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Infant Classroom*

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ABSTRACT

The significance of well-being in education has become a priority for schools over the past number of years, particularly with the impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic. However, the concept of well-being is not clearly defined and arguably, like many other aspects of education, has fallen victim to neoliberal policies and agendas. Within previous curriculum frameworks and The New Draft Curriculum (N.C.C.A., 2020) it is apparent that well-being can be treated as a subject that is driven by an outcomes-based and measurable approach. Neoliberal approaches are observed to create unrealistic expectations on educators to solve the multitude of problems children face in their daily lives. These expectations can lead to controversies within our practice, ranging from a sense of guilt for not 'fully providing' for every child in a class to cases of teacher burnout.

A nurturing environment is one based on opportunities, rather than focussing on outcomes. Through adapting a nurturing pedagogical approach, I hoped to create an environment that was more conducive to the well-being of the child – rather than measuring it. This environment identifies the importance of reciprocal relationships and recognises the role of the child and the voice of the child as educational factors within the classroom.

Self-study action research was the chosen research methodology for this project. It was a suitable methodology as it is a values-laden, predominantly qualitative approach, in which the practitioner endeavours to enhance their practice. Within this self-study action research project, an exploration was conducted on both the relationships within the class and the teacher's role in the agency of the child. Throughout the process, a focus was also placed on the promotion of the voice of the child. Within this exploration, and through identifying gaps in my pedagogical approaches, I sought to establish a nurturing environment within the classroom. Critical reflection and questioning were essential from the preliminary stages right

through to the conclusionary stages of the research journey. Triangulation was ensured throughout the data collection and validation processes. The project was structured on Carr and Kemmis' (1986) Model of Action research, with a four-step approach of observing, planning, acting and reflecting. After the baseline data was gathered, the project took a unique format, choosing to run three action-cycles concurrently rather than the traditional consecutive approach. Each action-cycle had its own interventions in the form of relational sociograms, a multi-modal approach to communication and expression and using puppets to create a socio-dramatic world. Each intervention led to a number of environmental and personal findings, but ultimately, everything intertwined in the form of an 'overarching finding.' This 'overarching finding' presented as a solar-system of the nurturing environment that I sought to establish. Within this solar-system, it was essential to provide opportunities for the children to identify the need for and benefit of reciprocal relationships, a multi-modal approach to discussion and expression and facilitate an active approach to socio-dramatic play to encourage the agency of the child and their social-emotional development. In providing such opportunities to the children and supporting them to find their own meanings in a shared learning environment, the practitioner is manifesting a nurturing pedagogy and truly embodying the educative value of care.

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"Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much." – Helen Keller

The significance of this very famous quote is the underpinning driving force behind my self-study action research project in both a personal and professional sense.

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ABBREVIATIONS

B.O.M.	Board of Management
C.E.C.D.E.	Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education
D.C.D.E.I.Y.	The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
D.E.S.	Department of Education and Skills
D.L.P.	Designated Liaison Person
D.O.H.	Department of Health
E.L.L.	English Language Learners
H.S.E.	Health Services Executive
L.M.T.	Leadership and Management Team
N.C.C.A.	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
N.C.S.E.	National Council for Special Education
O.J.	Observation Journal
P.Q.	Parent Questionnaire
R.J.	Reflective Journal
S.E.T./S.E.N.	Special Education Teacher/Special Educational Needs
S.P.H.E.	Social, Personal, Health Education
S.S.L.D.	Specific Speech and Language Disorders
U.N.I.C.E.F.	The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
W.H.O.	World Health Organisation

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Within this introductory chapter, I will narrate my self-study action research journey. The aim of this project was seeking to establish a nurturing environment within the junior infant classroom. To identify what necessitates a nurturing environment, I conducted an exploration on the relationships that existed within the class and examined the role of the voice of the child within this environment too. In doing so, I was attempting to enhance my practice to create an environment more conducive to the well-being needs of the children. Within this chapter, I will summarise the focus of my study and I will accentuate self-study action research as a values-laden approach and determine where my values lay throughout the process in a personal and professional sense. Finally, this chapter will conclude with an overview of the contents of each chapter.

1.1.1 The Methodology of my Study

Self-study action research was the chosen methodology of this research project. This methodology focusses on enhancing the practice of the researcher. It also establishes the researcher's values, and attempting to live more closely to these values, at the epicentre of the research journey (Bassey, 2002; McNiff, 2002; Vanassche and Kelchtermans, 2015; Sullivan et al., 2016; Cohen et al. 2018). Reflective practice is an essential factor of self-study action research as it positively informs good decision making and allows the practitioner to 'talk things over with themselves' throughout the process (Schön, 1983; Greene 1984; Brookfield, 2017). Self-study action research was my methodology of choice as it is a research tool that enables the practitioner to understand how they can enhance their practice and influence social change (McNiff, 2002; Kemmis, 2012).

1.1.2 The Focus of my Study

A nurturing classroom environment is one that is child-sensitive, respectful of the children's role in the environment, learning and relationships and opportunity-based rather than outcome-based (Delors, 1996; Banks, 2009; Hayes and Filipovic, 2018). Hayes and Filipovic (2018) argue the fact that adopting a measurable outcome discourse takes away from the children's ownership of their learning and is more so a basic pedagogy of 'basic skills.' In creating opportunities, rather than focussing on outcomes, the practitioner facilitates for the agency of the child, promotes the voice of the child and allows the children to experience education rather than it being prescribed to them (Hanafin and Brooks, 2005). Seeking to establish this nurturing environment within my practice was the principal aim of this action research project. The research project was inspired and influenced by the following questions:

- *How do the relationships within the classroom support the establishment of a nurturing environment?*
- *How can the voice of the child be promoted to support the establishment of a nurturing environment?*
- *What role do I, as the teacher, play in the relational structure of the class?*
- *How can I facilitate the promotion of the voice of the child within the classroom?*

In conducting this study, I was hoping to provide ample opportunities to promote the voice of the child, explore the relational structure of the class and enhance my practice by approaching social-emotional issues in a less didactic way. In doing so, I sought to establish a nurturing environment within the classroom - an environment of which is much more conducive to the well-being needs of the children. This nurturing environment would question the neoliberal agenda, as education is increasingly taking a neoliberal perspective

focussing on measurements, outcomes, narrowing of the curriculum and accountability (Ball, 2008; 2012; Mooney Simmie, 2012; Carr and Beckett, 2018; Hall and Pulsford, 2019).

To conceptualise a nurturing environment, data collection was triangulated through my reflective journal, observations on the children and from the parental perspective using questionnaires. Alongside this, critical conversations were conducted with critical friends and validation groups to enhance the reliability of the data collected – ensuring to include my own considerations as well as the considerations of others (Beauchamp, 2015). Although I was seeking to identify what a nurturing environment looked like, through this reflection and data collection process, I identified gaps in my practice that were inhibiting the establishment of this nurturing environment. I was not looking to solve every problem that existed in the classroom environment, but more so to enhance my practice and encourage change within my thinking. I wanted to shift from an outcomes-based approach to providing opportunities for the children to explore emotional, social and relational concerns and structures within the classroom environment. Also, I wanted to facilitate opportunities for the children to become increasingly agentic and promote their voice within the classroom environment (Fröbel and Jarvis, 1899; James and Prout, 1980; Alderson, 2001; Liberto, 2016; Moor, 2017; Kirby, 2019). I sought to approach aspects of my practice less didactyl and use a more collaborative approach to establish a nurturing environment within the class.

1.2 MY VALUES

Values are the underpinning driving-force behind self-study action research projects. Through conducting a self-study, the practitioner is attempting to live more closely to their values, amidst seeking to enhance their practice (McNiff, 2002; Sullivan et al., 2016). Through reflection and engaging with the self-study journey, it became apparent to me that my two core values were care and relationships. I was particularly inspired by the work of Nel Noddings (2003; 2005) and her philosophy and theory of care in education. Noddings

also recognises care as a two-way process, and this is fundamental within a nurturing environment and mirrors my second core value of relationships. Vygotsky (1978) and Bronfenbrenner (2005) explicate that learning is, essentially, a social and relational and process and highlight the need for day-to-day relational experiences for the holistic development of the child.

My values were theoretically informed by the above philosophers/theorists and more. However, more significantly, throughout the self-study process, I began to relate to my values more wholly and began interpreting their value to me, in a personal and professional sense. Kelchtermanns (2018) recognises the identity indifferences that may exist between teacher's personal and professional identities. I claimed to value care and relationships, but in identifying gaps within my practice, I found myself to be what Whitehead (1989) describes as a living contradiction. Through reflection, I started to realise the influence that the values of care and relationships in my personal life had on my professional life. This alignment of my values and practice supports the enhancement of my practice, and also contributes to the overall establishment of a nurturing environment in my classroom.

1.3 SYNOPSIS OF CHAPTERS

Chapter One – Introduction: This chapter consists of a brief narration based on the focus and aims of my self-study action research project. My values of care and relationships are explicated within this chapter too and how throughout the process, living closer to these values was another core objective.

Chapter Two – Literature Review: The literature review focusses on and analyses literature based around the rationale, theoretical influences and research questions that inspired this action research project. Within this chapter, literature around well-being in a theoretical and political sense is explored. Theorists that philosophise the educative role of care and

relationships are examined too. This chapter concludes with a focus on 'nurturing pedagogies', with specific considerations to the benefits and limitations of language-based communication and the teacher's role in the agency of the child.

Chapter Three – Research Methodology: The third chapter explores self-study action research as a qualitative, values-laden and critically reflective process. The data collection and analysis process, and the significance of triangulation and validation within this process will be exemplified too. Finally, the necessary ethical considerations of the research process will be explicated.

Chapter Four – Data Analysis and Findings: The penultimate chapter provides a narration and outline of my unique data collection journey. The themes that emerged with reference to Braun and Clark's (2006) six stages of thematic analysis will be examined throughout this chapter. The environmental findings and limitations that derived from the emergent themes, and the implementation of my interventions will be discussed throughout.

Chapter Five – Discussion, Recommendations and Conclusion: The final chapter of this self-study action research project will narrate and elucidate upon sub-themes and personal meanings behind the emergent themes mentioned in Chapter Four. The messiness and challenges behind my self-study and reflective journey will be discussed too. My new claim to knowledge in the form of an 'overarching' finding will also be explored. To conclude, recommendations for my future practice, policy and concluding thoughts will be considered.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The literature review will explore influential literature that contributed to the basis of this action research project. The chapter will be structured in an 'inverse-pyramid' design, commencing with broader ideologies and leading to a focus on the research questions, as exemplified in the following diagram:

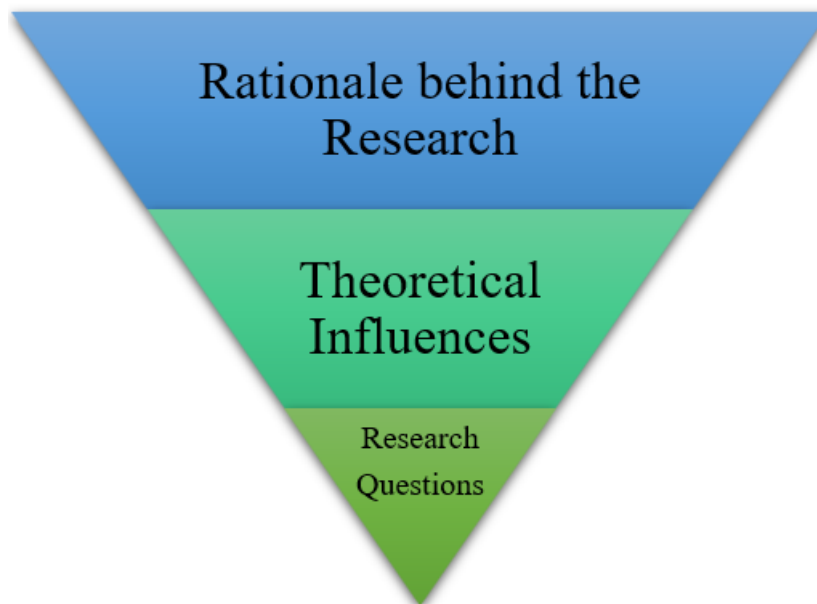


Fig 2.1 – Structure of Literature Review

The chapter will begin with a particular focus on neoliberalism and education, defining and contextualising well-being and a contrast of outcome-based and opportunity-based education. Further into the chapter, there will be a consideration of the theoretical influences on this action-research study. There will be a particular analysis of Nel Noddings and her philosophy of care in education, and an exploration of relational theories with references to Vygotsky, Bronfenbrenner and other such influential theorists. The final section of the literature review will focus predominantly on nurturing pedagogies. There will be a particular exploration of communication and the teacher's role in the agency of the child within such nurturing pedagogies.

2.2 EDUCATION AND NEOLIBERALISM

Neoliberalism has been defined as a set of political beliefs that suggests that human well-being can best be advanced by focusing on individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills, thus prioritising the safeguarding of the individual, rather than communities and populations as a whole (Harvey, 2005; Thorsen and Lie, 2006). Hill and Kumar (2012) reiterate this point, when they portray neoliberalism as profit-driven agendas, and something that is not for the good of all.

Public institutions, such as schools, are services and products within neoliberal agendas and are reconstituted as part of the market, creating the view that there is nothing distinctive or special about schools and education (Peters, 1999; Davies and Bansel, 2007). Hall and Pulsford (2019: 1) are echoic of this view when they suggest that neoliberalism can “inflect and infect primary school communities.” It can be argued that within neoliberal agendas, if schools are seen as purely services or products, then teachers can be perceived as a functionary of the state and that for efficient functioning, all that is needed is to train the teacher in the required skills and competencies and provide them with a set of instructions (Mooney Simmie, 2012). In contradiction, Nilsson and Loughran (2008) argue that it is teachers themselves who should have control over the generation of new teacher knowledge and that they should be informants of teacher training and policy formation. However, Ball (2008; 2012) recognises that neoliberal policies focus on decreasing the levels of investment while demanding increased productivity – suggesting a ‘performativity’ from teachers. This ‘performativity’ emphasises that in order for teachers to live up to societal demands for the many forms of education, they are now expected to be much more than just professional and educational experts (Day, 2000). Carr and Beckett (2018) suggest that the Irish education system has fallen victim to neoliberalism through the policy-based agenda exuberated by the

Department of Education and Skills (D.E.S.) as curricula have and continue to be recast in more measurable forms (Holland et al., 2016).

2.3 DEFINING AND CONTEXTUALISING WELL-BEING

The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (U.N.I.C.E.F.) define the well-being of the child as:

“their health and safety, their material security, their education and socialization, and their sense of being loved, valued, and included in the families and societies in which they are born” (2007: 1).

As found in the 'Well-being Policy Statement and Framework for Practice' (D.E.S., 2019), the World Health Organisation (W.H.O.) (2001) states that:

*“well-being is present when a person realises their potential, is resilient in dealing with the normal stresses of their life, takes care of their physical well-being and has a sense of purpose, connection and belonging to a wider community. **It is a fluid way of being and needs nurturing throughout life**”* (2019: 10).

