Being, Becoming and Beyond SPHE in Children and Young People's Lives

Proceedings from the 6th SPHE Network Conference
Marino Institute of Education, Dublin
11th November, 2023

Edited by
Barry Morrissey, Margaret Nohilly, Paul Knox,
Bernie Collins and Carol O'Sullivan

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Introduction

I am delighted to present the proceedings of the sixth SPHE Network conference entitled: *Being, Becoming and Beyond: SPHE in Children and Young People's Lives*, which took place on 11th November 2023 in Marino Institute of Education, Dublin.

Our sixth conference marked a significant moment for the SPHE Network as we returned to an in-person format for the first time since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The face-to-face connection, so central to the spirit of our community, was eagerly welcomed by many. At the same time, we embraced the lessons of the past few years by offering delegates the option to participate online, ensuring flexibility and accessibility for a broader audience. This hybrid approach allowed us to balance the benefits of personal interaction with the inclusivity afforded by virtual engagement. The *Being, Becoming and Beyond* theme provided a rich framework for exploring the evolving role of SPHE in the lives of children and young people. Through insightful paper presentations, interactive workshops, and thought-provoking panels, the conference fostered meaningful discussions about identity, relationships, personal development, healthy living and well-being across the life course.

Our two keynote speakers bookended our conference. Human rights activist, Colm O'Gorman, spoke candidly about his life experience and the importance of SPHE in creating a culture of acceptance, telling and of embracing diversity. He implored SPHE advocates to be brave in calling out injustice and in making society fairer for everyone. Leading academic, Prof Fionnuala Waldron, spoke on the importance of SPHE in what she terms 'the Age of Chaos'. Prof Waldron fleshes out her ideas in the first chapter in these proceedings.

This publication captures the breadth and depth of ideas shared during the conference, with a select number of chapters published to enlighten SPHE discourses. Dr Brighid Golden explores how we engage students as active citizens and conceptualises a 'framework for action' that schools and teachers can utilise. Dr Gerard Farrelly examines Restorative Practice (RP) as a way of being and argues that SPHE is the vehicle through which RP skills can be fostered. Dr Mia Treacy and Dr Margaret Nohilly provide us with empirical data from the mandated reporting experiences of Designated Liaison Persons in the Irish context, and highlight concerns around a reported lack of confidence. Ellen Corby and Oonagh O'Brien present a study exploring the use of participatory exercises in aiding young people's understanding of the complexities of sexual wellbeing and relationships. Finally, Rebecca Conlon and Hannah Dolan explore the sensitive issue of bereavement in the primary school classroom, and offer some valuable advice on how to approach it. This broad cross-section of topics illustrates clearly the range of areas covered by SPHE.

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to all the presenters, moderators, and participants who brought energy and insight to the conference. I am particularly grateful to the organising committee for their unwavering dedication in orchestrating a seamless experience across both in-person and online platforms. Special thanks are also due to the other members of the editorial team who showed great commitment in producing a high-quality publication: Bernie Collins, Margaret Nohilly, Carol O'Sullivan and Paul Knox.

Finally, I want to express my appreciation to the authors who submitted chapters for this publication, enriching the knowledge-base for ideas in SPHE. This publication is both a testament to the resilience and adaptability of the SPHE Network and a resource to inspire continued growth and collaboration in our shared mission.

I hope you find these proceedings both engaging and valuable as you advance your work in supporting the well-being and development of children and young people.

Dr Barry Morrissey
Editor and Chairperson of the SPHE Network

Biographies of Contributors

Dr Gerard Farrelly is a lecturer in the area of SPHE and the Course Leader of the MEd in the Leadership of Wellbeing in Education in Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. He is a former primary school teacher and teaching principal, and also a health and wellbeing advisor with PDST (Oide) for the Department of Education. Gerard has a particular interest in the areas of bullying, emotional and physical well-being, Relationships and Sexuality Education and child protection. He is a passionate advocate and trainer of Restorative Practice, which is used to help restore harmony when conflict and bullying arises, and to nurture and develop relationships in schools and communities. His doctoral research background is in the area of homophobic bullying in primary schools in Ireland and the response made by school leaders to this difficult and complex form of behaviour.

Dr Brighid Golden is an Assistant Professor in Global Citizenship Education (GCE) at Mary Immaculate College (MIC), Limerick. Brighid has represented MIC on the national Development and Intercultural Education (DICE) Project network since 2014. Brighid's core research interests explore the intersections between critical thinking and GCE.

Rebecca Conlon and Hannah Dolan are both primary school teachers with two years teaching experience. They have previously completed an undergraduate programme in Human Development in DCU. They then completed the Professional Masters of Education programme in Marino. They are currently teaching in large urban co-educational schools in Dublin.

Ellen Corby MSc. is a community outreach worker and sexuality educator from Dublin, Ireland. She graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Drama Studies with Modern Irish from Trinity College Dublin in 2016, and worked in the Arts for several years. In 2020 she graduated with a First Class Honours Master of Science degree in Global Health, majoring in Sexual and Reproductive Health, from the Institute of Global Health and Development at Queen Margaret University Edinburgh. She now works with people of all ages to empower them to make healthy, informed choices about their own health and wellbeing, and that of their community.

Oonagh O'Brien is an anthropologist and activist with expertise in gender and sexual and reproductive health. A lecturer at the Institute for Global Health and Development, she has over 35 years' experience working in health-related research, teaching and technical assistance. Her research interests have focussed on an intersectional rights-based approach to gender and sexual health. International work has included being a gender and social development advisor on a DfID groundwater protection project in Latin America and consultancy work on HIV and gender in South Africa, Uganda Nepal, Iraqi Kurdistan, and Europe.

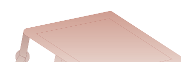
Dr Mia Treacy is a barrister and an Assistant Professor in educational policy at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. She is a former primary school principal during which time she was Designated Liaison Person for child protection. In addition to a Barrister at Law degree, she has completed an Advanced Diploma in Education and the Law and a Diploma in Legal Studies with the Honorable Society of King's Inns, Dublin. She was seconded to Department of Education support services for 11 years, during which time she was Deputy Director for Design and Research with the Professional Development Services for Teachers for 3 years. She was co-author of the recent research report

Primary Mathematics Curriculum: Consultation with Children which was commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. Her research interests include child protection, educational policy, pupil voice, initial teacher education, and teacher professional development.

Dr Margaret Nohilly lectures in SPHE and wellbeing at Mary Immaculate College. In 2011, Margaret completed her Doctorate in Education in the area of child protection. Her research interests include child protection, SPHE, wellbeing and policy in education. She was seconded to the Department of Education support services for 9 years, during which time she was Team Leader for the Health and Wellbeing team with the Professional Development Services for Teachers. She is the co-author of *Wellbeing in Schools Everyday: A whole-school approach to the practical implementation of Wellbeing* and of the recently published systematic literature on wellbeing that was commissioned by the National Council of Curriculum and Assessment. She is also Chair of the primary wellbeing development group in the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

Professor Fionnuala Waldron began her career as a primary teacher before joining the Education Department of St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, where she specialised in history education, social studies and teacher education. In 2005/5 she co-founded the Centre for Human Rights and Citizenship Education with Brian Ruane and Colm O Cuanachain (Amnesty Ireland). She later became Head of Education and Dean of the Faculty of Education in St Patrick's College. In 2016, she was appointed Cregan Professor of Teacher Education. She is currently a Professor Emerita of Dublin City University. Professor Waldron's areas of research and publication include history education, human rights and citizenship education and climate change education.

Dr Barry Morrissey is assistant professor at the School of Inclusive and Special Education in DCU and a member of the Centre for Inclusive Pedagogy. Formerly, principal of the Limerick School Project and an advisor with the Professional Development Service for Teachers, Barry has a strong interest in the social side of learning and promoting sustainable, long-term societal inclusion for persons with special educational needs.



Chapter 1

Children, Being and Becoming in an Age of Chaos: What Now for Education?

Fionnuala Waldron, Centre for Human Rights and Citizenship Education, Dublin City University

INTRODUCTION

The idea of children as being and *becoming* acknowledges them as social agents in the present, engaged in the construction of knowledge and of their world; importantly, it also recognises children as actively engaged in the construction of their future selves and future worlds as they negotiate their transitions to adulthood (Uprichard 2008). Recognising children as *becoming* within this framework is not a reversion to the old idea of children as adults-in-the-making that has historically underpinned much of education, and which sees children as less-than, or incompetent; nor does it confine children's agency to the present. Rather, to quote Uprichard:

> [It] extends the notion of agency offered by the 'being' discourse to consider the child as a social actor constructing his or her everyday life and the world around them, both in the present and the future.
>
> (Uprichard 2008, p. 311)

Recognising that change itself is intrinsic to human life across the age spans, it sees children as occupying dynamic spaces, beings of the present, active, capable, thinkers and doers, in constant flow and interaction with their future possibilities. As teachers, I believe we are privileged to witness and facilitate this negotiation and interaction between children's historic selves, current selves, emerging selves and future selves, the richness that is held in the present moment and the future promise continuously unfolding.

I started teaching in the early 1970s during a period of curricular change; the 'New Curriculum' as it was colloquially termed, was premised on the social constructivist, holistic ideology of child-centred education (CCE), which, for all its flaws (and there were many) changed child education in Ireland irrefutably for the better (Waldron 2004; Sugrue 1990). Having experienced the tyranny of 1950s and 60s classrooms, schools, in the best instances, had become sanctuaries where children could learn, interact, and play in a warm and welcoming environment, safe (again, in the best instances) from the harshness of the adult world. That was both its strength and its greatest weakness. The idea that children collectively exist in a space of safety and innocence uncontaminated by the world around them is both ahistorical and untenable, denying the socio-cultural, economic, political and personal contexts of children's lives. The growing rates of material and income poverty for children (Roantree *et al.* 2024), for example, is experienced every day in Irish classrooms, while recent reports into child sexual abuse demonstrate that, for too many children, Irish schools were and can be dangerous places (O'Toole 2024; Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2009). For children globally, while schools can serve as spaces of empowerment, opportunity, shelter and refuge, they can also be sites of conflict, destruction, violence, injury and death, as the ongoing bombardment of schools in Gaza demonstrates (United Nations 2024).

Individually and collectively, children are beings of and in the world, tethered to the historical past, the current context, and to a future that is both known and unknown, predictable and unpredictable at the same time. It is the case that children have had little say in the historical construction of our troubled present, or in the potentially dangerous and chaotic future ahead. That is not to say that they are without agency; I will come back to that. For now, though, we, as adults, bear that responsibility and it is one that we need to interrogate if we are to find the best way forward in terms of education.

This chapter argues the need for us, as teachers and educators, to think deeply about the context of our times, and to consider critically how that should be made manifest in education. What kind of education will best support children to face the unfolding chaos? How can we facilitate them in constructing a hopeful future? Drawing on my own, and colleagues, research over the past two decades and on recent literature in the field I will address three key questions to help structure what is inevitably a partial response: what kind of world? What kind of education? What kind of child? While the issues being addressed in this chapter are ones that have been addressed before, many times, by myself and others, these questions bear repeating as, one way or another, they will define this century.

WHAT KIND OF WORLD?

To say that we are living in an age of chaos is not an exaggeration. Currently, we are experiencing a range of cross-cutting crises of human-induced climate breakdown and species extinction that pose an existential threat to the sustainability of life on this planet for all life forms (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) 2023; Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) 2019). These intersecting crises are unfolding against a background of increasing manifestations of global conflict and political instability, fuelled by the growing strength of right wing and authoritarian voices and by the widespread dissemination of lies and disinformation via social media. Collectively, the crises converge to present an unprecedented global challenge to human rights and to democratic ideals and practices, including a rise in racist, misogynistic and homophobic discourses, a rowing back on the rights of civilians in areas of conflict and on the rights of asylum seekers and refugees as agreed in international human rights treaties. We are all aware that these intersecting crises pose very direct threats to human rights and children's rights both locally and worldwide, including the right to life. In 2023, for example, at least 450 million children worldwide were living in or fleeing conflict zones (United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2023) while in an Irish context, refugees and international protection applicants are being exposed daily to increasing levels of racism and violence.

As noted earlier, children's lives are not separate from this world of chaos and violence, but deeply embedded in it. Currently, for example, the dislocation caused by forced migration is evident in all our schools. Children in our classrooms are aware of, or may belong to, the growing number of people who have had to leave their homes because of conflict or because of climate and ecological breakdown and related disasters. They may already have experienced the death of family members or members of their community in these contexts. If they have not directly experienced them, they witness ecological and conflict-related disasters daily through news media. Children are also aware of the increased frequency of natural disasters and sensitised to the threats to human and cross- species survival posed by irreversible climate breakdown. At the same time, in Ireland and elsewhere, they are regularly exposed to political and everyday discourses that deny or downplay the plight of others, frequently under the banner of a false nationalism, setting local needs in opposition to the needs of more distant others. They may have witnessed, for example, disagreement and protest, sometimes violent, in their communities

around the local housing of refugees and asylum seekers; they may be listening to arguments in their families; they are party also to national debates and protests over sectoral responses to reducing carbon emissions, or restoring habitats, where sectoral interest, self-interest and, sometimes, personal preference or tradition are set against the survival of others and of other species. If children already experience the wider politics of climate and of conflict, what kind of education is needed to empower them to navigate a world of increasing threat and contested values?

WHAT KIND OF EDUCATION?

At the moment, we are in a period of curriculum change. Built on a process of research and consensus-building through discussion, a new framework has been created at primary level. Recently, it has gone through a research phase to ensure as far as possible that the curriculum that emerges is informed by current research and is evidence-based. This has been followed by a consultation phase. Currently, the Primary Curriculum Framework (PCF) (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) 2023) is post-consultation, with submissions and consultations published, while, at the time of writing, consultation on a range of draft primary curriculum specifications (PCS) is still ongoing. There is much to admire in this process of curriculum development, premised as it is on consultation and research. Its recognition of children's citizenship, its references to a just world, and to children's and teachers' agency, could suggest a curriculum-in-the-making that is open to supporting, if not engendering social action. However, the interlocking and existential crises of climate breakdown and species extinction that will determine our continued existence as a species, and the increase in global conflict are given scant mention in the PCF, reduced to a passing reference in relation to active citizenship or, in the case of the ecological crisis, benign references to interaction with the natural environment (NCCA 2023, p. 9). While the stated intention is for active citizenship to be embedded across the curriculum, a reading of the draft PCS suggests that this embedding is neither consistent nor deep. So, I think it is fair to ask whether the process missed its moment, bypassing what should have been its driving force?

Like the apocryphal Irish man when asked the way to Dublin, "If I were you I wouldn't start from here at all". So where should it have started? It should have started, I believe, by acknowledging that we are at an unprecedented moment in planetary history when the survival of life on the planet is uncertain, that at the very least our children's lives will not follow a similar pattern to our own, and that, in planetary terms, it may not all work out in the end. Acknowledging the science and the planetary experience of climate and ecological breakdown, and examining its implications, should be the starting point for any consideration of what education in the 21st century should look like. Learning how to live well and humanely with the human and environmental consequences of that breakdown should be the key aim in determining what it is our children need to know and the driving force behind curriculum.

So what are the kinds of values and dispositions that children need to live good lives in the present context and in the likely future? We know that climate breakdown has caused widespread damage to environments and livelihoods worldwide, and that this will gather pace (IPCC 2023). We know also that globally and locally, those most affected have the least resources to cope and that mass migration as a rational and often desperate response will grow rather than abate (Punia *et al*. 2023); we know that conflict between and within societies is growing, while conspiracy theories and disinformation is becoming increasingly more sophisticated, disrupting democratic processes and posing a threat to human rights worldwide (United Nations 2022). We also know that the kinds of actions that need to be taken politically, economically and socially, challenge the

ideologies and interests of powerful global, national and local actors (Selby and Kagawa 2010; Waldron *et al.* 2020).

So, given the increased need for western countries to recognise the harm we have historically inflicted on the Global South leading to unsustainable living environments, increased migration and potential new areas of conflict, how do we help children to sustain those values that underpin just and peaceful societies? How do we prepare children to give refuge to strangers, to share our resources with others in a sustained and inclusive way, without discrimination between those categorised as *worthy* by social media warriors and those not? How do we prepare them in ways that empower them to take action, even when those actions may require them to give up economic and social advantage? How do we support them to understand issues of culpability and responsibility in relation to climate and global justice and to be prepared to challenge privilege, while acknowledging and relinquishing their own, maintaining solidarity with those least advantaged locally and globally (Bryan 2024)? Firstly, I suggest that we need to identify, collectively, those values and dispositions that are critical to such an education, underpinning and driving all aspects of curriculum development in a generative sense, permeating and informing day to day learning. According to Waldron *et al.* (2024):

[S]uch a list should include the following capacities and emergent capabilities:

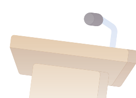
- to recognise the shared humanity, equal worth and dignity of all people;
- to feel concern that goes beyond the local, beyond ourselves and our immediate communities, to embrace the stranger;
- to be prepared to move beyond self interest in terms of decision-making and action;
- to take action to defend one's rights and rights more generally:
- to recognise the rights of other species and the natural world;
- to question and critique dominant narratives such as those relating to capitalism, growth, progress, consumerism and the distribution of wealth.

