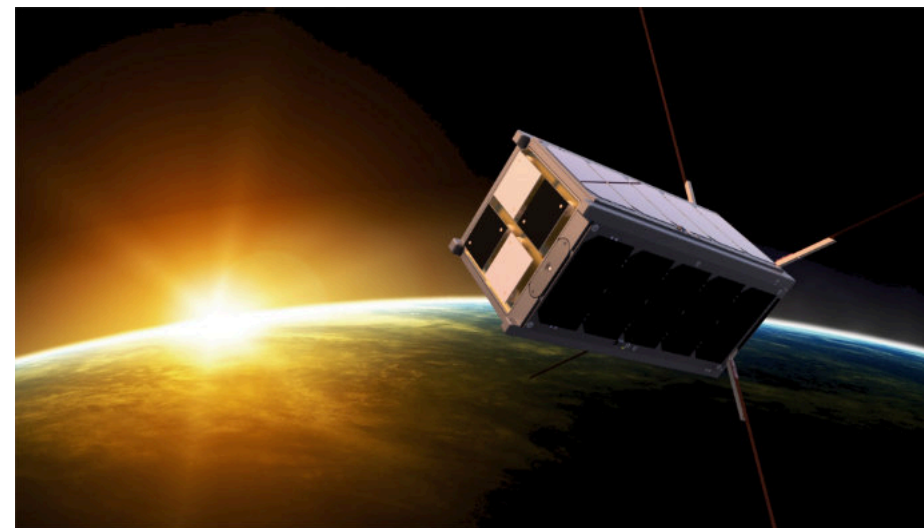
First Irish Satellite is launched into Space

The historic launch by the UCD project team of Ireland's first satellite, EIRSAT-1, has been welcomed by Neale Richmond, Minister of State for Business, Employment and Retail.

The UCD-based project was undertaken as part of the European Space Agency's (ESA) "Fly Your Satellite!" Programme.

Minister Richmond said:
"History has been made with Ireland's first satellite, EIRSAT-1 being launched into space. This is a huge moment for Ireland, and for our space sector. The team in UCD has worked tirelessly on this project, and I had the privilege of meeting them earlier this year and seeing at first hand the huge amount of work that has gone into the project. This is a day of celebration for the culmination of the efforts of the team over the last few years."

Looking Beyond What You See

How can primary school teachers support children with acquired brain injury?

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to explore the meaning of acquired brain injury (ABI) and to provide guidelines for primary school teachers on how they can actively support children who return to school after acquiring a brain injury.

ABI is defined as 'an injury to the brain, which is not hereditary, congenital, degenerative, or induced by birth trauma' (Brain Injury Association of America, 2019). Simply put, the person is not born with the brain injury: they acquire it after birth. It may be a traumatic brain injury (TBI), which means it occurred as a result of a trauma such as a fall or car accident, or a non-traumatic brain injury (NTBI), following stroke or meningitis, for example.

ABI is often referred to as an invisible disability, which is 'a physical, mental or neurological condition that is not visible from the outside, yet can limit or challenge a person's movements, senses or activities' (Invisible Disability Association, 2021). In other words, people can be left with physical, cognitive, emotional, and behavioural effects that are less visible to others but can significantly affect the quality of their day-to-day life, such as loss of memory or difficulty processing information (Headway Ireland, 2019). The effects of an ABI are different for everyone and can be temporary or permanent (International Brain Injury Association, 2022).

ABI affects millions of people globally, and an estimated 176 people die from TBI-related injuries daily in the USA (CDC, 2023). No specific data is available on the number of people living with ABI in Ireland. ABI Ireland (2020) estimates that 19,000 people, including children, acquire a brain injury yearly. ABI is the leading cause of mortality and acquired disability in children and young people (CYP)

Dr Lorraine M. Duffy

Postdoctoral Researcher, University of Galway

This article gives an overview of childhood acquired brain injury (ABI) and provides guidelines on how primary school teachers can support a child with ABI to participate inclusively in their classroom. Many consequences of ABI are invisible, so it is important for teachers to look beyond what they see to provide this support to children with ABI.

A brain injury in childhood or adolescence can affect the child's overall development.

globally and is therefore a significant public health issue. Although relatively few CYP brain injuries (5%) are deemed to be severe and the remainder are classified as mild, all levels of brain injury can affect a child's cognitive, educational, and psychological development (Palanivel & Burrough, 2021).

A child's brain differs from an adult's in several ways; for example, it is still developing and is classed as an 'immature' brain. Children's brains, because of their plasticity, recover more positively than adult brains. Such recovery tends to relate to motor function, but the same cannot be said for psychological and cognitive recovery (ibid.). Thus, a brain injury in childhood or adolescence can affect the child's overall development. The following section will outline how children may exhibit the consequences of an ABI in the classroom.

Childhood brain injury

Childhood ABI is multidimensional, with the consequences varying from child to child; no two brain injuries will be alike. Many difficulties can occur following an ABI, some of which may become apparent to the survivor and others only over time. For example, a child who was a high achiever pre-ABI may have to work much harder at learning post-ABI; this cognitive difficulty may look like behavioural issues to a teacher and can go unnoticed for a while. Some difficulties may be visible, but many are invisible, which can make living with these consequences very challenging and frustrating for the survivor and their families (see table) (Wehman & Targett, 2010; White et al., 2017).

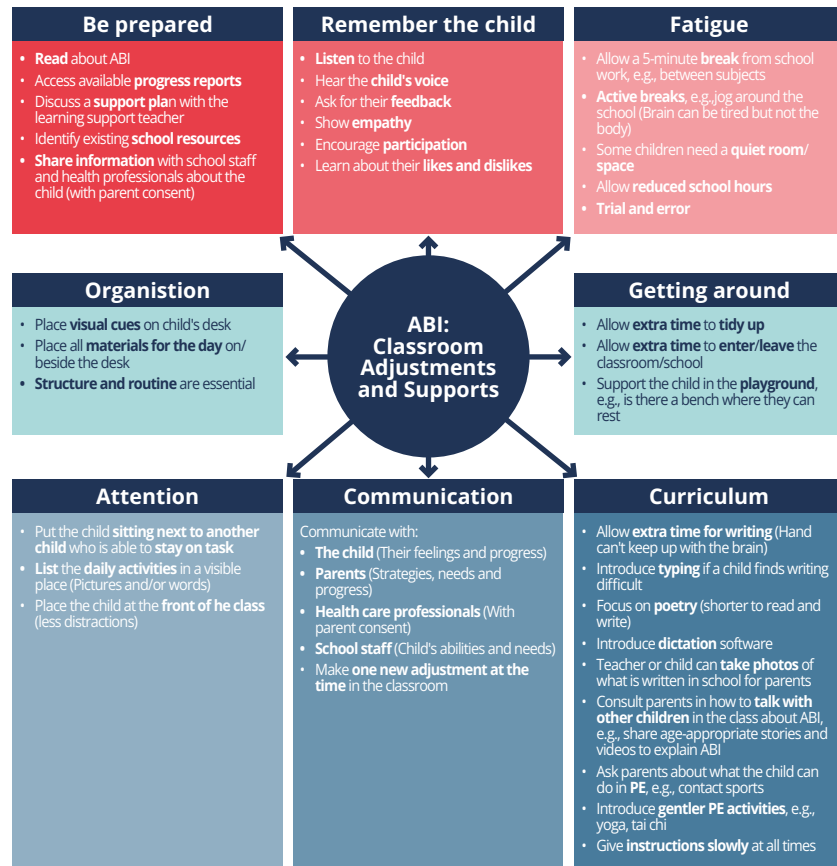| Physical Changes	Cognitive Changes	Behavioural and Emotional Changes
» Slower reactions	» Memory	» Depression
» Fatigue – cognitive and physical	» Organisational skills	» Anxiety
» Imbalance	» Learning new things	» Little or no emotion
» Sensitivity to light or noise	» Word-finding	» Unable to deal with small changes in daily routines
» Lack of interest in school work	» Distracted easily	» Low self-esteem
» Pain in parts of the body	» Processing speed	» Irritable
	» Communication	

Possible difficulties after acquiring a brain injury

Practical support at school

Children with ABI will follow different pathways before returning to school, depending on the severity and type of injury (NCSE, 2019). Some may need surgery, while others may not; some may need to be referred to the National Rehabilitation Hospital post-surgery to aid recovery. Children diagnosed with

an ABI will need support upon returning to school regardless of the severity of their injury.

Planning is central to a successful return to school for a child with an ABI. It requires a multidisciplinary approach between school staff, health care professionals, and parents, and the implementation of a child-centred, individualised approach. A child's support plan will depend on their individual needs and context. According to Mark Linden at Queen's University of Belfast, interventions should focus on 'key environmental influences such as school resources and policy, teacher training and education, identification and tracking' rather than just the deficits of the child (IOS Press, 2018). Every school environment has valuable resources that can support all children to live their best life according to their ability. Specific classroom supports and adjustments for a child with ABI can benefit all children and may include the following:

Be prepared
- **Read** about ABI
- Access available **progress reports**
- Discuss a **support plan** with the learning support teacher
- Identify existing **school resources**
- **Share information** with school staff and health professionals about the child (with parent consent)

Remember the child
- **Listen** to the child
- Hear the **child's voice**
- Ask for their **feedback**
- Show **empathy**
- Encourage **participation**
- Learn about their **likes and dislikes**

Fatigue
- Allow a 5-minute **break** from school work, e.g., between subjects
- **Active breaks**, e.g.,jog around the school (Brain can be tired but not the body)
- Some children need a **quiet room/space**
- Allow **reduced school hours**
- **Trial and error**

Organistion
- Place **visual cues** on child's desk
- Place all **materials for the day** on/beside the desk
- **Structure and routine** are essential

ABI: Classroom Adjustments and Supports

Getting around
- Allow **extra time** to **tidy up**
- Allow **extra time** to **enter/leave** the classroom/school
- Support the child in the **playground**, e.g., is there a bench where they can rest

Attention
- Put the child **sitting next to another child** who is able to **stay on task**
- **List** the **daily activities** in a visible place (Pictures and/or words)
- Place the child at the **front of he class** (less distractions)

Communication
Communicate with:
- **The child** (Their feelings and progress)
- **Parents** (Strategies, needs and progress)
- **Health care professionals** (With parent consent)
- **School staff** (Child's abilities and needs)
- Make **one new adjustment at the time** in the classroom

Curriculum
- Allow **extra time for writing** (Hand can't keep up with the brain)
- Introduce **typing** if a child finds writing difficult
- Focus on **poetry** (shorter to read and write)
- Introduce **dictation** software
- Teacher or child can **take photos** of what is written in school for parents
- Consult parents in how to **talk with other children** in the class about ABI, e.g., share age-appropriate stories and videos to explain ABI
- Ask parents about what the child can do in **PE**, e.g., contact sports
- Introduce **gentler PE activities**, e.g., yoga, tai chi
- Give **instructions slowly** at all times

Classroom supports and adjustments for children with an ABI (Senelmis, 2020; N-ABLES, 2021; Children's Trust, n.d.)