Both are arguably accurate definitions of well-being; however, U.N.I.C.E.F. (2007) prioritise the physical attributes and environmental factors to positive well-being and W.H.O. (2001) focus predominantly on the mental health aspects. Most interestingly, W.H.O. (2001) refer to well-being as a “fluid way of being and needs nurturing throughout life” (2019: 10). This statement highlights that it is unique and individual, a point reiterated by Hayes and Filipovic (2018) that enhancing well-being, even in the youngest children, is achieved through encouraging their active participation in a way that is respectful of their unique being. Although there is an inundation of the benefits of well-being and care of the whole child throughout Irish educational and child-based policy (C.E.C.D.E., 2006; N.C.C.A., 2009; D.C.E.D.I.Y., 2014; 2019), Ruggeri et al. (2020) identify the difficulties around 'measuring'

well-being. However, a focus on nurturing rather than measuring wellbeing is not always easy to achieve within the context of dominant discourses in education that may value measurement and 'accountability'. An alternative discourse to the dominant neoliberal viewpoint is provided by those who argue that well-being in education should not be based upon measurable outcomes, but more so focussed on opportunities which are concerned with what people require to desire for their individual well-being needs (Germain, 2022). Nohilly and Tynan (2022) also recognise the complexities around well-being in Irish primary schools but signify how well-being is much more than a measurable, curriculum experience for pupils. They argue that it needs to be understood, organised and treated in a way that takes account of the holistic school experience of pupils – a significant factor for the redevelopment of primary school curricula.

Fattore and Mason (2009) consider that well-being in schools is often viewed from a deficit perspective and that interventions are often put in place as a problem-solving method. Currently, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (N.C.C.A.) (1999) have allocated thirty minutes per week to Social, Personal and Health Education (S.P.H.E.). In the new Draft Curriculum Framework (N.C.C.A., 2020), there are three hours being prescribed to well-being, a definite step in the correct direction. However, it can be argued that even in prescribing an allocated time to well-being, it is taking for granted the overall classroom culture, climate and environment that is a hugely influential factor to the well-being of the children (Tynan and Nohilly, 2018). In focusing less on the content, outcomes-based approach, and more so on the relationships that exist between the students themselves and the students and teachers, a caring/nurturing environment can be established within classrooms and schools. Such an environment can positively impact the well-being of all stakeholders involved (Blum et al. 2004; Jamal et al. 2013).

2.4 OPPORTUNITY-BASED EDUCATION VERSUS OUTCOME-BASED EDUCATION

Neoliberalism promotes the need for prescription and instruction within education and as Holland et al. (2016) suggest, at most levels of education in Ireland, the curricula have and will continue to be recast in more measurable forms. A number of frameworks, such as 'The Well-being Policy Statement and Framework for Practice' (D.E.S., 2019), 'Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework' (N.C.C.A., 2009) and 'Well-Being in Primary Schools Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion' (D.E.S., D.O.H. & H.S.E., 2015) have been published to provide helpful supports and resources for relational and well-being practices. However, each document also comes with a list of aims and objectives based on how the child should "feel" or "act" or "communicate". This contradicts the W.H.O.'s definition of well-being as a fluid way of being (2001). This objectifies educational practices as outcome-based, rather than opportunity-based, an argument highlighted by Biesta (2022) when he signifies the pressures on schools to perform in a competition of sorts, hindering the overall 'quality' of education. Sahlberg (2011) is echoic of this point when he suggests that purely focussing on outcomes and falling to neoliberal agendas removes the importance of values, conceptual thinking and basic education from our educational systems.

Mashford-Scott, Church and Taylor (2012: 233) identify the benefits of adopting an opportunity-based approach within education, and state how the education of the child should be seen as "a process which facilitates children's progression towards all learning and development outcomes." Hayes and Filipovic (2018) further argue this point when they state that adopting a measurable outcome discourse takes away from the children's ownership of their learning and is more so a basic pedagogy of 'basic skills.' Hanafin and Brooks (2005) compare and contrast the objective and subjective approach in education. They did not disregard the objective educational approach as it does influence and support international

studies. However, they do emphasise the importance and benefit of subjective educational approach, particularly around relational and well-being education, as it relies on the child's personal assessment of their relationships, life circumstances, exploring their self-esteem and why they may feel different feelings in different experiences.

When aims and outcomes are at the centre of education, it massively influences parental and societal understandings and expectations (Hayes and Filipovic, 2018). Dietrich (2021) emphasises that these expectations are echoed in our everyday practice as there is a significant pressure from the outside world on schools to solve every problem, particularly social and emotional problems, that the child may encounter. Dietrich (2021) recognises, however, that teachers may not be equipped to support the children with such problems due to prescriptive policies, programmes and pressures from the curricula. These factors are significant contributors to teachers feeling a level of guilt within their practice and which, in turn, acts as a catalyst to teacher burnout (Hargreaves and Tucker, 1991; Xie et al., 2022).

The N.C.C.A., in their Draft Primary Curriculum Framework (2020) regard 'Fostering Well-being' as one of the key competencies to the new curricula going forward. A significant factor of this competency is supporting the children with their "self-care" which enables "self-awareness and promotes the importance of children seeing themselves as capable and resourceful" (N.C.C.A., 2020: 8). As well as this, relationships are considered to be a significant pillar to the well-being of the child, but it can be challenging to prioritise relational education when there is a focus put on outcomes and prescribing practices to teachers (Blum et al. 2004; Jamal et al. 2013). Evidently, this holistic, opportunity-based approach is depreciated and hindered by the current outcome-based approach that is prescribed to Irish primary schools.

2.5 THE THEORY OF CARE AND ITS EDUCATIVE ROLE

The N.C.C.A. make many references to balancing education and care (1999; 2009). There is a significant educative role of care to encourage the educator and child to reflect on the role of relations to establish a reciprocal, caring environment (Hayes and Filipovic, 2018). Nel Noddings reiterates this educative, relational role of care when she states, “When I care, I really hear, see, or feel what the other tries to convey” (2005: 16). Noddings (2005) also states that if we truly want to care we need to be present and not passive. Stating that you care without action is meaningless. Care, in itself, is a relationship. It is not a stand-alone feature in someone’s life or practice. Noddings identifies the complexities of care being a two-way process and how this has a major influence on the emotional development of the ‘carer’ and ‘cared-for’ (2005). This idea of care is reiterated by Burke and Nolan et al. (2012), when they state the purpose of the caring relationship is to promote growth, prevent harm, and meet the needs of the other – thus creating a nurturing environment, where each stakeholder understands the need to care for themselves and each other.

Holmes (2005), Zhang and Zheng (2021) support Noddings’ philosophy and theories, when they signify the importance of caring for our students, but also identifying the need for reciprocated care as teachers too. They further discuss the need for caring topics to be taught in all educational contexts, as a formal part of the curriculum, and how this may support children in accessing that “holistic feeling in the process of education” (2021: 78). This, in turn, can support the establishment of a nurturing environment and as Noddings (2003) recognises – schools are centres for care, and in establishing this caring/nurturing environment, it can support the children in accessing the curriculum and the continuation of education throughout their lives.

2.6 RELATIONAL THEORIES AND THEIR EDUCATIVE ROLE

Vygotsky (1978) asserts that learning is, essentially, a social and relational process in which the support of parents, caregivers, peers and the wider society and culture plays a crucial role in not only the education of the child, but also their overall, holistic development. Gergen (2009) echoes Vygotsky (1978) when he recognises knowledge as something nonhomogeneous and that education should not be individualised. He questions the individualist education route often taken by teachers and educators, and that individuals are woven into contexts and knowledge is produced in relations. Mcleod (2022) emphasises this interwoven concept, when he recognises Vygotsky's (1978) theory of education as one that establishes opportunities for the children to learn alongside their teacher, in a social and relational fashion. Within this relational education, individuals cannot be separated from their contexts. The complex dimensions of human life are mediated by relationships, and these are often the grounds for where knowledge is constructed and learning occurs (Wortham and Jackson, 2012). Dewey (1902) also recognises the importance of relational education and how the child and curriculum are two separate entities, and it is actually the relationship that the child has with their environment and the people around them that allows for access to this curriculum and learning itself. This relational aspect is less prescriptive and is more so an opportunity-based approach, which can provide the basis for establishing a nurturing environment within the classroom (Hayes and Filipovic, 2018). In establishing this environment, the teacher recognises the impact that friendships and relationships not only have on education, but also in creating a "support group or buffer zone" (Leung and Silberling, 2006: 58) within the classroom.

Relationships are fundamental to the education and holistic development of the child (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Bronfenbrenner (2005) proposes that relationships need to be understood and reciprocated and that human

development quintessentially takes place through these reciprocal interactions between the child and other people and their environment. These day-to-day interactions and experiences are also known as proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). Adults are of critical importance in facilitating these proximal processes and have a powerful role in providing for these reciprocal interactions and the relational education of the child (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006; Hayes et al., 2017). Understanding relationships, alongside a holistic and inclusive approach to education, allows for the educator and educated to learn with one another and this has a fundamental impact on the holistic education of the child (Vygotsky, 1978; Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). It is equally as important to realise that unintentional problems that can be created between the relationships within the classroom and that differentiating perceptions can exist between each child and the teacher, as well as the perception the teacher has on how each child views them (Claessens et al., 2017).

In identifying the importance of relational education within the nurturing environment, the teacher is highlighting the necessity for unity in the education of the child and recognises the importance of their families, communities and teachers/educators within this educational, nurturing environment (Bruce, 2021). Without significant relationships, it is very difficult for a child to undergo significant learning (O'Toole & Hayes, 2020).

2.7 NURTURING PEDAGOGIES

Hayes and Filipovic (2018) identify a nurturing pedagogy as one that is child-sensitive and is respectful of the children's own role within the environment and journey of learning. Within a nurturing classroom environment, the focus is put on learning opportunities rather than outcomes. These opportunities enhance the children's educational capabilities and their overall development and learning (Delors, 1996; Hayes and Filipovic, 2018). Banks (2009) suggests that the nurturing side of care in teaching goes far beyond

technical skill, curriculum and policy – breaking free from the neoliberal discourse very often prescribed to well-being practices within educational institutions.

Statham and Chase (2010: 3) comment on how the classroom environment can be challenged and influenced by a number of external factors such as “age, gender, disability, ethnicity, sexuality or by wider socio-economic or inclusion markers”. In adopting a nurturing pedagogy, the teacher is attempting to cater for the complex and diverse nature of the classroom environment. Hayes and Filipovic (2018) reinforce this point when they state that a ‘nurturing pedagogy’ is a more engaging and active image of care. This echoes Hayes’ (2008: 437) previous research when she defines a nurturing pedagogy as one that “fosters the processes of interaction, dialogue, and planning, leading to the shared construction of knowledge between the child and teacher”. Lucas (1999) described how implementing nurturing principles across classrooms and the school has a positive cycle of growth and development for the child and wider school community. Through their practice, the teacher must actively nourish, rear, foster and educate the child. It could be very evident that a teacher cares for the children in his/her care, however by conforming to the outcomes-based, neoliberal educational practices, it is highly possible to lose the ‘present’ child (Hayes and Filipovic, 2018).

2.8 WELL-BEING, RELATIONSHIPS AND A HOLISTIC UNDERSTANDING OF COMMUNICATION

Within the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework (N.C.C.A., 2020), ‘Communicating and Using Language’ is considered to be one of the key competencies for learning. Wegerif (2008) describes language-based communication as a powerful educational tool and that through interaction between different voices and different perspectives, new meanings can be established and understood. Furthermore, when people understand something, they do so in a communicational, dynamic way and not statically in a structure (Wells, 1999). According to

the N.C.C.A. (2015) communication takes place in many forms, and language-based communication enables the children to understand and make sense of the world around them and communicate effectively with others. However, in contrary, the N.C.C.A. (2007) also recognises that communication is a developmental process and that there is often an over-reliance on oral language-based communication, impacting the education and well-being of the child when challenges arise. Martinsen et. al (2021) reiterate this, when they suggest that high self-esteem is connected to expression and communication skills and, in turn, social relationships. Consequently, communication should be recognised as much more beyond the spoken word (Bock, 2016), in particular for children with mild learning disabilities, English Language Learners (E.L.L.) and children with Specific Speech and Language Disorders (S.S.L.D.).

Promoting the voice of the child allows for the teacher to adopt the child-sensitive and dialogical approach significant within the establishment of a nurturing classroom environment (Hayes and Filipovic, 2018). Children with speech and language difficulties, when required to communicate in an individual or group situation, find it challenging to use language and express themselves appropriately (Afasic, 2016; Peer and Reid, 2016). Although there is a necessity for direct teaching and teacher-modelling for the language acquisition of children with S.S.L.D., providing the children with a 'mixed-methods' approach to communication benefitted their expression and communication skills academically and socially. This supports the establishment of relationships and benefits the well-being of the children within the classroom environment (N.C.S.E., 2016; Dervan and Egan, 2021). This, furthermore, promotes the voice of the child and allows them to be agentic in their communicational methods within the classroom.

Through effective communication, learners can integrate separate structures into a creative system for establishing understanding and creating new meaning (Littlewood, 1984;

N.C.S.E., 2016). However, Zhang (2009) argues that with an over-reliance on oral-language based communication, barriers to communication exist for English learners, as speaking remains the most difficult skill to master for the majority of English learners. This can, in turn, affect the ability for the children to form relationships, use their voice and impact their well-being within the classroom environment. Marsh (2018) and Qian (2021) signify these limitations around oral-language based communication and E.L.L. and recognise a multi-method, creative approach as the most beneficial methodology to benefit the communication and expression of E.L.L. Going beyond the prescribed, curricula methods ensures that the teacher is catering for the nurturing side of care within their practice (Banks, 2009).

Adopting this 'multi-modal' approach to communication can support the deconstruction of the barriers created by an over-reliance on language-based communication (Marsh, 2018; Qian, 2021; Dervan and Egan, 2021). Halpenny (2021) suggests a number of creative, imaginative and digital ways to capture the children's voice and explore their understandings. Within these methods, socio-dramatic play is also considered to be an effective expressional tool. Teacher-participatory, socio-dramatic play encourages creative collaboration, and provides the children with a platform to connect their experiences with the real-world, beyond the spoken word (Whittington and Floyd, 2009; Dunn, 2011; Tarman and Tarman; 2011).

Although language-based communication is a highly effective educational tool, Halpenny (2021) recognises the power-dynamics that exist between adults and children of a young age when engaging with dialogue and language-based communication. There is an essence of the children telling the adult what they think will please them best. Mannion (2007) references this power-dynamic too, and highlights how adults play a significant role around the negotiation of the children's participation in discussion and contributions. As well as this, it is essential to not forget that communication is a two-way process of speaking and

listening. Practitioners must engage with active listening, so to tune into the individual interests, activities and competencies of the child and furthermore understand how they are feeling, of which is an integral part of the education of the child (Clark, 2004; Halpenny, 2021). In truly listening to the child, the teacher is ensuring to implement nurturing principles, further benefitting the holistic development and education of the child (Lucas, 1999).