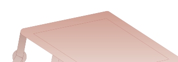
(Waldron *et al.* 2024, p. 223)

This list is not definitive or exhaustive and its sentiments will be familiar to many whose work is underpinned by social and global justice. It also needs to be acknowledged that the PCF references a number of similar values and dispositions, associated particularly with the competency of being an active citizen, though less explicit about their implications (NCCA 2023). At this point, I would like to turn my attention to the third question, what kind of child, before returning to the question of education.

WHAT KIND OF CHILD?

There is no doubt that the child at the centre of current conceptualisations of the primary curriculum is conceived as active and capable, exercising agency in the classroom and in the world and able to make decisions about their learning. This is consistent with the new paradigm of childhood that began to emerge through research and scholarship in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s which promoted a view of children as competent and capable of acting on the world (Qvortrup 2005; James and James 2004). Given impetus by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and, particularly, by Article 12, which sets out children's right to have a say





in matters that concern them, the idea of children's voice and agency have become guiding concepts in education internationally (UN 1989). Children's agency and participation is closely linked to the idea of children as current rather than future citizens and with schools as sites of children's democratic practice. Indeed, a focus on children's democratic participation in decision-making could be considered as an emblematic pedagogic practice of SPHE. Yet, the model of citizenship embodied in the SPHE curriculum is a limited one; oriented towards the idea of civic responsibility, it also presents a constrained and decontextualised understanding of human rights and children's rights education, divorced from the UNCRC (UN, 1989) and tilted towards the rights of others rather than those of the child (Waldron *et al.* 2011). More broadly, as Osler and Kato (2024, p.33) argue, notwithstanding the ratification of the UNCRC (UN 1989) by the vast majority of countries, "children remain marginalised in debates about citizenship". Although children can hold citizenship, for example, their status as citizens is reductive, according them nationality, but not the right to full enjoyment of their political rights (Osler and Kato 2024).

In practice, also, more traditional views of children and childhood have persisted. Waldron and Oberman (2016) for example, found that there was ambiguity amongst Irish primary teachers towards children's status as social actors which compromised their capacity to see children as agentic or provide real opportunities for participation. Moreover, while positively disposed towards human rights education, teachers predominantly associated children with rights of protection and safety while children's rights such as freedom of belief and opinion which embody conceptions of children as political and social actors were more associated with adult rights (Waldron and Oberman 2016; Waldron *et al.* 2011). Thus, while children as participative citizens has become a dominant concept in education and in discourse around children more generally, children's citizenship itself, in theory and practice, is subject to a range of constraints which limit agency.

The idea and practice of children's participation more broadly has been characterised as subject to a range of challenges such as tokenism, lack of impact on decision-making, failure to include all children, and lack of sustained practice (Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra 2022, p. 793). The UNCRC Article 12 (UN 1989) itself imposes limits on children's participation rights by qualifying those rights through reference to the age and maturity of the child, thereby subjecting children to adult judgment. Thus, adult views of children's agency can serve to limit the extent to which those views are heard or acted upon in everyday contexts such as schools. To this extent, children's rights of participation are constrained by adult power, by patriarchal systems and structures, and by discourses of subordination and control, which frequently draw their legitimacy from the idea of protection and which continue to define children as less-than-capable. Thus, even where children are exposed to education about climate change, for example, their agency can be corralled into those actions that are considered safe (Waldron *et al.* 2014) or limited by a "learn-now-act-later" approach to agency (Waldron *et al.* 2019, p. 905).

But that is not how children define themselves. Indeed, as was evidenced by the Fridays for Future movement, children, nationally and globally, are more informed, critical and committed to action on climate than the political systems they target, demonstrating all of the urgency so lacking in the response of adults. As Lundy *et al.* (2024) demonstrate, children relate to rights in a range of ways, as human rights holders, human rights claimants and human rights defenders. Under the auspices of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, the authors consulted with over 2,500 children (aged 5-18), to determine their views and experiences as actors in the field of human rights.

Highlighting the role played by schools, children identified adult resistance to their activities as a barrier to action; this resistance included the impositions of sanctions and the threat of school expulsion, which was experienced by some. Thus, although schools can act to support children as they navigate their multiple roles in relation to rights, they can also become barriers to the agency of children, particularly if their actions challenge the status quo (Lundy *et al.* 2024; Waldron *et al.* 2024).

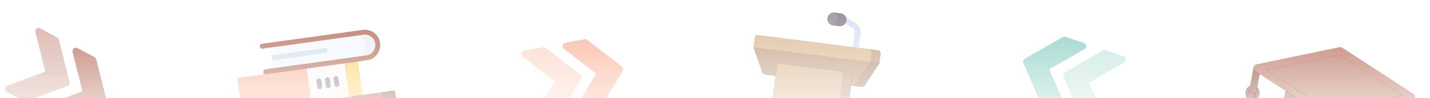
Predominantly, the opportunity to exercise meaningful agency decreases as one moves down the age groups. Very young children are frequently (though not always), excluded as representative voices, whether in school structures or consultative fora. A recent study by Catherine Kelly conducted in a Junior Infants' classroom, demonstrates what can happen when very young children (aged 4-5 years) are positioned as exercising power, voice and agency. The study (Kelly 2021) focused on children's functional or day-to-day agency in the classroom. Kelly describes functional agency as encompassing both child agency and teacher mindset, and positions agency as already held by children, rather than given to them by adults. Consistent with the focus of the research, Kelly designed a study where the children were co-researchers, partners in the construction of knowledge, from data collection to analysis. Engaging very young children (4-5 years) as research partners, requires trust in children's capabilities, and a willingness to share power; drawing on a range of participatory strategies, the children helped choose appropriate modes of expression, articulated their ideas, made collaborative decisions and analysed their collective responses. In the process, they identified issues, chose the area and direction of their enquiry and, where relevant, planned their strategic responses and took action; as the children found ways of giving voice to their realities and engaged in analysis and interpretation, the value of "deep careful listening" (Kelly *et al.* 2024, p. 55) to what children had to say became evident.

So, responding to the question of what kind of child: while there are limits placed by others on children's agency, defined by power, status, age, ideologies and politics, current conceptualisations of children and childhoods foreground children as social agents, capable of acting on the world, as rights holders, rights claimants and rights defenders, as knowledge builders and decision makers, as politically engaged with the world and critically aware of the current crises.

EDUCATION IN AN AGE OF CHAOS

Let us return, then, to the question of education. I think it is fair to say, that any education which seeks to address current and future contexts needs to be transformative, rather than one which supports a continuation of the status quo. At the very least, a curriculum that premised on the kinds of capacities identified above, would ask critical questions across the curriculum and at every age level that went to the heart of the current crises, for example, questioning what being human means, and how humans relate to each other, to the natural world (including other species) and to the planet, in the present and over time. It would enable children to consider contemporary issues critically and ask difficult questions about local and global justice. It would empower them to recognise and challenge historical and current discourses of wealth, privilege, race and patriarchy, and appreciate the diversity of life and culture on this planet (Waldron 2021). Moreover, such an education would support children in creating bonds of solidarity with others, whether local or distant, learning about, through and for human rights (Waldron *et al.* 2024; Struthers 2015; Mallon and Martinez Sainz 2021; UN 2011).

As argued elsewhere (Waldron *et al.* 2024, p. 223), I suggest that premising curriculum and practice on Human Rights Education (HRE) and, specifically, Children's Rights Education (CRE), should offer a supportive and generative foundational framework for the underpinning values,



dispositions and capacities outlined in this chapter. This would require, however, that CRE and its associated values be placed "at the core of curriculum, explicit, intentional, purposeful and generative" (Waldron *et al.* 2024, p. 224). Even though it is an obligatory part of children's education (UN 1989), CRE has remained, in most instances, a peripheral practice (Mallon and Martinez Sainz 2021). Moreover, there is little evidence in the ongoing dialogue about curriculum that this will substantially change.

Similar to climate change, while HRE is referred to in the PCF, such references are fleeting and in most instances coupled with the idea of responsibility. Given its ubiquity in educational policy and practice internationally, you may well ask why this twinning of rights and responsibilities is a problem. Indeed, several studies have noted the tendency in education, here and elsewhere, to couple children's rights with the idea of behaving responsibly, suggesting that one earns one's rights through responsible behaviour (for example, Waldron and Oberman, 2016; Trivers and Starkey, 2012; Struthers, 2015). Thus, HRE is conceptualised "through the lens of responsibility towards others, supporting a culture of behaviour management and teacher control" (Oberman and Waldron 2017). Such views, however, are contrary to the concept of human rights as inalienable and universal, rather than tied to responsible behaviour. This is important, as the twinning of rights and responsibilities underpins negative discourses about minorities in many instances, casting those who do not conform to our ideas of responsibility as less deserving of rights, rather than as rights-holders, a distinction that is often dependent on whether we see them *as one of us* or *one of them* (see Barton 2024 and Waldron and Oberman 2016, for a fuller discussion on responsibility- led rights education).

It is good, then, to find some small distancing of the two concepts in the Wellbeing PCS (NCCA 2024), through the introduction of the idea of social responsibility as a concept separate to rights; unfortunately, this was not consistent across the document and instances of the pairing of rights with responsibilities remain. Similarly, the creation of separate strand units for "Rights and Fairness" and "Citizenship" in the Learning Outcomes, allows for the development of a rights-based discourse and one premised on the idea of social responsibility, providing a basis for moving forward (NCCA, 2024). Looking in more detail at the SPHE specifications, however, it is clear that the concept of rights remains unarticulated, raising questions about whether traditional understandings of children's rights will continue to hold sway. Ultimately, while human rights and HRE are accorded space within the draft curriculum, it is not clear that its implementation across the curriculum will go beyond what Parker (2018, p.5) describes as "mentions" of something called "human rights" rather than the kind of robust foundational presence required to ensure that children have the opportunity to learn about, through and for human rights (UN 2011, Article 2). It seems, therefore, that the current process of curriculum change is unlikely to provide the kind of educational response needed to support children to engage fully with an increasingly unpredictable world.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, then, I have argued that education needs to be premised on a core set of values that respond to the current context, if it is to enable children to live good and hope-filled lives in the midst of imminent climate and ecological breakdown and increased conflict. A purposeful education that prioritises those values through the implementation of a rights-based curriculum framework is both possible and urgent. Children, as agentic and capable beings-in-the-present, in constant negotiation with their future becomings, deserve no less.

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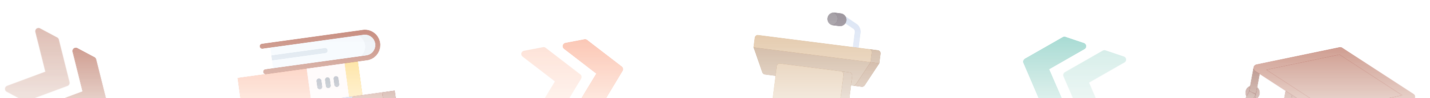

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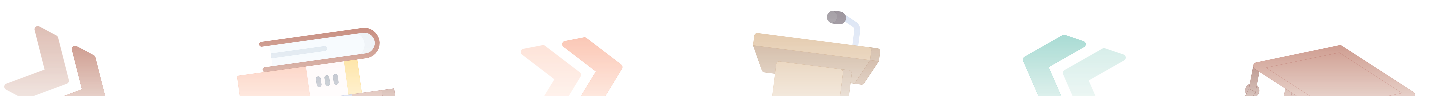

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Chapter 2

Engaging our Pupils as Active Citizens

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INTRODUCTION

Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) aims to support children to become active and responsible citizens (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) 1999). This aspiration is mirrored by Greene (1985) who posits that:

> …. surely it is an obligation of education in a democracy to empower the young to become members of the public, to participate and play articulate roles in the public sphere.
>
> Greene (1985, p.4)

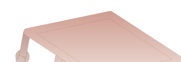
Furthermore, we see this sentiment reflected in the framework for the incoming Irish Primary School Curriculum (PSC), which includes action as a central component of primary education through the introduction of 'being an active citizen' as a new core competency.

This development is to be celebrated, as there has often been a tendency to regard children as not quite full citizens and focus on the importance of supporting them to be active global citizens in the future rather than exploring their current agency during their time in primary school. Indeed, Heggart (2020) challenges the common conceptualisation found in curriculum of children as 'citizens in waiting' and argues for a more nuanced understanding of what it means to be a young person in the twenty-first century. This sentiment is echoed by Osler and Starkey (2006) who highlight children's awareness of inequality and injustice as aspects of their citizenship. Highlighting why children should be considered as full citizens, Lundy *et al.* (2024, p.84) state that 'children, as human beings, enjoy all of the human rights, including the civic and political rights that adults do". This sentiment is a reminder that children hold human rights independently of the adults who care for them, and this includes the rights to take action and defend both their own and the rights of others.

This chapter will explore the relevant literature in the field of active citizenship to offer considerations in relation to key concepts within the field. Additionally, this chapter will discuss the way in which action is framed within schools and present best practice approaches grounded in research. Finally, this chapter will outline a practical framework which can be used to inform approaches to action in schools.

CONCEPTUALISING ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

There are three components to the way in which the NCCA (2023) define active citizenship as a competency within the new primary school curriculum framework. Firstly, they outline that it:



> ... fosters the knowledge, skills, concepts, attitudes, values, and dispositions in children that motivate and empower them as citizens to take positive actions to live justly, sustainably, and with regard for the rights of others.
>
> NCCA (2023, p.9)

Thus, they acknowledge that engaging in action is not simple or unconscious, but requires the teacher to support children in developing the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to enable them to do so. Further embedded within their definition is the implication that there are specific competencies necessary to engage in action which has a positive and sustainable impact. Lundy *et al.* (2024) state that:

> If children are to be able to defend human rights, it is important that they know and understand what they are; knowledge of human rights is a fundamental prerequisite for human rights implementation and is especially important for all [human rights defenders], including children.
>
> (Lundy *et al.* 2024, p.88)

They further acknowledge that children need to learn, not only about what their rights are, but also how these rights apply in different circumstances and what can or should be done in instances where rights are not respected. Waldron and Ruane (2010) advocate for schools as locations for children to learn about their rights and build the skills needed to defend and act on their own and others' rights.

Secondly, the NCCA's definition outlines the impact that active citizenship can have on children's cognitive skills by stating that:

> It helps children to question, critique, and understand what is happening in the world within a framework of human rights, equity, social justice, and sustainable development. It also raises awareness of global challenges such as climate change, conflict, and growing inequalities.
>
> (NCCA 2023, p. 9)

This section of their definition highlights the need to engage critically with knowledge, and implies that to be a critical thinker is a core component of active citizenship. Indeed, critical thinking is positioned as a 21st century skill necessary for future-proofed education which enables learners to be responsive to ever-evolving global challenges such as those mentioned in the NCCA's (2023) definition. Furthermore, the OECD (2019) advocate for combining critical thinking development with self-awareness, self-regulation, and reflective thinking to enable learners to take responsibility for their own actions and reflect on the impact other people's actions.

Finally, the definition focuses on the potential impact that active citizenship within education can have, not just for children individually but for society as a whole:

> It places democratic practices at the centre of the learning process. This competency develops children's capacity and motivation for active and meaningful participation in society at local, national, and global levels, and fosters their ability to contribute positively and compassionately to creating a more sustainable and just world.
>
> (NCCA 2023, p. 9)

Within this final component of their definition, the NCCA not only focus on impact, but on how this can be achieved in classrooms through democratic education. By definition, a democratic approach to education necessitates a focus on examining multiple perspectives and affording learners genuine opportunities to voice their ideas and hear opposing opinions (Golden 2023). Through a democratic focus, children learn to develop their own opinions, values and motivations for engaging with the world around them in active and meaningful ways. When education is grounded in democratic values, and children have had the opportunity to learn from and with people with different life experiences from them, they are more likely to engage compassionately in acting to make the world better for all people.

What is not included within the NCCA's (2023) definition of active citizenship is a consideration of what participation and action might look like. It should be acknowledged that being an active citizen looks different for everyone. As will be explored later in this chapter, action is not limited to public protests, but can also involve spreading awareness on a topic we are interested in, lobbying people in power to make change, or finding creative innovative ways to speak up for what you believe in. Furthermore, from the field of global citizenship education, we know that action is more powerful and impactful when engaged with collectively rather than individually (Council of Europe 2019).

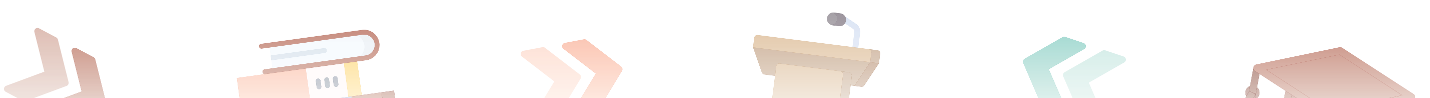
Fundamentally, action enables us to consider how we can respond to inequality and injustice in fair and sustainable ways (Titley 2023a). Bringing themes of inequality and injustice into the classroom is unavoidable in an age where children are confronted with climate change, homelessness, conflict, migration and other human rights issues on a daily basis. It is also inevitable that learning about inequality will evoke strong emotional responses in learners who may feel vulnerable, upset or angry. However, incorporating action and responses to injustice into their learning can help to mitigate against some of the helplessness pupils are likely to feel (Mintz 2013).