Conclusion

My concluding thought for teachers of children with an ABI centres on one word: time. Take time to research ABI, take time to talk to parents, and give children time to adjust to the new version of themselves and time to learn, communicate, participate, and play in an inclusive way.

REFERENCES

ABI Ireland (2020) 'Understanding brain injury: Facts and figures'. Dun Laoghaire, Co. Dublin: Acquired Brain Injury Ireland. www.abiireland.ie/understanding-brain-injury/facts-and-figures/.

Brain Injury Association of America (2019) 'What is the difference between acquired brain injury and traumatic brain injury?' Vienna, Virginia: BIAA. www.biausa.org/brain-injury/about-brain-injury/nbiic/what-is-the-difference-between-an-acquired-brain-injury-and-a-traumatic-brain-injury.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2023) *Traumatic brain injury and concussion.* Atlanta, Georgia: CDC. www.cdc.gov/traumaticbraininjury/index.html.

Children's Trust (n.d.) *Brain Injury Hub.* Surrey, UK: The Children's Trust. www.thechildrenstrust.org.uk/brain-injury-information/info-and-advice/return-to-education/introduction-to-returning-to-education.

Headway Ireland (2019) *The Family Guide to Brain Injury.* Dublin: Headway Ireland. https://headway.ie/app/uploads/2023/03/The-Family-Guide-to-Brain-Injury.pdf.

International Brain Injury Association (2022) 'Brain injury facts'. Alexandria, Virginia: IBIA. www.internationalbrain.org/resources/brain-injury-facts.

Invisible Disability Association (2021) 'What is an invisible disability?' Parker, Colorado: IDA. https://invisibledisabilities.org/what-is-an-invisible-disability/.

IOS Press (2018) 'How can we help children with brain injuries transition back to school?' *ScienceDaily*, 15 May. www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2018/05/180515105721.htm.

National Acquired Brain Injury in Learning and Education Syndicate (N-ABLES) (2021) *ABI Return: Children and Young People with Acquired Brain Injury – Guiding their return to education.* United Kingdom Acquired Brain Injury Forum.

National Council for Special Education (NCSE) (2019) *Teaching Pupils with Acquired Brain Injury in Primary and Post-Primary Schools.* Trim, Co. Meath: https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/ABI_18_19.pdf.

Palanivel, V. and Burrough, M. (2021) 'Acquired brain injury in children, and their rehabilitation: Where we are now?', *Paediatrics and Child Health*, 31(5), 176–180. DOI: 10.1016/j.paed.2021.02.001

Senelmis, S. (2020) 'Classroom adjustments: Acquired brain injury (ABI)' [podcast]. Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD). www.nccd.edu.au/professional-learning/classroom-adjustments-acquired-brain-injury-abi.

Wehman, P. and Targett, P. (2010) *Returning to School After Traumatic Brain Injury.* Arlington, VA: Model Systems Knowledge Translation Center.

White, P., Bennett, E., and Hammill, N. (2017) *Making a Successful Return to Education: Supporting Children and Young People with Acquired Brain Injuries* (ABI). Nottingham: Nottingham County Council.

Exploratory Investigations of Immersive Digital Reality in Engineering Education

A reflection on virtual reality and initial study outcomes

Introduction

Digital tools based on virtual reality (VR) technologies have seen a remarkable expansion in recent times, especially in terms of the features and characteristics available and their relative ease of use (Wirth et al., 2007). This research article describes how VR equipment was used as a support tool in engineering education to enhance the current learning approach.

The study addressed the following sub-questions in the current work (under the project name 'CarlowENG-VR1.0'):

1. From the students' perspective, what is the effect of using VR on their motivation and engagement?
2. In terms of educational setting and preparations, what should be considered when developing educational programmes that employ VR?
3. What are the additional and unique pedagogical features that VR environments offer?
4. How will VR headsets support learning and the development of attendant exploratory skills, from the students' perspective?

Suggested procedures

Twenty-five undergraduate students from a range of engineering-related programmes, including electronics and aerospace engineering, were notified about this project and invited to participate. To match their profiles, which included electronics and avionics engineering majors, the chosen topic centred on experiments and mission exploration being performed on the International Space Station (ISS) (Gaskill, 2021).

Dr Haider M. Al-Juboori

Department of Electronic Engineering and Communications, South East Technological University

Using virtual reality (VR) may have several benefits in the field of trainee education. For example it can allow them to test and deal with experiments that will be part of their future careers. This article explores how to best use VR, specifically the Oculus Quest 2 system, to improve and develop the level of contemporary training and enhance the educational experience.

The training session started with a short presentation of basic concepts for graphical user interface (GUI), controller options, and keys. This was followed by an introduction to the different representations which the Mission:ISS software can display. The sequence is shown in Figure 1.
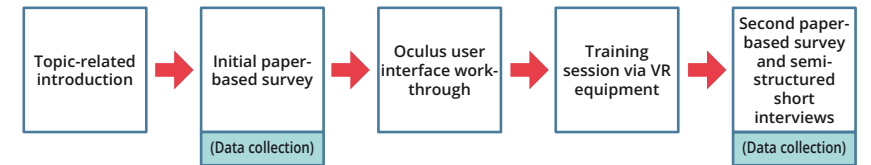

Figure 1: Structure of participants' programme

Results

The results of this research focused on users' opinions in written surveys. The training included a short video explaining what the space surrounding Earth looked like, and an opportunity to look at Earth from the angle of outer space. Participants were unanimous that such immersive technologies for showing educational films were invaluable.

Another question asked students their opinions about the possibilities of including immersive 3D videos in educational programmes in order to encourage people to increase their knowledge of Earth and new space technologies; 76% agreed or strongly agreed, while 20% were neutral (Figure 2(a)).

Watching films with VR or even augmented-reality technologies adds new features to exploring one's surroundings and discovering more precise details. In total, 92% of students classified the 3D-immersive video user interface as very good (Figure 2(b)).
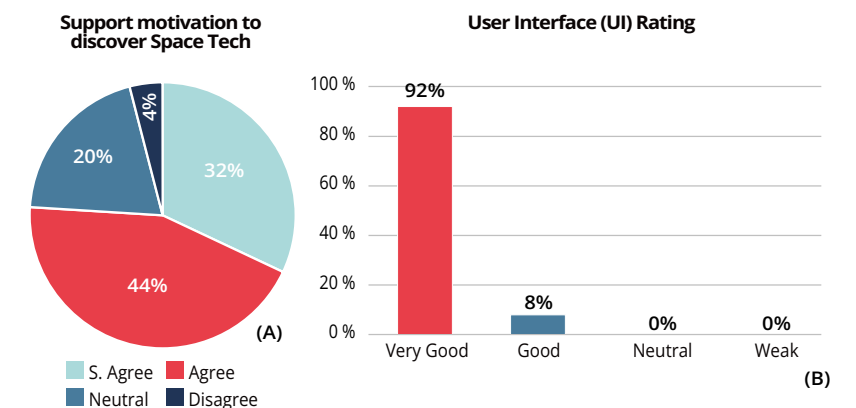

Figure 2: Summary of students' opinions on 3D immersive video

Additional reflections and reactions of trainees were measured based on different question categories (Figure 3), which provided a better understanding of how the training sessions might be developed in the future to ensure that the prescribed learning outcomes are attained.