2.9 THE TEACHER'S ROLE IN THE AGENCY OF THE CHILD WITHIN THE NURTURING ENVIRONMENT

Hayes (2008) suggests teaching in the early years and junior infant classroom can still be taught in a didactic way and that although teachers will cater for child-centred learning, the teacher tended to be passive in supporting this child-led learning. In creating an effective child-led learning environment, educators are recognising the agency of the child as a means for the child to be active meaning-makers in the construction of their social lives (Fröbel and Jarvis, 1899; James and Prout, 1980; Alderson, 2001). Liberto (2016) and Moor (2017) note the significance of allowing the child to follow their desires and be facilitated with opportunities in order to provide for agentic practices in the classroom. Kirby (2019:12) is echoic of this point when she states that “children demonstrate agency by skilfully ensuring time off from doing what the teacher demands; purposively and successfully deviating from the certainty emphasised in the classroom to pursue meandering lines of desire”. Earlier in the chapter, it was argued that teachers should veer from prescriptive policies and programmes to allow for the holistic development of the child. The same can be said for allowing children choice, agency and autonomy in their daily education. with a view to creating a relational, nurturing environment. Hayes (2008) and Halpenny (2021) highlight the importance of recognising the child as equal partners in their education. The pedagogical choices that teachers make, influence the opportunities and experiences of the child and

subsequently influence their agency over their own learning experiences (Broadhead and van der Aalsvoort, 2009; Peeters et al., 2014). In providing for an opportunities-based approach in the classroom environment, the practitioner is ensuring the establishment of a developmental and educational model to facilitate respectful 'child-sensitive' education – focussing on the interactive nature of the learning process in the classroom; and the contribution of all, including the child and the context, to this process (Hayes, 2008). Through demonstrating respect of the children's own role within the environment and journey of learning, the educator is constructing a basis for the establishment of a nurturing environment within their practice (Hayes and Filipovic, 2018).

Brady et al. (2015) recognise the importance of understanding children as social agents and as co-constructors of their social worlds. This is fundamental for their experiential development, as well as benefitting their dealings with health and well-being in everyday life. Hayes and Filipovic (2018) strengthen this point, when they state that enhancing well-being, even in the youngest children, is achieved through encouraging their active participation in a way that is respectful of their unique being. In recognising children as agents of their own learning and unique well-being needs, the practitioner is facilitating a learning journey rather than focussing outcomes for the child. As research shows, it is the process of travelling the pathways of learning, rather than the destination that is critical to the children's development and learning (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009; Wood, 2013).

2.10 CONCLUSION

The aim of this chapter was to exemplify, analyse and intertwine the literature based upon this self-study action research project. The first section of the literature review examined education through a neoliberal lens and attempted to define and contextualise well-being in a primary school setting. Literature around opportunity-based education and outcome-based education were critiqued and analysed too.

The second section of the chapter explored the theoretical and philosophical influences to this project. The theory of care and relational theories were the focus, with particular analyses made on the work of Nel Noddings, Vygotsky and Bronfenbrenner. The educative role of these value-based theories was echoed throughout.

The final section of this chapter drew from literature surrounding nurturing pedagogies. Within the analysis of these pedagogies, there was a particular exploration on communication within the nurturing environment and the recognition of children as agents of their own learning journeys.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The research methodology chapter describes the research process adopted by this study. There will be a focus on the theoretical factors underpinning my research and the reasons behind choosing self-study action research. Action research as a values-laden and qualitative approach and the importance of multi-lensed critical reflection throughout the research process will be examined too. The focus and development of my specific research will also be explored with a particular emphasis on the multimodal data collection process, data collection tools chosen and the analysis of data gathered throughout this research. As well as this, I will exemplify how I sought validation through the standards of judgement and criteria of myself, other participants and further interlinking factors. This use of triangulation within data collection ensures variance and validity of the actual data gathered, rather than one data collection tool (Cohen et al., 2018). Finally, the ethical considerations of the research process will be explored as there is no denying the complexity of potential ethical issues that may arise throughout conducting research with children of such a young age.

3.2 SELF-STUDY ACTION RESEARCH

3.2.1 Why Action Research?

To begin, it is important to determine why I chose action research as my form of research. In order to do so effectively, it is essential that I explore the four main research paradigms as exemplified by Pine (2008) and the determining factors that made action research the most suitable choice for this research project.

Bassey (2002) states that the **positivist researcher** sees the world as existing regardless of the people. They see the world as a rational place and positivists do not count themselves as variables within research. Grant and Giddings (2002) recognise positivist

researchers as researchers that 'play' with numerical, statistical and quantitative data.

Ultimately, other researchers within this paradigm will achieve the same conclusions at the end of their research journey (Bassey, 2002). Cohen et al. (2018: 9) mirror Bassey's thinking when they state that "Positivism may be characterized by its claim that science provides us with the clearest possible ideal of knowledge."

According to Kiyunja and Kuyini (2017) the **interpretive researcher**, on the other hand, has a more subjectivist way of viewing knowledge. They see reality as a construct of the human mind and that each individual may extract different meanings in their research. Interpretivists recognise themselves as potential variables in the research and are often qualitative-based, or combine quantitative and qualitative measures. Interpretive researchers aim to describe and interpret the phenomena of the world in attempts to get shared meanings with others (Bassey, 2002).

The **critical theory or postmodern paradigm** is one that recognises and questions concerns related to power, control, and epistemology as social constructions that have benefits for some and not for others. Although the 'real-world' is still there, it cannot be seen by anyone because of the biases and values that they possess (Freire, 1973; Giroux, 1989).

The **eclectic-mixed methods-pragmatic paradigm** (Caracelli & Greene, 1997; Chatterki, 2004; Brewer & Hunter, 2006) has most recently emerged in the postmodernist era and refers to its flexibility in establishing a combination of the methods from other paradigms to collect information and to solve complex problems. Within this paradigm, the researcher mixes or combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques and allows for the intertwinement of differentiating methods, approaches, concepts, or language into a single study (Pine, 2008). There is a focus put on the epistemological factors within research and the

necessity of triangulation within data collection is recognised too (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

As McDonagh et al. (2020) express in their work, it can be very difficult to place your research and your practice wholly within these four paradigms. The basis of my research is very complex and non-linear, and researchers may find different meanings within each diverse classroom, which is recognised in some, but not all of the mentioned paradigms. Not only this, but very little (if not none) of my research was quantitatively based and throughout the process, I was trying to live and work closer to my values and enhance the quality of my practice. It is here that action research can be identified as its own unique, evolving paradigm of sorts (Bassegy, 2002; Pine, 2008). As Pine (2008) reiterates, action research draws upon multiple elements of other research paradigms, but what makes it distinguishable is: its reflexivity, intersubjectivity, axiology (values-based), collaboration, dialectical nature and how it recognises real-life issues/problems. There is also a moral/political ethos underpinning action research (Pine, 2008; 67-77).

This is why the action research paradigm is the most applicable to my chosen research topic. Within action research, our research is designed to improve the quality of action and enhance our practice to improve and invent procedures in the classroom practice and create personal and social change (Cohen et al., 2018).

3.2.2 Self-Study Action Research

With the nature of my study falling within the action research paradigm, my chosen research methodology was Self-Study Action Research. Vanassche and Kelchtermans (2015: 508) state that “self-study research refers to educators researching their practice with the purpose of improving it, making explicit and validating their professional expertise and, at the same time, contributing to the knowledge base of teacher education”. It is essential that

the researcher's practice and improving their practice is at the centre-point of the research (Fetterman, 2015). Educators conducting educational action research use it as a tool to help them understand how they can enhance their practice and influence social change (Ferrance, 2000; McNiff, 2002; 2010; Kemmis 2012). At the beginning of my research, I found it very difficult to put myself at the centre of my study. I did not see how focussing on myself could genuinely encourage change. It was challenging to veer from my linear habits, and accept that action research is a messy experience (Fraenkel and Wallen, 2003; Johnson, 2008). However, through critical engagement, it has become apparent that in order for myself as researcher to succeed in worthwhile educational action research, I had to see myself as an inside-practitioner and not a detached object (Feldman et al., 2004).

3.2.3 Values

Our values are the underpinning, driving-force behind self-study action research (Sullivan et al., 2016; Bradbury et al., 2019; Hauge, 2021). Within the research, our values are interchangeable and overlapped across many aspects of our lives. Upon commencing the research process, and particularly through reflection, I identified that there was a strong link between the values of my personal and professional life. A lot of my frustrations, opinions and positivity came from my value of care and relationships, both inside and outside of school. In the early stages of my research, I could construct a momentous list of what I considered to be my life values. However, through reflection, I swiftly found that I was living contradiction (Whitehead, 1989). I found that the list of values I had constructed came under the umbrella values of care and relationships. As I delved deeper into my research I found myself questioning what care means to me, the reciprocal and nurturing role of care and relationships and how these values impact our individual well-being.

Within this values-laden approach, attempting to show that I was living more closely to my values to enhance my practice and encourage change within my classroom

environment was a significant standard of judgement throughout my research journey (Loughran and Northfield, 1996; Loughran, 2007; Koster and van den Berg; 2014). This criterium is echoed by Jean McNiff (2002) when she recognises that within self-study action research, if the researcher states that they hold certain values, they need to show how they are living in the direction of these values within their research. This is conducted through the use of a reflective journal – a tool of which allowed me to remain aware of the complex nature of the classroom and ensure that my values remained at the heart of my research (Thompson and Thompson, 2018).

3.2.4 Reflective Practice

Critical, self-reflection is a quintessential part of self-study action research.

Brookfield (2017) states that good education requires good decision-making and in order to make good decisions, one needs to practice critical thinking and reflection. Maxine Greene (1984) refers to reflection as a soundless, internalised dialogue through which we talk things over with ourselves.

Donald Schön (1983) identifies the importance of two different types of reflection: reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. This, as an educator, is essential to our practice. It was very difficult to reflect in the moment when the classroom is as complex and busy as it is. Whilst conducting my study, I took observation notes throughout the day and reflected on these notes at a later, more appropriate time. These observations, through reflecting-in-action, were fundamental to the triangulation of my data collection and created a sense of awareness that allowed for later meaning-making in further thoughts and reflections (Anderson, 2019). Schön's (1983) idea of reflecting-in-action and reflecting-on-action allowed for effective reflexivity when conducting research and enhancing our practice. It was equally as important to be reflexive during the course of my project. Reflexivity can be defined as an individual's considered response to an immediate context and is concerned with the ability of people to

process information and create new knowledge to influence life choices (D'Cruz et al., 2019). Giddens (1993) also echoes this definition of reflexivity when he defines the use of reflexivity as the development of the self-consciousness to create a self-awareness. This idea of reflexivity influencing self-awareness is vital within self-study action research, in which the practitioner is trying to establish new knowledge and creating a living-educational theory (Whitehead, 2000). Being reflexive contributed to triangulation and validation throughout the research process and as Reason and Bradbury (2013) tell us, we need to understand the reasons behind our actions and make sense of what it is that we want to enhance through our self-study action research, as action without understanding is blind.

3.2.5 A Qualitative Approach

Although, Dadds and Hart (2001) suggest that classroom action research can employ an eclectic mix of data-gathering methods, my data-gathering was predominantly a qualitative approach. Quantitative data being measurable, specific and statistical would have contradicted the nature of my study in my attempts to shift from didactic, outcome-based education to opportunity-based education and a nurturing classroom environment.

Check and Schutt (2012) describe qualitative data as data that prioritises the views of the participants or subject rather than that of the researcher. Although the focus throughout my self-study action research journey was on my practice and aiming to create social change, the opinions and insights of my pupils, critical friends, parents and all stakeholders to my research were invaluable to the validation of my research. As mentioned earlier, within the action research paradigm, the researcher is not solely an observer, but rather an active participant in the research itself (Pine, 2008).

In contradiction, due to its nature, evidence gathered from qualitative data remained open to criticism and interpretation. This is often perceived as a limitation of the data, but as

Atkins and Wallace (2012) argued, qualitative data is superlative in educational research as without the involvement of people, effective education is not possible. This strengthens the construct of the action research paradigm, stating that people are not predictable, or static (Bassey, 2002). Finally, the nature of my study was not something that could be measured by numbers, which disregarded the use of quantitative data. Using qualitative data allowed me to explore the complex and abstract structures of relationships, care and well-being – all of which are specific and unique to the individual. This also allowed me to be create deeper reflections and be reflexive throughout the research journey.

3.3 FOCUS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE RESEARCH

3.3.1 Action Plan

My action plan was structured by the following time-frame:

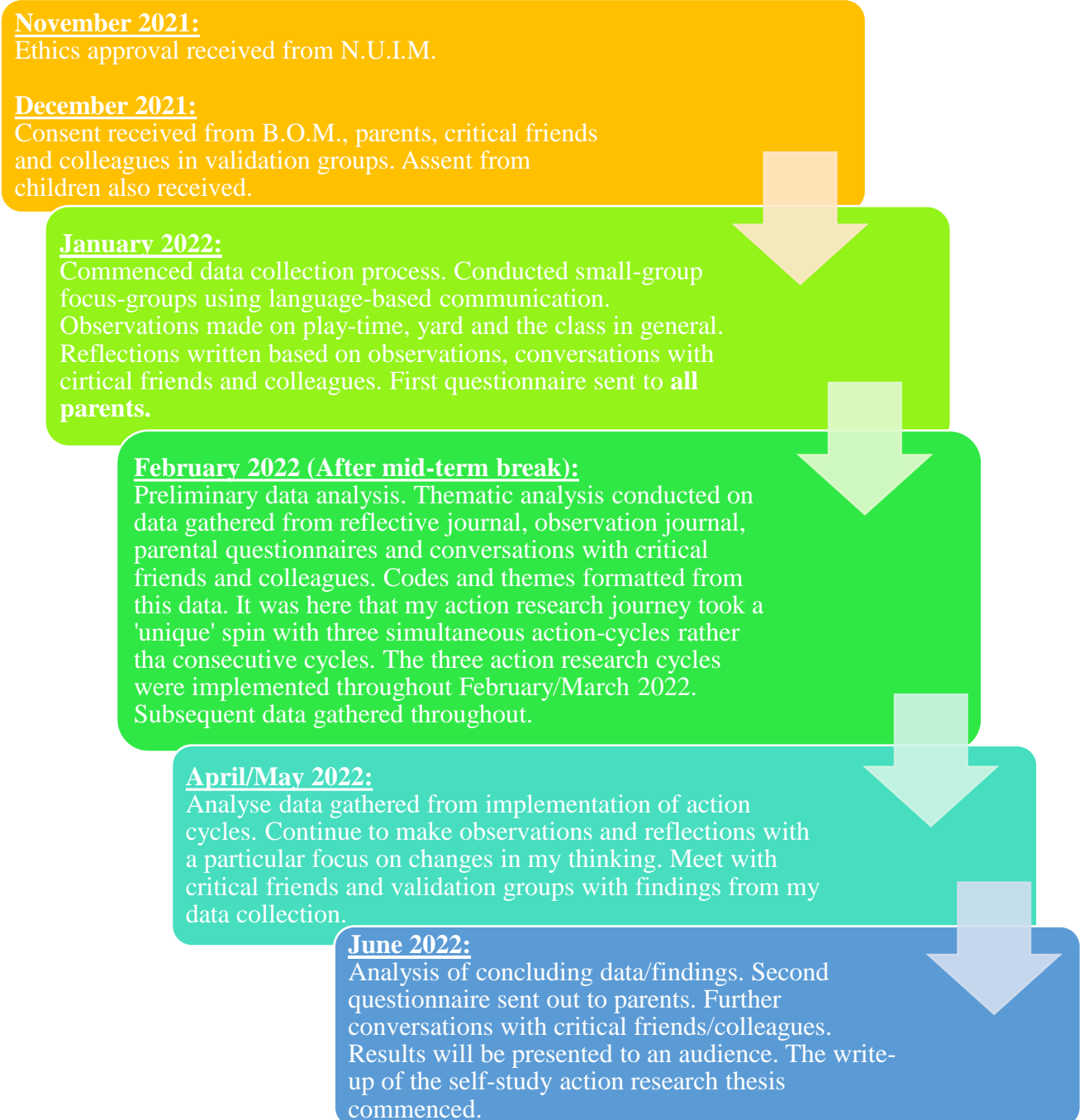


Fig 3.1 – Action Plan

3.3.2 Action research Model

Within my specific action-plan timeframe, I followed Carr and Kemmis' (1986)