CHARITY VERSUS JUSTICE APPROACHES

While recognizing the importance of action in schools, it must also be acknowledged that not all action is equal, or has the same impact. Some action can have harmful effects for those it is intended to help, despite any well-meaning intentions behind it. Concepts of 'charity' and 'justice' are often used to highlight the different lenses or approaches that can be taken. While sometimes presented as opposite ends of a binary, the concepts are more interconnected than this simplistic interpretation acknowledges.

A charity framing will be familiar to all of us, indeed, most of us have been involved in charity activities, such as fundraising appeals, in our lives. In Ireland we are proud of a history of charitable work both at home and overseas. Indeed, ongoing research by Irish non-governmental organisation Dóchas has found that on average 76% of the Irish population are in favour of overseas aid, with 71% of the population declaring concern around levels of poverty in developing countries (Reaper and Kirkwood 2024). Over the preceding four years, they (ibid) found that roughly half of the population has engaged in donations to overseas charities and, although they did not track it, it is a fair assumption that there may be even higher engagement with donations to local Irish charities.

However, as a framing for action, charity can be potentially problematic. Charity often presents a story of 'givers' and 'receivers'. The implication within this framing is that there are a group of



people with all the right solutions and a group of people without autonomy, skills, or knowledge to create change within their own lives. This binary sets up a problematic division or hierarchical way of viewing different groups or people or cultures. Unfortunately, this is the framing we are often first exposed to through aid campaigns, collections boxes, and charity fundraising appeals (Donnelly and Murphy 2023). These images are usually reinforced through the images of poverty (often from Africa) presented to us through the media which lead to stereotypes of the Global South as universally poor and dependent (Oberman and Waldron 2017). The 'solutions' presented within a charity framing are often simplistic in nature, revolving around donating money to address a symptom of injustice without consideration for the history or current context of a problem. Without attention to the causes of poverty and injustice, any solution offered will not be able to provide any long term or sustainable solution, and may even lead to perpetuating the problem further by downplaying the scale of the problem and shifting the focus away from those with responsibility for causing it.

While acknowledging the often very good intentions behind charitable acts, this chapter presents justice as an alternative framing to consider when exploring how to act in response to global justice or human rights issues. A justice approach seeks to first understand the root causes of a problem and examine the structures which create and perpetuate inequality. Significantly, "this approach recognises that poverty is not natural, but is deeply rooted in historical, economic, and political exploitation" (Donnelly and Murphy 2023, p.52). A justice approach advocates for addressing the cause of a problem to ensure that action leads to structural and long-term change, eradicating the need for ongoing action. Additionally, a justice approach necessitates the involvement of people who are directly impacted by an issue, therefore, removing the hierarchical power-imbalance typical within a charity-based framing.

Often presented as opposites, in practice charity and justice are more interconnected. While addressing the root cause of issues to ensure sustainable change is critical, it is also important to ensure support for immediate needs is offered to those who cannot wait for long-term change. Consequently, the approaches should be complementary. Borg *et al.* (2010) highlight the need for the interconnection between the two approaches by stating that charity without justice can lead to compassion fatigue, can be disempowering and dehumanising for those you are trying to support, can encourage intellectual laziness as it removes the need to consider the bigger historical and political picture, and most critically, can downplay the role and responsibility of the state. Ultimately, our actions should be directed at those with the power to bring about change. This usually involves changes to law and to governance structures.

Given the deep connection many people may have to charity framings, I propose that there is a need to rewire our brains and rethink how we conceptualise action. When engaging in action, it is crucial to critically consider our motivations, our intentions, and our processes, to ensure that our actions reflect a solidarity approach, focused on sustainable change. It is crucial that we dig a little deeper and target our interventions to address the root causes, rather than the solely visible symptoms of global inequality.

ACTION IN SCHOOLS

While active citizenship may be a new competency within the Irish PSC, it is not a new concept within education and has roots in democratic education with links to other educational fields which focus on social justice such as global citizenship education, human rights education, education for sustainability and others. Consequently, when considering how to approach active citizenship in the new primary curriculum, we can draw on the wealth of research and practical guidelines already available from those fields.

However, despite a long history of action in schools, some practices remain prevalent despite what we know about best practice and impact. Significantly, when activism on global justice issues happens in schools, it is often underpinned by a 'development-as-charity' or the 'Three Fs' approach – these being fundraising, fasting, and having fun – in aid of a specific cause (Bryan and Bracken 2011). This means that sometimes efforts to help make positive change in the world, while well-intentioned, can be tokenistic, ineffective, or even harmful. A common action seen in schools is a fundraising event targeting a cause, organisation or issue. While the intention behind the event is well meaning, the unintended outcome can be an oversimplified understanding of the issue itself. Through a focus on fundraising as a solution to a cause, there is inevitably an under-emphasis on understanding the root cause of the issue, or the current context of the lived reality for people. If we take homelessness as an example: while money is needed in the immediate and short term to provide shelter, clothing, and food, these provisions don't address the reason that people become homeless or work towards ensuring that people do not become homeless again in the future. Focusing solely on the immediate needs can lead to a misunderstanding of homelessness as accidental, thus downplaying the political responsibility of the state to ensure all citizens can access their basic human rights.

Lundy and Martinez Sainz (2018) present human rights education as a crucial component of active citizenship, stating that "children should not just learn what rights they have, but also how to claim them and defend their own rights and the rights of others" (quoted in Lundy *et al.* 2024, p.92). Through learning about human rights, children are given the opportunity to become aware of instances where rights are not respected, either in their own lives or in their communities, and consequently gain an understanding of the bigger picture, rather than just focusing on immediate needs of people. Though teachers may become concerned about how engaging in activism may give rise to controversy or may place children in vulnerable positions, the United Nations (2011) position student activism as a valid experience of public participation and human rights defending. Indeed, Lundy *et al.* (2024, p.93) posit that "part of the role of the school is to respect, protect, and fulfil children's rights to freedom of expression, to assemble, and to protest".

While acknowledging that the practicalities of engaging in action in primary schools may feel intimidating to some teachers, there is a need to expand our definition of active citizenship to incorporate multiple forms of action. Although we may traditionally think of fundraising or direct action such as protests or petitions as the main ways to make change, it is important to acknowledge that if the goal of action is to respond to injustice, then non-traditional actions such as knowledge and skill development should also be considered. Titley (2023b) presents a useful table of actions which could be used in schools. The table is divided into those actions which may require permissions, to those which can happen independent of permissions. The actions on this list range from those which may make teachers new to active citizenship nervous such as civil disobedience, to those which many teachers are already incorporating into their classrooms such as arts-based responses.

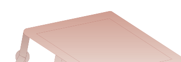


Table 1: Examples of Types of Action, from Titley (2023, p.140)

Examples of actions	
Negotiated action which would involve levels of permission from school leadership and/ or parents/ guardians	*Action which children can undertake independently of school level or parental permissions*
Going on strike	Getting in touch with decision-makers
Going on a 'go slow' (not quite a full strike, but just doing the bare minimum and slowing down your pace of work)	Lobbying politicians/ policy-makers
Boycott (this could be of a brand, an organisation, a shop or a product)	Writing letters
Civil disobedience (when a group of people collectively agree to ignore a rule, or law or regulation that they consider unjust)	Awareness raising on social media
Attending a protest	Signing a petition
Going on a march	Make a submission (e.g. Citizens Assembly/ open consultation)
Banner drops (this is a protest which might involve hanging a poster/ banner with a slogan or strong message in a public place)	Being an ethical consumer
Street action (taking to the streets to spread your message about how you feel about a particular topic).	Making a targeted, informed, reasoned, or collective decision to donate to a charity
Sit ins (individuals or a group of people occupying a place as a form of peaceful protest)	Arts-based responses – writing a play, poem, making a film and disseminating the end products

Crucially, this list offers approaches to active citizenship which go beyond the 'Three F's' approach and provide examples which are not focused on fundraising, but on awareness raising. The examples within this table also provide teachers with examples which are focused on outcomes, which can potentially make a significant contribution towards addressing, or bringing attention to, the cause of an issue rather than solely focusing on its symptoms.

FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION

A framework for action (Titley and Golden 2023) was developed as part of the book 'Curious Teachers, Critical Classrooms' to guide teachers when engaging in action with pupils in classrooms. The framework is rooted in the principles outlined in this chapter and strongly emphasises the importance of action being child-led. Child-led action means that the cause or issue being addressed has been selected by children, the form of action to be engaged in is chosen by children, and critically, that the action itself is carried out by children. This principle is strongly rooted in Lundy's (2007) model of child participation, acknowledging the importance of children's right to express their views and have them taken seriously. Additionally, ensuring children are involved in all stages of taking action is in line with Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation, ensuring that their participation is not tokenistic, but that they have control over choosing, designing, and carrying out any action they may engage in.

The framework focuses on empowering teachers to support children to engage in action which is safe, achievable, age-appropriate, yet remains focused on enacting real and positive change. There are four steps within the framework: research; plan; act and share; and reflect.

Once an issue has been selected, researching is firmly positioned as the first step to engaging in action. It is crucial that any action be informed by a solid knowledge base, rooted in an awareness of root causes of a problem and a broad understanding of current implications as outlined by people with direct experience. It is recommended that children are encouraged to

ask questions during this step, to get to know as much as they can about the issue. This should include exploration of the cause of the issue, the history of how the issue came about, and the impact for people who are affected by the issue. It may be possible that the issue that has been selected will directly impact some members of the class or wider community. In such instances, it would be important to ensure they are comfortable with this issue being explored in the classroom and should be given the opportunity to share their own story if comfortable to do so.

Planning is the second step of the framework. While the instinct might be to rush in and take action, this step ensures that children take things slowly, reflect on the goals of their action and think through the most appropriate action to take and the impact it is likely to have. When this step is skipped, we often see action which does not have a solid connection to outcomes. For example, we learn about conflict in another part of the world and rush to raise money for an aid organisation without considering what help is truly needed. Often, in the height of conflict, aid organisations do not have direct access to the people who need them most, and so funding these organisations rarely has a direct impact for people. A more appropriate action would be to raise awareness about the conflict, to ask people in power to intervene on our behalf, or to consider how our everyday, seemingly small, actions may be contributing to conflict. During this step is a good time to look at the table above to get ideas for different types of action. A crucial component of the planning phase would be to make some goals, consider what the group would like to achieve by engaging in this action. The goal will rarely be to solve the entire issue, but choosing goals at this stage can help children to notice the success of their action.

The third step is to act and then share. This step will look different depending on the form of action which has been chosen. However, it should always include sharing the process or outcomes of the action with other people. This could involve hanging artwork about the issue in public spaces, performing a play that has been written for the community, or sharing a further reaching campaign through letter writing or other means. Sharing the action with others beyond the classroom ensures that the action will have a more significant impact.

Finally, the framework encourages reflection on the impact and experience of the action. It is unlikely for any one action to solve an issue entirely, but it is important to consider what impact the action had and whether the goals that were set out were met. Sometimes, on reflection, it can become clear that an action also achieved some unexpected outcomes. The success of an action is often beyond our control, and so it is important to ensure that children are aware of this; if they did not meet their goals, this may not be as a result of their action, but because of other factors beyond the group and its context. To encourage children to continue to engage with action, it is important during the reflection phase to also consider what they learned from the experience and how they would go about it differently if they were starting all over again. This reinforces the idea that we don't have to get things perfect, but can learn from our experiences and try again in the future.

THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER AS FACILITATOR

As stated above, classroom-based action should be child-led. The teacher's role then becomes one of facilitator, supporting pupils to design and carry out action on topics they are passionate about. In this role, teachers should aim to:

- Enable children to be independent, critical, and creative thinkers who can imagine alternatives to injustice, and think of solutions to make the world a fairer place. This work will happen throughout all teaching as these skills can be learned through many lessons or

activities.

- Facilitate the processes involved in taking action. Amongst other tasks this could include asking prompt questions and acting as devil's advocate to help children think through their plans, sharing materials or ideas that children may not be aware of, or providing context if a chosen action is inappropriate, unrealistic or dangerous.
- Ensure that children's physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing is upheld throughout. Action, and the issues actions address, can give rise to strong emotions both from participants (the children) and from people who become aware of the action. It is important to ensure that engaging in action does not put the children in a vulnerable or dangerous position.
- Provide time and space for children to engage in opportunities which allow them to develop their awareness of the world, to become aware of their opinions, values, and attitudes on justice topics, and to follow their interests to find out more about topics they are passionate about.
- Ensure that [they] have any necessary permissions. If an action is taking place within school, [teachers] may need permission from the principal or the Board of Management. Actions which are more public would require permission from parents or guardians. Ensure that relevant people are informed about the purpose of the action and the process it will involve.

(Titley and Golden 2023, p.194)

CONCLUSION

Opportunities to engage in action supports children to come to know themselves as important citizens in society and learn that their voice matters. As spaces where children should be learning about human rights, schools are well placed to also be places where children learn how to be active citizens, able to act on and engage with the world around them.

In many instances, it is not the form of action engaged in that is the most important, but the process of enabling children to make decisions about how they would like to act and supporting them to make decisions about their own agency. Sometimes a class may engage with the research phase of the framework and decide not to take any further action, this in itself is significant learning for children, as well as a significant step forward in how we conceptualise action. Additionally, teachers may consider classroom discussions as a legitimate form of action to develop understanding and support children to develop their critical and creative thinking and have time to consider their personal values and beliefs.

Ultimately, the framework for action presented in this chapter is offered as a guide for teachers interested in supporting children to be active global citizens. It is up to teachers themselves to consider how best it can be applied in their own classrooms, and may look different for every group depending on experience and comfort levels.

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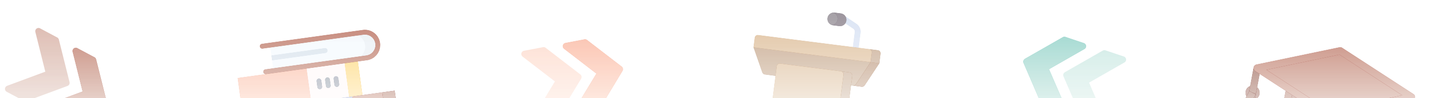

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Chapter 3

Restorative Practice: An Approach 'to' Teaching SPHE and Teaching 'Within' SPHE as a Way of Being

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INTRODUCTION

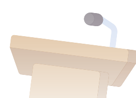
This chapter examines how Restorative Practice (RP) can be used in an educational and institutional education context to improve relationships, reduce conflict, aggression, and bullying behaviour. It provides a particular perspective and way of thinking, which can be used to help teachers teach the curriculum, especially the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum. In turn it can help children and young people explore the nature of their lives, their feelings, emotions, and how to help repair harm in conflict situations. RP supports the conference theme of 'Being, Becoming and Beyond', as the development and application of the practice is something that can be learned at any age; it serves as a 'way of being' which is empowering; can help to develop and nurture relationships; and is something that can be used throughout one's life. As the chapter explains, it is both within the subject of SPHE, and also as an approach to the teaching of SPHE, that many of the skills required can be learned and practised through the active learning methodologies associated with many SPHE curriculum learning objectives.

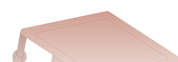
The chapter begins by exploring RP in terms of what it is, and describes the value it has in terms of developing and nurturing relationships. It also explores how conflict and bullying behaviour can be addressed through the scaffolding structure of RP. The chapter also places an emphasis on the use of restorative circles as a core practice and component of RP, and how they can be used as a starting point to great effect in classrooms as part of SPHE lessons, and within school/institution structures in general, where it can help build relationships, solve problems, and repair harm when it occurs.

RESTORATIVE PRACTICE: WHAT IS IT AND WHAT IS THE VALUE OF IT?

According to Wachtel (2016, p.1), RP can be defined as a "social science that studies how to build social capital and achieve social discipline through participatory learning and decision making." In this context, social capital refers to the connections amongst individuals and the trust, mutual understanding, shared values and behaviours that bind human beings together and make co- operative action possible (Cohen and Prusak 2001). Where this social capital or network of relationships has been established, it is easier to respond effectively to wrong doing and restore social order, whilst simultaneously creating a healthy and positive organisational environment.

This underlines the importance of healthy and positive relationships being established within school communities. The process and methods of RP, as the next paragraphs highlight, lend themselves to the creation of harmonious relationships and to their restoration when a





breakdown occurs. Research shows that in places where restorative practice is used there is a reduction in bullying and conflict situations (Varnham 2005).