The paper-based survey indicated that most of the 25 students were highly motivated to work with the Oculus Quest 2 system. Their attitudes to using this kind of immersive learning and interactive training, and integrating them into engineering education, were very positive. Despite their limited prior experience with VR, they were generally confident in their ability to work successfully with rotation, scaling, and navigation features and with other options and parameters of the Oculus system (Figure 3(a)).
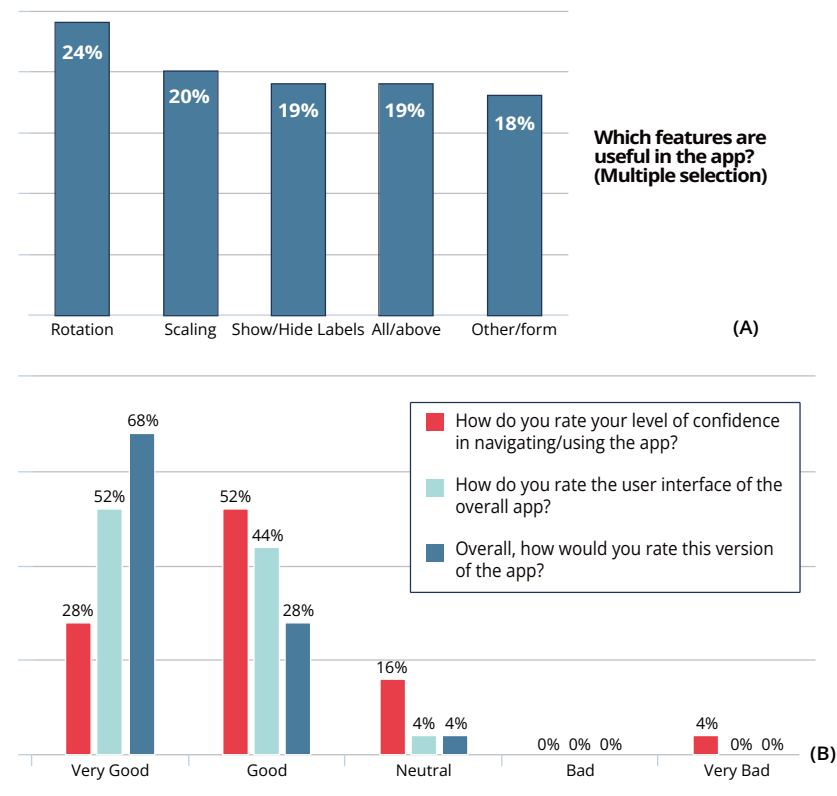

Figure 3: Summary of users' responses after testing the Mission:ISS software via VR headset

Students' attitudes to VR applications were also positive (i.e., good or very good) (Figure 3(b)), with a mean score of 8.1 on a 1–10 scale.

Conclusions and proposed future goals

These kinds of training techniques and high-tech research using digital reality can increase knowledge creation and awareness by sparking learners' imagination, and supporting them to experience learning such as testing partial zero-gravity in the ISS, which would not have been otherwise accessible to them in the classroom.

Until the current study, there were a limited number of studies on embedding VR techniques in teaching engineering in Ireland. This research offers new findings that may be applicable to higher education in general or to engineering fields specifically. Mainly, the results show that potential students or trainees are supportive of integrating VR technologies and related equipment in higher-education programmes, especially as support tools in the laboratory.

Nowadays, digital reality equipment seems relatively costly, especially when needed for all students to use simultaneously in a teaching session, which might mean it is unsuitable to scale up. However, creating innovative teaching or training sessions with continuous enhancements and additional improvement, such as the adoption of digital reality devices, could make its overall use in educational environments more sustainable.

The use of immersive and smart technologies in education promises many benefits for learners and educators.

This research study can open doors for new ideas and project proposals to enhance undergraduate engineering education supported by immersive technologies. This would be the case, for example, in the work required to develop the strategic concepts to design and implement a mixed-reality environment for electronic engineering applications, such as on hands-on Arduino electronic board courses or modules. Microcontrollers such as Arduino form part of the curriculum on several programmes, and students on these programmes in South East Technological University (SETU) have the chance to learn related concepts and to work on basic projects.

The suggested methodology deals with some current problems of learning and teaching with immersive technologies, such as how these technologies can support learning, how to systematically design immersive systems, and how to increase the efficiency of composing immersive learning applications.

What is unique about the first level of this new and proposed platform lesson is that students are immersively learning the Arduino micro-controller architecture and all electronic board properties and pin configurations of the microcontroller and related characteristics (for different kinds of Arduino versions), as illustrated by the instruction sets, based on simple programmes for different scenarios (Figure 4(a)).

As well as learning how to assemble the electronic board by following side-by-side virtual board instructions, students can follow these instructions on the

physical board assembly. There are also opportunities to integrate educational tools, such as Arduino Simulator, which can help in advanced Arduino simulation based on mixed reality (Figure 4(b)).
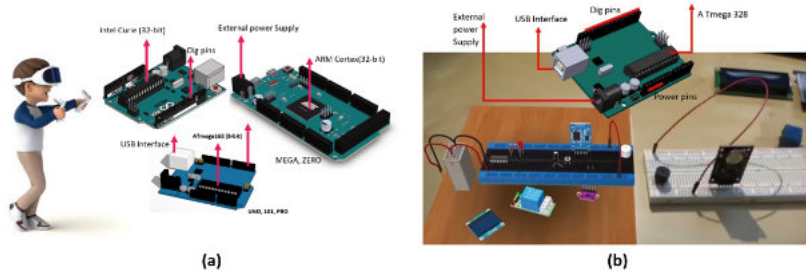

Figure 4: Principles of suggested two levels of educational immersive system

The use of immersive and smart technologies in education promises many benefits for learners and educators. However, many studies have shown that the success of every learning environment based on new technology depends on its design and integration in the learning process (Aljagoub & Webber, 2022). The proposed framework emerging from this study could present a holistic approach to integrating intelligent and immersive environments in engineering education, as shown in Figure 5.
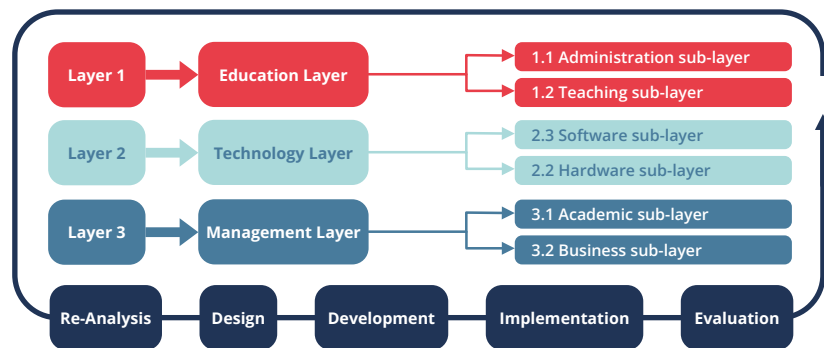

Figure 5: Suggested methodology for integrating smart and immersive environments in engineering education (Al-Kishali & Al-Juboori, 2003; Al-Juboori, 2012)

This approach would allow educators to examine the use of immersive technology from different angles. The framework deals with the interplay between the three layers – education, technology, and management – and emphasises how technology influences the traditional instructional design and management processes (Figure 5). In other words, the presented framework builds on the educational life cycle, which can help provide a structure and guidelines for educators to plan and implement an educational programme based on immersive and smart technologies.

REFERENCES

Aljagoub, R. and Webber, R. (2022) 'Integrating virtual reality (VR) into construction engineering and management (CEM) courses: A case study', *EPiC Series in Built Environment*, 3, 633–642.

Al–Juboori, H.M. (2012) 'Analytical study of GUI model for e–learning solutions', *International Journal of Reasoning-based Intelligent Systems*, 4(4), 204–208.

Al-Kishali M. and Al-Juboori, H.M. (2003) *An Experience in Community Service: Integrating Teaching and Research with Community Service*, 1st edition, pp. 568–587. UAE: University of Sharjah.

Gaskill, M. (2021) *Nine Ways We Use AR and VR on the International Space Station*. NASA Space Station Research.

Wirth, W., Hartmann, T., Böcking, S., Vorderer, P., Klimmt, C., Schramm, H., Saari, T., Laarni, J., Ravaja, N., Gouveia, F.R., and Biocca, F. (2007) 'A process model of the formation of spatial presence experiences', *Media Psychology*, 9(3), 493–525.

✳✳✳

U.S. Company Signify Health collaborates with University of Galway on new case study for Business syllabus

A case study examining the business strategy behind Signify Health's decision to open its first overseas hub in Galway is to become part of the syllabus for students based in third-level institutions around the globe.

Signify Health is a healthcare services company using advanced technology and data analytics to enable value-based care in the U.S. healthcare market.

Some 80 people in technology innovation roles have been recruited in Galway, with recruitment continuing. The team in Galway is creating tech solutions for some of the biggest challenges in the U.S. healthcare system.

Steps+: Developing a New Career Guidance Platform in Oberstown Children Detention Campus

Introduction

Oberstown is Ireland's national centre for the detention, care, and education of young people under 18 years referred by the courts on detention or remand orders. These young people usually face criminal charges of a serious or persistent nature. They often present with complex needs (Figure 1), including significant trauma histories of maltreatment, neglect, domestic violence, and familial substance misuse, often coupled with difficulties with mental health or speech and language, and challenging behaviour. In a recent study, 93% of participants reported exposure to three or more traumatic events (Ennis, 2023). Young people in Oberstown often require individualised and specialised multi-professional care and support.

School and educational attainment are important factors in determining whether a young person becomes involved in antisocial or criminal behaviour (Sutherland, 2011). Poor attendance or performance at school, and behaviour problems in the school environment, are influential on the pathway to youth offending in Ireland (Redmond, 2009; Oberstown, 2020). Early school exclusion is one of the strongest predictors, significantly associated with increased risk of involvement with drug abuse, antisocial behaviour, and further marginalisation in society (McCrystal et al., 2007). School exclusion before age 12 increases the odds of imprisonment by age 22 by a factor of four (McAra & McVie, 2010).