Action Research Model, as exemplified below:

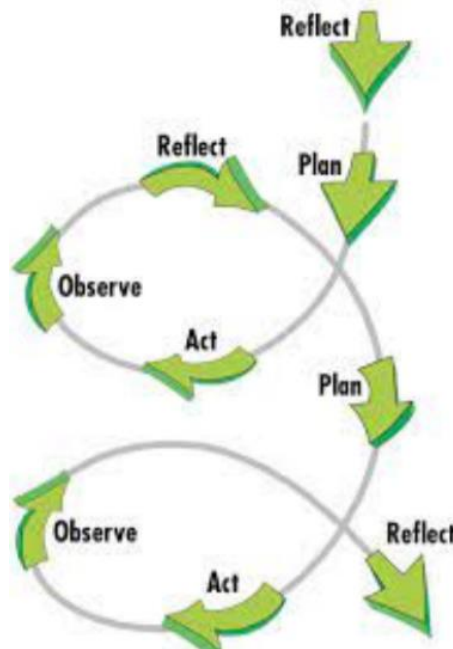


Fig 3.2 – Carr and Kemmis; Action Research Model; 1986

Carr and Kemmis' (1986) Action Research Model is a four-step approach to conducting action research in educational settings. The process commences with planning amongst the research participants and the discourse of the education environment – collecting preliminary data is quintessential at this point too. After planning, the practitioner 'acts' or implements an intervention within their practice. This is followed by observing and gathering data based on the actions within the practitioner's practice. Finally, there must be detailed, critical reflections conducted on the process, so to inform the next action cycle. Within this process, Carr and Kemmis (1986) recognise planning and acting as constructive processes and observing and reflecting as reconstructive processes. Their model is further explained through the following diagram:

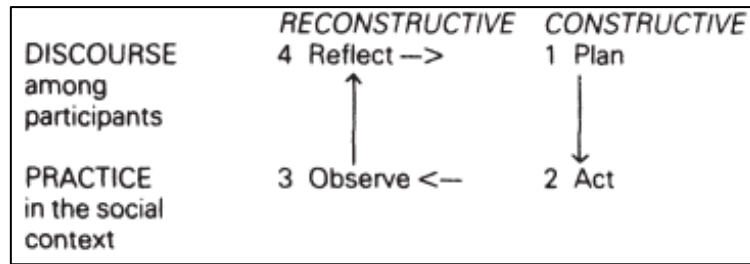


Fig 3.3 – ‘The Moments of Action Research’ (Carr and Kemmis; 1986: 186)

3.3.3 Research Setting

The setting for the research is a large, co-educational, catholic primary school. The school has a pupil population of over 700 children, and a staff consisting of 42 members. The school has a middle socio-economic status. I have taught in the school for eight years, in a number of positions. For the duration of my research, I taught a class of 20 junior infants.

3.3.4 Research Participants and Sampling

In order to ensure that no child felt excluded or uncomfortable throughout the research process, all twenty children in the class participated in my research. Furthermore, as I was seeking to establish a nurturing environment within my classroom, I wanted to include all of the children as stakeholders within the research.

Kemmis and Mc Taggart (1988) describe collaboration as crucial to the action research process. With collaboration being an integral part of self-study action research, I ensured to have a number of critical friends and validation groups. I had two critical friends in the form of the Special Education Teacher (S.E.T.) who supports the class, and a School Leader who holds a post of responsibility around student and staff well-being. I felt these were appropriate choices as critical friends as the S.E.T. had formed a relationship with myself and the class, ensuring that they could question or validate my thoughts and interventions. The School Leader held similar values to me and recognised our school as a place of care, and therefore could ensure to question me, and my values, throughout the

process. A third critical friend is a colleague who was also taking part in Self-Study Action Research. I had two validation groups in the form of other teachers from junior and senior infants within the school and a school-self-evaluation group that are focussing on well-being. Both of these groups provided valuable insights, particularly around questioning and supporting the interventions applied. Along with collegial gatekeepers, all parents of the children in my class provided invaluable information that contributed to the data collection and analysis process. Throughout the process, I ensured to communicate with consenting parents so to contribute to the validation of my research. In having an expansive group of critical friends and colleagues, I was ensuring triangulation and collaboration throughout my research journey. This is indispensable for validation purposes, but also in identifying research problems and potential solutions to those problems (Winter, 2003).

In terms of data analysis and choosing samples of data, I used purposive or judgmental sampling. This a strategy in which particular settings, persons or events are selected deliberately so to enhance the practitioners thinking (Maxwell, 2005; Taherdoost, 2016). There were significant observations, reflections and conversational moments that ignited new thoughts and ideas, that ensured I was aiming to enhance my practice and identify how I could live more closely to my values.

3.4 DATA COLLECTION PROCESS AND TOOLS

Throughout this action research project, a number of data collection tools were used prior to, during and after the implementation of the action cycles. As well as this, the methods behind the analysis of my data will be explored within this section. To begin, the chosen data collection tools will be examined and analysed.

3.4.1 Observations

Throughout the research project, I used a combination of two forms of observations: naturalistic and participant. Jhangiani et al. (2015) state that within naturalistic observation, observations are usually made as unobtrusively as possible so that participants are not aware that they are being studied. Within participant observation, the researcher themselves makes observations as they are part of the research journey (Jhangiana et al., 2015). Ethically, combining these methods is considered to be acceptable as the participants remain anonymous and the observations made on behaviours occur in a comfortable setting. I strived to ensure that my observational methods did not influence the information that the children provided as part of my data collection. I took notes, very discreetly, in a separate 'observation journal' (reflecting-in-action) and quite often, these notes informed my reflection-on-action (Schon, 1983). Dudovskiy (2022) recognises that within observation data collection, the practitioner immerses themselves in direct access to research phenomena, as well as generating a permanent record of phenomena to be referred to later.

3.4.2 Reflective Journal

The reflective journal was one of the most invaluable data collection tools used over the course of my study:

“a reflective journal provides data about changes in your thinking, your work and how you go about it. These changes are important because they track the story of one’s learning, which is at the heart of generating theory from practice” (Sullivan et al, 2016: 79).

The reflective journal was used at all stages of the research cycles. Not only did it include entries based on changes in my thinking and my practice, it also allowed for me to record my thoughts after conversations with my validation groups, critical friends and reflect on observations made throughout the day.

Using my reflective journal also allowed me to be reflexive and to relate my core values with changes in my thinking. Without it, the most valuable source of observation and thinking of teaching and learning would be excluded: the classroom teacher (Longstreet, 1982). Denzin and Lincoln (2017) state how recording reflections situates one's experiences as qualitative data and in keeping such comprehensive records of my thinking, it supported the validation of my work as I began to identify and to focus on my claim to new knowledge. Engaging with reflections in action research provides for a holistic approach and furthermore frame out the practitioner's thinking about the complexities of teaching and learning (Davies, 2012; Simmons et al., 2021).

3.4.3 Questionnaires

Questionnaires were an effective data gathering tool for collecting insights and opinions from the other gatekeepers involved in my research, especially regarding the parents of the children in my class. Mukherji and Albon (2018) suggest that questionnaires are an effective gathering data tool as they are an effective use of time, adhere to anonymity and ethical procedures and usually succeed with a successful return rate with standardised questions.

However, in using questionnaires, the researcher must ensure to not limit themselves by expecting descriptions rather than explanations in their questions (Mukherji and Albon 2018). In creating such questionnaires, I tried not to use yes/no or questions that may seem I am looking for the 'correct' answer. Instead, I used higher-order, expressive questions that could contribute to deeper, qualitative data being gathered and provide for triangulation in my work; *e.g. What do you think supports your child's ability to create positive connections/relationships in the Junior Infant classroom?* (See Appendices.)

3.4.4 Data Analysis Process and Triangulation

Data analysis began immediately from the initial stages of my research. Throughout the research process, I used Braun and Clark's (2006) six-step procedure to thematic analysis. Codes are identified within the data. These codes are evaluated and present themes and patterns within the collected data. As data were collected, I sifted through everything gathered and allowed the themes to emerge naturally from a number of perspectives (Percy et al., 2015; Belotto, 2016). In taking this more grounded approach, my action research cycles took a unique spin of three simultaneous cycle, as mentioned above. In choosing to use thematic analysis, as well as allowing the themes to emerge naturally, I was providing for the flexibility needed to research the complex topic of nurturing environments – and furthermore, reflecting on who I am as a teacher from what I saw in the data (Terry et al., 2017).

Cohen et al. (2018) suggest that we can explain more fully the richness and complexity of the research when it is studied from more than one standpoint. This cross-checking of data to show its credibility is known as triangulation. Mertler (2009) regards triangulation as an indispensable tool improving the overall quality of the data and the accuracy of the findings. Triangulation commenced from the offset of my research and ensuring that data were collected from a number of perspectives was fundamental for the validation and reliability of the data (Robson, 2011). Two such examples are:

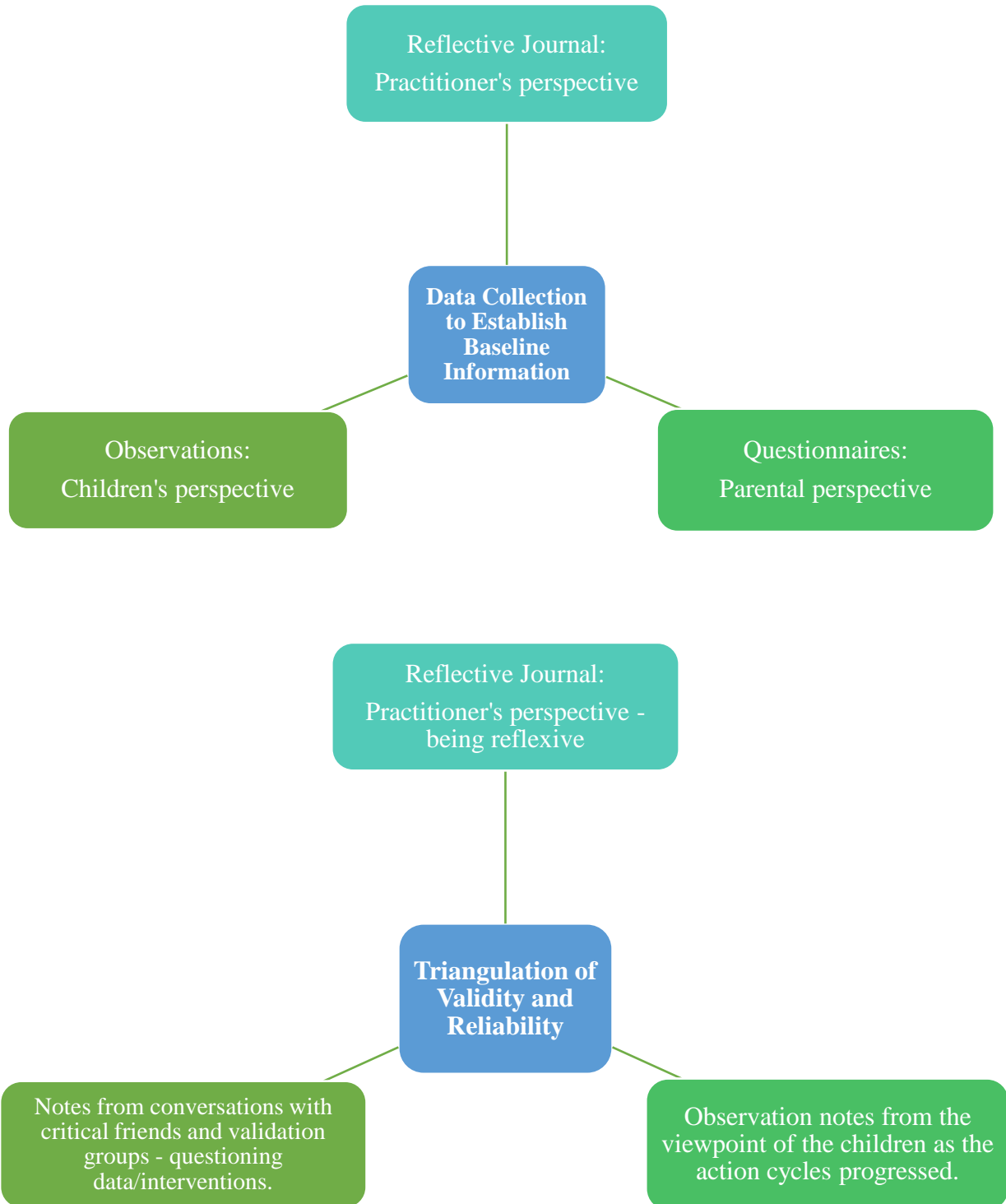


Fig 3.4 – Samples of Triangulation

The analysis of my data, as well as findings from the research, will be explored in further detail throughout Chapter Four.

3.5 VALIDATION PROCESS AND STANDARDS OF JUDGEMENT

3.5.1 Validity and Reliability

Throughout this chapter, I referred to action research being a values-laden approach, and how through reflection, the practitioner can identify changes in their thinking and recognise their attempts to live more closely to their values. This contributes to the validation process and establishes one's personal standards of judgement. Although this learning is a significant source of validity, Champion and Stowell (2003) recognise critical relationships and triangulation as prime roots to validation and reliability of data within action research.

Triangulation is an important concept regarding data analysis for action research studies and by using a number of external analysis methods concerning the same events, the practitioner is enhancing the validity of the process through triangulation (Marshall and Rossman, 2016). As exemplified in Figure 3.4, triangulation was used from the initial stages of my data gathering process using my reflective journal, notes based on the observations of the children and parental questionnaires. However, as the research process developed, triangulation was also used to validate and enhance the reliability of the data collected through reflexivity on previous reflections, further observations and critical friends and validation groups critiquing and questioning the data gathered and interventions applied. As Fusch et al. (2018: 21) argue: "the importance of triangulation cannot be underestimated to ensure reliability and validity of the data and results."

