Transforming educational experience for children, parents and teachers

Practitioner Research from the CDI/NUIM Masters Programme 2013

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Foreword

This Masters in Education programme was developed in 2010 through collaboration between the Childhood Development Initiative, (CDI) and the Education Department, NUI Maynooth. The purpose of the two year programme (2011-2013) was to provide teachers in designated disadvantaged schools and others working with young people in the area of Tallaght West with a specifically tailored academic programme of studies. Focused on providing a highly participative learning environment, the programme aimed to enhance the professional development of teachers and other practitioners with particular reference to the analysis and amelioration of educational disadvantage.

By delivering much of the course locally, the programme combined critical theoretical analyses that were locally relevant. It aimed to give teachers the critical space to explore and reflect upon their professional practices, contextualising these experiences within educational theory, pedagogy and policy. It offered opportunities for critical engagement with and development of participative research based action strategies.

Students completed a range of modules including:
- An Introduction to Research in Education
- Environments of Learning
- Reflective Practice, Learning and Social Justice
- Educational Disadvantage: Models, Perspectives and Redress
- Education Studies Specialism

Examination was by continuous assessment using a variety of assessment tools including assignments, portfolio and a major action research thesis of 25,000 words. Copies of these theses are accessible through the NUI Maynooth Education Department.

Childhood Development Initiative

CDI is funded under the Government's Area Based Childhood Programme (ABC), which builds on the learning to date from the Prevention and Early Intervention Programmes (PEIP). The initiative aims to break the cycle of child poverty in areas where it is most deeply entrenched and to improve the outcomes for children and young people where these are currently significantly poorer than they are for children and young people living elsewhere in the State.

Based in Tallaght West, CDI is the result of the professionalism, passion and persistence of a consortium of 23 concerned individuals and organisations in the community who had a vision of a better place for children. Through innovative partnerships, they brought together the science of evidenced-based practice and rigorous evaluation, with the spirit of an approach focused on the identified needs of children and families.

CDI was initially established through a partnership between the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) and The Atlantic Philanthropies (AP), under the Prevention and Early Intervention Programmes, which was set up with "the objective of testing innovative ways of delivering services and early interventions for children and young people, including the wider family and community settings," (DCYA, 2011).

CDI designs, delivers and evaluates a suite of programmes across a spectrum of local needs including language, literacy, health, early years, conflict management and community safety. All CDI programmes are evidence informed and manualised, and are delivered through existing structures and services.

The Education Department, NUI Maynooth

The Education Department, NUI Maynooth is committed to providing a broad range of unparalleled programmes to the next generation of educators. It supports a diverse range of Undergraduate Degrees and Postgraduate Diplomas, Masters and Doctorate Programmes in areas of initial teacher education, school leadership, school guidance and counselling and innovative teaching and learning. The Education Department supports an energetic, dynamic interdisciplinary research culture with staff and postgraduate students covering all aspects of education and learning and focused on learning for all across the life-course through theoretically informed applied research.

The organisation of research into three themes provide opportunities for staff and those engaged in educational research to maximise collaborative opportunities, obtain critical commentary on ongoing research, develop research thinking and plan new projects. The three cross-cutting themes are as follows:

1 Innovative and Creative Teaching and Learning Environments

2 Identity, Social Justice and Inclusion

3 Development and Well-Being

These cross-cutting research themes are explored by staff using a range of research designs and methodologies that include action research, narrative inquiry, qualitative research, quantitative research, documentary analysis, ethnographic

and arts based approaches. They also cross-cut key subject areas that staff are involved in including the use of technology in education; innovative, active approaches to teaching and learning; the teaching and learning of Maths and Science and Languages; leadership in educational settings, counselling and guidance, social justice, Development Education, Special Education Needs and educational disadvantage. Further details are available on the Department's website: http://www.nuim.ie/education.

Editorial

Action research has gained a renewed significance in Irish and international educational settings over the past number of decades. As recently as 2007 the Commission of the European Communities (2007) articulated a vision of teachers and schools engaged in continuous, systematic reflection on their practice as professionals, evaluating the effectiveness of their strategies and amending them accordingly. The Teaching Council **Policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education** (2011) and the national policy which supports school self evaluation prioritize these practices and together these have been especially significant in urging and prioritising commitment by teachers and schools to continual critical-creative, professional enquiry.

The participatory action research studies outlined in this collection were conducted across the range of education sectors and sought to improve the rationality and outcomes of professional practice. The research emphasis was essentially collaborative and involved the researchers working in close community with a broad range of students, teachers, parents and the wider community. Together these engaged in collective reflection and constructive commitment to a range of thematic concerns including: fostering resilience and emotional well being of students; student motivation and supports; restorative practices within schools and promoting literacy and numeracy through home school links. For editorial ease each of the eight studies are arranged alphabetically by the author's surnames. The case studies are structured in four parts which set out the nature and scale of the educational dilemma, the methodological process and procedures, the key findings and concluding with a focus on next steps.

In the first chapter Simon Brennan implemented an evidence based initiative to promote intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy amongst primary school students. This focus on motivation and self-efficacy follows through in the next two studies. Paul Dempsey investigated factors that affected students' choice of Leaving Certificate Science subjects and devised actions that would enable and inform choice. David Murphy examined how involvement in sports can help promote positive student behaviour and achievement in school. What was uncovered was a key focus on the importance of involvement in extra curricular activities in building self esteem and resilience among students. Deirdre O'Callaghan's study builds on these themes. She explored the use of Forum Theatre to foster resilience in sixth class children before their transition to secondary school. Her study found engagement with this programme enabled these children to find their voice and actively rehearse ways to deal with real world situations. Fíona O'Fiaich's study also centred on the implementation of an innovative programme called 'Learning Through Play' (LTP). This programme was developed for children who are learning through Irish in an area of social and economic disadvantage. It built partnerships with children

and families, helping children to learn, develop and acquire language skills through play and through interactions with others. This emphasis on collaboration with parents was also taken up in Pauline O'Hanlon's study which described how the voices of parents of educationally disadvantaged students are often unheard. She details how working class parents describe themselves as being 'frozen out' of school decision making and experiencing a general lack of consultation. She investigated how best to support and encourage teachers to involve parents in raising literacy levels amongst students. Gráinne Smith's chapter further takes up this aspect of supports within schools and she looked at ways schools can support children who have experienced 'loss' through bereavement and family break-up and how it could be enhanced. The issue here was very much one of lived values and culture within schools. These are aspects which Michelle Stowe was also centrally concerned with. Her study outlined the intention to establish a professional community of teachers so as to implement relationship-building and conflict-resolution practices in their most challenging class. It traces the impact this had on relationships, teaching practice and learning.