RP is based primarily on a set of core values, and the explicit promotion and enhancement of particular skills, such as the ability to empathise, and solve problems. This practice allows for building trust between and with people. It provides a structured approach in the form of a scaffold, which helps build and sustain relationships, and provides a focus which allows for the potential growth of positive relationships to become established between people. Within the structure of the SPHE curriculum, through the many different active learning methodologies and content objectives, it is possible to teach these aforementioned skills and values.

In adopting a restorative approach, we strive to be honest and to collaborate with others to solve a problem, including when conflict or bullying arises. As Kelly and Thorsborne (2014) infer, when utilised properly, RP can help provide the opportunity for healing for all involved, whether at work, within families, within criminal justice settings, or within schools and communities. Thorsborne and Vinegrad (2008a) highlight, from their own experience, how some schools that have become dissatisfied with the frequent numbers of suspensions and exclusions and other deterrents, have looked to an alternative approach and a different way of thinking about discipline in schools.

This alternative restorative approach has its roots in the modern day criminal justice system, but historically it can be traced back to indigenous Maori, Inuit, Native American and Aboriginal peoples, when the survival of the respective communities was dependent on people working together for the good of all, and everyone contributing to building and nurturing their respective relationships. Mirsky (2011, p.46) alludes to the fact that "as a species we require community bonds for our emotional well-being," and this notion forms the basis for how RP can be utilised in school. It is within the teaching of the SPHE curriculum at all levels of schooling that these bonds can be enhanced through explicit teaching.

The use of restorative techniques such as restorative circles, conversations, meetings and conferencing allow for such growth to take place and to deal with conflict in a healthy and creative manner when it occurs (Burssens and Vettenburg 2006; Chmelynski 2005; Goldys 2016). The restorative process incorporates the use of various cognitive behavioural activities, such as role play, discussion, feedback, demonstration and other forms of active learning, that are designed to help to repair harm to all involved. If a more formal restorative meeting/ conversation/conference is engaged with in order to repair any harm caused, various stakeholders can be invited in to the process, with the desired outcome to be a negotiated settlement/agreement/conclusion which addresses the harm. These stakeholders may well include the person accused of doing wrong and their parents/support group, the wronged person and their parents/support group, and a trained facilitator. Through participation in the process, "participants learn about one another and develop empathy by looking through a lens of respect, co-operation and understanding" (Zaslaw 2010; p.59).

Although each restorative approach methodology is of major importance, and significant explanation would be justified for each one, this chapter provides for a more generalised overview of the philosophy and approach as a whole rather than an explanation and rationale for each approach.

RPs are inextricably linked to all interactions that occur throughout the school day, and they cannot be reviewed as isolated interventions or tools that schools only use when required (Thorsborne and Vinegrad 2008a). The notion of a restorative and just school has to be seen within the culture of the school, such as the everyday language used in interactions between staff and pupils/students and parents in everyday communications, and the way teaching and learning happens with regard to all pupils/students and their needs - a message which can be reinforced both within and through SPHE teaching. Thus, the notion of a restorative school in its practice "represents a school culture that permeates all aspects of school organisation and relationships within the school as well as relationships between the school and its community" (Meyer and Evans 2012, p.5).

The next section considers how RP can work in in practice in response to bullying and challenging behaviour, and how there needs to be an emphasis placed on relationships and repairing the harm that is caused, rather than merely responding by issuing sanctions to perpetrators.

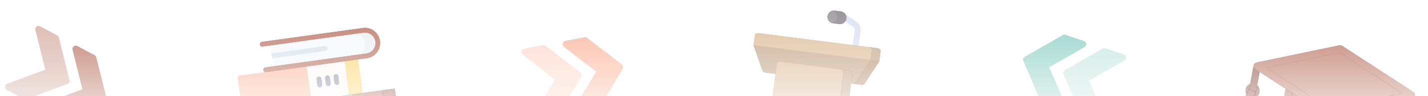
RESOLVING CONFLICT AND ADDRESSING BULLYING BEHAVIOUR

International research indicates that challenging aggressive behaviour in schools is predominantly met with a traditional disciplinary response, whereby sanctions are imposed on the perpetrators of such actions (Rigby 2014; 2010). These can include a wide range of responses such as verbal reprimands, meetings with parents, removal from a class situation, loss of school privileges, detention, internal suspension, external short term suspension, or a more permanent exclusion from school. The net result of this approach is that the damage to the relationship of different parties is not repaired and harmony is not restored.

The 2013 anti-bullying procedures for primary and post-primary schools in the Republic of Ireland (Government of Ireland 2013) make no reference to the use of sanctions save for pointing out to school personnel that parents of someone who has been victimised do not have the right to know what sanctions are issued to a perpetrator of bullying behaviour. The primary focus, as stated within the procedures in Section 6, refer to the restoration of the relationship as being the primary aim, and it is within the gift of RP that the healing of relationships and the repair of any harm can actually take place.

Significantly, and in contrast to the above, the most recently published and updated anti-bullying procedures for use in all schools, *Bí Cineálta* (Government of Ireland 2024), refer to the use of sanctions in terms of utilising the school code of behaviour when bullying behaviour continues to be perpetrated by an individual or group. However, the procedures also outline once again that the primary aim is, as far as is practicable, to restore the relationships of those involved, as well as stopping the bullying behaviour. This suggests there is a difficult and delicate balance to be struck between the possibility of issuing sanctions and repairing the relationships. In addition to this, the procedures also reference using RP to address bullying behaviour, but only in circumstances where teaching staff have been trained in how to engage in these methods.

Rather than adopting a zero tolerance approach and using authoritarian punishment to deal with behaviour such as aggression and bullying, Zaslaw (2010) suggests that a restorative approach provides a high level of encouragement and support which augments appropriate behaviour, and consequently reduces aggressive/bullying behaviour. This approach is



facilitated whereby all the parties involved in any incident are invited to meet and try and acknowledge what has happened and the impact any behaviour has had, and resolve the situation that has developed by attempting to repair the harm. This meeting follows a very particular format and the adoption of the restorative questions as a scaffold. These questions are asked by a trained RP facilitator, who can be a member of the school community who takes on this role. It should be emphasised here that adopting such an approach does not remove the need for sanctions or abolish consequences or responsibility when the behaviour hurts or harms another person. Instead, it seeks to help in the repairing the harm through dialogue. Where apposite, sanctions can be agreed and applied through the school behaviour policy, but it is appropriate and explained rather than simply being issued as a reprimand and final judgement. In adopting such an approach, and as the underlying philosophy dictates, Porter (2005) suggests human beings are happier, more productive, and more likely to make positive changes in their behaviour when people in positions of authority do things with them rather than for them or to them. In other words, in any school response to an incident, by incorporating a restorative response, consequences to behaviour are explained and understood by all involved through a fair and transparent process, with all parties having a voice and a chance at reparation, rather than an individual/group being automatically sanctioned.

It is important to also understand as Thorsborne and Vinegrad (2008a, p.9) suggest, that "a restorative intervention cannot be an "add-on" to punitive and retributive policy and practices." In other words, a restorative meeting or other RP is adopted as a way of solving the problem and/or repairing the harm to support those involved, rather than merely serving as a 'double punishment' where someone has to explain and justify their behaviour, and paying lip service to the idea of a restorative approach.

In the United States (US), the use of suspensions remains a widely utilised approach to school discipline despite a lack of evidence that they prevent future misbehaviour or make schools safer (Gregory *et al.* 2016). Similarly, a study of 1378 schools in England revealed how direct sanctions were identified in 92% of schools as the most commonly used strategy in responding to cases of bullying (Thompson and Smith 2011).

In an Irish school context, figures show there was a steady increase in the number and percentage of suspensions between the years 2014/15 and 2015/16. The figures for primary schools increased from 1,264 to 1,438, whilst for post-primary schools the figures increased from 12,727 to 13,383 (Child and Family Agency 2016). Suspensions generally occur most commonly in post-primary schools. In 2015/16, 3.9% (13,383) of post-primary students were suspended. The average number of suspensions for the five years of 2014 to 2018 was 1,437 for primary and 12,519 for post- primary schools.

Expulsions are relatively rare in an Irish context, with 19 expulsions reported in primary schools in 2015/16 and 21 in 2014/15, with the figure down to 7 in 2021-22. (Child and Family Agency 2016; Tusla Education Support Service 2023).

These sets of figures suggest the possibility that schools are still prone to adopting a sanctions-based approach when misconduct occurs. It is therefore important to consider the figures in the context of research which indicates that one of the major benefits of using RP is the reduction in the need to use formal sanctions due to the work done in healing relationships (Mirsky 2011). The next section considers how by placing the focus on relationship building and nurturing, incidences of conflict and bullying can in reality be reduced.

RESTORATIVE PRACTICE: RESOLVING BULLYING AND CONFLICT THROUGH RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

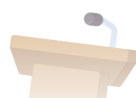
In dealing with specific forms of behaviour such as bullying, Thorsborne and Vinegrad (2008b) highlight how schools across the western world have traditionally adopted a quasi-judicial approach to the management of most types of misconduct. Consequently, when particular rules are broken, sanctions are applied, with the perceived outcome being a change in behaviour and greater levels of pupil/student compliance. However, as this chapter argues, by adopting a more restorative approach, there are cultural and climactic changes that occur in the school community, leading to reduced incidents of aggressive type behaviour.

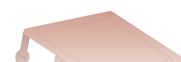
It is suggested by Pepler and Craig (2007) that in attempting to understand bullying there also needs to be a focus on the relationships of the children/young people, and in particular the social dynamics that exist within peer groups, and how bullying often happens due to a power differential that exists between the person being bullied and the person who is perpetrating the bullying. This chapter argues that there also needs to be a focus on the key roles that adults play in shaping the experiences children have, and this includes the adult responses to challenging behavioural situations, and the significance of responding restoratively.

It is arguable if the assertion by Pepler and Craig (2008) above is true in the context of primary and post-primary schools in Ireland in 2024. As cited by Grossi and Dos Santos (2012), bullying remains one of the most prevalent types of violence in schools and yet it is mostly ignored. It would be fair to say that following the implementation of the 2013 anti-bullying procedures, schools made huge efforts to deal with bullying, with all schools required to create and implement an anti-bullying policy. This is borne out from the findings of a study of 918 Irish primary and post-primary principals, and their responses to, and perceptions of bullying (Foody *et al.* 2018). The study revealed that 99% of respondents in the study had an anti-bullying policy. However, Beaudoin (2006) suggests that it is possible schools do not always acknowledge the extent to which bullying occurs, and may dismiss or ignore the problem, or refuse to attempt to resolve the issue. This is despite the presence of a policy. Interestingly, Foody *et al.* (2018) also argue that because they found a large number of schools where no one designated person was assigned to deal with bullying, principal teachers are more likely to be unaware of the extent to which bullying occurs, and there may therefore be an under-reporting of bullying incidents in schools. This finding does have implications for schools in Ireland, especially as Foody *et al.* (2017a) assert from their international research that bullying is a significant problem in Irish schools as it is in other parts of the world. However, it is important to recognise that, from a procedural perspective, it could be the class teacher as the identified relevant teacher who is first point of contact in schools for dealing with bullying and this teacher is obliged to deal with the issue (Government of Ireland 2013). Having a designated person(s) respond to bullying is now also a pre-requisite for schools, which is recorded within the school policy (Government of Ireland 2024).

A previous meta-analysis of all bullying studies on the island of Ireland found that 22.4% of pupils in primary schools and 11.8% of students in post-primary schools were victims of bullying (Foody *et al.* 2017b). Resolving bullying issues can be, and is, extremely complex due to the nature of the social interactions at play.

The fact that specific Irish studies have linked involvement in bullying to poorer self-esteem (O'Moore and Kirkham 2001), lower life satisfaction (Callaghan *et al.* 2015), and increased anxiety and depression (McMahon, *et al.* 2010) is significant from the perspective of adopting





a restorative approach when dealing with conflict and bullying behaviour. The complexity of resolving bullying arises from the management of different relationships and establishing how best to resolve a situation, without pillorying the perpetrator of such behaviour through punitive sanction and reprimand, whilst also giving consideration to the specific needs and wants of the person who has been victimised. It is suggested by Kelly (2014, p.39) that a child or student who bullies does so quite often in order to reduce their own inner feelings of what he terms as "shame". This inner feeling is extremely complex and it could be argued that it needs to be understood in wider psychological theory. However, although there is little scope here to explore this notion, it is important to provide some insight and understanding of this significant emotion in the context of behaviour and this chapter. Shame evolved biologically to tell human beings that something was happening in their immediate environment that was making us unhappy rather than simply feeling ashamed of oneself for having done something. In this context human beings have evolved through displaying different mannerisms and responses to each other within and outside human contact.

It must be emphasised here that a restorative approach is about healing relationships between all parties rather than trying to make someone feel bad for what has happened, either as a perpetrator or victim. Kelly (2014) perceives that any form of bullying signals a vulnerability within the perpetrator of such behaviour, and by adopting punitive methods with someone who is prone to engaging in aggressive or bullying behaviour, this tends to create a greater element of personal shame for the perpetrator. This is because there appears to be little concern or care shown at this point for what led to or motivates their individual behaviour. The behaviour is punished but the inner person and feelings are often ignored when something happens. The 'shame' referenced here manifests itself in a number of different forms such as continually attacking others physically or verbally, or turning feelings towards oneself through withdrawal or physical self-harm. When the inner person and their needs are ignored, people often feel uncared for and alienated, thereby affecting the person's feelings of self-worth and self-acceptance.

Similarly, for anyone who is prone to being victimised through bullying and aggressive behaviour, as Thorsborne and Vinegrad (2008b) suggest, their desire is that the bullying will stop and not recur, and that that they are given a chance to tell their story with their experience being acknowledged and validated. Through the processes involved in restorative practice such as conversations, circles, meetings and conferences, as previously outlined, procedural fairness or natural justice together with a non-judgemental approach help to resolve differences and manage conflict between people, including when the behaviour is identified as bullying.

At a time when a large emphasis is placed on well-being of all personnel in schools in Ireland, and the wellbeing policy statement and framework of practice (Government of Ireland 2018) has been published, schools are committed to, and have become totally *au fait* with the importance of sustaining and nurturing the wellbeing and relationships of everyone within the whole school community. Such nurturing is often achieved through examples of good practice, such as a negotiated active learning SPHE curriculum; utilising democratic processes to create school and classroom rules; promoting civics and citizenship; developing emotional competencies; and catering for the individual needs of pupils and students, and classrooms, whereby the needs of everyone are considered. Such examples of the different types of practice outlined above, suggest that adults in schools are keen to build strong relationships with pupils/students, teachers and parents alike.

However, as Thorsborne and Vinegrad (2017) suggest, whilst the benefits of such an approach improves learner outcomes, there may also be a continual risk placed on such relationships where the school system continues to use punishment in an attempt to change behaviour. Research shows that such a practice is not effective (Varnham 2005). RP places the emphasis back on the relationship when there is a breakdown through inappropriate and/or aggressive behaviour and considers the reasons for the behaviour rather than focusing blame/shame on the individual person who has perpetrated such behaviour. The restorative approach is, as Zaslaw (2010) suggests, a process that puts the responsibility on the pupils/students to respond to wrongdoing in order to bring healing and learning to those involved. The relationships are formed and strengthened through fair process, which then allows for empathy and a sense of responsibility towards individuals and community to be fostered and encouraged. It is this understanding and fostering of relationships where the use of RPs has a crucial role to play.

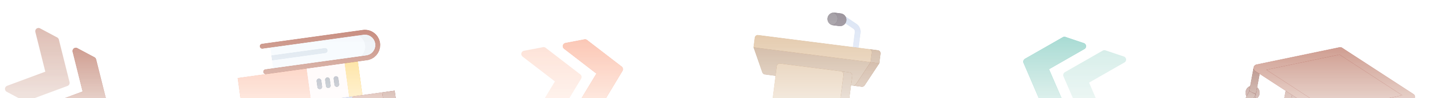
EMBEDDING RP IN SCHOOLS

The literature highlights the fact that embedding RP in the fabric of a school takes 3-10 years (Blood and Thorsborne 2005), primarily because it often requires a paradigm shift in terms of hearts and minds and requires work to be primarily done in sustaining and improving all the relationships within a particular culture/institution. Improving relationships is at the heart of the restorative mind-set and requires a slow and gradual approach rather than a quick fix.

As Guskey (2002) perceives, and coincidentally but significantly, as restorative practice literature espouses (Thorsborne and Blood, 2013), change is a slow and gradual process for teachers, that requires both time and effort, because to change or try something new involves risk of failure. At the heart of RP is the notion that changing school culture and mind-sets through the practice of RP takes time (Thorsborne and Blood 2013). Learning the skills and methodologies associated with RP and implementing the changes that come with this approach requires time, and as Thorsborne and Blood (2013, p.87) recognise, "we simply can't expect people to change because we want them to." Further to this, as Thorsborne and Blood (2013) assert, whoever is tasked with implementing such radical change in this way of working, will also need to seek out others to support and implement such transformative change. It could be argued that they need not only to make the case for such a transformation by making the linkages and outlining how restorative practice can make a difference, but also need to convince school leaders and the wider school community of the need to be strategic in trying to implement such practice. For example, the use of check in and check out circles is a simple yet effective starting point to building relationships with pupils/students and staff.