3.5.2 Multi-Lensed Critical Reflection

Although critical reflection is predominantly conducted by the practitioner themselves, Brookfield (2017) notes that as educators, our actions are based on assumptions made from previous experiences. He defines critical reflection as "the sustained and intentional process of identifying and checking the accuracy and validity of our teaching

assumptions” (2017: 3). In order to seek validation within our research and truly question our assumptions, we must see ourselves from “unfamiliar angles” (Brookfield, 2017: 61). He mentions four lenses of critical reflection: the students’ eyes, colleagues’ perceptions, theory and personal experiences (2017).

Weingarten (2016) also highlighted the benefits of reflection and dialogue when in conjunction with somebody else. In using Brookfield’s lenses, I had to ensure to never treat them as stand-alone perceptions, and throughout the research, I needed to identify the relatability between these viewpoints. This was particularly important as one of my core values is relationships and throughout the research I was exploring relationships within my classroom and also relational education. LaBoskey (2004) and Heikkinen et al. (2007) argue that in order for validation to be established through critical reflection, the practitioner must be reflexive and demonstrate subjective adequacy on their relationship with all stakeholders of the research project. As well as this, they must exhibit workability, dialectics and transparency to truly seek validation through the multiple lenses of critical reflection (Heikkinen et al., 2007).

Throughout the research process, I regularly had meetings with my critical friends and validation groups to support the validation and reliability of my research, as well as enhance my new claim to knowledge that I was constructing. These validation groups and critical friends support us in checking our assumptions and in clarifying and validating thoughts and doubts that the practitioner may experience throughout their research. As Brookfield maintains, “the presence of critical friends is at the heart of the critically reflective process” (Brookfield, 2017: 66).

3.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Lovisa Skånfors (2009) highlights the importance of a practitioner's 'ethical radar' whilst conducting any form of research with young children. It was a necessity that this 'radar' was used in all stages of my research, due to the naturally complex and diverse setting of the junior infant classroom. Using this radar effectively ensured that the following ethical issues were considered in all aspects of the self-study action research process:

3.6.1 Power-Dynamics

The inevitable power-dynamics between children and adults can negatively impact the gathering of quality of evidence from children when conducting research (Halpenny, 2021). The power-dynamics that exist between the researcher and the participants should always strive to be democratic (Banegas and Castro, 2019). The participating children are very young and therefore needed regular reminding that they do not have to take part if they do not want to and that this study is based on the researcher and to help my practice and not based on their performance.

It is also important to refer to the internal power-dynamic that may come from reflecting throughout the research process (Bolton and Delderfield, 2018; Walker and Oldford, 2020). With reflection and reflexivity being at the centre of this research, it is essential not to engage in constant, harsh, self-critique as this could cause a negative internal power-dynamic (Mohammed Idris et al. 2021). The same can be mentioned as regards our critical friends and colleagues in that their critiques should remain professional and should not be taken personally.

Finally, it was essential that I was sensitive to the power-dynamics that can potentially exist between the teacher and parents too. Parents, at times, feel like they have to consent to the teacher's requests. This was experienced within the use of the parental questionnaires. For

the first questionnaire, I received twenty out of twenty questionnaires back. However, after the second, I received fifteen out of twenty. Although the practitioner may feel it more efficient to pressurise parents to return these valuable data collection sources, it was important that I did not continuously remind parents that five were not returned, as this would be deemed as unethical and contradictory of what consent in research is.

3.6.2 Informed Consent and Assent

At the beginning of my research process, I had a conversation with my principal outlining my research questions and methodologies. This was formatted into a letter and presented to the Board of Management (B.O.M.) and formal consent was received. After approval was granted at a managerial level, I provided my critical friends and validation groups with the same information sheets and consent letters. Another letter explaining the details of my research was formed and sent to the parents of the children in my class (see Appendices).

Farrell (2005) argues the point that children should always be considered as competent participants in the research. Their assent should always be accounted for in educational action research and they should be reminded that they do not have to participate if they do not want to. After I received consent from the parents, I had a conversation with the children in my class in a small-group setting. Using a letter including appropriate visual aids for the children, I explained my research in a child-friendly and understandable manner. I ensured to emphasise that the research was about improving my role as a teacher and not their performance in class. Skånfors (2009) highlights the importance of providing the children with a 'no' option whilst conducting research, so to truly treat them as equal partners throughout the research. Therefore, I regularly ensured to use a smiley-face or a sad-face to determine whether the children are still comfortable in participating in my research and on a moment to moment basis responded to behavioural indicators. All stakeholders involved were

continuously updated of my research throughout the process and were reminded that they could remove consent or assent at any time.

3.6.3 Sensitivity and Vulnerability

The epicentre of my research is based upon creating a safe, comfortable and confidential space for all research participants to discuss and explore relationships, well-being and care with ease. Given the nature of my study and encouraging children to use their voice and express their emotions, I needed to be prepared for the chance that some children may become upset or otherwise need support. In preparation for this, and depending on the nature of the upset, I was fully aware that I may have needed to call on the S.E.T or a member of the Leadership and Management Team (L.M.T.) to assist me when I talked to the child, documented the incident and informed the child's parents. As well as this, I needed to be prepared for the chance that something sensitive, intrusive or stressful was disclosed. I would need to follow the appropriate protocol as per my school's Child Safeguarding Statement and report it to the Designated Liaison Person (D.L.P.) as per this statement.

All parents and children consented and assented to the research, but if I felt the child seemed uncomfortable in any way, I had other activities available so that they could walk away without feeling they are being punished or excluded. This was from a child-protection perspective, but in saying this, when dealing with research based on nurturing environments, I expected that feelings and emotions could emerge. The discovery, recognition and expression of such feelings was essential to my research – so where possible, I ensured that the children were aware that they could express these emotions within the safe environment of the classroom and within the trust and care of the relationship we had.

3.6.4 Data Storage and Confidentiality

It was fundamental that all data gathered throughout my research process was stored and protected appropriately. All participants and gatekeepers, along with the research site, were given pseudonyms to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Any hard copies of data collected were stored in a sealed file organiser within a locked cabinet in my classroom, of which only I have a key for. All soft copies of data were stored in an encrypted folder on my laptop. Whilst conducting my research, I ensured to adhere by the General Data Protection Regulation Guidelines and the Maynooth University Research Ethics Policy. I continuously referred to the Acceptable Usage Policy and Data Protection Policy of my school also. The data will be kept for ten years and destroyed appropriately, as per the Ethics Policy of the university.

3.7 CONCLUSION

This chapter described the chosen research methodology of this study: Self-Study Action Research. The nature of self-study action research was explored with a specific focus on it being values-laden approach, seeking to enhance my practice and bring about change and the importance of multi-lensed critical reflection throughout the research process. The framework of the action plan and relevant cycles, along with the contributing elements of data collection, data analysis, validation and ethical considerations were examined too.

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter will narrate and outline my data collection journey, the themes that emerged with reference to Braun and Clark's (2006) six stages of thematic analysis and how my action research journey, although informed by Carr and Kemmis' (1986) model, perturbed into a model of its own. As each theme is explored on an individual, detailed level, environmental findings and limitations will be exemplified within. Throughout this chapter, I will relate all findings to my core values and to the fact that I am attempting to shift aspects of my practice from an outcome-based approach to an opportunities-based approach (Hayes and Filipovic, 2018) with reference to the core questions that my research was predominantly based upon.

To begin, I will provide details on how my action research study took an unexpected, unique form as I commenced the data-collection journey.

4.2 A UNIQUE ACTION RESEARCH MODEL – A PERSONAL RESEARCH FINDING

Carr and Kemmis (1986) depicted action research as a spiral represented by four steps: plan, act, observe, reflect. The following diagram represents the model that they suggested:

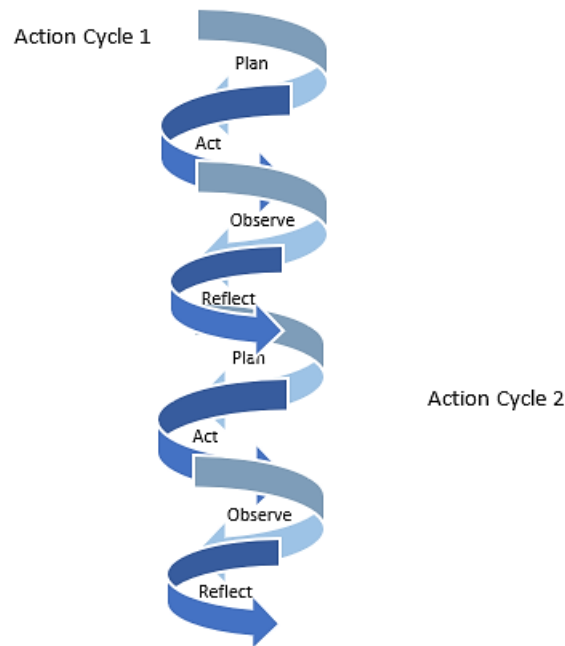


Fig 4.1 – Carr and Kemmis' (1986) Action Research Model

Carr and Kemmis (1986) suggested that each action-cycle informed the next, however, as I commenced the analysis of my data, formed codes and identified emergent themes, I realised that although I was following the same four-step approach, I was, in fact, running three action-cycles simultaneously rather than consecutively. The following diagram suggests the model that perturbed from my data analysis:

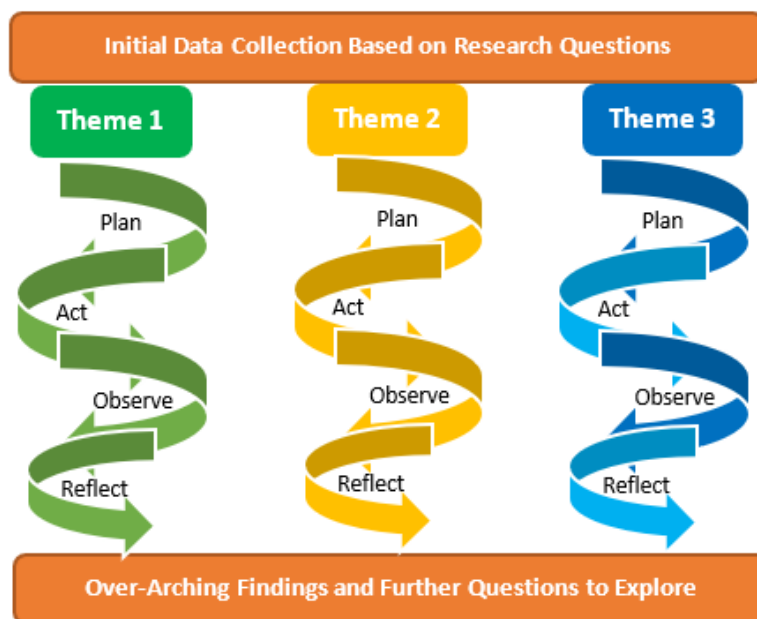


Fig 4.2 – The Action-Cycle Journey Unique to My Research Project

This, in itself, was a personal, enlightening finding, as I realised that action research is unique to me, my practice and my current, individual classroom environment – factors that I found difficult to comprehend at the preliminary stages of my research journey. This realisation echoes Cohen et. al (2018: 440) when they define action research as “a useful tool for change and improvement at the local level”.

4.3 DATA ANALYSIS JOURNEY

4.3.1 Baseline Data Collection

In January 2022, I commenced the gathering of my baseline data within my classroom environment. Initially, this was a challenge, as I was not completely sure what it was that I was searching for. Within action research, the practitioner needs to remember that it is not a linear process, and often identifying the topic or concern within your practice is a messy experience (Fraenkel and Wallen, 2003; Johnson, 2008). It is here that I recognised the need for triangulation, and the importance of the practitioner truly immersing themselves in the data collected (Mertler, 2009). Using my reflective journal, observation journal and parental questionnaires, data were collected around my thoughts, observations of the children and information from the parents around the well-being, relationships and the social-emotional expression of all stakeholders within our classroom environment.

4.3.2 Data Analysis, Development of Codes and Emergent Themes

In February 2022, after completing the initial collection of my baseline data, I commenced the analysis of this qualitative data thematically, in accordance with Braun and Clark (2006). This thematic analysis is suited for the analysis of qualitative data, as it identifies, evaluates and presents themes and patterns within the collected data, in a flexible manner (Braun and Clark, 2006). I closely adhered to the six-step procedure developed by

Braun and Clark (2006) as shown:



Fig 4.3 – Six Stages of Thematic Analysis – Adapted from Braun and Clark (2006)

As I followed this process, I identified 17 key codes throughout my baseline data gathering tools:



Fig 4.4 – 17 Initial Codes Gathered from Baseline Data

For a comprehensive understanding of these codes, I think it is important that a brief synopsis is provided for each one:

<u>Code</u>	<u>Source/Meaning</u>
Play	A significant number of recorded issues around relationships or social/emotional issues occurred during playtime.
Language Difficulties	Children with S.S.L.D. and E.L.L. were finding communication and establishing relationships a challenge.
Presence in the Classroom	Through observations and reflections, I felt that some of the children were getting 'lost' within the busyness of the classroom.

Uncertainty	A number of children appeared to be uncertain of their place in the classroom.
Fear of the Unknown	There was a hesitance around trying new things and participation – fear of ‘being wrong’ or ‘in trouble.’
Lack of Empathy	The majority of the children found it very difficult to put themselves in the shoes of others.
Reciprocity	There were issues around reciprocity – particularly around relationships.
Comfort Zones	Very few of the stakeholders, including myself, found it easy to put themselves outside of their comfort zones.
Frustration	Often, social-emotional or relational issues led to frustration, which, in turn, inhibited effective communication.
Relationships	There was a common pattern of misconstrued relationships within the children of the class – including the children’s perceptions of me.
Negative Attitudes	Through reflection, I found that I often displayed a very negative attitude towards myself and practice. The children had obtained some negative attitudes too; “I can’t...”, “I am bad at...”
Self-Esteem	There were reoccurring issues around the low self-esteem of some of the children.
Isolation	Some of the children, due to lack of relationships, felt isolated within the classroom.
Disconnection	There was a disconnection between some of the children and their peers, as well as some of the children and myself.
Discomfort	There was, at times, discomfort around the topics of feelings, emotions and relationships.
Communication	Issues around communication were prevalent throughout from all perspectives.
Feelings/Emotions	Feelings/emotions were also prevalent throughout from all perspectives.

Fig 4.5 – Synopsis of Identified Codes

These initial codes led to the identification of three themes within my data: *Dialogue*, *Relationships and Emotional Expression*. Belotto (2018) recognises the importance of forming your codes alongside your research questions, and often how your codes can be represented across a number of, if not all, of your emergent themes. The patterns within your codes, contribute to the formation of your emergent themes (Percy et al., 2015) and this is occurred within my data analysis, as exemplified below:

<u>Code</u>	<u>Theme</u>
Discomfort – Language Difficulties – Self-Esteem – Fear of the Unknown – Feelings/Emotions – Lack of Empathy –	Dialogue

Communication – Comfort Zones - Disconnection	
Lack of Empathy – Disconnection – Relationships – Reciprocity – Communication – Negative Attitudes – Frustration – Uncertainty – Language Difficulties – Self-Esteem – Isolation – Feelings/Emotions – Presence in the Classroom	Relationships
Lack of Empathy – Disconnections – Relationships – Communication – Comfort Zones – Discomfort – Frustration – Uncertainty – Language Difficulties – Self- Esteem – Feelings/Emotions	Emotional Expression

Fig 4.6 – Emergent themes from Initial Data Gathered

Upon reflection and examination of the themes, it was clear to me that these were very broad and required further defining. Through additional reflection and clarification, the three ultimate themes that emerged were:

1. 'The negative impacts of non-reciprocal relationships.'
2. 'The limitations of language-based communication.'
3. 'The teacher's role in the agency of the child.'