Each of the studies set out in this collection recognises the inherent and fundamental principle of acting differently as a result of learning from experience. These stories are ones of optimism and a commitment to community activism. They bear witness to an order of discourse which challenges the prevailing status quo. Things need not be the way they are and efforts at active reform need not be futile.

Promoting intrinsic motivation to improve self-efficacy.
- Simon Brennan

Introduction: The Dilemma/Issues

The purpose of this action research thesis was to implement an evidence based initiative that could help better engage students in school. I chose to investigate the area of promoting intrinsic motivation in students. It was at a later stage that I realised that self-efficacy could be achieved through the use of intrinsic motivation. My experience to date as a primary school teacher convinced me that many students need initiatives to improve their school performance in all areas not just the academic. Often students can become passengers in education and the hope was to try to address this issue. With increased motivation I felt that students could do better in school. This in itself was hardly a unique observation. However, what was the best way to motivate students?

To increase participation, you need to increase motivation, but how to achieve this seemed less obvious. Students, even at an early age, need to take ownership of their own learning to be motivated to develop. I formed the opinion based on my research that with increased ownership, students in school could achieve autonomy of education and be the driver of it. But how do you increase student involvement, encourage greater participation and achieve personal autonomy in the learning process? I believed that this could be achieved by firstly drawing attention to the learning process and the factors which can impact on educational success. It was therefore my responsibility as a teacher to create opportunities for students where they could experience success.

I felt that this autonomy of education could be achieved using a partnership approach between myself and the students in my class. I wanted to create an environment where students knew exactly how they were performing in school and draw attention to key performance criteria which would aid improved school performance. The performance criteria were narrowed to five key areas, namely attendance, punctuality, behaviour, homework and effort. Success was to be celebrated and attributed directly to the performance of the students.

From the beginning I did not want my thesis to be a journey of self-exploration. I hoped instead to design an initiative that would achieve as much input from the students as possible. I wanted to maximise the student perspective input, as ultimately, to my mind, this would determine its success.

At a Glance!

- Aimed to promote intrinsic motivation in students as opposed to merely motivating students with the use of external rewards.
- Students with increased levels of self-belief and self-confidence will have a greater sense of self-efficacy.

How: The Approach

Increasingly I felt that some students had become disengaged in school. I wanted to investigate what may be causing this and what could be done to improve the situation. I was strongly influenced by the work of Dr. Brenna Bry, (2001) an American psychologist specialising in behaviour monitoring and reinforcement and research emanating from The University of Colorado after the Columbine Massacre. In my case, an evidence based initiative was put in place. Data was gathered and recorded. Feedback was provided by the students involved who also documented their feelings on a weekly basis. Weekly goals were set by the class teacher and articulated to each individual student. Over time when the students became more familiar with the processes involved, they began to set their own goals and to self-evaluate their own weekly performance. The students were surveyed prior to the initiative being put in place. This helped to identify students who would require additional support. Participating class teachers were interviewed to ascertain their views on the effectiveness of the initiative on individual class performance and on the challenges involved.

What: The Findings

As a result of the implementation of the initiative I learned that the vast majority of students were anxious to become involved and they participated fully. The investigation helped me realise that a system could be developed that would involve students more in their own education and would help them see the importance of it. Students were prepared to take increased ownership of the initiative and as a result they gained greater autonomy over their own education. Instead of being passengers in education, they became the driving force of it. The initiative involved observing and providing feedback on a series of performance criteria associated with successful school students. I was keen to ensure that students would not be merely measured on academic success, but looked at the factors that contribute to this success such as attendance, punctuality, behaviour and effort. Students clearly experienced success under the outlined performance criteria and this success helped generate increased levels of self-belief and self-confidence. The process of promoting intrinsic motivation in students, eventually lead to greater levels of self-efficacy. I found the writings of Albert Bandura insightful in this regard and drew on his 1977 paper 'Self-Efficacy: Toward a Unifying Theory of Behavioural Change'. According to Bandura's theory, people with a high level of self-efficacy are more likely to confront difficult challenges, tasks and achieve, as opposed to shying away from them in avoidance. Results of research carried out by Bandura (1977) also found that self-efficacy can have an impact on various key factors from behaviour to psychological state of mind to levels of motivation.

Where to: Future Directions

I fear that students are being 'punished with external rewards'. I strongly believe 'Do this and you'll get that' teaching has a negative impact on students, dangling goodies in front of them in much the same way as you train the family pet. I am positive that rewards motivate people. They motivate people to get rewards. But there will come a time when that reward

is no longer sufficient. Many teachers see their role as simply imparting knowledge of their subject to their students instead of one of encouraging and developing a capacity for self-motivated learning. My hope is that initiatives such as mine can be implemented in a variety of school settings, thus encouraging students to set personal goals. Once students believe they have the ability to succeed, they will, more often than not.

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An investigation into factors that affect students' choice of science subjects at Leaving Certificate with the aim of devising actions that will inform and enable choice.

- Paul Dempsey

Introduction: The Dilemma/Issues

This research investigated factors that affected students' choice of Leaving Certificate Science subjects and devised actions that would enable and inform this choice. The research was set against a drop in the numbers of students choosing science subjects for Leaving Certificate (Smyth and Hannan, 2006). The research took place in a community school in the south west area of Dublin. This school caters for a wide range of students from some of the most disadvantaged communities of Dublin. There is a huge diversity in the student population attending the school with 25% immigrant students and more than 10% of the school population with some kind of diagnosed learning difficulty.

Preliminary data indicated that 35% of the sample group did not seek advice on their option choices, that students were not making informed decisions, and were confused about the options process. Consequently significant numbers of students were changing their options in fifth year resulting in adjustment difficulties for them and interruptions to the establishment phase of this year. This also presented significant logistical and administrative problems for the school. Therefore it was felt that an investigation into the factors affecting these students' choices could be beneficial and would aid in designing interventions to inform their choice.

How: The Approach

The factors affecting student choice were investigated using qualitative and quantitative methods of enquiry. Surveys were administered to one transition year class (sample group) with focus group interviews conducted to elucidate points which came to light. Students used the journaling technique throughout the research which yielded unique student focused insights into their thought processes as they made their choices. The viewpoints of parents, teachers and year heads

At a Glance!