A Starting Point: The Use of Restorative Circles

One of the most appropriate and effective restorative methodologies for use in school is 'restorative circles', which are a way of proactively building a restorative culture in the classroom (Fisher and Frey 2022). The simple premise is, as Follestad and Wroldsen (2019) explain, that the circle serves as a community process for supporting members of a group, based on dialogue, communication, and active, equal participation. The notion of teaching and learning through circles is a key active learning method used to support the delivery of the SPHE curriculum in schools in Ireland, and therefore RP circles marry very well with the SPHE curriculum objectives (Government of Ireland 1999). The circle can serve as a safe and structured way of starting RP in the classroom.



The structure and practice of the restorative circles is such that it allows for each member of the group to be able to see other members, with members of the circle positioned equally in terms of height and position. The key element of the circle is active speaking and listening based on mutual respect. As a way of facilitating the circle, and ensuring there is a democratic process in place, a listening/talking piece is chosen such as a stone, piece of wood, soft toy, bean bag, or something associated with the group, and as the object is passed from person to person, only the holder of the object is able to speak. The object is passed round sequentially (go-around circle) or if thoughts are being shared non-sequentially, it is passed from person to person, who indicate by an approved gesture that they wish to contribute, and then 'move in and out' of the circle (popcorn circle).

Fisher and Frey (2022) highlight how circles contribute to a positive classroom and school culture by placing an emphasis on the voice of the participants and the choices they make. They also help the group to work through issues and situations that can affect their life in school classroom, and as a consequence, help build the capacity of classroom and school communities to reach a consensus, make decisions, and take action.

CONCLUSION

In their review of International literature in RP, Lodi *et al.* (2021) identify that practices such as peer mediation, circle time, restorative conferencing, family group conferencing, and community- building circles can represent an approach aimed not only at repairing harm in case of conflicts and/or incorrect behaviour, but one which allows building and strengthening of relationships, as well as promoting and developing relational and personal skills such as empathy, assertiveness and self-efficacy.

Restorative practice is a concept which cannot be delivered just in terms of professional development alone, but requires a willingness to change and courage to try it. The SPHE curriculum provides a safe place where the skills of RP can be fostered. RP is not just a philosophy, social science, or a methodology. It is as the conference theme highlights, a way of 'Being, Becoming and Beyond': a way of life.

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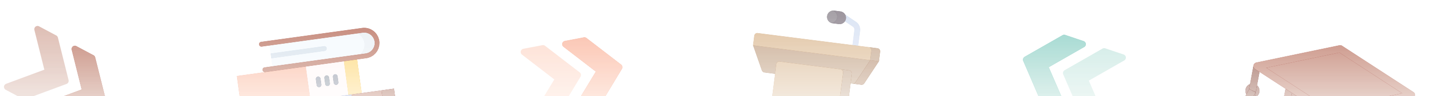

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Chapter 4

Being the DLP: Mandated Reporting Experiences in Irish Primary Schools

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INTRODUCTION

Pursuant to the Children First Act (2015), registered teachers with the Teaching Council in Ireland were assigned mandatory child protection obligations for the first time on December 11th 2017. In addition to these legislative requirements, each school Board of Management is required to adopt and implement the Department of Education Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools (2023) (hereafter the Procedures). School personnel are required to adhere to these procedures when dealing with allegations or suspicions of child abuse. Whilst the statutory obligations under the Children First Act (2015) only apply to registered teachers, including principals, the Procedures apply to all school personnel.

This chapter outlines research conducted with Designated Liaison Persons (DLPs) in Irish primary schools in 2019 and 2023 to ascertain their experiences of child protection since the commencement of these statutory mandated reporting obligations, with a specific focus on their experience of dealing with different categories of abuse. Literature in relation to defining and identifying child abuse, and teachers' ability and confidence in identifying child abuse is analysed. Due to a dearth of Irish research in this area, much of the literature referenced is international. First, child abuse prevention is situated within the provisions of the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) Curriculum (1999) for Irish primary schools.

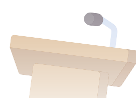
CURRICULAR PROVISION

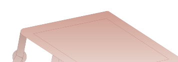
Child abuse prevention is explicitly addressed in the SPHE Curriculum (1999) for Irish primary schools:

> As children progress through an SPHE programme, they will encounter a wide range of issues. These will include substance misuse, relationships, sexuality, child abuse prevention, prejudice and discrimination.
>
> (Government of Ireland, 1999, p.2)

The curriculum promotes an emphasis on "...building a foundation of skills, values, attitudes and understanding relevant to all these issues…" (SPHE Curriculum 1999, p.2).

Additionally, the aims of the curriculum include, *inter alia*, the promotion of the "personal development and well-being of the child"; and fostering in the child a "sense of care and respect for himself/herself and others and an appreciation of the dignity of every human being" (SPHE Curriculum 1999, p.9). Child abuse prevention is explicitly addressed in the broad objectives of the curriculum: "….the SPHE curriculum should enable the child to develop a sense





of safety and an ability to protect himself/herself from danger and abuse" (SPHE Curriculum 1999, p.10).

Under the 'Myself' strand, and specifically, under 'Personal Safety' in the strand unit 'Safety and Protection', children should be enabled to identify situations and places which support or threaten personal safety; explore appropriate strategies for dealing with unsafe situations and places; and explore how others can persuade him/her to engage in unsafe behaviour. It is emphasised that unsafe situations include "…being asked to keep a difficult secret (one that causes worry or makes him/her feel uncomfortable)" (SPHE Curriculum 1999, p.19); "inappropriate or unsafe touches" (p.30); and "being touched inappropriately" (p.43). Additionally, from third class, children begin to explore the concept that increased responsibility for personal safety comes with an increase in independence and so a strategy for safety needs to be developed and adhered to by each individual. Further, from fifth class, children explore the role that each individual can play in keeping others safe.

In 2011, the Department of Education mandated that all primary schools must "…fully implement the Stay Safe Programme" (Department of Education 2011, p.2). The Stay Safe Programme (2016) is a personal safety skills programme for primary schools which aims to reduce vulnerability to child abuse. The programme enables an abuse prevention education that addresses personal safety issues such as physical, emotional and sexual abuse as well as bullying and stranger danger (MacIntyre and Lawlor 2016, p.1). The Stay Safe Programme (2016) recommends that it is taught in the context of SPHE. Consequently, preventing child abuse, in addition to providing children with the knowledge and skills required to respond to unsafe situations, are central tenets of the SPHE Curriculum (1999).

DEFINING AND IDENTIFYING CHILD ABUSE

Neglect

A general definition of neglect focuses on a broad range of unmet *material* and *relational* needs that may result in harm and/or disrupted development for children (Caldwell and Sinha 2020).[1] Some consider it an absence or omission of care which impacts the welfare of the child, whereas others place more emphasis on the carer's intention or 'wilfulness'. However, it is made explicit in Ireland that it is the impact on the child, and not the intention of the parent/carer that is important in deciding whether behaviour is abuse or neglect (Department of Child and Youth Affairs 2017). Relatedly, there is disagreement in the literature about what constitutes neglect, and furthermore, whether, child abuse and neglect are the same, or whether they should be conceptualised differently. Further ambiguities surrounding the conceptualisation of neglect include cultural differences and long-term consequences (Friedman and Billick 2015).

Neglect (including medical neglect) is the category of abuse under which most maltreated children were categorised in the United States (US) at 64% (Munro *et al.* 2011), which is far greater than the next most frequent category of physical abuse at 14%. This compares to 29% and 34% for Australia and Canada respectively (Munro *et al.* 2011). Further, it should be noted that in many states in the US, neglect that occurs solely due to poverty is not defined as child neglect on their state statute books (Rebbe 2018).

[1] Emphasis in the original.

In Canada in 2008, neglect was the primary maltreatment concern in 34% of all substantiated child welfare investigations (Trocmé *et al.* 2013) but even higher at 46% of substantiated investigations involving First Nations children (Sinha *et al.* 2013). This over-representation of First Nations children in neglect investigations is further evidenced by the fact that whilst they represented only 6% of the child population, over 25% of neglect investigations involved First Nations children (Sinha *et al.* 2013).

Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse is complex, broad-ranging, and multi-faceted. For this reason, it can be used as a "catch-all" category of abuse and can be difficult to succinctly define. However, Munro *et al.* (2011) have identified common elements in its conceptualisation, including that it is longstanding, repetitive and sustained; and that it relates to a relationship between a caregiver and child, rather than a single event. Rees (2010, p.59) contends that:

> ….emotional abuse lacks the public and political profile of physical and sexual abuse, despite being at their core and frequently their most damaging dimension.
>
> Rees (2010, p.59)

The proportion of cases of emotional abuse (including intimate partner violence) extracted from available investigative data in 2010 shows a wide range of differing rates. Just 6% of cases of child abuse in the US related to emotional abuse, whereas this increased to 40% and 43% in Australia and Canada respectively (Munro *et al.* 2011). Consequently, emotional abuse is the category under which maltreated children were classified most frequently in Australia and Canada.

Physical Abuse

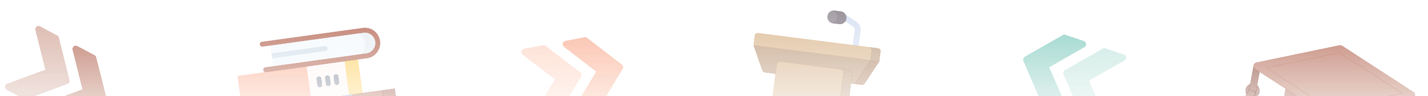
The prevalence of child physical abuse varies internationally. For example, in high-income countries, the annual prevalence of physical abuse has ranged from 4% to 16% of all reported abuse cases (Norman *et al.* 2012). The proportion of cases of physical abuse based on investigation data available in 2010 ranged from 14% of cases in the US to 20% and 22% of cases in Canada and Australia respectively (Munro *et al.* 2011).[2]

Sexual Abuse

Research conducted in Australia found that sexual abuse was the most difficult type of child abuse for teachers to accurately identify (Walsh *et al.* 2005). These challenges in relation to identifying sexual abuse are replicated in research with teachers in Spain (Márquez-Flores *et al.* 2016), in China (Wu *et al.* 2021), and with early childhood practitioners in Florida (Dinehart and Kenny 2015).

The proportion of reported cases of sexual abuse extracted from available investigation data in 2010 revealed that it represented only 3% of cases in Canada, 8% in the US, and 10% in Australia (Munro *et al.* 2011).

[2] Data in England and Norway are collected at a later stage, for example, when a child becomes the subject of a child protection plan. Consequently, this data is different and so is not used to compare reports of varying types of abuse.



Teachers' Ability and Confidence in Identifying Child Abuse

Australian research found that teachers were generally unsure (overall average of 3.4 on a 5-point scale) when asked to rate their confidence in appropriately identifying signs and symptoms of various categories of child abuse and neglect (Walsh *et al.* 2005). Teachers were slightly more confident in identifying physical abuse and neglect than emotional abuse, and they were least confident in their ability to identify sexual abuse. Further, the study indicated that teachers who worked in schools where there was frequent discussion about child abuse and neglect were more confident in their ability to identify it. This study is important because it found that these teachers were more likely to detect and report neglect and physical abuse when they had self-reported confidence in their ability to accurately identify it (Walsh *et al.* 2005). Irish research may be instructive in exploring why teachers report more confidence in identifying physical abuse and neglect, than emotional abuse and sexual abuse. Teachers reported finding 'black and white cases' easier to manage and less stressful than 'grey' or 'borderline' cases which require 'judgement calls' by teachers (Nohilly and Treacy 2022).

A study of 137 early childhood practitioners in Florida found that despite most reporting that they had received training in child abuse and child abuse reporting (83%), and a finding that these practitioners had adequate knowledge about child abuse and reporting practices, the practitioners continued to fall short when presented with possible abuse scenarios (Dinehart and Kenny 2015). In particular, participants were less able to identify behaviours associated with sexual abuse when presented with vignettes. Crucially, this research indicates that feeling confident about signs and symptoms of child abuse is not indicative of actual knowledge about abuse and reporting practices.

Research conducted with 450 teachers in Spain found knowledge deficiencies about child sexual abuse in which almost 91% of teachers were not familiar with methods of identifying child sexual abuse (Márquez-Flores *et al.* 2016). Worryingly, 41.3% of the teachers reported that, if they suspected sexual abuse, they would not report it. Various erroneous beliefs were identified among the participating teachers, including *inter alia* that the vast majority of child sexual abuse implies violent behaviour, and that abusers cannot be the same age as the victim. These knowledge deficits in relation to child sexual abuse were also evident in a study of 518 primary school teachers in China in which only 22.6% of teachers knew that there is usually no obvious physical evidence on sexually abused children (Wu *et al.* 2021).

METHODS IN THE CURRENT STUDY

Data Gathering

National research was conducted in 2019 (n=387) and again in 2023 (n=647) with DLPs in Irish primary schools to ascertain their experiences of the new statutory reporting obligations for child abuse. This research comprised two online surveys almost 4 years apart that were emailed to all primary schools in Ireland. This research received institutional ethical approval and included informed consent and the continuing right to withdraw for participants. Both research phases comprised self-completion surveys which focused on the DLPs' experiences of the child protection role in schools, and each survey was designed specifically for that research phase. Robson (2002) contends that one of the advantages of a self-completion survey is that it is good for dealing with sensitive topics. Child protection is such a sensitive topic. Both surveys included a pilot study which was used to refine and adapt survey items.

Data Analysis

Statistical analysis was conducted on the quantitative data using the statistics programme 'Microsoft Office Professional Plus 2019'. The analysis consisted of descriptive and inferential analysis. The crosstabs procedure was used to explore interactions between pairs of categorical variables. For example, the categorical data related to categories of abuse was analysed in relation to the frequency with which schools deal with particular categories of abuse. These findings were compared for 2019 and 2023. Subsequently, the categorical data in relation to DLPs' reported confidence in dealing with categories of abuse was analysed for each category in 2023 for both frequency and percentage. Finally, a Chi-square test was used to further analyse this data set in relation to another categorical variable, gender.

FINDINGS

Frequency of Category of Abuse

As outlined in Table 1, findings indicate that neglect is the category of abuse which the majority of schools encounter most frequently (69.5% and 63.6% of schools in 2019 and 2023 respectively) followed by emotional abuse in 2019 (15.8% of schools) and physical abuse in 2023 (21.2% of schools). Only 1.7% and 2.7% of DLPs in 2019 and 2023 respectively indicate that sexual abuse is the category of abuse with which their school deals most frequently.

Table 1: Categories of Abuse which Schools Encounter Most Frequently

	2019	*2023*
Neglect	69.5%	63.6%
Physical Abuse	12.9%	21.2%
Emotional Abuse	15.8%	12.4%
Sexual Abuse	1.7%	2.7%

Confidence in Dealing with Categories of Abuse

The categories of abuse with which DLPs indicate they are most confident in dealing is physical abuse, with 84.6% indicating confidence in dealing with this category. This is followed by neglect, with 77.5% of DLPs indicating confidence in dealing with this category of abuse. Contrastingly, just over half of DLPs indicate confidence in dealing with emotional abuse (54.6%) and sexual abuse (50.6%).

Conversely, almost half of DLPs in 2023 (49.4%) indicate they are less confident in dealing with sexual abuse, followed closely by 45.4% reporting less confidence in dealing with emotional abuse, 22.5% indicating less confidence in dealing with neglect, and 15.4% indicating less confidence in dealing with physical abuse.

This data suggests that the majority of DLPs report confidence in dealing with physical abuse and neglect but that approximately half of DLPs are less confident in dealing with emotional abuse and sexual abuse.

Table 2: DLPs' Reported Confidence in Dealing with Categories of Abuse

	Confident	*Less Confident*
Sexual Abuse	50.6%	49.4%
Emotional Abuse	54.6%	45.4%
Neglect	77.5%	22.5%
Physical Abuse	84.6%	15.4%

DLPs' confidence in dealing with the different categories of abuse varies according to gender, as indicated in Table 3 below. The percentage of males who report confidence in dealing with categories of abuse is higher for each category when compared with percentages of females. The differences are greatest for emotional abuse and neglect. Almost 63% of male DLPs report confidence in dealing with emotional abuse, in comparison to 51% of female DLPs, whilst almost 86% of male DLPs report confidence in dealing with neglect compared with 74% of female DLPs. The differences are smaller for physical abuse and sexual abuse, with 86.6% of male DLPs and 83.2% of female DLPS reporting confidence in dealing with physical abuse, whilst 53.6% of male DLPs and 49.3% of female DLPs report confidence in dealing with sexual abuse. In 2023, these are also the categories of abuse which schools reported encountering most frequently (as discussed in relation to Table 1).