In line with legal requirements, Oberstown meets the needs of young people in relation to their care, education, health, offending behaviour, and preparation for leaving: the five elements of CEHOP®, the Oberstown model of care (Figure 2). Through a rights-based model, young

Bernadette Walsh
Guidance Counsellor and Researcher, CareersPortal

Dr Yvette Ennis
Steps+ Project Lead, Oberstown

Skills, Training, Education and Person-Centred Support Project (Steps+) is a new, innovative career guidance platform developed for the young people and staff in Oberstown Children Detention Centre. It was designed collaboratively with key stakeholders through a three-year action-research pilot project. This article describes the platform's development.

people participate in decision-making about their care, their lives, and the campus. Oberstown recognises the transformative power of education and its potential to affect the likelihood of positive outcomes for young people in conflict with the law. Many young people in Oberstown come with negative school experiences.
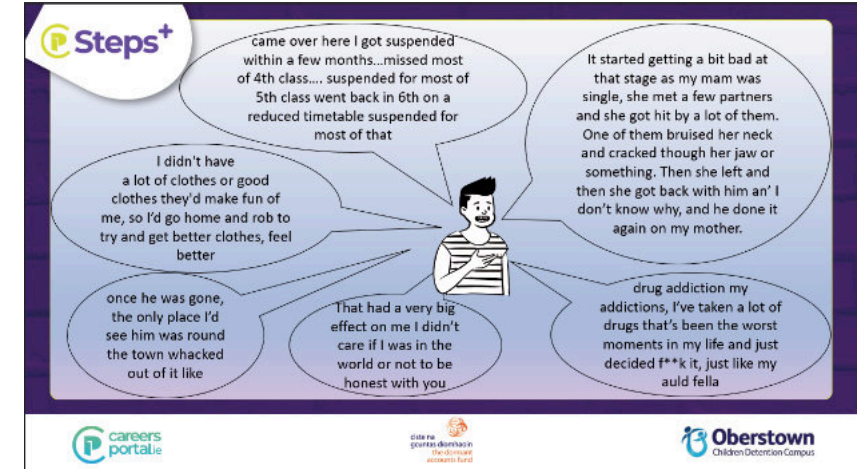

Figure 1: Voices of some young people

Oberstown knows that further education, training, and employment opportunities are significant in preventing further offending, so it collaborated with CareersPortal to develop Steps+, an inclusive careers education platform that aims to interrupt the pathway to a future cycle of offending.

Figure 2: CEHOP model
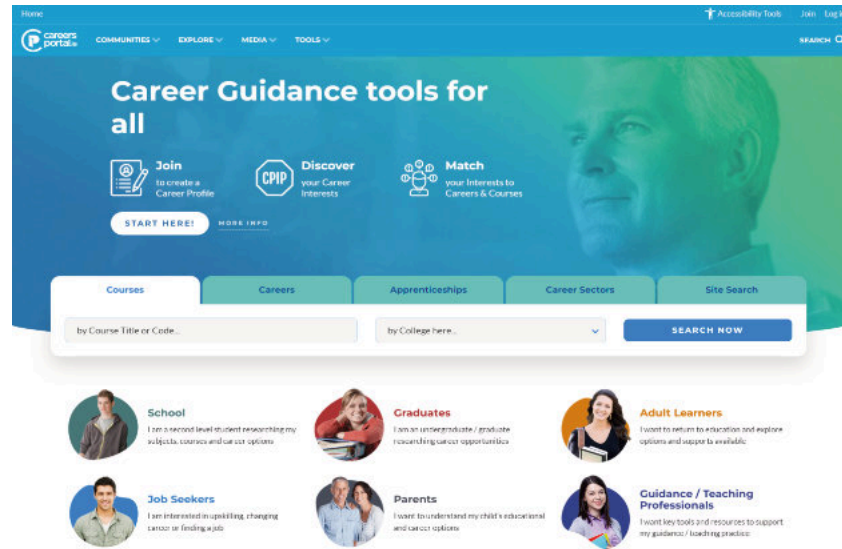
CareersPortal

Figure 3: Careersportal.ie website

Launched in 2008 by the Minister of Education, the CareersPortal.ie website is a national one-stop careers information portal, providing up-to-date and relevant information and resources to those needing or providing career guidance (Figure 3).

The site supports second- and third-level students, parents, adult learners, job seekers, and guidance and teaching professionals. CareersPortal collaborates with educational providers and key public and private organisations to include the most up-to-date labour-market information. The 33 most prominent industry sectors are profiled, integrating occupations, skills shortages, educational pathways, sector news, associated articles, videos, and live jobs.

The need emerged to develop bespoke career-guidance programmes. REACH+ is a senior cycle guidance programme, and MyFuture+ is integrated in further education and public employment services. They support guidance counsellors, career professionals, and educators to support their students, adult learners, clients, and jobseekers.

Steps+ project

With its expertise in developing tailor-made career guidance systems in a range of contexts, CareersPortal achieved Dormant Accounts Funding for a three-year pilot phased action-research project from April 2021 to March 2024. The

Skills, Training, Education and Person-Centred Support Project (Steps+) is a new, innovative career-guidance platform developed for the young people and staff in Oberstown. It aims to support young people to:

> *understand their options and different paths to work, to plan the steps they need to take, and to get from where they are to where they want to go; be inspired about new opportunities they might not have known about (or that might not exist yet), or thought they could not achieve; understand their own knowledge and skills and how they can be used in the workplace; get, hold and progress in a job, whatever their age, ability or background; increase the amount they earn across their working lives; improve their well-being through doing a job they are good at and enjoy. (DfE, 2017, p.5)*

Oberstown strives to ensure that young people are supported to move away from offending behaviour and to make a more positive contribution to society.

Steps+ seeks to address the gap in appropriate career-guidance provision for the young people at Oberstown. Each young person is assigned a key worker: a residential social childcare worker who supervises them and gives them one-to-one guidance. Oberstown strives to ensure that young people are supported to move away from offending behaviour and to make a more positive contribution to society.

The CEHOP model adopted in Oberstown is holistic in response to young people's needs. The Steps+ platform aims to enhance this person-centred model to support the young people in their career learning and to access meaningful education and employment opportunities. ICT career-guidance-assisted systems can be effective in encouraging career learning and development, underpinned by models of career guidance (Walsh, 2016).

Developing Steps+

The project has been shaped and developed in response to the emerging needs of all stakeholders. An action-research approach was adopted in gathering feedback through consistent consultation with the young people and staff on campus, senior management, and parents and guardians. This has influenced next steps, new developments, and project activities throughout all phases. Researchers have consulted with over 100 staff and 70 young people to date. Action research entails collaborative self-evaluation, whereby practitioners reflect on their work and identify areas that need reconsideration and possible improvement in dialogue with others (Darbey et al., 2013).

It became evident at an early stage that there was a need for strengths-based career assessments that built confidence, self-esteem, and meaningful opportunities for the young people to establish viable career-progression pathways.

As this new programme has evolved, the development team have taken an innovative approach to accommodate the diverse needs of young people on campus. The platform has accessibility tools that allow the young people to change the integrated activities into any language, use voice-to-text features for literacy challenges, and other tools that support differing abilities, including auditory and visual challenges.

Gysbers (2013) writes that career-ready young people have the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to map and plan for their futures. Steps+ is an opportunity for these young people to look at their options and consider next steps that they previously may have struggled to be ready for and to access.

The project also showcases the important work of the campus and the careers on offer in Oberstown. On 11 October 2023 the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) hosted an information day on funded projects on campus, including Steps+ (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Steps+ development and research team with Minister O'Gorman at DCEDIY Steps+ information day

The project is being extended because of its succcess to date, and because of the need to examine how it can best support young people to transition successfully from Oberstown. The next phase involves developing features to provide access to online training, a repository for young people's certificates and CVs, career-assessment results, and so on, to support them on their career journey.

A new pilot research project aims to support up to 18 young people as they transition from Oberstown, irrespective of their legal status. It is aligned to the strategic objectives of Oberstown (Oberstown, 2022–2026) and Youth Justice Strategy (Department of Justice, 2021–2027). It is envisaged that this project will inform future policy on education with youths who are in conflict with the law.

REFERENCES

Darbey, L., McNiff, J., and Fields, P. (2013) *Evidence-Based Handbook: Guidance Case Studies*. National Centre for Guidance in Education.

Department for Education (DfE) (2017) *Careers Strategy: Making the most of everyone's skills and talents*. www.gov.uk/government/publications/careers-strategy-making-the-most-of-everyones-skills-and-talents.

Department of Justice (2021–2027) *Youth Justice Strategy*. Dublin: Government of Ireland.

Ennis, Y. (2023) 'The role of victimisation and trauma on offending behaviour in male adolescents in a secure institution in Ireland'. Thesis, University of Nottingham.

Gysbers, N.C. (2013) 'Career-ready students: A goal of comprehensive school counseling programs', *Career Development Quarterly*, 61(3), 283–288.

McAra, L. and McVie, S. (2010) 'Youth crime and justice: Key messages from the Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime', *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, 10(2), 179–209.

McCrystal, P., Percy, A., and Higgins, K. (2007) 'Exclusion and marginalisation in adolescence: The experience of school exclusion on drug use and antisocial behaviour', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 10(1), 35–54.

Oberstown Children Detention Campus (2020) *Annual Report 2019*. Lusk, Dublin: Oberstown.

Oberstown Children Detention Campus (2022–2026) *Our Strategy*. Lusk, Dublin: Oberstown.

Redmond, S. (2009) 'A baseline analysis of Garda Youth Diversion Projects: Considering complexities in understanding youth crime in local communities in Ireland', *Irish Probation Journal*, 6, 135–150.

Sutherland, A. (2011) 'The relationship between school and youth offending', *Social Policy Journal of New Zealand*, 37, 51–69.

Walsh, B.. (2016) 'ICT: Collaboration, innovation and integration. An action research study of the development of a new ICT career learning tool'. MEd thesis, Maynooth University.

Teaching as Creative Endeavour

An approach to foster positive wellbeing in education

Introduction

Wellbeing has garnered increasing attention internationally and nationally in the field of education, evidenced in Ireland by the publication of the Wellbeing Framework for Practice in 2018. While the stated vision of this policy focuses on promoting wellbeing in education, the high-level actions encourage schools to work in creative and innovative ways to identify and realise wellbeing in their organisations. However, of particular note is the absence of recognising or encouraging creativity as a conduit for wellbeing in our schools and classrooms across the continuum of education.