For the following sections of this chapter, each theme will be explored on an individual level. As mentioned, these themes sparked the creation of three simultaneous action cycles rather than action cycles that ran consecutively. I will present the reasoning behind the emergence of each theme, the interventions applied in each case and the environmental findings from the interventions, all coinciding with my values and research questions.

4.4 ETHICAL NOTES

Before conducting this examination, it is of utmost importance that I refer to the imperative ethical considerations necessary throughout this section. Within this section, pseudonyms are used in place of the children's names, so to assure anonymity and privacy.

As well as this, it was paramount that throughout the data collection and implementation of my interventions, that I had my 'ethical radar' (Skånfors, 2009) switched on. When discussing 'big' feelings the practitioner should be prepared for 'big' reactions. I always ensured that the children had a safety zone, in the form of other playtime activities, that the children could use should I have felt that they were no longer assenting to the intervention activities through observation of their behaviours and/or discomfort. As well as this, I ensured that the S.E.T. of our class and/or a member of management was aware that I may need a support should there be a huge level of upset or disclosure of confidential information. Finally, anytime I was conducting any form of data collection or research tasks, I ensured the children assented to the activities, by regularly using the smiley-face assent form (Appendix 6).

4.5 THEME 1: THE NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF NON-RECIPROCAL RELATIONSHIPS

4.5.1 Emergence of Theme 1

Bronfenbrenner (2005) proposes that relationships need to be understood and reciprocated and that human development quintessentially takes place through these reciprocal interactions between the child and other people and their environment. At the beginning of my data collection process, it became evident that there was a misconstrued view of relationships in the classroom and a lot of the relationships that existed were non-reciprocal. This theme emerged through data gathered from the different perspectives of all stakeholders involved. On January 27th, after collecting data through focus-groups discussions, I reported that:

“Only half of the children in the class identified their friends, in school, as important people in their lives” (Observation Journal [O.J.], 27th January 2022).

Not only this, but previous to that observation, it became apparent to me that a number of children in the class were finding it very difficult to form relationships and connections with their peers.

As I explored more deeply, and through further observations, I focussed particularly on one child in the class: Eve. Eve, is a very happy, academic child. She is quietly confident but quite reserved. When I commenced my explorations of the relationships in the class, Eve at one stage, became very upset over the discussion of friendships. I always encourage discussion around such big feelings, but in this moment, I felt Eve was no longer assenting to the research discussions and she discreetly joined some of her peers in some of the structured play activities that were happening in the class. That evening, I wrote a reflection based on the incident that day. It is very clear that the incident influenced my opinion of my practice when I stated:

“I’ve actually been feeling a bit guilty today. Guilty in the sense that perhaps I have really taken a passive route when it comes to the teaching and exploring of relationships in the class.” (Reflective Journal [R.J.], 18th January 2022)

The following week, we were conducting small-group discussions on ‘Important People in Our Lives.’ What struck me in this discussion was that only one child mentioned me, their teacher, as an important person in their life. This child in question was Eve and this observation really provided an eye-opener to the complexity of the relationships in the classroom. Not only this, it encouraged me to really reflect on the reciprocal relationships that existed between myself and the children:

“Eve is an only-child, so maybe it is easier for her to discuss child-adult relationships but it really hit me today the complexities that exist in all relational aspects of the classroom – not just between the children but also the relationships that have been established between them

and I and the influence that the lack of reciprocity has on all stakeholders.” (R.J., 25th January 2022)

Although I have applied the focus to one child in this case, it was apparent that there was a confusion around the reciprocal role of relationships in the class. The need for reciprocity was reinforced from a parental perspective also, as stated by one parent when they wrote:

*“You as their teacher play an important role in facilitating opportunities for lots of play and activities to encourage the children to mix with one another to form friendships. The **environment of the classroom** is important also to help assist with this as well as the relationship between you as the teacher and pupils to recognise where any additional supports or encouragement may be needed.” (Parental Questionnaire [P.Q.], January 2022)*

This confusion, alongside the identification of a number of non-reciprocal relationships within the classroom environment led to the realisation that I was, in-fact what Whitehead (1989) describes as a living contradiction. I proclaimed to value care and relationships, however Nel Noddings (2005) states the importance of care being a two-way process and how this has a major influence on the emotional development of the ‘carer’ and ‘cared-for’. Undeniably, there were children in the class who had formed solid, reciprocal friendships between themselves and between their teacher – however if I am seeking to establish this ‘nurturing environment’ within my practice, I realised that I must provide opportunities for all of the children in my classroom to establish these reciprocal relationships and furthermore, should use positive interactions and relationships as a more quality measure of my practice and education (Hayes and Filipovic, 2018).

4.5.2 Intervention 1: Sociograms

In order for me to strive towards that personal and social change referenced by Bassey (2002), I needed to fully understand and explore all relationship dynamics in the classroom.

To do so, I decided to construct a sociogram based on the relationships in the classroom. Leung and Silberling (2006) describe sociograms as a method of exploring and confirming social aspects of the classroom. They also state that “Sociograms can supplement teacher observations to promote a positive learning environment for all students” (2006: 57). Through observations, as well as discussions with the children, I was able to construct the following sociogram based on the classroom relationships in February/March 2022:

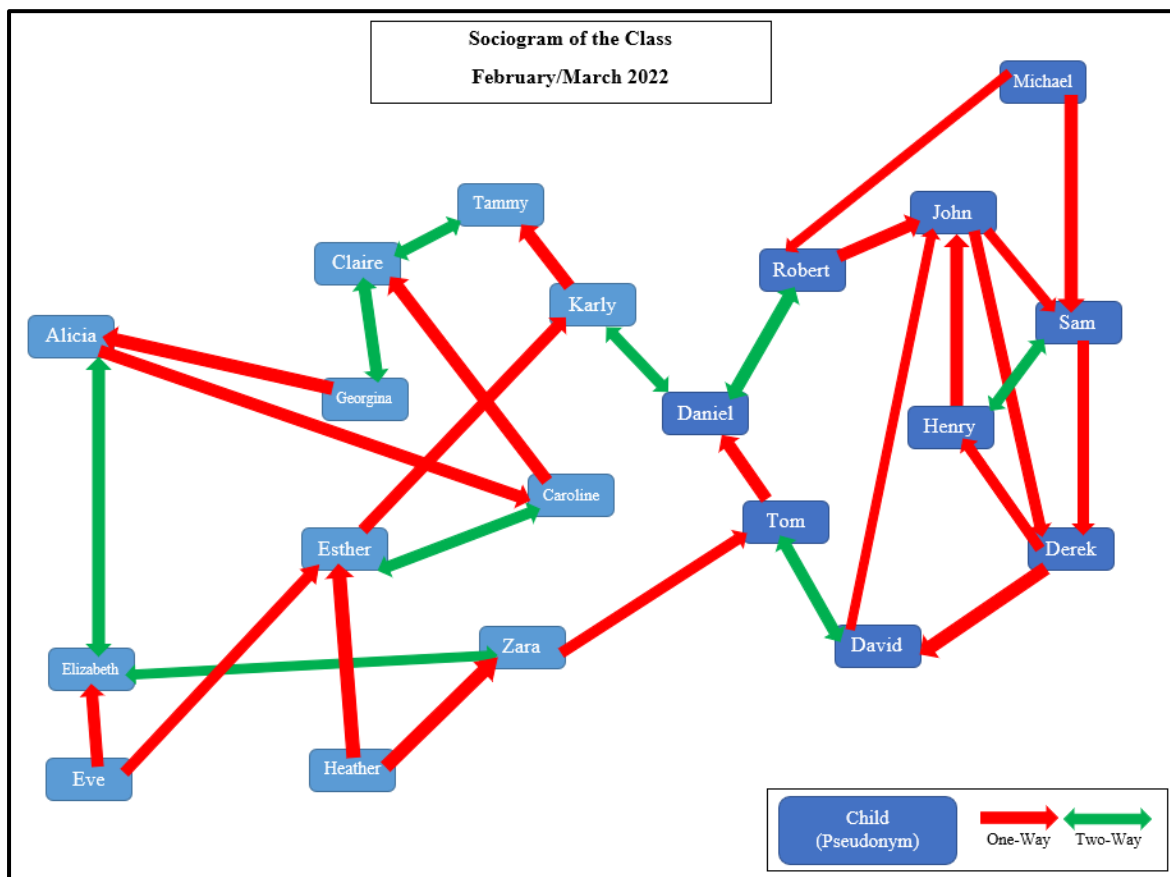


Fig 4.7 – Sociogram Constructed of the Relationships in the Classroom February/March 2022

A significant observation made here was the number of one-way relationships that existed within the classroom environment. It also appeared that some children had not established any reciprocated friendships up until this point. However, the most significant observation made on the sociogram was made by critical friend when they said:

“Having this sociogram provides a great insight into the relationships in your class. However, you need to be careful when it comes to ensuring the children ‘make friends.’ You can’t force this process, and you’re only their teacher for a set amount of time, so you should use it to encourage opportunities for relationships and make sure you don’t use it to ‘tick a box.’ How are you really going to use it in your classroom?” (Conversation with Critical Friend – R.J.; 14th March 2022)

This was the question that felt difficult to answer. However, in the weeks following this conversation, I consulted with my critical friend again, and they enlightened me with a statement that *“relationships are either draining or empowering.”* (Conversation with Critical Friend – R.J.; 24th March 2022). I further reflected on this statement on the 31st March and I wrote:

“Traditionally, I group the children using a mixed academic-ability approach. Why not apply the same approach to the relationships of the class? Identify the children who are struggling with friendships and perhaps group them together? Also, the children who have a good awareness of other with children who do not?” (R.J.; 31st March 2022)

Leung and Silberling also identified the importance of realising the impact that friendships and relationships have in creating “support group or buffer zone” (2006: 58) within which children adjust socially to the classroom environment. Through this realisation, I structured my classroom seating-plan based on the sociogram:

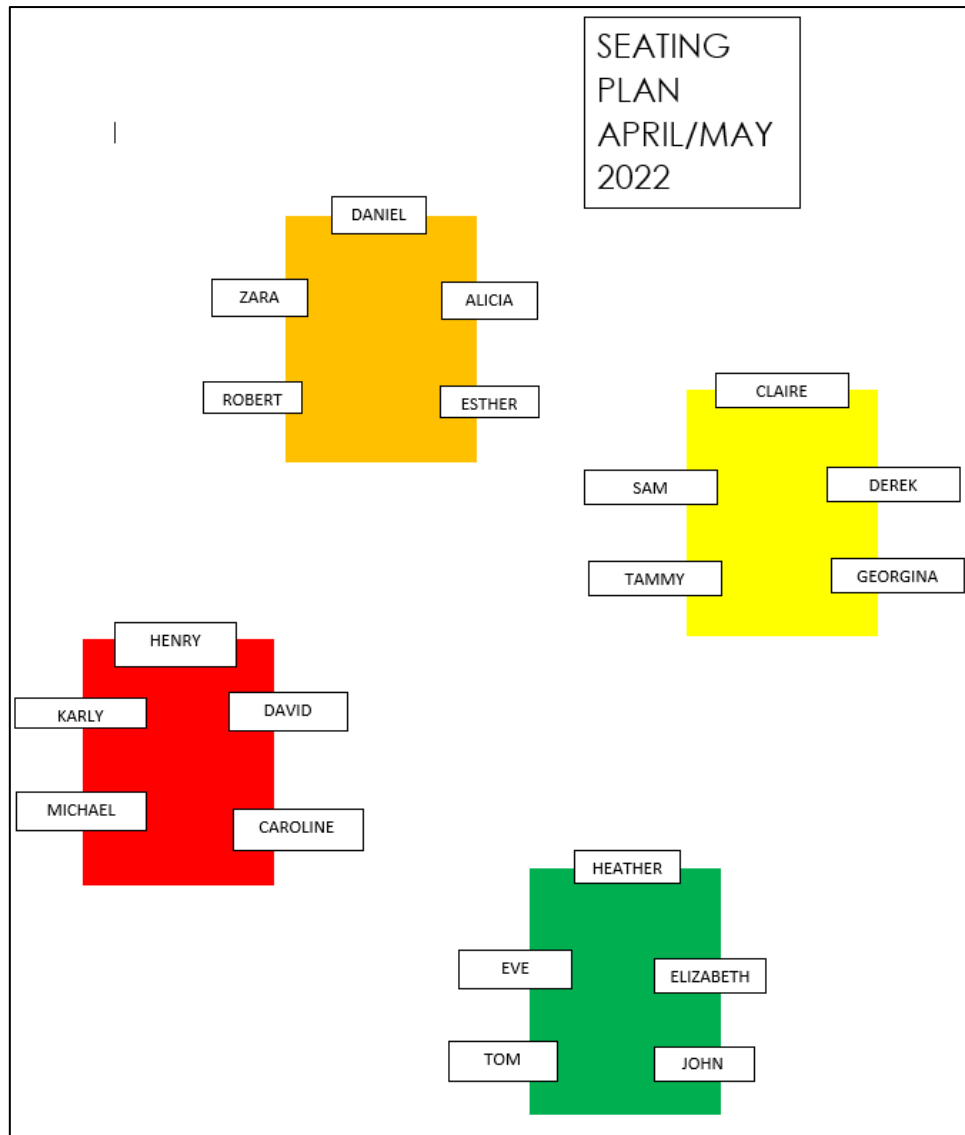


Fig 4.8 – Seating Plan Informed by Sociogram

In structuring my classroom in this format, I was providing the children with the opportunity to engage with the proximal processes that Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) deemed as essential for the relational development of the child. Here are a few examples of why I chose to structure the classroom in this format:

- Heather and Eve both struggled with forming friendships. Could they potentially find a friendship in each other?

- As evident in the Sociogram (Fig 4.7) John had a very complex relationship dynamic, whereas Tom had a fantastic awareness of himself and others, so he could possibly support John in his development.
- Georgina struggles with expressing herself whereas Derek and Seán show a fantastic level of self-expression and empathy – could they positively influence Georgina's self-esteem and expression?

4.5.3 Environmental Findings based on Action Cycle 1

When determining my findings from each action cycle, it is essential to remember the fact that action research is a values-laden form of research (McNiff, 2002). Throughout the research journey, I have been striving to live more closely to my values of care and relationships. As well as this, I was attempting to shift my practice, particularly on well-being, from an outcome-based approach to an opportunity-based approach so to cultivate a nurturing environment in my classroom. Hayes and Filipovic (2018) reiterate this in their discussion on opportunity-based learning when they identify a nurturing pedagogy as one that is child-sensitive and is respectful of the children's own role within the environment and journey of learning.