- Set against the drop in the numbers of students choosing science subjects for Leaving Certificate.
- There was a 39% increase in the numbers of students seeking advice on subject choice.
- The findings show that students would benefit from engagement in a shadowing or taster initiative.

were ascertained through interviews and were used to triangulate the students' views. Action research was the chosen research method as its inclusive emphasis helped to build confidence in students and its iterative nature allowed processes to be refined. It also allowed for the researcher voice to be included. The two actions used were Differential Aptitude Testing (DATS) and a shadowing initiative, where students were able to join classes of Chemistry, Physics and Biology. The combination of action research with a mixed methods approach allowed an in-depth study of current practice in the school, and ultimately led to improvements in that practice (Elliot, 1991).

What: The Findings

Post intervention data indicated that interest and enjoyment values, expectation of success and career needs remained important, echoing the results of both Irish (Smyth and Hannan, 2006) and international literature (Roderio, 2007). There was a 39% increase in the numbers of students seeking advice on subject choice. 40% of students reported that the action steps were the most important factor in their choices. The role of the career guidance department was shown to have affected student choices, but individual engagement occurred in fewer than 10% of cases. This was not surprising given the increased role of counselling over career guidance, and the consequent lack of scheduled time with the transition year group.

An unintended outcome of the action steps was that parents and family became more marginalised. Parents' educational attainment was shown to be poor and together with little engagement with the school (as shown in the case record) parents were no longer as important in helping students make decisions. This gap between the school and parents and therefore student, was shown to be common for parents from disadvantaged areas as addressed in the work of Lyons *et al*. (2003) who referred to these parents as 'outsiders'. Addressing this 'outsider status', and bringing parents into the decision making process, presents a challenge for the design of any future actions.

The findings suggest that it would be beneficial for all students to sit the DATS test before choosing their subjects. The individual student based approach to this research was one of its key strengths therefore feedback of the results should be done by a trusted individual, such as the tutor. The tutor/teacher featured as a source of advice for the students throughout the research and armed with data from the DATS they would prove to be a valuable source of information. This could be done at parent teacher meeting time. This method of delivering results and engaging in dialogue with both parent and student will increase parental and student involvement and build confidence in the system.

The findings show that students would benefit from engagement in a shadowing or taster initiative. However, experience showed that it would be logistically more difficult to implement. A modification of this action used would be for specialist teachers to introduce subjects during normal science classes, rotating in and out of class settings.   Ideally a taster course

in all options could be offered at the start of fifth year. A pre-choice form, such as the one used in this research could still be administered in March of third year to give an indication of numbers of classes, staffing allocation etc. with the final choice then being filled out early in the new academic year.

Where to: Future Directions

This research could be expanded by tracking the sample group to the end of the Leaving Certificate. The effect of choice on attainment could be examined at this time, and the role of interest and enjoyment values examined further. It would provide data on students' career paths as by this stage college applications would have been filled out. The comparison with career choices at the beginning of transition year, subjects chosen and the choices made could yield valuable information on the effectiveness of the action cycles, and how to improve the process going forward.

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Can involvement in sport improve student behaviour and motivation in the classroom?
- David Murphy

Introduction: The Dilemma/Issues

The project explored how students can take leadership skills from the field of sport and use them in school to help them with their academic work.

The initial purpose of this study was to examine how involvement in sports can help students' behaviour and achievement in school. By the end of the study it had expanded to look at the improvements to motivation, as well as behaviour, in the classroom that participation in sport can promote. Students participated in the project outside of the classroom as a means to help them with class work. The project also aimed to support teachers' classroom management. The research also included analysing students' and teachers' questionnaires and interviews to explore the possible ways their involvement in the research had benefited them.

I am currently a language teacher to all school years in a DEIS secondary school in West Dublin that has an enrolment figure of 450 students. I also coach both the Gaelic football and soccer teams in the school. Students attending our school experience high levels of educational disadvantage and this prevents the majority of them from reaping benefits from education. Of the six students involved in this research there were four boys and two girls, drawn from third year to sixth year. The students were chosen for a number of reasons, but they had in common that they showed promise on the sports' field and were perceived by teachers as being at risk of underachieving academically.

How: The Approach

Six teachers also participated in this action research. Some of the teachers were involved in sport while others were not. The teachers' main contribution was to observe students and note any possible changes in their behaviour in class. Their tasks included handing out roles of responsibility to students and focusing on enhancing positive interactions and relationships with students.

At a Glance!

- Looked at how school sports can positively affect students' confidence and self-esteem.
- Asked whether students' attitudes to learning improved and whether they behaved more appropriately in the classroom.
- Outcomes were increased self-esteem with consequent benefits to their academic work.
- Found clear evidence that participation in sports in education can enable young people to make changes in their lives.

The literature review I conducted prior to the data collection in the project revealed that participation of sports in education can result in many benefits. Some outcomes such as the physical benefits are easier to measure than personal development and different personal skills that are harder to identify. (Eccles et al) I was drawn to the model developed by the American Sports Institute entitled the 'Pass' programme which uses 'sport in education as a vehicle to promote personal development and life skills'.

I also found evidence that extra-curricular sport was important in second level education in Ireland. A study conducted by Woods et al. (2010) found 73% of post primary school students participate in extra-curricular sport at least one day a week. This proportion has increased since 2004. Furthermore, the literature noted that students who participate in sport avoid obesity and stay healthy. Other benefits that were highlighted in the research included the finding that students who play sports perform better in school due to the influence of team mates and coaches which helps focus them in school and helps their studies. The research added that team work within sports increases self-confidence and self-esteem. Other research found that students who participate in sport possess leadership skills that can develop students' maturity levels and give them the ability to be more autonomous learners. (Chami- Sather, G (2004) Although the research has shown that these benefits are harder to quantify than physical benefits, sport can be an effective way of developing relationships and these relationships in turn can be a factor in facilitating change. And it was this work that I was keen to replicate in our school.

The research took place from the end of August 2012 until December 2012. It consisted of two cycles. The first cycle aimed to see how teachers and students felt about sport and the impact they felt it has on them and the school. Data during this phase were collected by means of questionnaires and interviews. I also observed students and looked at how they were getting on in the classroom from both an academic and a behavioural perspective. From this information and from the literature I had consulted, I devised a plan with my collaborative group on ways that students could use their skills and behaviours that they use during sport and bring them into the classroom. These included: transferring students' leadership skills; boosting their self-confidence; paying attention to their attendance and the value they placed on preparation.

After consulting my research group, the strategies for the next stage in the research became clear. The result of this consultation was that I devised a seven point plan of practical strategies as follows:

1   Put lists of school teams around the school

2   Give students responsibility

3   Create opportunities for students to act as leaders

4   Get students involved in activities or events in the school other than sport

5   Praise and encourage students

6   Deploy a "No homework: No game" policy

7   Promote sports scholarship

The overall aspiration for this seven point plan was to give students a sense of belonging in the school.