Creativity has been defined as the ability to produce new ideas and work (Sternberg & Lubart, 1999) through a sequence of thoughts and actions that result in novel approaches and production (Lubart, 2001). Robinson and Aronica (2016) suggested that it is 'the process of having original ideas that have value'; while imagination is the root of creativity, creativity is the putting to work of imagination.

Creativity is role-modelled and embedded in our schools through pedagogies and practices that develop the skills and competencies our children and young people require to be creative and innovative citizens contributing to the continuous (re)shaping of our society.

Creativity and wellbeing

This article draws on data from a qualitative research study (CreatEd) using semi-structured interviews conducted with 11 teachers working in primary and post-primary schools across Ireland. The main aim of the

Dr Deirdre McGillicuddy

Primary School Teacher and Assistant Professor in Education, University College Dublin

This article explores the role of creativity in fostering wellbeing across the continuum of education. It draws on findings from the CreatEd study to interrogate how creativity is defined and supported in education and the potentialities it presents for nurturing wellbeing across our school communities, particularly in supporting how young people understand who they are as citizens in an increasingly complex and globalised world.

CreatEd study was to explore the role of creativity in education. Wellbeing emerged from data analysis as one of the key themes.

Creativity was defined by participants as an 'expression of self', the process of creating 'something unique' that was of 'benefit to others', and of 'putting something into the world that wasn't there before'. It is interesting to note that teachers placed equal emphasis on creativity as process, as pedagogical approach, as they did on creativity as distinctively arts-based. Creativity was considered a key methodological approach to meeting children's needs by embracing individual forms of expression, while also contributing to enhancing student engagement, bringing learning to life and making it fun. Key characteristics of this approach included busy, noisy, active classrooms filled with pupils/students and teachers who are full of excitement and enthusiasm.

The symbiotic relationship between creativity and wellbeing identified by participants was of particular note. While some believed that positive wellbeing was essential to nurturing creativity, others suggested that creativity fostered positive wellbeing. Adopting creative pedagogical practices evoked strong psychosocial responses, 'sparking curiosity and happiness' and a sense of 'excitement in coming up with new ways of doing and learning'. This is especially important when contributing to the eudaimonic development of pupil/student wellbeing, with creativity perceived to play a critical role in allowing them to 'express self and feelings' as they come to understand their true selves in the world around them.

Some believed that positive wellbeing was essential to nurturing creativity, others suggested that creativity fostered positive wellbeing.

Connection

The world's longest-running longitudinal lifecourse study, the Harvard Study of Adult Development, identified a strong correlation between relationships and wellbeing, with positive relationships significantly contributing to happier, healthier, and longer lives. Participants in the CreatEd study identified creativity as a really effective and impactful way to build and nurture relationships in the classroom both between peers and between educators and pupils/students. It was seen as a way to 'build trust between student and teacher' to 'enable creativity through connection'.

Such connection through creativity allowed everyone to 'get to really know each other and have fun', which contributed directly to 'breaking down barriers and enhancing communication'. Indeed, one participant suggested that to ensure a 'creative journey, there's a trust element there between teacher and students and building that kind of relationship to really allow a creative space to happen in the classroom'. The potential of creativity to nurture positive relationships between teachers and pupils/students cannot be overstated, particularly when considering the importance of positive wellbeing for all members of school communities.

Leadership and growth

Teacher agency and school leadership were identified by participants as key drivers in creating environments conducive to facilitating creative approaches and pedagogical practices. It was argued that it is critical to give teachers the freedom to be creative in their approaches to teaching and learning, supporting and fostering creativity in our education system. One participant said that a key aspect of realising creativity in our schools is recognising and valuing creative practice. School leadership and national policy were identified as crucial in realising such an aspiration. Creativity was said to contribute positively to school improvement, but 'confident and secure leadership' was required to allow for freedom – 'and you need to know that you're supported by your school leader to deliver that bit of creativity'.

If play is 'the free expression of what is in a child's soul' (Froebel, 1826), creativity creates places, spaces, opportunities, approaches, and methodologies through which children and young people can explore who they are as citizens in the world, developing their sense of true self; it thereby contributes positively to their sense of wellbeing. Indeed, teaching is a creative endeavour, encompassing transformative possibilities for our teachers and pupils/students, especially in fostering positive wellbeing and sense of self in education and beyond. In an increasingly complex and globalised world, it is incumbent upon us to prepare our children and young people to respond in creative ways.

Creativity creates places, spaces, opportunities, approaches, and methodologies through which children and young people can explore who they are as citizens in the world, developing their sense of true self.

REFERENCES

Froebel, F. (1826) *Froebel's Chief Writings on Education*, tr. S.S.F. Fletcher and J. Welton (1912). London: Edward Arnold.

Lubart, T.I. (2001) 'Models of the creative process: Past, present and future', *Creativity Research Journal*, 13(3–4), 295–308. DOI: 10.1207/S15326934CRJ1334_07

Robinson, K. and Aronica, L. (2016) *Creative Schools: The Grassroots Revolution that's Transforming Education*. New York: Penguin Books.

Sternberg, R.J. and Lubart, T.I. (1999) 'The concept of creativity: Prospects and paradigms'. In: R.J. Sternberg (Ed.) *Handbook of Creativity*, pp. 3–15. Cambridge University Press.

Examining the Post–School Decision–Making and Self–Determination of Disabled Young Adults in Ireland

Introduction

The end of compulsory education is a moment when students' life trajectories, which in many ways have been shared through primary and second-level schooling, profoundly diverge. Our research explores how disabled students experience decision-making at this critical juncture.

While disabled young people have made gains in post-secondary education and employment outcomes over time, gaps persist (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Carroll, McCoy, & Mihut 2022), particularly for students with socio-emotional difficulties (Carroll, Ye, & McCoy, 2022). Disabled youth remain less likely to attain and maintain competitive, integrated employment or to pursue post-secondary education to prepare for long-term careers (Newman & Madaus, 2015; Chatzitheochari & Platt, 2019).

These gaps have been linked to individual characteristics as well as home- and school-related factors. School-based interventions aimed at reducing these gaps by increasing self-determination and transition skills (Gothberg et al., 2019; Lindsay et al., 2019; Lindstrom et al., 2020; Lombardi et al., 2022) have shown promise in decreasing achievement gaps, but less effectiveness in increasing quality of life (Levy et al., 2020).

Using evidence from Growing Up in Ireland, the national longitudinal study of children, our research traces the multifaceted influences on self-determination over the life course, examining the role of early educational experiences, parental expectations, economic vulnerability, school context, and educational supports.

Keyu Ye
Research Assistant, Economic and Social Research Institute

Selina McCoy
Head of Education Research, Economic and Social Research Institute

There is a dearth of research on how disabled young adults reflect on self-determination and post-school opportunities, and how school context shapes these. This article reports on a study of decision-making at this critical juncture. It shows that self-determination and decision-making are systemic phenomena, and certain risk factors tend to appear together. It makes recommendations for schools to ensure that all young adults can make self-determined choices and are prepared for post-school life.

Results

Despite the generally positive response to schools fostering self-determination skills, there are wide gaps between students with and without special educational needs (SEN) or disabilities, with disabled students expressing less positivity about school developing their self-determination skills.

Our analysis reveals systematic gaps between and among disabled and non-disabled students – some displaying strong self-determination and others conveying constrained decision-making. In particular, students facing social, emotional, or behavioural challenges are consistently less likely to feel that their decision-making was supported at school, also found in earlier research (Carter et al., 2006; Carroll, Ye, and McCoy, 2022).

Significant gender differences emerged, with girls being less positive about their self-determination skills developed at school. Globally, research findings are mixed on the influence of gender on self-determination competencies. Some studies do not find gender a significant predictor (Abery & Stancliffe, 2003; Garrett, 2010), while others identify specific challenges that girls encounter in exercising self-determination (Wehmeyer & Lawrence, 1995; Trainor, 2005).

In addition, certain key school-related factors strongly influence students' development of self-determination skills. Students who displayed positive school engagement and had better academic performance tended to be more positive about their school supporting them to make decisions for themselves. Conversely, more constrained decision-making was found among students who reported greater conflict with teachers and those with higher school absence.

Students' development of self-determination skills is also closely associated with entry to higher education (HE). Compared to those who attended HE, students in any form of education are much less likely to feel that their school supported their development of self-determination skills. The relatively negative experiences of students following paths other than HE might reflect a traditional perception that further education was, at least up to recently, considered a 'second-best' option compared to HE.

On the other hand, our analysis shows that positive interactions with teachers act as a protective factor, and an enhanced self-concept may also increase decision-making agency. In particular, those with higher academic self-image scores were more likely to feel that their self-determination skills were cultivated at school.

When considering family resources, students who are economically vulnerable also tend to experience more limited decision-making opportunities.

Significant gender differences emerged, with girls being less positive about their self-determination skills developed at school.

Discussion

We address a significant research gap in examining the processes shaping decision-making for young people with different types of disability. After accounting for proximal processes and personal and contextual characteristics, we assess the potential associations between disability status and disability type with post-school self-determination and decision-making.

Approaching these results through a bio-ecological lens, we can see that self-determination and decision-making are systemic phenomena, and that disabled students were more likely to experience cumulative risk factors shown to impact on early school leaving and post-school opportunities. The results illustrate how post-school decision-making both reflects and contributes to social stratification.

It is imperative that schools value and teach skills to ensure that all students are college- and career-ready while they are still in school, in line with research by Lombardi et al. (2022). In this context, reforms to streamline and facilitate the transition from further education and training to higher education are particularly important. Other potential areas for policy in school and post-school settings are identified, particularly in the development of self-determination skills.

REFERENCES

Abery, B.H. and Stancliffe, R.J. (2003) 'An ecological theory of self-determination: Theoretical foundations'. In: M.L. Wehmeyer, B.H. Abery, D.E. Mithaug, and R.J. Stancliffe (Eds.) *Theory in Self-Determination: Foundations for Educational Practice*. Charles C. Thomas Publisher.