Through further observations of the revised classroom structure, there were some genuine, significant changes in some of the children in the class. Two examples of such significant changes are the following:

- O.J., 28th April 2022: *“Significant learning point regarding the relationships of the class. John (very complex relationships in the class) is now sitting beside Tom (great awareness of relationships). John was snatching toys during structured play, and I observed Tom taking the time to discuss why John should not do that and that they were in-fact ‘a team.’ John seemed to have listened to Tom as he apologised to the*

others. I question what would have happened if I had to intervene – John would usually get upset when he thinks he is “in trouble.”

- R.J., 25th April 2022: “Today was our first day back after Easter. During news-time, Eve, a child struggling with relationships, informed me that herself and Heather (a child in a similar situation) had a play-date over the Easter. The girls were ecstatic to tell me...With the girls finally finding a friend in each other, the well-being benefits as well as classroom environment benefits were clear to be seen. It is also a significant finding in that I can see myself attempting to live closer to my values of care and relationships.”

Alongside these examples, at the end of the year, using observations and conversations with the children, I constructed another sociogram based on the relationships in the class:

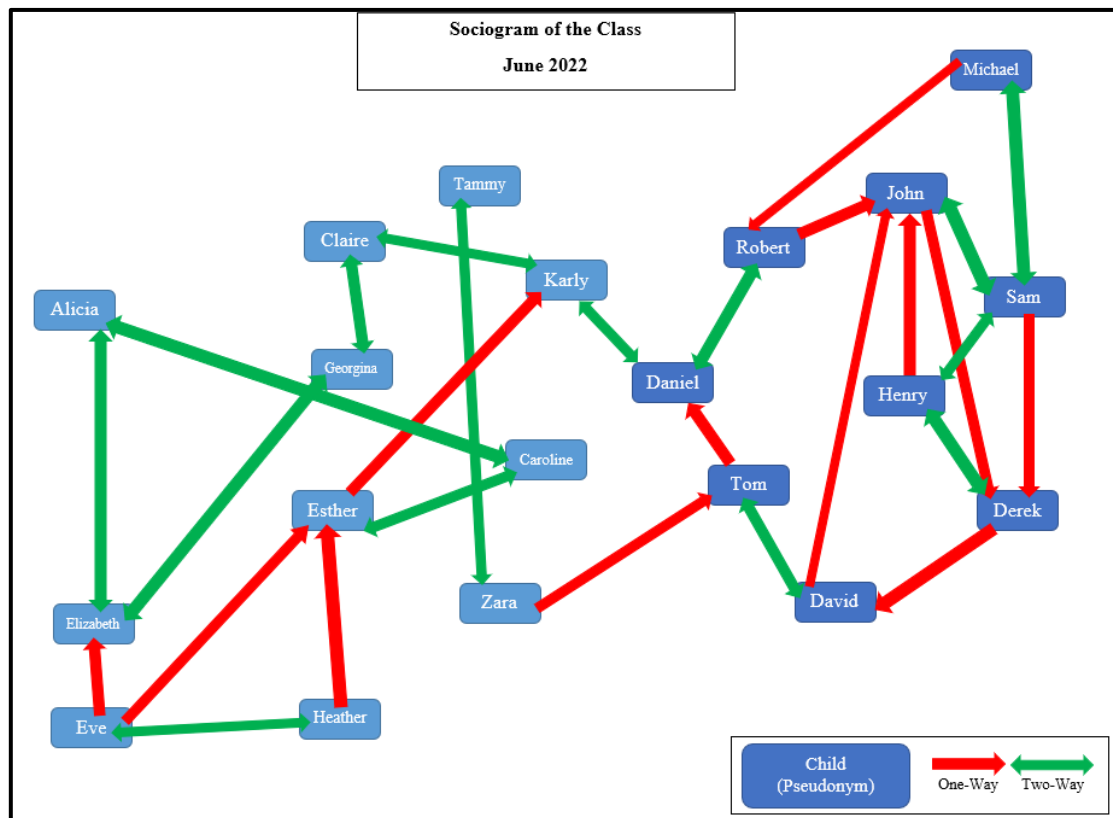


Fig 4.9 – Sociogram: June 2022

As the teacher of the class, as well as seeking to enhance my practice around nurturing pedagogies, it was rewarding to note a significant improvement in the number of two-way

relationships that existed in the class. Within this, there were two very significant observations that I made:

- The children that I noted throughout this project to have language, expressional and communicational difficulties e.g. Claire, Georgina, Tammy etc. seemed to grasp a good understanding of relationships and established good friendships throughout the year. Do the challenges these children face enhance their need for solid relationships in the class?
- I was also left questioning if the establishment of relationships derived from a year of maturing, and perhaps the children, in themselves, self-discovered what it was they needed from friendships/relationships?

Although these examples were significant to this action cycle, it is also worth noting, that I did observe very few changes in some children in the class, but this, itself, is a significant finding when it comes to an opportunity-based intervention of my research. In identifying the need to shift to an opportunity-based approach in my practice I am not attempting to 'solve' the problems within my practice and classroom environment, but more so pursue improvement in my practice (Ferrance, 2000; McNiff, 2010).

4.6 THEME 2: THE LIMITATIONS OF LANGUAGE-BASED COMMUNICATION

4.6.1 Emergence of Theme 2

Language-based communication is a formidable learning tool that is used in the classroom, every day. It enables the children to understand and make sense of the world around them and communicate effectively with others (N.C.C.A., 2015). However, it must be noted that communication is a developmental process and that there is often an over-reliance on oral language-based communication and that communication was much more beyond the spoken word (N.C.C.A., 2007). I began to understand that although language-based

communication was essential for the collection of my preliminary data, the power-dynamics that existed between myself and the children was having an influence on the conversations during our focus-groups that we partook in at the early stages of data collection. Halpenny (2021) echoes this idea when she states the power dynamics that exist between children and adults can negatively impact the gathering of quality of evidence from children when conducting research. This influence was evident across a number of research participant perspectives:

- **Professional Perspective:** *“Today, Claire came into school very upset. She doesn't have a high level of English, but her mam told me that she thinks she is beginning to realise that the other children don't understand her as well as they do the others. This really got to me. I feel so sorry for her, but it is very difficult when she cannot express to me what she is feeling/thinking and furthermore if she doesn't understand my reassurances in English.”* (R.J., 20th September 2022)
- **Students' Perspective:** *“When discussing friendships, Georgina found it challenging to verbalise the friendships that she has and the importance of such friendships. It was very clear that she felt uncomfortable in conversing about this. She very quickly mentions her cousins and her Mam and returns to play-time.”* (O.J., 24th January, 2022)
- **Parents' Perspective:**
 - *“She doesn't understand everything and sometimes she's upset about it.”*
 - *“Child is not able to make connections when he is scared.”*
 - *“If he is uncertain or has unanswered questions”*

(P.Q., January 2022)
- **Critical Friend Perspective:** *“When using small-group discussions with my own Infant class, I do notice that they often seem to tell me what they think I want to hear,*

without even thinking about the question.” (Critical Friend Conversation, 10th February, 2022)

This realisation was another contribution to the fact that I was a living contradiction (Whitehead, 1989). It was clear to me that I could not access the voice of a number of the children through language-based communication, for reasons such as English not being their primary language, speech and language difficulties, social-emotional issues and the power-dynamics that existed between myself and the children. Mannion (2007) references how adults play a significant role around the negotiation of the children's participation in discussion and contributions. I was keen to find an approach that would allow me to access the children's voice beyond language-based communication, and provide the children with ample opportunities to express themselves, recount narratives and comfortably communicate with their teacher.

Check and Schutt (2012) describe qualitative data as data that prioritises the views of the participants or subject rather than that of the researcher. This was a crucial point to note, as it was a child in the class that informed the next step in the action cycle:

Whilst having a class discussion on things we can do when we feel sad: *“Tom, a sensitive but extremely self-aware child, put up his hand to tell us that when he feels sad at home he draws or paints. I didn't allude to artwork being a form of expression at all, so Tom sharing this made me question my assumptions in the sense of realising the expressional capabilities of the child even at such a young age.”* (R.J., 20th January, 2022)

Clark (2004) notes the essentiality of active listening, as it allows educators or researchers to understand what children are feeling and gain insights into their experiences. Tom's point was an enlightening learning moment and if I did not embrace his experience and insight, I

was undoubtedly not living towards my values or seeking to establish the opportunity-based approach to cultivate a nurturing environment in the classroom.

4.6.2 Intervention 2: “Accessing the Child’s Voice Beyond Language-Based Communication”: A Multi-Modal Approach to Discussion and Expression

Halpenny (2021) signifies the importance of having a ‘multi-modal’ approach to conducting research with very young children. As a researcher, it is fundamental to recognise the importance of slowing down, capturing the child’s curiosity and interests and how efficient observations are at the heart of documenting our research.

Within Halpenny’s (2021) work, a number of creative, imaginative and digital ways to capture the children’s voice and meanings are explored. Influenced by this approach along with the reinforcement of Tom’s point above, I decided to shift my focus-group discussions from a teacher-led, didactic and purely dialogical form to one where the children had a multitude of opportunities to express themselves or discuss sensitive topics with less influence from the apparent power-dynamics that existed in the classroom. When it came to providing the S.P.H.E. lessons, discussions around well-being or simply when issues came up in the classroom I would ensure that there were a number of expressional tools available for the children. Throughout the research process, we experimented with a number of such tools:

- Artwork (drawing, painting, colouring as a form of expression.)
- Playdough (creating ‘people’ to form a role-play of sort/modelling important objects to discuss.)
- Puppets (socio-dramatic play to explore issues arising in class – attempting to develop empathy by putting ourselves in the shoes of others)
- Construction Materials (constructing important places/people that perhaps hold happy, sad, angry memories etc.)



Fig 4.10 – Sample activities for the provision of “multi-modal” opportunities

In providing the children with a number of resources that could support their expression and reinforce their discussions, there was a definite shift from measurable outcomes towards opportunity-based approaches. This idea is reiterated by Bock (2016) when she recognises multi-modal approaches as tools to fully open up and provide productive access to the multiplicity of representational and communicational potentials.

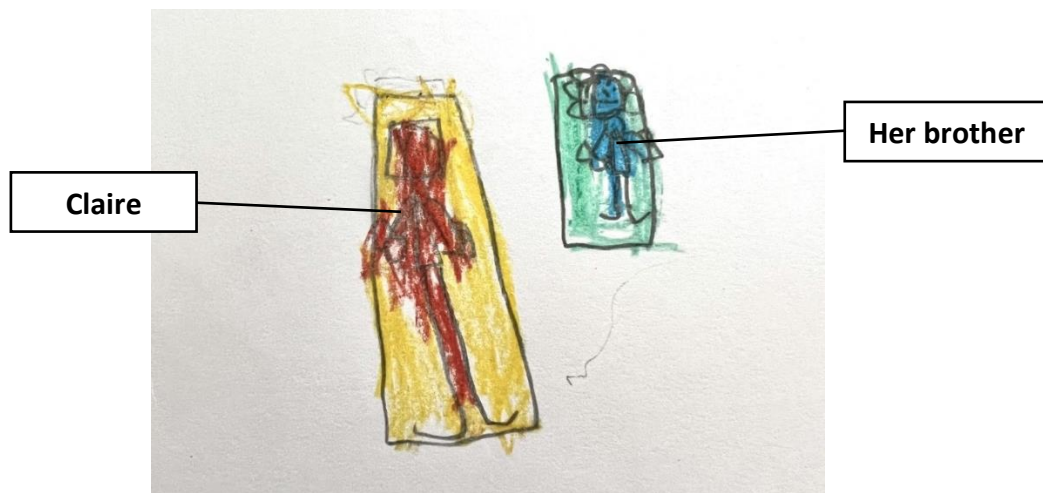
4.6.3 Environmental Findings based on Action Cycle 2

In order to clarify the environmental findings of Action Cycle 2, it is important to classify them into sub-headings: The benefits for English Language Learners (E.L.L.), the benefits for children with Specific Speech and Language Disorders (S.S.L.D.), the benefits for children with low self-esteem and obstructions that still exist.

4.6.3.i The benefits for English Language Learners

Qian (2021) highlighted the impact of providing language learning children with a multitude of ways to express themselves has on the children's desire to learn the language and participate in class.

Take for example Claire, the child mentioned above, whose mother was concerned about the understanding between her child and the other children (R.J., 20th September 2021). At the beginning of the year, Claire would not put up her hand or share her thoughts/feelings as there was an evident language barrier in place. However, Claire loves art and drawing, so when provided with this method as a form of expression, there was a clear change in her ability to do so:



"I feel sad when brother is sad. I love him." (O.J., 18th May 2022)

Up until this point, Claire has found it difficult to discuss her family and her relationships at home. Normally, as part of her language development, there would be a lot of yes/no questions and answers, but in providing her with a mode of communication that she enjoys, I gained insights into her life that I had not accessed before. Although she had mentioned her brother, she found difficulty in discussing the emotional/relational aspect to her family. A second example is Michael, another child of whom English is not his primary language.

Although Michael has a higher proficiency of language, his expression can be confused and there's a frustration that comes with this that often leads to clashes with his peers. However, whilst we were exploring the issue of children feeling isolated on the yard, Michael provided a very insightful opinion:



“I built a place and me and Polly (the lonely character in question) could relax here and talk.” (O.J., 5th May 2022)

Michael, as observed in the Sociogram Fig 4.7, was having issues with establishing relationships in the class, but in providing this insight it shows that he has a better understanding of relationships than originally portrayed and that perhaps, with continued opportunities, may develop stronger, reciprocal relationships over time.

4.6.3.ii The benefits for children with Specific Speech and Language Disorders

Afasic, a U.K. group devoted to supporting parents, children and schools with S.S.L.D. state that “finding it difficult to talk and to understand what others say may chip away at a child’s feelings of self-esteem, cause anxiety and lead to avoidance of social interactions and feelings of frustration and anger” (2016: website).

Zara, a child in the class with profound S.S.L.D., avoids sharing her opinions, thoughts and feelings in the majority of situations, for example:

“Today, Zara became very upset during handwriting time. Zara’s mam mentioned similar frustrations at home during homework time... She scribbled across her sheet and became very distressed. She couldn’t tell me what it was she was finding difficult and I can’t help but feel I have missed the boat with supporting Zara in school.” (R.J., 7th February 2022)

On the 17th of May, the class were exploring people/places/things that make us happy, and Zara, using play-dough as a form of expression provided the following:



*“I made my sister. She makes me happy because she **listens**.”* (O.J., 17th May 2022)

The key-word here was ‘**listen**’. It was clear from my reflection that I was not actively listening to Zara, or providing her with an effective communication tool with which could engage a more active-listening approach. Clark (2004) recognises this point when she mentions openness, collaboration, timing, patience and imagination as significant principles to active listening.

4.6.3.iii The benefits for children with low self-esteem

Martinsen et. al (2021) suggest that high self-esteem is connected to expression and communication skills and, in turn, social relationships. Throughout the preliminary stages of data collection, I observed a number of children that expressed a low level of self-esteem, especially when it came to recognising the relationships that they have with others and their ability to converse, share and express their opinions, thoughts and feelings.