Table 3: DLPs' Reported Confidence in Dealing with Categories of Abuse by Gender

		Confident		*Less Confident*	
		Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Sexual Abuse	Male	104	53.6%	90	46.4%
	Female	222	49.3%	228	50.7%
Emotional Abuse	Male	122	62.9%	72	37.1%
	Female	231	51.1%	221	48.9%
Neglect	Male	166	85.6%	28	14.4%
	Female	335	74.1%	117	25.9%
Physical Abuse	Male	171	88.6%	22	11.4%
	Female	376	83.2%	76	16.8%

A Chi-square of independence was conducted between several variables, for example, confidence in dealing with specific categories of abuse and the gender of the DLP. These associations are outlined in Table 4 below and suggest a significant association between gender and reported confidence in dealing with emotional abuse ($p < 0.05$), and between gender and reported confidence in dealing with neglect ($p < 0.05$). There was no significant association between gender and reported confidence in dealing with either sexual abuse or physical abuse.

Table 4: Chi-Square Analysis for Gender and Categories of Abuse

		Observed Frequencies		
		Confident	Less Confident	Total
Emotional Abuse	Male	122	72	194
	Female	231	221	452
	Total	353	293	646
		Expected Frequencies		
		Confident	Less Confident	Total
	Male	106.0092879	87.99071207	194
	Female	246.9907121	205.0092879	452
	Total	353	293	646
	p value = 0.005835			
	Statistical Significance		***Yes***	
Neglect		**Observed Frequencies**		
		Confident	Less Confident	Total
	Male	166	28	194
	Female	335	117	452
	Total	501	145	646
		Expected Frequencies		
		Confident	Less Confident	Total
	Male	150.4551084	43.54489164	194
	Female	350.5448916	101.4551084	452
	Total	501	145	646
	p value = 0.00138			
	Statistical Significance		***Yes***	

DISCUSSION

Neglect is the category of abuse which DLPs report that Irish primary schools deal with most frequently (over 60% of DLPs), followed at a much lower rate by emotional abuse in 2019 and physical abuse in 2023. These findings align with USA research which found that neglect was the category of abuse in which most maltreated children were categorised at 64%, followed by physical abuse at 14% as the next most frequent category (Munro *et al.* 2011). However, this finding can be contrasted with Irish data from 2023 indicating that neglect only accounted for 14% of all child abuse referrals to Tusla, the Child and Family Agency (CFA, 2023).

Almost 13% and 21% of DLPs in 2019 and 2023 respectively reported that physical abuse was the category with which their school dealt most frequently. This aligns generally with similar findings internationally in which cases of reported physical abuse range from 4% to 22% (Munro *et al.* 2011; Norman *et al.* 2012). This finding is also consistent with Irish data indicating that physical abuse accounted for 23% of child abuse referrals in 2023 (CFA, 2023).

Very few DLPs reported that sexual abuse was the category with which their school dealt with most frequently, with only 1.7% of DLPs in 2019 and 2.7% in 2023. This roughly aligns with the proportion of sexual abuse cases in Canada at 3% but is less than the US and Australia with 8% and 10% respectively (Munro *et al.*, 2011), and much less than referrals for sexual abuse in Ireland in 2023 which amounted to 16% of all child abuse referrals (CFA, 2023).

Only approximately 16% and 12% of DLPs reported that emotional abuse is the category of abuse with which their school deals most frequently in 2019 and 2023 respectively. This finding can be contrasted with the proportion of cases of emotional abuse in Australia at 40% and Canada at 43% (Munro *et al.* 2011). It is also much less than the 46% which accounted for referrals for emotional abuse in Ireland in 2023 (CFA, 2023).

These findings indicate inconsistencies between the frequency with which schools deal with neglect, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse (but not physical abuse), and the percentage of national referrals for each of these categories of abuse. Neglect is over-represented in the frequency with which schools deal with categories of abuse when compared with national statistics for child abuse referrals, whilst both sexual abuse and emotional abuse are under-represented.

One explanation for these differences could be that the referral statistics relate to *all* reports of child abuse and neglect, whereas the current research refers solely to primary schools, and further, to schools' experiences of dealing with these categories of abuse, whether or not they actually make a referral. Another explanation could be the very nature of schooling, and in particular, the limited window into the child's home life which is available to a primary school teacher. Signs of neglect may be more visible to a teacher, for example, by way of the child's physical appearance, hygiene, clothing, attendance, for example, than signs of emotional abuse, which may be more difficult to identify for a teacher, considering it is based on the relationship between the child and the caregiver, a relationship which may not be visible or accessible to the teacher in the same way. Similarly, save in circumstances whereby a child makes a disclosure, signs of sexual abuse may be difficult to identify in a classroom setting. So, it is possible that 'black and white cases' which require less 'judgement calls' by teachers (Nohilly and Treacy 2022), such as cases of neglect, may be dealt with more frequently in school settings due to the very nature of schooling.

Another explanation, applicable only to the international statistics, might be the established difficulties in operational definitions of the various categories of abuse across countries, potentially undermining the utility and validity of international comparisons. In particular, these inconsistencies with definitions may be particularly relevant to emotional abuse which is broad-ranging and often used as a 'catch-all' category of abuse.

This research indicates that the majority of DLPs report confidence in dealing with physical abuse and neglect but that approximately half of DLPs are less confident in dealing with emotional abuse and sexual abuse. This finding is important because although research conducted by Dinehart and Kenny (2015) with early years practitioners in Florida suggests that feeling confident about signs and symptoms of child abuse is not indicative of actual knowledge about abuse and reporting practices, Australian research with teachers indicates that they are more likely to detect and report neglect and physical abuse when they have self-reported confidence in their ability to accurately identify it (Walsh *et al.* 2005). Teachers' lack of confidence in dealing with sexual abuse is unsurprising considering research in Spain and China suggests considerable knowledge deficiencies in relation to teachers' ability to identify and detect signs of child sexual abuse (Márquez-Flores *et al.* 2016; Wu *et al.* 2021).

Whilst this current research suggests a significant association between the DLPs' gender and their reported confidence in dealing with emotional abuse, and with neglect, there is a dearth in the literature specifically related to gender differentials and self-reported teacher confidence. However, Australian research exploring gender, teacher confidence, and child abuse reporting

and detection found that teacher's gender had no effect on teacher confidence in accurately identifying child abuse and neglect, nor was gender a significant predictor of teacher's likelihood to detect child abuse in a vignette, nor of reporting (Walsh *et al.* 2005).

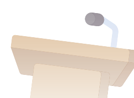
More broadly, albeit not related to teacher confidence but rather to gender and teacher child abuse efficacy, US research found that whilst there were no differences in the number of referrals made based on the teacher's gender, female teachers were more likely to assist in child abuse reports, that is, reporting to an administrator (Kenny 2001). Similarly, research in Brussels found that gender was the only statistically significant variable in relation to school personnel when presented with vignettes. Female staff had a higher propensity to consider a referral or professional help, and their assessments of the vignettes tended to be more severe than that of their male counterparts (Vanderfaeillie *et al.* 2018). Contrastingly, research in Spain found a statistically significant association between reporting suspicions and gender, in that male school personnel were more likely to report suspicions than females (Greco *et al.* 2017). Thus, conflicting findings exist in relation to reporting patterns and teachers' gender, whilst the research related to teacher confidence and gender is almost two decades old, highlighting that more research is required in this area.

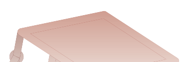
CONCLUSION

Inconsistencies exist between the frequency with which schools deal with neglect, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse, and the percentage of national referrals for each of these categories of abuse.

Neglect is the category of abuse which DLPs report that Irish primary schools deal with most frequently, whilst sexual abuse is the category with which they report dealing least often. DLPs' reported confidence in dealing with categories of abuse broadly reflects this finding, with approximately eight in 10 DLPs reporting confidence in dealing with physical abuse and neglect, whilst they report less confidence in dealing with sexual abuse and emotional abuse. A significant association exists between gender and reported confidence in dealing with emotional abuse and with neglect.

Recommendations include that child protection supports for schools must explicitly address DLPs' (and potentially teachers') lack of confidence in dealing with categories of abuse, specifically sexual abuse and emotional abuse. Further, it is recommended that the role gender plays in such confidence is emphasised in future research, both for DLPs and for teachers.





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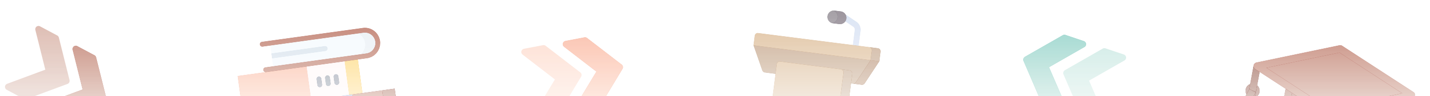

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Chapter 5

Exploring the Use of Participatory Exercises in Aiding Young People's Understanding of the Complexities of Sexual Wellbeing and Relationships

Ellen Corby and Oonagh O'Brien

INTRODUCTION

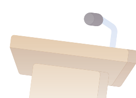
Sexuality and reproductive health education intends to equip people with the tools necessary to lead fulfilling sexual lives (Pound *et al.* 2017). The question of whether sexuality education (SE) is succeeding in preparing young people for life as fully actualised sexual beings (Allen and Carmody 2012), and what shape an effective educational programme should take, is of importance. Evaluation of SE curricula has made clear the need for sex-positive, comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) for young people (International Planned Parenthood Federation 2010); however, it seems that Ireland's sex education has not yet met this standard.

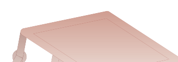
Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) curricula have been under review in the Republic of Ireland in recent years. Irish young people felt that the RSE curriculum did not cover the topics they most need guidance on, citing over-emphasis on contraception, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and the reproductive system, rather than empathy, consent, respect, and positivity (Citizens' Assembly of Ireland 2017). The 2019 Houses of the Oireachtas Report stated that Irish RSE was insufficient to equip young people for adult life. In response, an updated Junior Cycle Social Physical and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum was drafted, and the report on this process by Ireland's National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in 2020 emphasised the need for SE that is "holistic, student-centred, inclusive and age-and developmentally appropriate" (p.1). The resulting updated Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum was officially launched in 2023, and the process was repeated with the Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum which is due to be introduced in Irish schools in 2025. Both new curricula specifically include discussions of gender identity, the spectrum of sexuality, pornography, and mutual pleasure in intimate relationships, which marks a significant progress at a policy level for the Irish SE system. However, in practice, there remain significant issues in educator competency and delivery methods in educational settings (Lodge *et al.* 2024). Educators continue to rely heavily on direct instruction as a delivery method, with competency and confidence of delivery varying widely.

This chapter reports on the findings relating to student voice of a study undertaken in 2019 that explored the potential of arts-based, participatory teaching delivery methodologies for SE in school settings.

LITERATURE

The International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF)'s Framework for Comprehensive Sexuality Education (2010) presents a simple but thorough rights-based outline of the elements required for effective CSE. It places emphasis on continuous review, and on the involvement of young people in planning, delivery and evaluation. Its seven components: gender; sexual and reproductive health and HIV; sexual rights and sexual citizenship; pleasure; violence; diversity;





relationships, encourage moving from a focus on reproduction to a holistic form of education, treating CSE as a child's right (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 2010). It positions gender and pleasure as vital components of SE and planning, and it acknowledges that SE curricula are often designed around young people without including or seeking their input. It provides principles of good practice for planning, delivery, and assessment/evaluation of SE programmes, all involving the youth voice, and echoing much of the literature.

Often, SE is taught from a negative perspective, with only surface reference to the surrounding concepts of communication, refusal skills and simple enjoyment. (Pound *et al.* 2017). Consequence-focused approaches to SE, e.g., focusing on the prevention of STIs, unplanned pregnancy or sexual violence, has proved insufficient and outdated (Keating *et al.* 2018). If young people are to be equipped with the skills to make informed, responsible decisions, discussion of pleasure and the reasons one would want to have sex must be an equal part of learning – and to reduce the rates of sexual assault, sex-positive teaching and the understanding of pleasure must play a role (Allen and Carmody 2012; Dixon-Mueller 1993). A young woman or man must be able to conceptualise healthy sexual relationships if they are to understand discomfort, dissatisfaction, and violence, and how to respond to these in real life situations (Pound *et al.* 2017). Delivery method is crucial, and should avoid being prescriptive or top-down, but allow young people's safe exploration and discussion (Allen and Carmody 2012).

Educators need to be given training and supports to enable them to engage with students and the subject comfortably (McNamara *et al.* 2010). Delivery is the most important aspect of SE, but the most difficult to manage (Pound *et al.* 2017). Young people want sex educators that are comfortable and knowledgeable about the subject matter, and deliver enthusiastic, sex-positive, and engaging lessons. Interactive classes with participatory learning are cited as very effective in SE, allowing for the practical application of skills (IPPF 2010).

Dixon-Mueller (1993) mentions the use of the arts among other alternative methods for the teaching of sexual and reproductive health and suggests gender role switching or dramas that explore more overlooked concepts. She emphasises the importance of a less solemn approach to sexual health that does not rely on consequences and shame. Aiming to provide students with a practical roadmap for skills they will need for fulfilling sexual lives is innovative and bold. While parents and even students may recoil at the idea of positive, participatory SE, "there is a certain unrecognised potential in questioning some of both adult allies and young people's most enlightened assumptions about what sexuality education ought to be about" (Coll *et al.* 2018: p.167). If the notion of dealing directly with sex, pleasure and desire in a classroom setting is uncomfortable, then the solution may be in changing the delivery. If SE classes instead provide participatory exercises that employ drama techniques to explore relationships, consent, communication, body language and emotional intelligence in a safe, desexualised way, young people may be given the tools to form a practical experiential roadmap for sexual relationships and situations, without becoming overly uncomfortable or pressurised.

METHODOLOGY

This study sought to investigate if an alternative indirect instruction methodology would support understanding of sexual complexities among post-primary students. Exploratory qualitative research was chosen as the methodological framework for this study. The study design consisted of: an initial focus group to assess the knowledge and attitudes of the participants; a drama-based practical workshop, exploring concepts such as open communication, consent and boundaries; and a post-workshop focus group for the participants

to feedback on their experience and the methods. All 23 participants, aged 16-18, took part in a workshop, with a random selection taking part in the focus groups. This data was analysed using thematic analysis.

The research team consisted of the researcher and a research assistant. Ethical approval was granted by the Institute for Global Health and Development at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, and voluntary participant recruitment took place within the participating school, following all school child-protection guidelines.

Limitations

This was a short small-scale study, drawing its sample from one school in suburban Dublin. While this study was presented to an approximately evenly gendered target group, the final gender ratio of voluntary participants was greater than 11: 1/female: male. This naturally led to an over- representation of the female voice.

RESULTS

Results and discussion sections of this chapter will be presented under the IPPF's (2010) elements of CSE, and analysis takes into account student voice from both focus groups and workshops.

Pleasure and Positivity

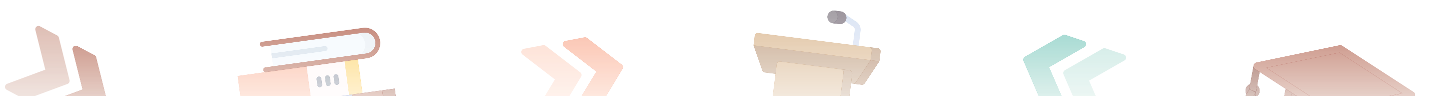
One of the most fundamental themes that emerged from the study was positivity. While only a selection of students reported having experience in drama, all students reported in discussion portions of the workshops that they found activities engaging, fun, and relatable:

> It was a breath of fresh air
>
> It was like meditation or something
>
> It felt more personal
>
> I didn't want to go back to [class]

Students adopted the abstracted exercises quickly, connecting them to the subject matter, and using the exercises as a guide for detailed insights into their own lives and relationships. Students commented that they understood the reason for each exercise, and that learning could be far more in-depth if the session were lengthened:

> I really got what you're talking about by the end
>
> It was kind of like a metaphor… for controlling relationships

Students found the workshop realistic and applicable to a variety of real-world contexts:



> I just felt like our opinions mattered more than it would in class, like in class our teachers are
>
> just like "Here it is, ok", but you were trying to get our opinions, so I felt more comfortable giving it, you know?
>
> Yeah, you wanted us to be honest about everything.

While the response to the workshops was overwhelmingly positive, students did point out that they had volunteered and wondered how they or their classmates would respond to compulsory participation.

Relationships

While students' contributions in the pre-workshop focus group were honest, often they seemed reserved and tentative about speaking freely. Workshops served as an icebreaker for more complicated topics. Students were able to engage more practically with concepts, such as power, consent and boundaries, facilitating further engagement. Pre-workshop feedback was factual and blunt; workshop exercises asked students to engage with their feelings and body and their feedback following became more detailed, personal and nuanced.

The workshop exercises remained simple and unrelated directly to relationships and sexuality, but they provided a way into complex, intensive discussion. Several concepts emerged organically for the students and were explored during the workshops, such as control in relationships, power- dynamics, vulnerability and manipulation, feelings of pressure and discomfort in the body:

> I didn't like being told to tell people to do things
>
> ...just having to do what you're told, like a dog

Students appreciated the "Communicating about the Body" activity as a chance to set their physical boundaries with their partners early in the process and noted the importance of the chance to practice vocalising these boundaries freely and confidently.