Blackorby, J. and Wagner, M. (1996) 'Longitudinal postschool outcomes of youth with disabilities: Findings from the National Longitudinal Transition Study', *Exceptional Children*, 62(5), 399–413.

Carroll, E., McCoy, S., and Mihut, G. (2022) 'Exploring cumulative disadvantage in early school leaving and planned post-school pathways among those identified with special educational needs in Irish primary schools', *British Educational Research Journal*, 48(6), 1065–1082. DOI: 10.1002/berj.3815

Carroll, E., Ye, K., and McCoy, S. (2022) 'Educationally maintained inequality? The role of risk factors and resilience at 9, 13 and 17 in disabled young people's post-school pathways at 20', *Irish Educational Studies*, 41(3). DOI: 10.1080/03323315.2022.2093257

Carter E.W., Lane, K., Pierson, M.R., and Glaeser, B. (2006) 'Self-determination skills and opportunities of transition-age youth with emotional disturbance and learning disabilities', *Exceptional Children*, 72(3), 333–346. DOI: 10.1177/0014402906072003

Chatzitheochari, S. and Platt, L. (2019) 'Disability differentials in educational attainment in England: Primary and secondary effects', *British Journal of Sociology*, 70(2), 502–525.

Garrett, B.A. (2010) 'Improving transition domains by examining self-determination proficiency among gender and race of secondary adolescents with specific learning disabilities'. Dissertation, Kansas State University. http://hdl.handle.net/2097/6819.

Gothberg, J.E., Greene, G., and Kohler, P.D. (2019) 'District implementation of research-based practices for transition planning with culturally and linguistically diverse youth with disabilities and their families', *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals,* 42(2), 77–86.

Levy, B.B., Song, J.Z., Luong, D., Perrier, L., Bayley, M.T., Andrew, G., and Munce, S.E. (2020) 'Transitional care interventions for youth with disabilities: A systematic review', *Pediatrics,* 146(5).

Lindsay, S., Lamptey, D.L., Cagliostro, E., Srikanthan, D., Mortaji, N., and Karon, L. (2019) 'A systematic review of post-secondary transition interventions for youth with disabilities', *Disability and Rehabilitation,* 41(21), 2492–2505.

Lindstrom, L., DeGarmo, D., Khurana, A., Hirano, K., and Leve, L. (2020) 'Paths 2 the Future: Evidence for the efficacy of a career development intervention for young women with disabilities', *Exceptional Children*, 87(1), 54–73.

Lombardi, A.R., Rifenbark, G.G., Rogers, H.J., Swaminathan, H., Taconet, A., Mazzotti, V.L., Morningstar, M.E., Wu, R., and Langdon, S. (2022) 'Establishing construct validity of a measure of adolescent perceptions of college and career readiness', *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals.* DOI: 10.1177/21651434221081229

Newman, L.A. and Madaus, J.W. (2015) 'An analysis of factors related to receipt of accommodations and services by post-secondary students with disabilities', *Remedial and Special Education*, 36, 208–219. DOI: 10.1177/0741932515572912

Trainor, A.A. (2005) 'Self-determination perceptions and behaviors of diverse students with LD during the transition planning process', *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 38, 233–249. DOI: 10.1177/002221940503800305

Wehmeyer, M. and Lawrence, M. (1995) 'Whose future is it anyway? Promoting student involvement in transition planning', *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals,* 18(2). DOI: 10.1177/088572889501800202

Lifestyle medicine (LM) is an emerging branch of medicine with a focus on preventing and managing non-communicable diseases through evidence-based lifestyle interventions and education (ACLM, 2022).

When the Mind Meets the Body
Health and wellbeing for schools

Most risk factors for developing non-communicable diseases, such as diabetes and heart disease, are established during adolescence. Urgent action is required to prevent the premature death of this cohort in Ireland as a result. We conducted a quasi-experiment combining positive psychology and lifestyle medicine to help students improve their sleep, nutrition, stress management, and physical activity. Here we reflect on our findings and the implications for school wellbeing policy and practice.

Jolanta Burke
Senior Lecturer, Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland

Padraic J. Dunne
Senior Lecturer, Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland

Annemarie Doran
Assistant Professor, Lecturer in Education, Hibernia College

Introduction

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2021), 72% of annual global death is attributable to non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as diabetes, heart disease, stroke, lung disease, certain cancers, and mental health disorders. Almost 70% of risk factors for developing NCDs (smoking and alcohol consumption, drug use, poor diet, lack of physical activity) are established during adolescence (Akseer et al., 2020).

At the same time, the Growing Up in Ireland longitudinal study identified a worrying lifestyle trend in young people in Ireland (McNamara et al., 2020). Almost half of their 17–18-year-old cohort had smoked cigarettes, a third had tried e-cigarettes, and 30% had used cannabis. According to the WHO screening tool, 89% of youths consumed alcohol, with 36% reporting risky drinking behaviour; 20% were overweight; 8% were obese; 17% reported self-harming; and 10% reported anxiety and/or depression.

According to a recent report, 61% of Irish residents aged 15–24 met the weekly recommended guidelines for physical activity (71% of males, 51% of females) (Healthy Ireland, 2019). Young people spend almost 6 hours of a weekday sitting (ibid.). Urgent action is thus required to prevent the premature death of current post-primary students in Ireland.

Lifestyle medicine

Lifestyle medicine (LM) is an emerging branch of medicine with a focus on preventing and managing non-communicable diseases through evidence-based lifestyle interventions and education (ACLM, 2022). It focuses on six pillars of health: eating healthy food, regular physical activity, adequate sleep, stress management, avoiding risky substances (alcohol, tobacco, illicit drugs), and cultivating positive relationships.

LM-based interventions that support lifestyle changes have been shown to prevent – and in some cases reverse – NCDs such as type 2 diabetes and heart disease (Bodai et al., 2018). Adolescents have specific needs in relation to LM pillars compared with adults. For example, it is recommended that adolescents get 8–10 hours of quality sleep each night (Hirshkowitz et al., 2015), and engage in 60 minutes of moderate physical activity daily and three days of strength-based exercise weekly (WHO, 2020).

Taking all this into consideration, we conducted a quasi-experiment with 176 students aged 12–20 in post-primary schools, combining positive psychology and LM tools to help them improve sleep, nutrition, stress management, and physical activity (Burke et al., forthcoming). Positive psychology is a science of wellbeing (Burke, 2021). It explores positive subjective experiences (e.g., flow, positive relationships, psychological richness), positive individual traits (e.g., curiosity, kindness, forgiveness), and how organisations and groups, including schools and workplaces, can facilitate positive experiences. Combining LM with positive psychology can tap into optimal functioning of the body and mind. We refer to this approach as positive health (O'Boyle et al., 2023).

Activities used in the four-week experiment were sampled from over 100 research-based positive-health tools compiled by academics at the University of Medicine and Health Sciences, Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (Burke et al., forthcoming). We integrated some activities with each other by ensuring that body and mind were represented throughout. For example, instead of asking young people to eat well, we asked them to perform three acts of kindness to their body and eat well or reflect at the end of the day on the three good things they ate, thus combining kindness and gratitude with nutrition. Instead of asking them to engage in sleep hygiene, we asked them to write down, before going to bed, three funny things that happened to them that day or to vividly imagine three positive events that could happen the next day. This combined sleep hygiene with positive psychological concepts of humour and positive prospecting.

Almost 70% of risk factors for developing NCDs (smoking and alcohol consumption, drug use, poor diet, lack of physical activity) are established during adolescence (Akseer et al., 2020).

Lifestyle medicine (LM) focuses on six pillars of health: eating healthy food, regular physical activity, adequate sleep, stress management, avoiding risky substances (alcohol, tobacco, illicit drugs), and cultivating positive relationships.

Results and conclusion

The results showed that combining positive psychology and LM interventions was more effective at improving young people's wellbeing and many aspects of their health than engaging with pure LM interventions such as exercise, probiotic food, or sleep hygiene. The experiment took place halfway through the school year, which adversely affected all students' wellbeing. However, the students who participated in the experiment reported the smallest decline compared to the control group. This finding is in line with our research with adults, which showed that people who flourish psychologically are nine times more likely to use the six pillars of LM than those who languish (Burke & Dunne, 2022).

While the interventions effectively improved psychological and emotional wellbeing, participants who practised a combination of interventions reported a decline in their satisfaction with sleep. This may have been due to having 'too much of a good thing'. In our previous research, we highlighted that the mechanisms for engaging in body-and-mind interventions differ between psychological wellbeing and health practice (ibid.). Thus, schools cannot assume that introducing any wellbeing and health interventions for their students will have a positive outcome on all aspects of their body and mind.

Wellbeing interventions, ironically, can harm young people's wellbeing (Burke, 2021), and there are programmes currently implemented in Irish schools that have not been empirically assessed. Thus, care needs to be taken with the dosage and content of interventions when implementing them. Also, psychological interventions are not enough to improve students' wellbeing. Alternative interventions need to be designed and validated that combine body and mind to create a healthier future society. Finally, it is important to measure not only the psychological outcomes of these programmes but also their impact on the body, as it may differ. Only then can we truly contribute to growing a healthy generation free from non-communicable disease.

REFERENCES

American College of Lifestyle Medicine (ACLM) (2022) 'What is lifestyle medicine?' Chesterfield, Missouri: ACLM. https://lifestylemedicine.org/.