What: The Findings

The participating teachers and I handed roles of responsibility to students. Students reacted brilliantly to the roles given to them, whether it was handing out permission slips or training the first year teams in coaching sessions with me. Students excelled during their role as coaches particularly, they were outstanding at organising training and advising the younger students about what to do on the field. It was evident that the first years looked up to these students as role models and the students had to be like their role models in school also. Students were also taught about the importance of being prepared and committed to things in life. The introduction of 'No Homework: No Game' in the school ensured that as previously reluctant learners the students would at least try to do their homework rather than ignoring it altogether. Students were asked to consider the implications of not preparing for a game properly and to compare this to when they had preparations to do for school work. Students learnt from this and by the end of the research period they were more consistently attempting if not also completing their homework. From this teachers acknowledged the work or roles these students had were having a positive impact and student-teacher relationships improved with obvious benefits for both.

Both teachers and students noted a number of improvements in the students' attitudes and behaviour. They were as follows:

1   Improvements to classroom behaviour

2   Increased class attendance

3   Improved student-teacher relationships

4   Greater sense of belonging to the school and increased effort in class

5   Improved self-esteem among students

6   Leadership skills into school by helping in class or by been giving a responsibility to do a task outside of class

7   Students attempted the homework and were more likely to bring the right materials into class

Where to: Future Directions

In answering my research question I believe I have found evidence that participation in sports in education can enable young people of any school to make changes in their lives. I believe every student has something to give in school. This can be through the subjects we teach them or through the extra-curricular activities that they participate in. We, as teachers, get to see this hidden talent through these extra-curricular activities. Through my research I saw students use their leadership skills in the field of their sport and the research enabled them to bring these skills explicitly into the classroom. The outcomes were increased self-esteem with consequent benefits to their academic work and how they interacted with the younger students. In turn the younger students saw them as role models and teachers also began to see them in this new light. By the end of both research cycles both students and teachers were able to recognise the changes students had made with this research whether it was improved behaviour, greater confidence or better academic results.

Three recommendations will be implemented in future to improve student behaviour as follows:

1 Create a system using the same techniques but in different aspects of school life (e.g. give students roles of leadership in a school musical or help other students in the homework club).

2 Implement homework and attendance policy for prefect students i.e. no homework and no attendance means no access to games or training.

3 Continue to give praise, recognition and trust to students ensuring a sense of belonging and desire to work in the classroom.

It is hoped that students will take these skills they used and acquired during this action research project to develop them further in life and to achieve greater outcomes for themselves than might otherwise be the case.

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Transitions: using Forum Theatre to foster resilience in sixth class children.

- Deirdre O'Callaghan

Introduction: The Dilemma/Issues

This action research Project looked at the use of Forum Theatre to foster resilience in sixth class children before their transition to secondary school. Reconnaissance data revealed the children face may difficulties and challenges in their lives. More specifically from the statistics around retention rates in school and parental educational attainment it can be surmised the children will have to rely on their own resilience to flourish in their new school. Resilient children have been described as those who are successful despite the odds. That even though they live their early years under the severe circumstances of deprivation, maltreatment, illness or neglect, resilient children are those who can still create successful lives for themselves (Doll, Zucker, Brehni, 2004).

The aim of this research was to increase resilience in the children by enabling them to find their voice, name their oppression and actively rehearse ways to deal with these situations. It aimed to provide a safe space within which the children could 'rehearse for real life'.

How: The Approach

The methodology set out by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) was a source of inspiration for this research project. Freire was concerned about the effects an oppressive society has on programming the individual - especially the disadvantaged - to a 'rigid conformity' (Freire, 1970). He discusses this idea of feeling 'other' and not having a voice or a place within the system. This is often the case within a disadvantaged community where others speak for them and so can never truly represent their ideas. Freire argues that it is only by achieving freedom that the masses can participate in the transformation of their society. The method of learning put forward by Freire requires that students are enabled to create their own words, words that allow them to become aware of reality in order to fight for their own emancipation.

This qualitative research project used arts-based research methods such as visual arts representation, creative writing, video recording and drama. This research was cyclical in nature with the direction dictated by the researcher's reflection using

At a Glance!

- Project looked at the use of Forum Theatre to foster resilience in sixth class children before their transition to secondary school.
- Children reported positive experiences in their new school as a result of their participation in Forum Theatre.

journaling, critical friendships and most importantly the children's own views.

Forum Theatre is a method created by Brazilian dramatist and political activist Augusto Boal (1979). Boal created the 'spect-actor' where the audience member was no longer one of the masses receiving the story and the message but was actively involved within it. I created spaces where the spect-actor had the opportunity to become the actors that they could reflect on their own lived experiences to offer alternative solutions to the problem posed and in so doing transform the drama, the outcome of the story. Through Forum Theatre Boal created an innovative way for people to deal with social and cultural issues in their lives and in their communities. Forum Theatre was used as a means to enable the children in my class to explore the issues around transition as well as a tool for social justice. It sought to foster resilience within the children by enabling them to practise their social skills and problem-solving abilities within the safe space of the Forum Theatre.

What: The Findings

This research consisted of three cycles. The first cycle was concerned with encouraging the children to share their own experiences through visual arts and creative writing. The second cycle then used this data to inform a series of Forum Theatre sessions centred on the issues evidenced in the children's stories and pictures. The children also completed a questionnaire looking at amongst other issues the prevalence of bullying experienced by them. The third cycle was concerned with evaluating the effectiveness of Forum Theatre by re-visiting the children approximately two months after they entered secondary school.

The issue of bullying was named by the children as one of the main obstacles to their educational attainment. From the work completed by the children in the first cycle it was clear that many factors influenced the types of bullying experienced by the children including: the importance of appearance, peer approval/social exclusion and cyber-bullying involving texting, comments on Facebook and in online chat rooms (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Children's visual representations of bullying

The importance of peer relationships for children has been well documented (Smyth et al., 2004). Therefore it was decided that the Forum Theatre would focus on a character (Jennifer) created by the children. The children used the problems projected onto this character to rehearse for situations in which they found themselves in reality. Throughout the Forum Theatre sessions the children were encouraged to participate in the safe space and become actively involved in the drama. The children became more articulate about and aware of different types of bullying. They took on the role of both protagonist and oppressor in achieving solutions to the problems experienced by their character.

The analysis of the questionnaires divided into two main themes, namely: Prevalence of Bullying and Bullying and Gender. The main findings to emerge were that verbal aggression was the most common form of bullying overall as were the concerns the children had about false accusations and being lied to. Three types of bullying were significantly more common in girls compared to boys: name calling, isolation and cyber bullying using Facebook. Two types of bullying were significantly more common in boys as compared to girls: pushing and cyber bullying using 'chat rooms' accessed through gaming consoles.