Consent Versus Violence

Students' reaction and perceived understanding of consent did not align with their reported learning and their observed practical skills in these areas. Students were very familiar with vocabulary such as "consent" and "non-verbal communication" and reported that consent was one of the few topics covered in depth in SE. However, content focused on the law, i.e., age of consent; alcohol; rather than recognising positive and enthusiastic physical and verbal consent. While they identified in the exercises the importance of learning to express yourself clearly and being able to say 'no', students were less skilled in reading body language and responsibility for asking permission to touch. This was subtly pointed out during workshops, and they became more aware of how their partner was acting and communication. However, later discussion focused on refusal skills, rather than listening for and receiving consent. This could be linked to the lack of association in SE between consent and sexual pressure or assault, as students stated that rape and sexual harassment are avoided in SE classes:

> …the thing you'd use the most, you need to know how, and the one where we were telling people to stop [moving], like you need to know how to say no, and how to tell people to stop.

Students expressed the wish to learn practically about healthy relationships, as they already have sophisticated and nuanced concerns about abuse and peer-pressure:

> We're able for more

> They just said relationships. Like if you're in a long relationship, then you might want to [have sex]. But they didn't really talk about the realistic situations of how a lot of people lose their virginity, you know?

> [on sexual violence] they act like it could never happen to you but it could.

Regarding pleasure and positivity however, students could not conceive of a way in which discussion of pleasure and sex-positivity could ever be addressed appropriately in SE:

> Well, you wouldn't want it to be like, an overly positive view because then it would be like "GO!" [encouragement]. *all laugh* They have to be a bit neutral, cos they can't obviously be like "it's okay, go do it" cos you know, they're teachers… imagine your parents hearing that, and it looks like-"Yeah, "what did you do today?

> Yeah, my teacher told me I can have sex!" *laughter*… "I think the whole legal side is more important than 'yeah go off and have sex' because you don't want to run into the law.

When it was suggested that something akin to these workshops could be used to teach about pleasure and positivity in relationships, students stated that they felt that this could be an appropriate method of teaching, even for children as young as primary school age. They added that such a basis for this instruction could be built upon during later years, linking it more directly with sex as young people age.

Teachers and Teaching Methods

Students had strong positive reactions to this participatory style of indirect instruction for SE:

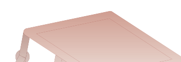
> I felt really good after [the workshop]

> This was way better than sitting in a classroom.

> It was very interactive, and it wasn't just like boring and like "this is this, and this is that", it was fun to do… normally in school, when we're learning about that type of stuff it's kind of just from a book and the teacher just reads it to us.

> You can kind of put it into your own life, like the type of scenarios when you were telling everyone to stop, or moving people around the room.

Through abstracted exercises, students had the opportunity to practice setting boundaries and vocalising feelings about physicality. Students reported that the workshops facilitated open discussions and in-depth exploration, but acknowledged the difficulty facing teachers



contending with large classes, and the difficulty organising such programmes for full year groups.

Clear throughout this study was students' strong urge to learn, their interest in the subject, and their awareness and concern that their SE is leaving them underprepared:

> I mean everyone has sex at different times in their lives and stages. Like, some people start in 2nd year. I know it's not ideal but like whatever, but they don't give [sex ed] to us until TY [Transition Year, 15-16 years old], so a lot of people start before then and they don't have the facts. They think they know some things off their friends or their mates or something like that, but they don't actually know the law, the facts of it, the real stuff… And treatment as well, like no one really has a breeze about what you're supposed to do about if you have [an STI], how to spot it and then the treatment for it.

Sexual and Reproductive Health and Diversity: 'The Facts'.

An emerging theme was students' dissatisfaction with their experience of SE in school. They had never experienced SE approached in a participatory experiential way and said on several occasions that it was a welcome surprise as they were expecting to be taught 'The Facts'. This phrase appeared often as a description of the focus on impersonal definitions of sex and sex acts and their reproductive function.

While students refer to this as 'The Facts', they report and display no factual knowledge related to access to contraception, or practical understanding of options for treatment of STIs or for unplanned pregnancy. The importance of contraception is made clear, but avenues of access are not. Students point out that these methods often employ scare tactics to stop them from having sex at all, rather than empowering them to have safe sex:

> I think it was once again just fearmongering, 'cos then it goes into contraception, and like 'Abstinence is the best way to be!'

Students report receiving a dichotomous message from their sexual health classes: sex is desirable, and yet they must avoid it. Curiosity is often met with suspicion or scare tactics from both parents and teachers, and asking for information is interpreted as an admission of being sexually active:

> I was told the best form of contraception is not have sex in general… But it was weird. It was like, you shouldn't feel pressured into it and to not be, like, stressed by it. But the best way to not get pregnant is not have sex, right. So it was kind of like a double message, like you shouldn't feel, like, ashamed by it but you shouldn't do it.

> If I went to my mom, my mom would be like "Are you crazy? You're too young, don't do it!" She'd go crazy, she'd think of pregnancy straight away, and getting pregnant. It's not a good idea bringing it up in my family.

Students express the desire for sexuality to be addressed in school but have little faith in its current effectiveness. Teenagers know that people have sex for reasons other than reproduction, and so are aware that the information they are receiving is edited and filtered.

Gender

Gender emerged as a strong theme. Female and male students believed that a more even gender representation would have made the research more accurate, but also reported times throughout their educational experience when male students' poor behaviour in SE classes had been disruptive:

> In 6th class when they had us all together and they were talking about pregnancy… the girls were serious, but the guys were just laughing, making jokes about it… they kind of had to separate us after so they could finish talking because the boys wouldn't stop laughing…I think if there's just one boy with loads of girls then he won't say anything, or he'll act mature, but if he's with a gang of boys, that's when they don't act mature.

Female students were certain that having more boys involved with the study would have changed the dynamic; however, they did not want male students absent. They highlighted the importance for male students to be educated about sex and reported that male students didn't care about SE because of immaturity and because the impact of unwanted pregnancy was far less for boys. Students commented that in the workshops they felt able to ask questions and give their opinions, whereas, while asking questions in SE classes, there is a pressure to not appear as though you know nothing.

Students report early experiences of secrecy about gendered elements of puberty such as periods, being encouraged to keep this information secret from male students, which contributed to stigma. Conversations continue to be mainly heteronormative, with gay or transgender people being the subjects of anti-bullying campaigns, rather than as a positive aspect of human sexuality. Students are aware of this erasure of homosexuality from the discourse, and this further convinces them of current SE's lack of relevance to their lives:

> Everything applies to straight people, it doesn't go into gay people or bi ["or transgender"] people or whatever, it's just cos… well I don't know why.

> They're just like 'sex is bad unless you want to make babies with your husband or wife' - that's literally it. But there's some people, say like lesbians or gay people, they don't do it to make babies. And it's normal, but it's not taught that it's a normal thing, it's just like 'no, it's only for reproduction'.

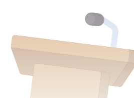
Sexual Rights and Sexual Citizenship

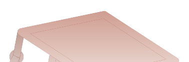
Workshop exercises were designed to address respect; of one another's bodies, personal space, and physical autonomy. The respect afforded to young people by their teachers and the curriculum itself also emerged as a strong theme, and indeed, the respect of the subject of SE by the school, teachers and students. Students pointed out that if the school calendar and the teachers themselves don't respect the subject of SE enough to afford it adequate amount of thought and class time, it is difficult for them to engage. If students feel as though the content or teaching tools are irrelevant or infantilising, they cannot put their faith in them:

> My teacher for SPHE said we were going to watch the video, and then it just never happened.

> It's always 'Sally and Tom like each other', who talks like that?

> They're acting like we're 12 or something, d'you know, they won't talk… I would just want to talk about like, bigger problems, but I'm not gonna mention it cos they're not talking about it





Young people already have ideas and experiences of healthy and unhealthy relationships. They are aware of the gaps in their knowledge and require information on difficult subjects.

Students identified the difficulties teachers face surrounding disclosure and mandated reporting of issues to parents. They highlighted teachers' unwillingness to address the emotional or personal side of SE, tending to steer the class away from challenging subjects. Students interpret this as a lack of trust in their ability to handle in-depth discussion in a mature way, feeling a distancing from important subjects.

DISCUSSION

All elements of the IPPF Framework for CSE (2010) are used to structure this discussion. This study's results indicated that consequence-based, heteronormative SE teaching methods place unequal responsibility on the different genders (Dixon-Mueller 1993; Allen and Carmody 2012). If current SE programmes are failing to engage boys in a positive way and keeping girls from speaking up, overhaul is needed.

Students are not only aware of complexities to do with sexual and reproductive health; they are already personally encountering them. The results show that students have detailed, nuanced questions, and show an instinct to take responsibility for their own health. An unsupportive response to interest in sex is not successfully preventive, and does not delay the age at which students begin to act on sexual impulses (Ferguson *et al.* 2008). However, it does succeed in frightening them; while aware of the "dangers" of sex, they are uninformed about the practical methods of treatment for sexual health issues, and options for contraception and unplanned pregnancy. And yet, these are the first issues they bring up, rather than love, enjoyment or fulfilment.

Young people have a right to be considered sexual citizens and so have the right to CSE. This study's results and the surrounding literature both indicate that SE is very often broached only once or twice a year, by teachers who are given little training or support (Lodge *et al.* 2024). This creates an environment in which nuanced exploration of concepts and student-led discussion are unlikely to take place. Inconsistency creates distrust in the curriculum and leads to different levels of understanding within the same year group. The literature recommends ongoing programmes using spiral learning models to reinforce the retention of information (Lloyd and Lyth 2003, Pound *et al.* 2017), and the students recommended this type of learning. To achieve SE that appropriately addresses the rights and agendas of young people, it must also support educators to implement it. Oversight is required to ensure that students are receiving equal high-quality education in these areas, and appropriate teacher training and follow-ups are necessary.

The results outlined the negative effect that discussion of consent limited to legality can have on young people's understanding of and how consent relates to sexual violence. Sexual violence and rape are often distinct in these young people's minds from consent. The understanding that an act without consent is, by definition, an act of sexual violence, was not made clear, nor that a consensual act can quickly become non-consensual (Allen and Carmody 2012). This nuanced understanding is vital for avoidance of sexual harassment and assault. Consent laws have been presented to them as a rule set down to prevent them from having sex, rather than laws that exist to protect against advantage being taken of young people by older adults.

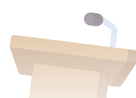
Positivity and pleasure are vital parts of SE. Students need practical examples of what positive, enthusiastic consent can look like, and the study data supports the idea that non-sexualised, abstracted exercises can provide students with a roadmap for nuanced and complicated concepts like consent. They can explore the natural grey areas that arise in relationships, along with consensual versus non-consensual actions in a safe, supportive environment.

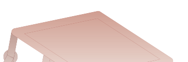
If SE is based on heteronormative relationships and consequence-focused, then sex can only be penetrative, heterosexual and for the purposes of reproduction. If sex exists only for pregnancy, and pregnancy is to be avoided for teenagers, then the overarching message of school SE is that there is no diversity in attraction, and that sex is something to avoid. This gives a negative tone to all teaching, while simultaneously excluding queer people, putting more pressure on girls, and missing the opportunity to impress upon young people that sexual relationships can and should always be healthy and safe for everyone involved. Diversity and realism in SE cannot exist without allowing for positivity in teaching methods, without acknowledging pleasure and enjoyment in sexuality and sex.

CONCLUSION

There have been significant changes in Ireland's attitude, both culturally and educationally, to sexuality education even in the four years since this research study was undertaken. Irish people are becoming more comfortable with speaking openly about sex, sexuality and gender identity, and the visibility and acceptance of the queer community continues to grow, though with notable issues still to address, i.e., the rise of transphobia and sex-negative political movements.

This study, and those in more recent years that echo its findings, have highlighted that there is clear commitment from the Irish Government to implement change in the SE curriculum, but that educators need further support to deliver it effectively, and that young people should be involved in the development of CSE. Young people respond positively to participatory indirect instruction, and this chapter has evidenced that these methods support understanding of communication, respect and boundaries. The study data and subsequent discussion suggests that this methodology could serve as a useful addition or alternative to direct classroom-based instruction, allowing students to create their own roadmap for sexual situations in a safe, controlled, desexualised way.





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Chapter 6

Bereavement in the Primary School Classroom

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INTRODUCTION

According to a study conducted by Growing Up in Ireland (GUI), approximately 5% of children experience parental loss before reaching eighteen (Rodríguez *et al.* 2022). Grief, while an inescapable phenomenon, constitutes one of the most arduous and transformative experiences for a child. Following such bereavement, a child's world often devolves into profound disarray and anguish. A substantial body of research underscores that bereavement can significantly impair a child's social, emotional, and academic functioning within an educational setting (Kahn 2013). It is widely acknowledged that the pedagogical role encompasses more than mere academic instruction. Teachers are essential in facilitating the emotional, physical, and social development of children, especially during the grieving process. As Hunnes (2022, p.80) astutely observes: "When little people are overwhelmed by big emotions, it's the teacher's role to share our calm, not join their chaos," highlighting the critical responsibility teachers have in providing stability and support during such turbulent times.

RATIONALE AND RESEARCH

The rationale for this study emerged from the personal experiences of both authors, stemming from their extensive work within various educational settings and their commitment to addressing the emotional needs of students. Bereavement exerts a profound influence on a child's life, particularly within the school environment. It became evident that managing bereavement is a sensitive and complex issue, especially among primary school teachers in Ireland. Many educators expressed feelings of discomfort and a lack of proficiency when confronted with instances of bereavement, alongside a noted deficiency in bereavement support services available at the primary level. This sentiment is similarly reflected in the existing literature. Consequently, the authors sought to deepen their knowledge and understanding of effective strategies for responding to and accommodating the needs of bereaved children in the primary classroom context. Furthermore, this study aspired to contribute to the existing body of research in this field, ultimately equipping primary educators to navigate this exceptionally delicate matter with greater competence and sensitivity.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Piaget's Developmental Theory

According to Piaget's developmental theory, children typically grasp the universality, inevitability, and irreversibility of death by the age of seven or eight (Piaget 1955). Moreover, research identifies three distinct stages in a child's understanding of death. Stage 1 (ages two to five) is characterised by a child's perception of death as merely a departure, wherein they believe the deceased has simply relocated to another place. Stage 2 (ages five to nine) reflects the child's conviction that death is entirely avoidable. Finally, Stage 3 (ages nine to twelve) marks

the period in which children are believed to successfully acquire the concept of permanence, recognising that the cessation of life is irreversible.

Applying Piaget's theory within the primary classroom context can enhance teachers' understanding of a child's capacity to comprehend death and grief. A child's ability to process such loss may also be influenced by their developmental stage, contextual factors, and the support available within their home environment (Chachar *et al.* 2021).

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory (BET)

Given that children spend approximately one-third of their lives in school, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory emphasises the significance of interactions within the school environment for a child's growth and development (Abraham-Steele and Edmonds 2021). This theory is frequently employed to elucidate the impact of the social environment on human development (O'Brien and McGuckin 2013).

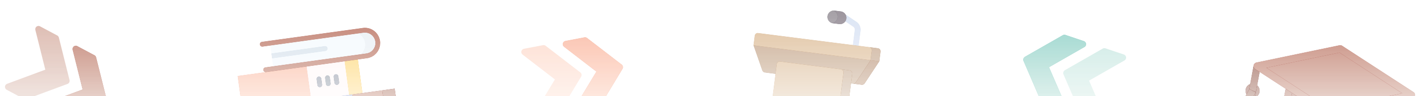
Bronfenbrenner's theory posits that the surrounding environment profoundly influences various facets of life, including emotional experiences and interests (Abraham-Steele and Edmonds 2021). Central to this theory is the mesosystem, which highlights the relationship between the child and their immediate school environment. A substantial body of research has utilised BET to investigate how primary schools can effectively support bereaved children (Dimery and Templeton 2021). Studies indicate that a school's response during a child's grieving process is critical in fulfilling the child's needs, as inadequate support may lead to adverse emotional or health-related consequences in the future (O'Brien and McGuckin 2013).

RELEVANT LITERATURE

The Effects of Childhood Bereavement

John Bowlby conceptualised attachment as a profound emotional bond formed between individuals (Holmes 2014). The attachment figure is one from whom individuals seek comfort, safety, and support. Bowlby contended that these attachment relationships significantly influence a child's development (Shevlin *et al.* 2014). He articulated that while attachment bonds confer psychological benefits, the removal of one individual from such a bond can precipitate chaos and distress for the remaining individual (Holmes 2014). In the context of childhood bereavement, a child may abruptly confront feelings of isolation, devoid of safety or security, leading to profound distress (Holmes 2014). In the short term following a bereavement, a child may experience intermittent anxiety, diminished self-esteem, and disruptions in psychological regulation (Shevlin *et al.* 2014).