Akseer, N., Mehta, S., Wigle, J., Chera, R., Brickman, Z. J., Al-Gashm, S., . . . and Bhutta, Z.A. (2020) 'Non-communicable diseases among adolescents: Current status, determinants, interventions and policies', *BMC Public Health*, 20(1), 1908. DOI: 10.1186/s12889-020-09988-5

Bodai, B.I., Nakata, T.E., Wong, W.T., Clark, D.R., Lawenda, S., Tsou, C., . . . and Campbell, T.M. (2018) 'Lifestyle medicine: A brief review of its dramatic impact on health and survival', *Permanente Journal*, 22(1), 17–25. DOI: 10.7812/tpp/17-025

Burke, J. (2021) *The Ultimate Guide to Implementing Wellbeing Programmes for School*. Routledge.

Burke, J. and Dunne, P.J. (2022) 'Lifestyle medicine pillars as predictors of psychological flourishing', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 963806. DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2022.963806

Burke, J., Dunne, P., Meehan, T., O'Boyle, C., and van Nieuwerburgh, C. (2022) *Positive Health: 100+ Research-Based Positive Psychology and Lifestyle Medicine Tools for Enhancing Wellbeing.* Routledge.

Burke, J., Dunne, J.P., and Doran, A. (forthcoming) 'When body meets the mind at school: A quasi-experiment pilot for health and wellbeing in post-primary schools in Ireland'.

Healthy Ireland (2019) *Healthy Ireland Summary Report 2019.* Dublin: Government of Ireland. https://assets.gov.ie/41141/e5d6fea3a59a4720b081893e11fe299e.pdf.

Hirshkowitz, M., Whiton, K., Albert, S.M., Alessi, C., Bruni, O., DonCarlos, L., . . . and Adams Hillard, P.J. (2015) 'National Sleep Foundation's sleep time duration recommendations: Methodology and results summary', *Sleep Health,* 1(1), 40–43. DOI: 10.1016/j.sleh.2014.12.010

McNamara, E., Murphy, D., Murray, A., Smyth, E., and Watson, D. (2020) *Growing Up in Ireland: The Lives of 17/18-Year-Olds.* Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute; Trinity College Dublin; and Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

O'Boyle, C.A., Lianov, L., Burke, J., Frates, B., and Boniwell, I. (2023) 'Positive health: An emerging new construct'. In: J. Burke, I. Boniwell, B. Frates, L. Lianov, and C.A. O'Boyle (Eds.) *The Routledge International Handbook of Positive Health.* Routledge.

Seligman, M.E.P. and Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000) 'Positive psychology: An introduction', *American Psychologist,* 55(1), 5–14. DOI: 10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.5

World Health Organisation (WHO) (2020) *WHO Guidelines on Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour.* Geneva: WHO. www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK566045/.

World Health Organisation (WHO) (2021) *Noncommunicable Diseases (Key Facts).* Geneva: WHO. www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/noncommunicable-diseases.

* * *

Aaron Maloney of the Technological University of the Shannon (TUS) was awarded the Jane Grimson Medal of Excellence as the top-ranked postgraduate researcher in the STEM category under the Irish Research Council Government of Ireland awards.

Organisational Psychology in Education Settings
A catalyst for optimising human potential

Introduction

Learning is a lifelong journey, percolating to our innermost core, shaping and defining our unfolding as mature, caring beings, loved and loving, sharing and giving, dreaming and hoping, building and innovating, while passing on the torch to our young as an extension of ourselves, an expression of spirit living on. (Hand-Campbell, 2017)

Teresa Hand-Campbell
Director, Total Human Capital Consultancy Ltd

Education is a natural home of organisational psychology in action. This article outlines the benefits of this approach and the various models of organisational psychology that may be applied in an educational setting.

Work psychology has gained new impetus across every sector post-Covid-19, as incessant change, uncertainty, and unpredictability have become synonymous with the emerging world of work and the traditions of fitting the job to the person and the person to the job.

Education and its links with all other disciplines are often overlooked as the true home of work psychology in action – psychological assessment at work; learning, training, and development; leadership, engagement, and motivation; wellbeing and work; work design, change, and development. Equality, diversity, and inclusion, and gender, fairness, and justice permeate each area, the seeds of which are sown in education establishments both as workplaces and as centres of human formation. Has organisational psychology, applied to educational contexts, finally come home?

This short article addresses this question, grounding workplace dynamics in established theories and culminating in a model for action in the modern work setting.

Organisational psychology: benefits and models

Organisational psychology, when applied to educational contexts, can foster workplace synergies and optimise human potential. An organisational psychologist's primary goal is to enhance workplace performance, productivity, and wellbeing by understanding and optimising the organisation's interactions and dynamics.

Among the many areas pursued are: team collaboration, leadership development, conflict resolution, diversity and inclusion, employee engagement, communication, change management, work–life balance, performance appraisals and feedback, psychological safety, organisational culture, employee wellbeing programmes, talent management, performance metrics, and application of research and data analysis to identify trends and patterns in the organisation while providing evidence-based insights for decision-making and intervention planning.

Supporting research provides a theoretical foundation for understanding and implementing strategies towards optimising human potential in educational institutions, across staff, key stakeholders, and students. The literature on organisational culture emphasises the importance of shared values, beliefs, and norms. Applying these to an educational setting involves cultivating a positive and inclusive culture that promotes and supports everyone's wellbeing and potential.

Schein's model of organisational culture (2010) can guide interventions to shape and align the culture with the educational institution's mission and goals. Droichead, for instance, is an ideal vehicle through which seasoned educators ensure the transfer of skills, knowledge (including systems knowledge), and organisational aspirations to onboarding educators.

Hackman and Oldham's job characteristics model (cited in Kass et al., 2011) is pertinent in this context. It posits that certain job characteristics such as skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback lead to higher motivation and job satisfaction and enhanced performance. In an educational setting, applying this model may involve redesigning roles to give educators more meaningful and challenging tasks; their enhanced motivation and satisfaction improve productivity, quality of delivery, and student receptiveness.

The importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in promoting intrinsic motivation is emphasised in Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory (2017). Creating a supportive environment that facilitates teachers' autonomy in decision-making, opportunities for professional development, and positive relationships among staff can increase motivation and engagement while minimising conflict and its detrimental effects. Because 'learning hoarded is

An organisational psychologist's primary goal is to enhance workplace performance, productivity, and wellbeing by understanding and optimising the organisation's interactions and dynamics.

Transformational leaders inspire and motivate followers, encouraging them to put aside their own interests for the collective good.

growth denied', sharing learning through strategically planned 'pop-ups' at staff meetings ensures the relevance and vitality of the learning community that is any education setting.

The transformational leadership theory introduced by Bass and Avolio (1990) is highly relevant in educational leadership. Transformational leaders inspire and motivate followers, encouraging them to put aside their own interests for the collective good. This leadership style opens avenues for creating a vision that resonates with educators, provides intellectual stimulation, and offers individualised support, allowing for the optimisation of human potential in the organisation.

How do people derive their sense of self from group membership? Social identity theory posits that understanding and leveraging social identities can be pivotal in building a positive organisational culture (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). Encouraging a shared sense of identity among educators and staff can foster a collaborative and supportive environment, contributing to workplace synergies. The cohesiveness achieved through working towards a common goal is inestimable.

Goal-setting theory suggests that establishing specific and challenging goals can lead to enhanced performance when accompanied by appropriate feedback and commitment (Locke & Latham, 2013). Such strategies can be used by administrators to enhance teachers' performance and encourage professional development while aligning individual and organisational goals.

Human learning and behaviour change lie at the heart of education. Bandura's social cognitive theory (2012) highlights the role of observational learning and modelling in behavioural change, applicable to both educator and student. Human functioning, he writes, may be viewed through the triad of personal, behavioural, and environmental interactions. Key variables from this dynamic in an education setting include self-efficacy, outcome expectations, self-control, and reinforcements. Applying this theory involves creating opportunities for educators and students alike to observe and learn from each other, fostering a culture of continuous improvement and skill development.

Theory into action

Putting theory into action is pivotal to developing successful interventions in organisational settings. One investigation (Hand-Campbell, 2013) extends Karasek and Theorell's demands-control model (1990) and the job demands–resources model of stress and engagement (Demerouti et al., 2001) while seeking to identify the stressors reported by 65 principals of Irish voluntary secondary schools. Principals who experience considerable strain yet remain engaged use the personal resource of *job crafting*: 'the self-initiated changes

that employees make in their own job demands and job resources to attain/ optimise their personal (work) goals' (Tims et al., 2012, p.173). The two-way flow between resources and engagement was deemed central to stress reduction.

The key to heightened understanding lies in finding the crossovers between the personal, professional, and organisational. 'Wired for Success' is one such training programme devised by the author at THC Consult and aimed at both leaders and their followers. The unifying role of emotional intelligence, fit, agility, and trust helps self-awareness and organisational awareness in any work setting.

In conclusion, the place of organisational psychology in the education setting is undeniable, as is its potential to strategically optimise human potential and enable workplace synergies. By drawing on and applying existing and emerging frameworks, such as those outlined in this article, educational institutions can create environments that promote motivation, engagement, collaboration, and continuous development: a solid foundation for the growth of future generations in formation.

REFERENCES

Bandura, A. (2012) 'Social cognitive theory'. In: P.A.M. Van Lange, A.W. Kruglanski, and E.T. Higgins (Eds.) *Handbook of Theories of Social Psychology*, pp. 349–373. Sage.

Bass, B.M. and Avolio, B.J. (1990) 'Developing transformational leadership: 1992 and beyond', *Journal of European Industrial Training*. ISSN0309-0590.

Demerouti, E., Bakker, A.B., Nachreiner, F., and Schaufeli, W.B. (2001) 'The job demands–resources model of burnout', *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 86, 499–512.

Hand-Campbell, T. (2013) 'Linking demands, resources and engagement to principals' levels of stress and strain in Irish voluntary secondary schools'. Master's thesis, University of Leicester.

Hand-Campbell, T. (2017) *An Inheritance Celebrated*. The Manuscript Publisher.