In the third cycle the children reported positive experiences in their new school with their class level being consistently named as having an impact on how they settled. If children were put in a lower class they presented as more negative while students placed in a higher class reported pressure to maintain the level although they were more positive.

The children became more resilient as a result of their participation in Forum Theatre as evidenced in the feedback from the participants during their first term in secondary school. A difference in the children's empathy towards each other was also reported by colleagues and critical friends. I also in my role as the research teacher found the experience to have a positive effect and to have improved the atmosphere in the classroom.

Where to: Future Directions

I concluded that Forum Theatre was a powerful transformative tool to foster resilience within the students. I also envisage the schools anti-bullying policy being re-visited and more specific strategies being taught regarding staying safe online.

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Developing a 'Learning Through Play' programme in a DEIS Gaelscoil.

- Fíona O'Fiaich

Introduction: The Dilemma/Issues

This research developed and implemented a 'Learning Through Play' (LTP) programme for children who are learning through Irish in an area of social and economic disadvantage. It built partnerships with children and families, helping children to learn, develop and acquire language skills through play and through interactions with others. The need to support learning and development through effective methods of assessment is clearly evident from this research.

I proposed the following research question as a result of a cyclical process including ten years of working with Infant classes in a designated disadvantaged Gaelscoil. The work was also prompted subsequent to the completion of the Síolta (CECDE, 2006) Quality Assurance process in my school and by my studies in NUI, Maynooth and the Childhood Development Initiative. The outcome of my reflection was to ask: 'How can I develop and implement an effective 'Learning Through Play' (LTP) programme for Infant Classes in a school which is situated in an area of social and economic disadvantage, and where the language of instruction and communication is the second language of students?'

The **Aistear Early Childhood Curriculum Framework**, (NCCA, 2009), provides guidelines for families, childcare workers and teachers on the education of young children. The framework is based on advances in early childhood education theory and practice and advocates LTP for children from 0-6 years of age. The DEIS scheme (Department of Education and Science, 2005) was introduced in 2005, subsuming existing schemes targeting educational disadvantage in Ireland. Researchers are working toward publishing a combined language curriculum for Irish and English in Primary schools as a result of research showing how children transfer skills between languages as they learn. I felt that the implementation of a LTP programme for young children in my school was timely, considering the advances in educational theory and practices in the early childhood sector in Ireland in recent years. My school holds a unique position in Irish society, being both

At a Glance!

- Developing and implementing a Learning Through Play programme for children who are learning through Irish in an area of social and economic disadvantage.
- Building partnerships with children and families.
- Helping children to learn, develop and acquire language skills through play and through interactions with others.
- Supporting learning and development through effective methods of assessment.

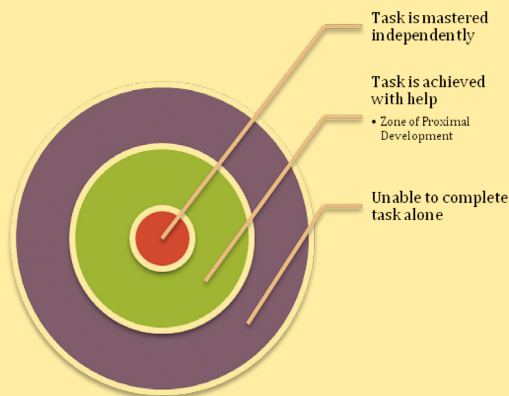Figure 1: Play station arrangement in the classroom

Figure 2: Action Cycle: Learning and Developing Through Interactions

designated disadvantaged and Irish speaking, where none of our students comes from an Irish speaking household, giving us a particular scope for research on the topic of learning through play that may be difficult to replicate in other school settings.

How: The Approach

I used action research in order to investigate how the children in my care learned as they were playing and how best to facilitate this. I hoped by becoming a teacher/action researcher I could gradually implement aspects of the recommendations in the Aistear curriculum framework. I aimed to foster and establish a culture and practice of rotating play stations (see Figure 1), investigating problems and reflecting on the practice of teaching and learning in the classroom without putting children at a disadvantage.

I was cognisant of the recommendations in pre-school programmes such as High/Scope from which Aistear drew some of its recommendations that the children participate in cycles of plan/do/review, and I was of the opinion that if the children could do this, I could become a reflective practitioner along with them. Therefore, I used the maxim of 'plan, do, reflect, review' when completing two cycles of action research in February/March 2012 and September/October 2012.

What: The Findings

I outlined my findings using the scaffolding on which good practice in early years settings is based, which according to Aistear are:

- Building partnerships between parents and practitioners
- Learning and developing through interactions
- Learning and developing through play
- Supporting learning and development through assessment

We made changes to our planning methods in Infant classes in order to allow for the curricular integration that LTP provided (see Figure 2). We

observed an increase in the children's retention of Irish pertaining to weekly LTP themes as opposed to Irish language lessons only. The addition of a literacy station in the second cycle of action research furthered these retention skills.

Parents were supportive and enthusiastic about LTP and showed an interest in their children's progress, although they did not, for the most part, play a role in the acquisition of equipment for LTP. Play proved to be a therapeutic tool in the class. For example a child with separation anxiety, and who did not speak at school prior to the introduction of LTP, began to integrate into school life. It was also a useful mechanism to enable the children to process disturbing events in their lives and in the locality. We discovered solutions to behavioural issues that arose during LTP and paired children who had difficulty adapting to the programme with those who were adept and independent players, in order to minimise disruption and give each child a chance to flourish during playtime. The use of additional assessment methods in the second cycle of the action research enabled us to formulate a cohesive and wide-ranging portrait of each child as learner and/or 'master player.'

Where to: Future Directions

As my research drew to a close, I formulated the following recommendations for other teachers and professionals who may be considering the implementation of an LTP programme in the future. Although some recommendations may apply only to Gaelscoileanna and others to DEIS schools, the list is broad and could apply to many types of school situation:

1   When planning for play, pick a theme for each week or fortnight and then consult the curriculum in order to provide as much curricular integration as possible-while they play, children can learn about many different concepts and improve on a vast array of skills.

2   Classrooms should be divided into clear and manageable interest areas. If space is an issue, we found that we could often use the children's desks and turn it into a play station - children's capacity for imagination and use of space is limitless, in our opinion.

3   Partnership with the children's families can help to make LTP sessions effective and useful for both children and adults. Two-way sharing of information between practitioners and parents/guardians helps to build a broad and balanced picture of children as learners and as members of society.