The implications of bereavement for a child are manifold, as it represents one of the most distressing events encountered during childhood (McGovern and Tracey 2010). The child grapples not only with the loss of a loved one but also with the anxiety stemming from the necessary adjustments to their world, as they must reconstruct a new reality for themselves (O'Brien and McGuckin 2013). The formidable task of reconstituting a new reality can present significant challenges for a young child, potentially resulting in academic difficulties. Mourning children often exhibit adverse effects on their psychological and emotional well-being in the short term, consistent with the assertions of Bowlby's attachment theory (Duncan 2020; Akerman and Statham 2011). Dowling (2014) categorises a child's response to loss into four domains: behavioural, physical, psychological, and emotional. However, the nuances of each child's response are influenced by the specific circumstances surrounding the loss. Without



adequate support or guidance, children may experience unresolved grief that adversely affects their social, emotional, and academic functioning in the long term (Kahn 2013). Research indicates that parental bereavement at a young age can lead to anxiety, mild depression, and reduced self-esteem (Lowton and Higginson 2003). Several studies have established a correlation between bereavement in youth and increased incidence of depression, with findings indicating that 25% of bereaved young individuals experience major depressive episodes, in stark contrast to just 1% of community controls (Dowling 2014).

An expanding body of research identifies common reactions to bereavement among young people (Chachar 2021). These behaviours are increasingly recognised as normative in the first two years following the death of a loved one, and are often manifesting within educational settings (Dowling 2014). Common responses to the loss of a loved one can adversely impact students' academic performance, social engagement, and may precipitate irregular behaviours such as eating disorders (O'Brien and McGuckin 2013). A longitudinal study revealed that nine out of ten children exhibited some form of behavioural disturbance at school after the death of a significant other, potentially reflecting their internal grieving process (McManus and Paul 2019). Reports of anger and violent outbursts were noted in 33% of cases, with over 40% of children exhibiting withdrawal or depressive symptoms. Despite these findings, numerous studies have demonstrated that the impact of bereavement on a child is contingent upon external factors, including the context of the death and the child's age (Willis 2002). Notably, children may experience diminished concentration and focus following the death of a close individual, which can impede their learning in school. Nevertheless, other studies have indicated that the majority of bereaved children continue to function effectively in educational settings (Chachar 2021). Silverman and Worden (1993) found that some children may immerse themselves in their academic work following a loss, resulting in improved performance, albeit often at the expense of social interactions. Such behaviour may be motivated by a desire to please their relatives or an attempt to escape the reality of their situation, highlighting the vital role of school support and the significance of BET.

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and the Social Personal Health Education (SPHE) Curriculum (1999)

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) encompasses processes that facilitate a child's development of self-awareness and emotional regulation, thereby providing a robust foundation for their interactions with others (CASEL 2017). It encompasses five core competencies: Self-awareness; Self-management; Social Awareness; Relationship Skills; and Responsible Decision-making. SEL fosters resilience and cultivates a safe, positive learning environment within the classroom. Research suggests that the development of SEL skills can be particularly beneficial for grieving children, aiding them in understanding and processing their emotions while simultaneously fostering empathy among their peers and educators (Cahill *et al.* 2014).

Within the SPHE curriculum, the strand unit titled *Growing and Changing* addresses the concept of loss (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA] 1999). This unit teaches that change is an inevitable aspect of life and that individuals may confront unforeseen alterations, such as bereavement. In 2020, the Draft Curriculum Framework for the new SPHE curriculum was published, reflecting the needs of children in today's rapidly evolving society. One of the seven competencies outlined (Fostering Well-being), aims to enhance children's understanding of well- being, empowering them to cultivate physical, social, emotional, and spiritual health. This framework ultimately promotes resilience, enabling children to navigate life's challenges effectively (NCCA 2023).

Teacher Bereavement Supports in Ireland

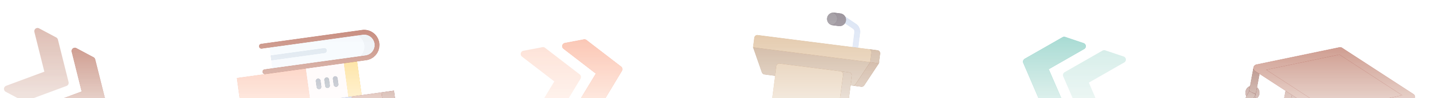
The Zones of Regulation is a self-regulation framework designed to help children identify and articulate their emotions within a secure environment, encouraging them to categorise their emotional states (Kuypers 2011). Through diverse activities, educators instruct students in utilising sensory tools and calming techniques to maintain emotional regulation (Heath and Cole 2012). Notably, the four zones are not designated as good or bad; rather, it is acknowledged that individuals will experience each zone throughout their lives. Implementing this programme in the classroom may directly benefit grieving children while simultaneously equipping other students with strategies to enhance their self-regulation skills.

The *Friends* programme serves as a universal initiative employed by educators to prevent and address anxiety, a common consequence of childhood bereavement. The *Friends* Programme also aims to foster resilience among children (Dimery and Templeton 2021). This programme comprises a series of cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) techniques. In Ireland, the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) administers the programme in two stages: *Fun Friends*, aimed at children aged four to seven, and *Friends for Life*, designed for children aged eight to eleven (Barrett 2005). A significant theme explored within the programme is coping self-efficacy beliefs, which pertain to individuals' perceptions of their capacity to confront and navigate difficult challenges. Research indicates that teachers can deliver this programme as effectively as psychologists (Barrett 2005).

The revised Wellbeing Framework (NCCA 2023) underscores the centrality of well-being promotion within the mission of the Department of Education and Skills (DES). Although the well- being programme offers various resources to promote healthy well-being in schools, only two resources specifically address grief and loss (NCCA 2023). The *Zippy's Friends* Programme (*ZF*) targets children aged five to eight, aiming to assist them in coping with change. The other recommended resource is Rainbows Ireland (RI), an Irish organisation that collaborates with schools to support children experiencing loss. While RI is acknowledged and valued within Irish schools, it primarily operates as an after-school programme that engages with children who have experienced bereavement, often facilitated by school staff. Although these programmes are invaluable for primary school children, they are not universally available or compulsory in all Irish schools. Furthermore, there is limited evidence regarding the efficacy of these programmes in supporting teachers when addressing cases of bereavement within the primary school context (Dimery and Templeton 2021).

Teachers' Perceptions of Child Bereavement Supports

Both international and national research consistently indicates that classroom teachers play a pivotal role in a child's life and can profoundly impact their educational experience, particularly as children spend approximately one-third of their lives in school (McManus and Paul 2019). However, numerous studies, both national and international, reveal that teachers often feel ill-equipped and lacking in confidence when faced with bereavement in the classroom (O'Brien and McGuckin 2014; Dyregrov and Isode 2013). A 2015 international study found that 90% of teachers felt inadequately prepared to manage bereavement, with guidance primarily suggesting the maintenance of normalcy and the implementation of existing strategies. O'Brien and McGuckin (2014) reported that 56% of schools actively sought assistance from independent organisations, such as Barnardos, the Irish Childhood Bereavement Network, Jigsaw, Calm, Pieta House, and NEPS, due to insufficient directives from the DES.



Bereavement is an area that impacts schools every year, yet teachers frequently express feelings of inadequacy and lack of governmental support (Kahn 2013). When some educators have undergone one or two days of training from organisations like RI, Seedlings, and Seasons for Growth, they have reported that such training was immensely beneficial (O'Brien and McGuckin 2014). It is critical to recognise that a child's grieving process differs from that of adults, as previously discussed in relation to stages of grief. Educators have observed that children express their feelings not necessarily through conventional adult language, but rather through creative means such as colouring, drawing, or scribbling to convey their emotions (Dowling, 2014). While children process and respond to death in varied ways across developmental stages, factors such as age, cognitive ability, cultural context, and prior experiences with death significantly influence a child's understanding of mortality.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative methodology, selected with the intention of eliciting comprehensive feedback regarding teachers' experiences with bereaved children within the classroom context. A total of fourteen primary school teachers were recruited from three counties in Ireland, encompassing a diverse sample that included both newly qualified and experienced teachers.

Research Approach

To amalgamate varied perspectives and insights, a qualitative research design was adopted, facilitating in-depth and holistic qualitative interviews (Martin-Hodgins 2014). Given the small-scale nature of this investigation, individual semi-structured interviews were deemed the most appropriate research method. This approach aimed to enrich the understanding of teachers' experiences in managing bereavement at the primary school level. The interview questions were carefully crafted based on themes emerging from the literature review. The researchers, having worked in numerous primary schools, opted for a snowball sampling technique, leveraging their professional networks to identify suitable participants. This method was employed to mitigate potential selection bias (Winship and Mare 1992).

Ethical Approval

Prior to the initiation of field research, ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Marino Institute of Education. The study adhered rigorously to ethical standards. Consent was solicited from the boards of management and principals of the participating schools, accompanied by information letters and consent forms that clearly outlined the study's objectives and the participants' roles. Participants were assured that pseudonyms would be assigned to their names and schools in the transcripts, with the option to receive a copy of their contributions upon request. All data were securely stored on a password-protected laptop and were systematically destroyed one week after transcription. Informed consent forms were subsequently provided to confirm participation, and data collection commenced upon receipt of consent.

Data Gathering and Analysis

The data analysis for this qualitative study encompassed the preparation and organisation of interview transcripts alongside the literature review findings. Utilising thematic coding, the researchers distilled this data into overarching themes. A thematic analysis approach was employed, which is particularly suited for analysing qualitative data derived from the interviews that were carried out (Alhojailan 2012). The data obtained from interviews were synthesised into

four principal themes, each further divided into sub-themes to facilitate an in-depth analysis and comprehensive discussion.

Limitations

Due to the limited sample size of fourteen participants, the findings cannot be generalised; their experiences do not necessarily reflect those of all educators, thereby constraining the study's conclusions. As is typical in small-scale research, the findings are restricted by factors such as time constraints, participant numbers, and the breadth of experience. An expanded participant pool and additional time for data collection would have rendered the findings more robust, allowing for a more thorough evaluation of teachers' perceptions of bereavement support in primary education. Moreover, with greater experience and time, a mixed-method approach could have been implemented to produce more extensive research outcomes.

FINDINGS

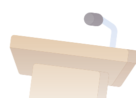
Many participants in this study acknowledged the paramount role of schools in supporting bereaved children, with participant 2 (P2) asserting that "supports must be in place for bereaved children; at the end of the day, they do spend a significant proportion of their lives in this setting." This perspective aligns with existing literature that emphasises the school's unique capacity to provide essential support during times of bereavement (Duncan 2020).

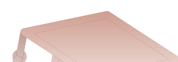
Initial Teacher Education (ITE)

A predominant theme articulated by participants was the pressing need for additional training in this domain, underscoring the inadequacy of existing offerings in Initial Teacher Education (ITE). A considerable number of participants remarked on the insufficiency of their third-level training, particularly concerning bereavement, with comments such as: "We only received six weeks of SPHE lecturing," (P4); and "There is just so much to cover that topics like bereavement aren't even mentioned" (P8; P14). Upon completion of their formal teacher education, teachers felt ill- equipped to address grief and loss issues in the classroom, despite being aware of the likelihood of such events occurring. These findings corroborate a body of literature indicating that educators often feel inadequately prepared to engage with sensitive topics within the classroom context (O'Brien and McGuckin 2013). Participants exhibited alternative views regarding their comfort levels when working with bereaved children. While P1, P2, P8 and P13 expressed greater confidence stemming from their personal experiences, P7 noted: "Although I experienced parental bereavement myself, the way in which others experience and respond to it can vary." This observation reflects the literature highlighting the influence of various factors, such as culture, age, religious beliefs, and the circumstances surrounding bereavement on individual grieving processes (Willis 2002).

Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

Participants were questioned about any Continuing Professional Development (CPD) they had received in relation to bereavement. Responses varied significantly, with 57% of them participating in either "a talk" or "a course day" focused on addressing bereavement in the classroom. However, it was revealed that all participants who had received this training did so in response to "a rise in bereavement cases at their schools." Many participants expressed that while the CPD was somewhat beneficial, they still "didn't feel confident and prepared to deal with bereavement in the classroom as a result of the training they completed" (P5, P6, P7, and P11). The findings suggest that 90% of teachers lack the necessary resources to effectively manage bereavement. This situation mirrors previous findings indicating that bereavement





is not consistently or comprehensively addressed in primary schools throughout Ireland, consistent with the data discussed earlier

Teachers' Experience with Grief in the Primary Classroom

The repercussions of loss can manifest in a child's behaviour within the school environment, "both in the short and long term" (P3). Initially, teachers reported instances of "emotional outbursts, anger, emotional dysregulation, anxiety, and a fear of attending school" (P4, P5, P10, P14). Over time, bereaved children exhibited symptoms such as significantly low self-esteem, frequent anger outbursts, and social withdrawal. Additional research has corroborated these observations, indicating that bereavement can lead to declines in academic performance, social withdrawal, and irregular behaviours, including eating disorders (Dowling 2014). Notably, participants observed that as children matured, they became increasingly aware of their "situation," necessitating greater emotional support at school. One participant indicated that "if the child received little support when they were younger, that they could see unresolved feelings and anguish" (P5). This finding aligns with research conducted by Kahn (2013), which established that a lack of support or guidance can lead to unresolved grief, adversely affecting social, emotional, and academic functioning in the long term.

SPHE Curriculum

The majority of participants lauded the SPHE curriculum and its methodologies, with one participant highlighting its "facilitating group discussions about death at a safe distance" (P9). Interestingly, no teachers in the study referenced the new primary curriculum framework outlined in the literature review, which proposes an increase in time allocations for well-being. Participants also emphasised the necessity of acknowledging a child's loss, a perspective that aligns with other studies indicating that such discussions can aid a child's adjustment to bereavement (Dimery and Templeton 2021).

School Policy and Training

Over 70% of participants in this study had encountered one or more children who had lost a parent. These findings underscore the critical need for robust support systems within schools to effectively meet the needs of bereaved children (Chachar 2021). Within this study, no bereavement policies were identified in any of the participating schools, although several participants articulated the need for such policies, stating: "There is no policy I am aware of" (P6); and "That is something that would be beneficial" (P13). While some participants acknowledged familiarity with the school's Critical Incident Policy, activated in the wake of bereavement, others expressed apprehension regarding the appropriate procedures to follow, remarking: "It would be so helpful to just have a guide when a child suffers a bereavement" (P2). As well as this, participants who engaged with the RI programme reported mixed experiences. Although they found it beneficial, they also noted limitations related to its non-compulsory nature and stringent criteria, with comments from P1 and P4 such as: "Waiting lists are just so long; it takes ages for a child to be seen" (P1); and "The programme is excellent, but the training process is time-consuming" (P4).

Participants 3 and 7 indicated that their schools lacked bereavement support programmes. Yet, they mentioned various means of supporting grieving students, such as referrals to "NEPS" (P3), "art, music, and play therapy" (P9), or utilisation of "nurture rooms" (P11). P13 offered valuable insight regarding the availability of counseling services in their school, noting that such services were in "short supply" and P14 mentioned how there was a similar situation in their school whereby children hoping to avail of counseling were on "long waiting lists".

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research illuminates the profound impact of childhood bereavement and highlights the urgent necessity for more accessible support within the primary school context. As a constant presence in children's lives, teachers occupy a unique position to assist bereaved children. However, the research elucidates the challenges faced by primary school teachers in addressing the needs of bereaved children in Ireland. A recurring theme in the findings was the teachers' desire to provide optimal support, coupled with feelings of inadequacy due to insufficient training and education on grief and loss. Consequently, the majority of participants sought assistance from independent organisations, citing a lack of directives from the DES.

Participants noted that children exhibit varying responses to bereavement, contingent upon the nature of the loss. Additionally, it was revealed that prolonged periods without support can exacerbate unresolved feelings and distress; this finding is corroborated by international research. Therefore, the implementation of a comprehensive bereavement plan is recommended, ensuring that both experienced and newly qualified teachers receive training on this phenomenon and are equipped with practical, hands-on strategies and resources tailored to their specific contexts.

This study is limited by its sample size of fourteen participants and does not encompass the experiences of children in the school environment following a bereavement. Given its small scale and reliance on teacher responses, further research with a larger sample size is warranted to explore how schools and teachers can better assist bereaved children. It is advisable for subsequent studies to investigate additional supports that could be instituted to empower teachers in addressing the needs of bereaved children. This study contributes to the existing body of research, highlighting the necessity for the development of comprehensive school policies to manage critical incidents. Such policies would ensure that all teachers are unified in their understanding of the protocols to follow when a bereavement occurs.

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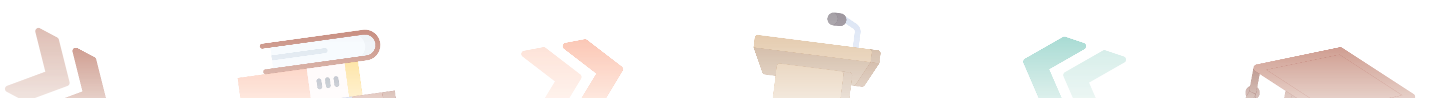

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