Karasek, R. and Theorell, T. (1990) *Healthy Work: Stress, Productivity and the Reconstruction of Working Life*. New York: Basic Books.

Kass, J., Vodanovich, S.J., and Khosravi, J.V. (2011) 'Applying the job characteristics model to the college education experience', *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 11(4), 56–68.

Locke, E.A. and Latham, G.P. (2013) 'Goal setting theory, 1990'. In: E.A. Locke and G.P. Latham (Eds.) *New Developments in Goal Setting and Task Performance*, pp. 3–15. Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group. DOI: 10.4324/9780203082744

Ryan, R.M. and Deci, E.L. (2017) *Self-Determination Theory: Basic Psychological Needs in Motivation, Development and Wellness*. Guildford Press. DOI: 10.1521/978.14625/28806

Schein, E.H. (2010) *Organisational Culture and Leadership*, 4th edn. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Tajfel, H. and Turner, J.C. (2004) 'The social identity theory of intergroup behaviour'. In: J.T. Jost and J. Sidanius (Eds.) *Political Psychology: Key Readings*, pp. 276–293. Psychology Press. DOI: 10.4324/9780203505984-16

Tims, M., Bakker, A.B., and Derks, D. (2012) 'Development and validation of the job crafting scale', *Journal of Vocational Behaviour*, 80, 173–186.

434

IRELAND'S
EDUCATION
YEARBOOK
2023

IRELAND'S
EDUCATION
YEARBOOK
2023

435

Dublin City wins the 'Global Green City Award 2023'

Dublin City has been awarded the 'Global Green City Award 2023' by the Global Forum on Human Settlements during their 18th Annual Session of the Forum in Dubai, a COP28 associated event.

The 'Global Green City Award' has in the past been awarded to Vienna, Vancouver, Oakland, Curtiba, Nantes, Mannheim and Yokohoma.

The 2023 win brings Dublin City into a group of leader cities on the global stage outstanding for their commitment to sustainable urban development that is green, fair, smart, and transformative.

Dublin City Council's submission to the award was reviewed by a technical jury. The application was evaluated based on 85

Sabrina Dekker, Cllr Alison Gilliland and Derek Kelly accepting the award on behalf of Dublin City Council.

indicators in key areas that determined Dublin City's performance in areas such as Sustainable urban Development, Climate Action, Transport, and Nature based solutions.

Receiving the award on behalf of Dublin City Council, COP28 delegate Cllr Alison Gilliland said "Dublin is very proud to win the award. I very much acknowledge the climate change journey we are on, all of us across Dublin."

Chief Executive, Richard Shakespeare said: "This award marks a moment and signals that we need to continue the momentum and be global leaders."

Nazi Experimentation on Children and Its Effects on Research Ethics

Introduction

Medical experiments conducted on children in National Socialist Germany and other occupied territories during World War II were among the most horrifically unethical in the history of research. These experiments, which usually took place in concentration camps, formed part of a larger programme of trials inflicted on unwilling prisoners and other vulnerable disenfranchised groups, including children. The 'researchers' were distinguished university doctors who were lauded by the contemporary medical profession and who often lectured in the most prestigious universities and research institutes.

A direct link exists between this experimentation and current childcare research practice in third-level educational institutions internationally and in Ireland. The reasons that undergraduate and postgraduate students of childcare must perform the often arduous task of obtaining ethical approval from university ethics committees before beginning research involving children may be traced back directly to these events.

To highlight the depravity of this immoral and unethical behaviour, and to show the extent to which research regulation was required after the war, this article examines briefly some of the reasons the tests were carried out and outlines the various categories of experiment. It then explores various attempts to introduce and define regulation of the research profession after WWII.

Nazi experimentation

The Nazis believed that the 'Aryan' or German race was genetically superior to all others. Inferior peoples,

Vincent O'Connor
Technological University of the Shannon

A direct link exists between the experimentation carried out on children and other vulnerable groups in Nazi Germany and current research practice internationally, including in Ireland. This article outlines the emergence of research codes of ethics in the wake of the Nuremberg trials that took place after World War II.

foremost among them the Jews, would weaken the genetic strength of the Aryans and ultimately lead to their demise, if they were allowed to continue to interbreed with the racially pure Germans. Inferior races, the Nazis believed, were therefore *lebensunwürdig* – unworthy of life – and should be destroyed. Rather than murder the children of these races, the Nazis often deemed it more appropriate to use them to further medical research and, as they claimed, expand knowledge of genetics, heredity, racial distinctions, resistance to disease, survival of extreme conditions, and population control, among other things.

The experiments carried out on children included freezing, where children were placed in ice water or subjected to extremely cold temperatures to investigate how long they could survive before death. In others, children were intentionally contaminated with malaria and typhus to explore the effectiveness of new medications, inoculations, and treatments. Children were administered toxic substances such as poison gas, or injected with toxins, to determine levels of lethal dosage. To test the effectiveness of new methods of population control, toddlers were often subjected to sterilisation.

In Auschwitz concentration camp in 1943–1944, Dr Josef Mengele conducted experiments on twins and other children. He injected them with harmful chemicals and intentionally infected them with potentially fatal diseases. In Natzweiler-Struthof concentration camp in 1942–1943, Dr August Hirt conducted experiments on Jewish and Romani children to collect racial data and create anatomical specimens for Nazi propaganda campaigns. In Buchenwald concentration camp in 1944, Dr Kurt Heissmeyer conducted experiments on 20 Jewish children to test the effectiveness of a new and ultimately useless tuberculosis vaccine. These are just a few examples of Nazi experimentation on children and other human subjects. The full extent is not known, as many of the records were destroyed by the Nazis before the end of the war.

Codes and guidelines

The experiments on children in particular represented a gross violation of human rights and a complete disregard for the wellbeing and dignity of these young, vulnerable individuals. Many subjects died, and those who were fortunate enough to survive suffered greatly with lifelong health problems. Many of the Nazi doctors and researchers who conducted the experiments were later put on trial for war crimes. An important legacy of these experiments is that they perhaps serve to mark the importance of adopting ethical research practices and the need to protect the rights and welfare of all research participants, particularly children.

The Nazis believed that the 'Aryan' or German race was genetically superior to all others.

Inferior races, the Nazis believed, were unworthy of life and should be destroyed.

In November 1945, France, the Soviet Union, the UK, and the US established the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg to prosecute the principal Nazi war criminals. It presided over a collective trial of senior Nazis for war crimes and crimes against humanity. Several sets of trials were conducted, including trials of major war criminals, principal Nazi judges, leaders of various war ministries, and Nazi doctors. The trial of Nazi doctors concentrated on the medical professionals who conducted inhumane experiments on concentration camp inmates, including children.

When the extent of the depravity was revealed, a subcommittee of physicians, lawyers, and judges involved in the trials was appointed to establish a code of ethics to regulate all future research on human beings, particularly medical research. The Nuremberg Code was thus intended to prevent such atrocities from happening again.

The Code consists of 10 principles, from which subsequent ethical guidelines for research on human subjects were to be derived.[1] It refers specifically to medical experimentation but was gradually accepted worldwide as a foundation document in all disciplines. The principles include the necessity for researchers to:

» obtain informed consent
» design research whose results will prove beneficial to society in general
» avoid all unnecessary physical or mental harm to participants
» avoid any chance of death or injury
» ensure that the degree of risk to participants is outweighed by the likely benefits of the research
» prepare properly to produce a safe environment for participants
» be qualified to conduct the research
» inform the participants that they may call a halt to the research at any time.

Since 1947, other milestones in research ethics have been reached. The brevity of this article prevents anything other than a cursory mention of some major ones. The Declaration of Helsinki incorporated and expanded on the ethical principles of the Nuremberg Code and was adopted by the World Medical Association in 1964. It provided more detailed and comprehensive guidance for conducting research, and it has been revised several times. The most recent version was adopted in 2013.

In 1979, the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research in the US released the Belmont Report. It proposed a more nuanced set of ethical principles and guidelines for the protection of human subjects in research, emphasising respect for persons,

1. The Nuremberg Code can be read at the website of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-nuremberg-code

beneficence, and justice. In 1991, the US federal government implemented the Common Rule, which outlines the ethical principles and regulatory requirements for research involving human subjects. The Common Rule has been revised several times, with the most recent version being released in 2018.

Ethical research in Ireland

Recognition of the need for independent ethics review of research involving human subjects grew in the 1960s and 1970s. Most universities and research institutions now have ethics review committees to review research proposals and apply ethical standards. In Ireland, the Health Research Regulations 2018 govern the ethical rules for research involving humans. They aim to ensure that research is conducted in an ethical manner that respects the rights and welfare of participants. Some of the key ethical rules for research in Ireland include:

The experiments on children in particular represented a gross violation of human rights and a complete disregard for the wellbeing and dignity of these young, vulnerable individuals.

- » informed consent
- » confidentiality
- » submission of proposal to an ethics committee for review
- » inclusion of risk–benefit analysis
- » protection of data
- » protection of the rights of vulnerable groups such as children
- » reporting of adverse events.

The underlying principle of all milestones in ethical research regulation is identical to that contained in the Nuremberg Code: protection of the rights of all participants.

Childcare research students often assume that a repetition of barbaric experimentation on children is now impossible, due to the existence and pervasiveness of ethical regulation. This, of course, is untrue. Before the Nazis came to power in Germany in 1933 – in the land of such great liberal intellectuals as Bonhoeffer, Goethe, Schiller, and Von Humboldt – such grotesque abuse and flagrant disrespect of children's rights was unheard of and forbidden. Laws and regulations are only as good as the people charged with the responsibility of writing, enforcing, and upholding them. It is therefore incumbent on all liberal thinkers to ensure that the people they elect to make and interpret the law have a fundamental respect for the rights of children.