4   Adults should act as both enablers and directors, choosing appropriate roles as situations allow. They should play with children frequently to help in their observations and interactions with them and to aid children in moving to new levels of meaning.

5 Teachers in Gaelscoileanna should be cognisant of the aims of the Naíonraí from which many of the children have come, giving the child the opportunity to enrich the Irish language naturally, speaking to them in Irish all of the time, and being positive and supportive of the children's home language while not lapsing into it. This will allow the children to transfer their language skills from Irish to English and vice-versa as their language and literacy develops.

6 Play can be a therapeutic tool for children in helping them to process life events and issues that arise from time to time. It can enable children with specific learning needs to integrate and to further their development across a range of domains.

7 It is important to assess using a range of methods so that you can build a wide-ranging and detailed picture of each child in your care. Methods of assessment that worked for us include: photographs/video/audio recordings, notes, a teacher's assessment book, and learning folders for each child.

8 Including a literacy station where children could improve their literacy skills while they played was extremely successful for us, allowing children to play in small groups and pairs and cement learning that had taken place in class previously.

9 We managed behavioural issues by using differentiation. It was our experience that children who acted out during LTP were those who struggled to fit in or to adapt to the theme that the class was investigating. By separating these children from each other and including them in groups that already contained independent and focused players and learners, the children with behavioural issues were less likely to cause disruption to others.

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The introduction of a model of family learning to a senior primary school: an action research study.

- Pauline O'Hanlon

Introduction: The Dilemma/Issues

The last ten years has seen the disappearance of social class as an issue in the debate on educational failure, and its replacement with the more recent focus on school effectiveness. Within this debate, voices of parents of educationally disadvantaged students are unheard. Working class parents describe themselves being 'frozen out' of school decision making (Hall, et al, 2008) and of experiencing a general lack of consultation (Hanafin and Lynch, 2002). Ruth (2005) explains that teachers, generally middle class people, carry a high degree of unawareness into relationships with working class or raised-poor people but trust their thinking and are used to dispensing it to other people.

With the advent of DEIS-funded supports, and thanks to constant application, our school has seen improved literacy scores among our primary school students. The challenge is to maintain and sustain the achievement of our incoming cohort of third class children so that we achieve 'added value' to their attainment in literacy when they leave us from sixth class. Kennedy (2010) outlines a number of large-scale studies of effective teaching of literacy and lists what works. I drew on this as well as on research by Desforges and Abouchar (2003) who tell us about the vital role played by parents and other caregivers in children's education. They outline how their involvement has more impact than any other demographic measure. In this study I focused on how I (as Home School Co-ordinator) could best support parents in their role as primary educators. I also investigated how I could best support and encourage teachers to involve parents in raising literacy levels amongst students.

How: The Approach

Using an action research approach (Coghlan and Brannick 2010) and working from a Systems Theory perspective, I decided to capitalise on parents' interest in the para-curriculum and introduced a model of Family Learning.

Research shows that children whose home-use of literacy is valued are more likely to engage confidently with school

At a Glance!

- A school is a learning organisation.
- Relationships matter.
- Literacy is a social practice. The literacy domain is wider than schools, and should be about merging home and school literacies.
- Change comes from small initiatives which work.

learning (NESF, 2009). The report emphasises the importance of looking at the continuities between home and school, rather than the discontinuities. The literacy learned at home and in local communities is rich in the use of local language and in the expression of the experience and history of families, communities and cultures.

Working from the stance that literacy is a social practice, and that family activities form the prime socialisation activities, I decided to introduce a model of Family Learning that would honour local literacies.

Drawing on New Literacy Studies I collaborated with Community Development Partnership and together we devised a museum project that merged artefacts with literacy (Pahl and Rowsell, 2010). Over a six-week period we curated a 'pop-up' museum with parents, celebrating their memories of growing up and reflecting on all that has changed in those years. Third class children were invited to visit the pop-up museum. Parents taught them playground games and rhymes from the past, and children viewed photographic exhibitions and listened to stories the parents had recorded, as well as viewing artefacts.

In the following school term, using story, we offered the Memory Book project. Parents were invited to make and decorate a book of the 'best bits' of their childhood memories. Children and parents were encouraged to tell us their stories as part of the Family Learning project and to have their experience validated by school. We also mounted an exhibition of photographs of adult visitors to our school with their favourite children's book.

What: The Findings

All the work on strengthening social capital in the school community depends on relationships. Over time, I noticed a change in the kinds of conversations colleagues had with me. Once parents' attendance at Friday assembly became a regular feature, discussions with the focus group of teachers suggested other occasions when parents could be invited into the school and some expressed interest in supporting such occasions. Questionnaires revealed that the professional development session, jointly held with the Junior school could not, in one event, build a relationship, but can be part of a process for future communication. Topics of mutual interest to parents and teachers, such as sport and music are useful currency in building relationships.

There were many sources of knowledge regarding adult education in the community sector from which I could draw, including the local Community Development Partnership, National Adult Literacy Agency, and the National Parents' Council. I collaborated with an adult education facilitator to devise and deliver two family learning projects, 'Every Object Tells a Story' and the 'Memory Book' project. Her advice that benefit, rather than deficit be the tenor of our work, proved crucial to encouraging parents to participate in the projects.

Objects from home are important containers of meaning. Story is a powerful connector to home and community. Literacy is about merging home and school practices. I situated the photographs of 'My Favourite Book' near the school library, there are now about twenty exhibits, including teachers, parents, ancillary staff, and adult visitors to the school. Children stop to read the captions as they pass by, and some look for the recommended books when they visit the library. This approach employs ideas of 'third space' (Pahl and Rowsell, 2010).

Where to: Future Directions

My approach to strengthening social capital was based on a model developed by Epstein and colleagues (2002). I will present this way of working to my own colleagues this year. Together with the staff, I will chart where our school is located in relation to the six elements of the model. Since I completed this study, seven colleagues from my school have begun further professional development and some of them have studied this model. I plan to deliver a strengths-based family learning project that combines digital literacy with local stories and local history in the coming year, using laptops, mobile phones and iPads. There will shortly be a number of iPads available for use in my school. Stories can be made into pod casts by the learners (parents, teachers and children) and uploaded onto the school website. Thus a more permeable curriculum is pursued.

One of the best outcomes of the strategy document, *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life* (DES, 2011) was that it directed schools to collaborate with community education providers in offering family learning opportunities. The HSCL service is well placed to lead this collaboration, which will create synergies that benefit family learning initiatives. Many of the parents who expressed interest in joining our family learning projects could not do so because of childcare commitments. This must be accommodated if parents are to be really welcomed into the family learning process.

I will investigate the possibility of getting a book of parents' stories from the memory books published. The museum idea could be used periodically to display artefacts of intercultural interest.

In September 2012 I spoke about the Family Learning projects to a group of adult education facilitators visiting Dublin from Europe. In November 2013 I joined the group in Norway where some participants had developed their own strengths-based literacy projects based on the artefacts literacies model.

Our school has also recently begun a project with schools in Spain and Italy on toys and games. I intend to incorporate this into a family learning project in 2014, developing work done in last year's projects.

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Bereavement and family break-up: teachers' perspectives on how they impact children and their role in offering support.

- Gráinne Smith

Introduction: The Dilemma/Issues

This research presents the findings from a study undertaken in a Senior Primary School in a disadvantaged area in Dublin.

The main focus of the study, which included both quantitative and qualitative elements, was to look at how schools currently support children who have experienced 'loss' through bereavement and family break-up and how it could be enhanced. In order to determine this, an exploration of teachers' perspectives on the impact loss had on children was needed. The following questions aided this exploration: Does loss affect a child's educational attainment? How do schools currently react to and support children in these situations? Is there a policy in place? Do teachers feel it is part of their role? What extra supports would teachers like?

At a Glance!

- Project looked at the impact, if any, of teachers' perspectives of loss (bereavement and/or family break-up) on children and their role, if any, in supporting children through this process.
- Teachers received no form of training with some teachers feeling it was not their role.
- There is a need for policy and additional support, both from organisations concerned with this issue and the Department of Education and Skills.

How: The Approach

Action research is always concerned with practical issues or a situation that needs a response or 'action' to address problems or concerns. The core of action research is not only to identify and understand the nature of or reasons underlying problems, but to effect change to a given situation. Therefore, this type of research best suits the study in question, as effecting change by undergoing a process will ensure that the need for change is understood, the action designed is relevant, and the subsequent change is sustained. Farrell and Weitman (2007) stress that research done *by* teachers as opposed to *on* teachers, is a powerful means of teacher professional development.

As part of the initial data gathering phase, a questionnaire was distributed to all staff within the school and the findings analysed using Microsoft Excel and content analysis, with a return rate of 62% of all staff within the school. As well as looking at staff demographics, the questionnaire also looked at teachers' perspectives on the impacts loss can have on children; training received on these topics; and what they perceive the role of the school to be in supporting children

in these situations. Two focus group discussions (FGD) were held with the Care Team (CT), one before the design of the action with a second FGD following the implementation of the action. The FGD was reviewed using thematic and descriptive analysis.

What: The Findings

Following analysis of both the FGD and questionnaire, emerging themes were reflected upon and informed the course of action taken. A one and a half hour workshop was facilitated by an organisation which specialises in offering support to those working with children who have experienced loss. The workshop was offered to all staff within the study school. Following the implementation of the action, a further analysis and review of the follow-up FGD was undertaken which subsequently informed the next stage of action. The main findings from the initial FGD and questionnaire were:

- The school does not have a formal policy on loss;
- Only one teacher and one SNA received any form of training on loss during their initial teacher training;
- Only three teachers attended a workshop/'in-service' session on loss since graduation;
- All thirteen staff reported that loss had a range of effects which impacted children;
- The majority of respondents referred children to the school counsellor or drew on their own experiences;
- Staff felt that it was not their role to support children through these experiences;
- The schools also drew support from outside agencies;
- Ten respondents stated that they would attend a workshop on loss;
- Following the workshop, the next action cycle identified was to create a school policy with a library of relevant books and leaflets available for use by both parents and staff;
- Parents are seen as a resource in order to form communication strategies with children.

Where to: Future Directions

Given that 43% of Irish nine year olds have experienced bereavement and 15% experienced divorce and separation of parents (Williams, *et al*, 2009) it is fair to say that these are issues faced by many children in the study school. As well as the many impacts loss can have on a child it can also affect their educational attainment. This coupled with other 'stressors' can further impact educational attainment for children from disadvantaged areas (McElearney et al., 2007). While the findings from this study highlight teachers' understanding of the impacts of loss, it also highlights the 'fear' teachers have when it comes to supporting children in these situations. Many teachers feel that 'counselling' children is not their role, but acknowledge they have a pastoral role. While the role of teachers is to educate children, they also must understand the complexities faced by children on a regular basis. In addition, teachers too need support.

An Irish study by McGovern and Tracey (2010) found that only 3% of their sample schools had attended any form of training or workshop on bereavement. This corresponds with the findings from this study, which showed that only three out of thirteen teachers have attended training on this topic. Therefore, training is needed at both initial teacher education level and following graduation. Schools also need to collaborate with parents, to ensure that there is consistency with communication of messages to children between home and school (Daly, 2007). As a result of the workshop undertaken teachers agreed that they would consult with parents prior to a child returning to school following a loss. Support is also needed from a Department level, as teachers struggle to balance the 'administrational' demands and supporting children's wellbeing (Daly, 2007; McLoughlin 2012). Only then will teachers feel confident in approaching and supporting a child through what is undoubtedly a very stressful and life changing event.

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Implementation of Restorative Practice (RP) using a Professional Learning Community (PLC) in a school setting: an action research study.

- Michelle Stowe

Introduction: The Dilemma/Issues

This action research project outlines the intention of a community of teachers to implement relationship-building and conflict-resolution practices in their most challenging class. It traces the impact that this had on relationships, teaching practice and learning.

The intention of this action project was to set up a Professional Learning Community (PLC) in my school with teachers who were interested in inculcating the practices and principles of Restorative Practice (RP) in their classrooms. My interest in RP is driven by its transformative potential and its ability to create caring, respectful communities of which I wish to be a part.

At a Glance!

- Set up a Professional Learning Community (PLC) with teachers who were interested in inculcating the practices and principles of Restorative Practice (RP).
- A restorative approach shifts the emphasis from managing behaviour in schools to focussing on the building, nurturing and repairing of relationships.
- Implementation and positive impact of RP is a process.

Restorative Practice (RP) draws on the principles and practices of what is more commonly known as Restorative Justice (RJ), adapting them to a school situation. It is an innovative approach to offending, inappropriate behaviour and conflict which puts repairing harm done to relationships and people over and above the need for assigning blame and dispensing punishment (Hopkins, 2006). A restorative approach shifts the emphasis from managing behaviour in schools to focussing on the building, nurturing and repairing of relationships. It involves a paradigm shift away from punitive approaches. There are a set of proactive and reactive explicit practices which gives potential for school-wide implementation.

My school is a fertile ground for restorative seeds to grow as it has a very strong inclusion policy and a robust pastoral tradition. The implementation of RP would reflect our school ethos and could potentially improve attendance and learning. RP may develop the lifelong emotional literacy skills that are essential for well-being (O'Brien, 2008). This is especially necessary in a school situated in an area of disadvantage where the development of such communication skills may have been hindered due to the problems inherent in such an area. Punitive discipline structures can negate the restorative values

enshrined in our school's mission statement. This may compromise our ability to foster and nurture positive relationships; the scaffolding upon which learning and well-being is built (Brooks, 1991).

Our school was introduced to RP in 2010. Two years later, RP was only happening in pockets throughout the school despite the positive feedback from the introductory day and efforts made by myself and fellow champions to increase its profile. We had mainly focused on training senior students in conflict resolution. My reconnaissance for this research study showed that a renewed focus on teachers was necessary to facilitate the initiation and implementation of RP in our school through a Professional Learning Community.

Professional Learning Community (PLC) is a group of people who meet in an organised, structured space that is agenda and solution focused. It promotes supportive relationships, develops shared norms and values, and focuses on the acquisition of knowledge and skills. Teachers collaborate to reinvent practice and share professional growth (Stoll, L., et al, 2006).

The PLC's structured engagement offered a very good fit for my action research which involved working with teachers to explore the possibilities offered by RP; to structure its implementation in their classrooms; and to facilitate the interrogation and evaluation of its use (not only individually via journals) but collaboratively via our PLC. My intention in forming a PLC in my school was to establish, explore, evaluate and extend the use of RP in our classrooms. I wanted to investigate the following:

1   To what extent have teacher-student relationships improved as a result of initiating RP?

2   To what extent does continual and purposeful collaboration with the principles and practices of RP impact on the individual teachers' approach to teaching?

3   To what extent can the work of this small group of teachers provide a stimulus for wider school change towards the principles and practices of RP?

How: The Approach

The aim of my research was to investigate how RP impacted on teacher-student relationships with their chosen challenging class: Class X, as we set out to explore how working as a solution-focused community of teachers would influence our teaching practices. I was a facilitator and an active member of this reflective community. I wanted to investigate if there was a significant improvement in class relationships. I felt that if this occurred it would help teachers and our school community to validate the positive impact that RP could have. This could foster a commitment to create the RP School

of which I was a member. I wanted my action to create a heart-felt and informed choice to commit to a whole school restorative culture, to begin the transition necessary for a restorative paradigm shift.

My action research strategy involved twelve actions, many of which evolved iteratively over two cycles. Cycle one involved eight teachers who met weekly from February to March, six of whom continued into cycle two from April to May. My investigation, in the broadest sense, was interpretive. I was interested in the experiences, reflections and emotions of the participants in the study as they implement and consider how RP has affected their classroom teaching and relationships. This commitment to understanding educationalists' own experience also grounds my research in a constructivist approach, emphasising the importance of working towards a shared construction (an RP school) which can provide the basis for future action (implementation/institutionalisation plan); co-constructing meaning through dialogue, stories, and experiences (assisting a restorative paradigm shift). The research methods of journals, focus groups and restorative circles (semi-structured group interviews) served this qualitative research approach. Weekly circles not only provided information but promoted community in our PLC and modelled the practices that I hoped participants would use in their classrooms. Journals promoted the necessary reflexivity to assist a paradigm shift and the focus groups allowed for the probing and teasing out of research questions.

What: The Findings

Our investigation found that the inculcation of RP did improve relationships. It promoted empathy and developed emotional literacy skills among the participants. Weekly journaling, circles and the use of RP in the classroom increased reflection. This, in turn, offered participants a sense of ownership over behaviour. There was a change in approach to misbehaviour that had a positive effect on teachers' mental health and feeling of well-being. The evidence suggests that improved relationships often had a positive impact on work ethic within the classroom (see Figure 1). Teachers enjoyed working as a solution-focused community of teachers, it helped to reinvent and enhance their best practice through the sharing of ideas.
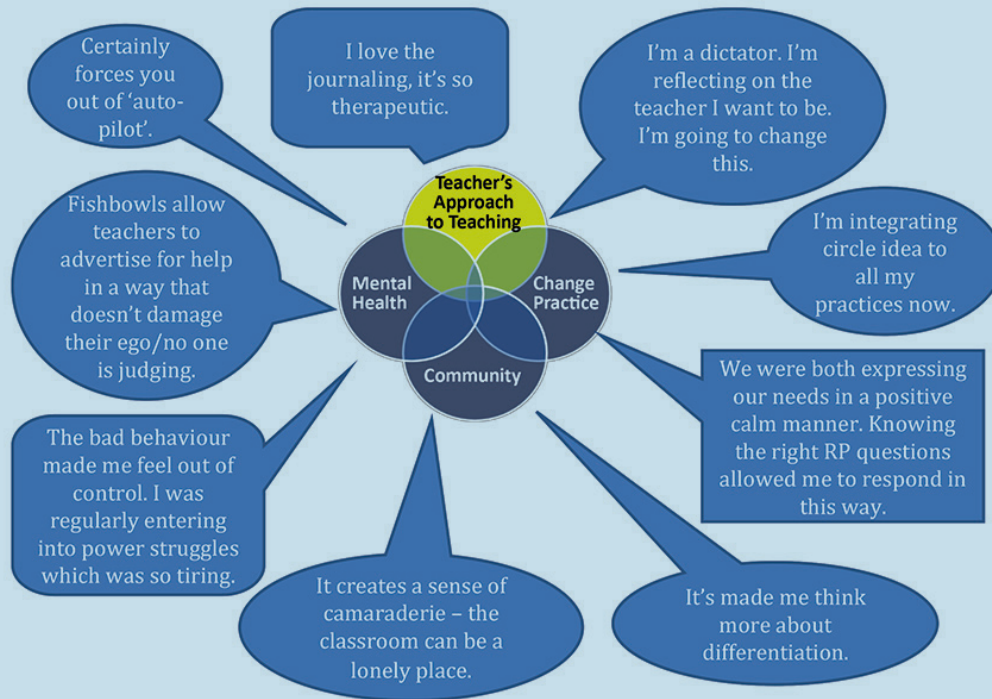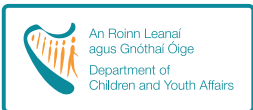
Figure 1: Teachers' Approach and Impact on Teaching and Learning

Where to: Future Directions

The evidence showed that the implementation and positive impact of RP is process. It is something that requires repeated, structured and reflective engagement, such as that offered by our PLC. Our PLC could and has had an impact on whole school change that also involves a restorative paradigm shift. This is a long-term goal, one to which both the participants of my study and I are committed.

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