For example, Tammy. Tammy is particularly shy, unconfident and finds it difficult to approach others and participate in any of the subjects outside of her comfort zone. She also finds it very difficult to approach myself and other teachers as reflected on 2nd November 2021 (see above.) During a discussion on important people in our lives and happy/sad memories, Tammy chose to express herself creatively, through drawing and colouring:



“I love my cousins. It makes me sad when I have to leave their houses.” (O.J., 18th May 2022)

Upon further questioning of Tammy’s relationship with her cousins, it was immediately evident that this was a comfortable topic of conversation for her. She illuminated confidence and we had a very fulfilling chat about these cousins that she had, what appeared as, a very

reciprocal relationship with. This, in reciprocity, provided me with a sense of achievement in that I have formed a connection, common-ground as such, with a child that has self-esteem issues. This highlights the essentiality of the day-to-day experiences that Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) describe as proximal processes. Hayes et al. (2017: 111) further highlight the importance of valuing such proximal processes when they state “the quality of proximal processes is mediated by social interactions, and this provides a link between the structure and the processes of development.”

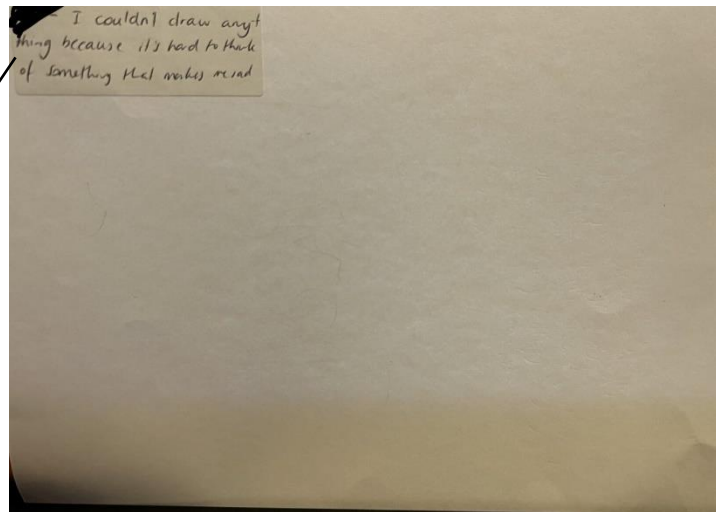
4.6.3.iv Obstructions that still exist

Bradbury et. al (2019) in their recipe for action researchers, emphasise the importance of the action researcher clarifying their research questions, as well as fixing these questions, along with your values at the epicentre of your research. Throughout the research process, particularly with the application of interventions, I needed to remember that I sought to provide opportunities over focussing on measurable outcomes constructed within my core values of care and relationships. With this in mind, it is important to note the limitations that existed within this intervention and obstructions that it caused, and still exist at the concluding stages of this research project:

- For children that could already express themselves and communicate their thoughts, ideas and opinions effectively, the provision of this multi-modal approach did not advance these skills. For example, Tom, who I have referenced already, had previously inspired the implementation of this intervention had already developed the ability to express himself both imaginatively and creatively. (R.J., 20th January 2022.)
- Alongside this, children with similar self-esteem issues as Tammy (mentioned above) could not access the intervention as she did. For example, Georgina - a child struggles with expression and communication. Georgina's parents also expressed concerns around her discomfort in talking about feelings, relationships and other social aspects. When

Georgina chose to use drawing and colouring as a form of expression, I observed that she seemed slightly uncomfortable and somewhat lost in her expression:

Georgina: "I couldn't draw anything because it's hard to think of something that makes me sad"



After this instance, I recorded an observation in my observation journal: *"I attempted to discuss the significance of sadness with Georgina and offered some other expressional tools, however she just shrugged her shoulders and put the sheet to one side"* (O.J., 17th May 2022). It's evident that in this case, I could not access Georgina's voice within or beyond language-based communication.

4.7 THEME 3: THE TEACHER'S ROLE IN THE AGENCY OF THE CHILD

4.7.1 Emergence of Theme 3

During the data collection stage of my research journey, I used an “emotions-wheel” to gain an insight into the feelings/emotions that the children could identify:



Fig 4.11 – Body Maps and Emotion Colour Wheel
Source: *Jamet, C. (2020)*

[found at: <https://blossomireland.ie/body-maps-and-emotions-colour-wheel/>]

Every child in the class could identify a version of each emotion – e.g. worried for anxious, scared for afraid, excited for happy (O.J., 11th January 2022). However, as my observations went on, it became clear that a number of children that could identify the emotions could not apply these emotions to social situations and also could not recognise how to deal with the prevalence of such emotions by their classmates.

On the 19th of January, 31st January and 2nd February 2022, I made a number of observations and reflections based on social issues that were arising in the class with children telling their peers “*You can’t be my friend*”, “*We’re not friends anymore*” and other such comments (R.J. and O.J., 2022). Although these issues seem like day-to-day classroom experiences, it is clear that they were affecting the classroom environment and that the children were taking these disdains home, as one parent reported: “*My child gets very upset*

by disagreements with others or when they say 'I don't want to be your friend'" (P.Q. , January 2022). Although these issues seem like a part of the developmental stages of the child, it was clear that I was approaching these issues in a passive, didactic way. This was evident in my reflective journal, when I wrote about an incident between Heather and Esther:

"I spend a lot of time preaching about inclusion and issues on yard, not realising that this preacher method does not support the children in realising that we will not, in fact, get on with everyone in the room... it is clear that Heather's well-being is negatively impact by Esther's 'approach' to friendship, but even though myself and her parents have addressed these concerns with Heather, she is still determined to be Esther's friend" (R.J., 19th January 2022)

Esther was purposefully including and then excluding Heather from games. She was telling Heather that there were conditions to their friendship such as: *"You can be my friend if I can come to your party"* (O.J., January 18th 2022) and it was clear that my didactic, dialogical approach was not supporting Heather in her social and emotional development. I was not facilitating opportunities for the agency of the child, that enables them to be active meaning-makers in the construction of their social lives, (James and Prout, 1990; Moor, 2017; Kirby, 2019), thus influencing the well-being of some and effecting the establishment of a nurturing environment.

Once again, I find myself clashing with my values of care and relationships. I proclaimed to value reciprocal relationships, a comfortable expressive classroom and was seeking to establish this 'nurturing environment' within my practice but Nel Noddings (2005) reminds us - stating that you care without action is meaningless. Care, in itself, is a relationship. It is not a stand-alone feature in someone's life or practice. A caring relation is only completed when one or both parties meet the caring needs of the other.

4.7.2 Intervention 3: Using Puppets to Create a Socio-Dramatic World

Dunn (2011: 29) refers to socio-dramatic play as a classroom development of “group genius” or “collaborative creativity.” Although we have socio-dramatic play as part of our structured-play rota, I immediately recognised the fact that I was taking a very passive approach to socio-dramatic play. An example here is when I reflected upon an incident in which I prioritised an administration job over the active participation in the socio-dramatic world that the children were role-playing in and how *“I felt such guilt for prioritising paperwork over this potentially lovely teaching, learning and relational moment between myself and the child”* (R.J., 8th September 2021). Brady et al. (2015) recognise the importance of understanding children as social agents and as co-constructors of their social worlds and it was clear that I was not facilitating opportunities for the children to be agents of their own learning. I was taking a passive approach to solving social issues and socio-dramatic play, clashing with my values of care and relationships.

The intervention that was applied to Action Cycle 3 was that of the creation of a socio-dramatic world to explore to social and emotional issues that were arising in class, in the hope to enlighten some of the children that were being negatively impacted by such issues. I was seeking to provide the children with the opportunity to realise that there were ways to overcome and learn from these negative incidents that were impacting their well-being. I was aware that this concept required a lot of empathy and would be a difficult task to undertake, but as research shows; it is the process of travelling the pathways of learning, rather than the destination that is critical to the children’s development and learning (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009; Wood, 2013).

We used the puppets in a number of classroom settings: whole-class, small-group and on a one-to-one basis. We explored a number of classroom issues, but three ‘topics’ came to the fore:

- *Exclusion on the yard*
- *Children feeling lonely on the yard – but not necessarily excluded*
- *Conditional friendships – “I will be your friend if...”*

The fundamental key feature of this socio-dramatic ‘world’ was that I too was a character in the make-believe world we had created. As Hayes (2008) suggests, teachers can be very passive in the establishment of ‘child-centred’ learning. Instead, a developmental and educational model to facilitate respectful ‘child-sensitive’ education in practice should be established, with a focus on the interactive nature of the learning process in the classroom; and the contribution of **all**, including the teacher, child and the context, to this process.

4.7.3 Environmental Findings based on Action Cycle 3

The intervention of Action Cycle 3 created opportunities for the children to witness, from an ‘outsider’s’ perspective, the issues that were arising in class that were negatively influencing the well-being of the children. The use of puppets, as well as my active participation, created a more relaxed approach to breaking down these issues and reduced the influencing power-dynamics that were evident in my practice. It also gave the children the opportunity to take control of their own learning. I was facilitating the learning opportunities by providing the resources and setting the scene, yet the individual learning had to come from what the children took from the socio-dramatic world. ‘Polly the Parrot’ was the main character of this socio-dramatic world and the persona that I adopted to present the children with the arising social issues that were obstructing the ‘nurturing environment’ that I sought to create. Whilst exploring isolation and exclusion on the yard, here were some endearing, positive insights displayed from the children:

These examples were taken from my Observation Journal between 9th – 13th May 2022:



Robert: *“If I saw Polly looking lonely on yard I would have to go over to them.”*



Eve: *“I would make sure to check in on Polly because feeling lonely is not nice.”*



Alicia: *“When someone is lonely I ask them to play.”*



David: *“Sometimes a hug or holding someone’s hand might make you feel better.”*

However, one of the most insightful observations made was when the issue of conditional friendships entered our socio-dramatic world:

“When exploring the issues that arise with conditional friendships, Esther made a very interesting point. She stated that telling people you can only be friends if they invite you to your party is a little bit mean and greedy.” (O.J., 10th May 2022)

As described in my observation above, Esther was actually putting her friendship with Heather under conditions similar to these (O.J., 19th January 2022). These observations made on Esther's behaviour prior to the implementation of the intervention was one of the key data findings that influenced the creation of this socio-dramatic world. Through socio-dramatic play, Esther was making connections between this 'new' world we had created, and connecting them to previous experiences. This connection is a crucial within the establishment of effective socio-dramatic play in the early-years environment (Whittington and Floyd, 2009). In continuing to provide opportunities to approach classroom conflicts and social issues in this way, I would hope that Esther, and some of the other children, would establish that intersubjectivity, essential to socio-dramatic play, and apply it to their classroom environment.

For the foremost, providing the children with the opportunity to express themselves via socio-dramatic play was a positive experience. Throughout the process, however, I observed this form of play as an intimidating, daunting experience for some of the children in the class. For example, Zara, mentioned earlier in this chapter, with S.S.L.D. When using the puppets, it is clear that she did not feel comfortable in expressing herself through this medium:

“Zara became very upset when we were role-playing issues on the yard with the puppets today. She actually cried and threw the puppet on the floor.” (O.J., 10th May 2022)

I further reflected on this incident that evening:

“I felt quite bad today after witnessing Zara becoming distressed over using the puppets. I know I wasn't forcing her to participate, and I allowed her to leave and choose another activity to play with, but it was still distressing for me. Up until now, the intervention processes have been very positive. I know I am not going to solve every issue that arises in this complex classroom, but today really highlighted the fact that one shoe does not fit all.”

(R.J., 10th May 2022)

There was a significant number of learning moments for both myself and the children here, and it was clear that the pedagogical choices that I make influence the opportunities and experiences of the child and subsequently influence their agency over their own learning experiences, for better or for worse (Broadhead and van der Aalsvoort, 2009).

4.8 CONCLUSION

This chapter recounted the data analysis process of my self-study action research journey. It began through describing the unique model of three action-cycles, within my action research study, that unfolded from my data collection. After this, the three themes that emerged from my thematic analysis were explored in detail, with specific references to the interventions applied and the environmental findings that materialised throughout this process. The next, and final, chapter of this project will highlight the reconnection of my three action-cycles - a 'solar-system' that intertwined my values, research questions and significant thoughts for my future self and practice.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The final chapter of this action research project will narrate and elucidate upon sub-themes and personal meanings derived from the emergent themes mentioned in Chapter Four. Although the environmental findings around the establishment and interventions of these themes have been explored previously, I have found deeper, personal meanings that have led to thought-provoking ideas for my future personal and professional self.

This chapter will begin with the exploration of my personal findings and how self-study action research was a messy, challenging, yet enlightening experience. My reflective journey will be discussed too, and how sometimes reflection can be a difficult process to engage with. The second section of this chapter will illuminate and illustrate the 'over-arching' finding that derived from the intertwinement of my three-action cycles, and how this is linked to my formation of new knowledge and theory. This chapter will conclude with the portrayal of future recommendations on a personal and professional level, as well as considerations for policy and future-research.

5.2 PERSONAL FINDINGS

5.2.1 Personal Finding 1 – Relationships and Assumptions

Vanassche and Kelchtermans (2015) refer to action researchers as practitioners who seek to enhance their practice as well contribute to their personal teacher education.

Referencing the 'I' throughout this research journey proved as a difficult task. Mohammed Idris et al. (2021) and Sullivan et al. (2016) describe self-critique and examining one's practice as one of the most significant challenges to conducting action research, and this challenge created personal and professional tension for me too. This really shone through in a

number of my reflections when, at times, I neglected the influence of my relationship on the children in the class. For example:

“Today, Tammy became very upset over making a mistake. She was distraught, and to be honest, so was I. I couldn't understand why she was so upset. I thought I cultivated an environment where mistakes are encouraged.” (R.J.; 2nd November 2021)

Although a valid recount, it is clear to me that I was not considering the role that my relationship had on this incident and also how I was telling a narrative based on assumptions that I had made on my practice (Brookfield, 2017). Claessens et al. (2017) note the unintentional problems that can be created between the teacher and their students and the differentiating perceptions that exist between each child and the teacher, as well as the perception the teacher has on how each child views them. I claimed to value care and relationships, and have adopted the ‘firm but fair’ approach in my practice. But in applying this approach to all, I am contradicting the ‘nurturing environment’ that I sought to establish. It was clear that there was a level of self-contradiction, perhaps at an unintentional level, but that I still have some ‘navigating’ to do between my personal and professional self (Kelchtermanns, 2018).

As I explored the relationships that existed within the classroom environment, it led me down a pathway of reflecting upon the relationships that I had on a personal level, outside of the classroom. On the 16th of February 2022, I reflected upon a personal relationship, and frustrations that I had noticed around, what I felt, was a lack of reciprocity (R.J., 2022). Walker and Oldford (2020) identify the risks associated with reflection, and how often reflecting in a professional sense can open up the questioning of our identity on a personal level too. Kelchtermanns (2018) recognises the tensions that exist between a practitioner's personal and professional identities, and if I was providing opportunities for the children to

identify the need for reciprocal relationships, I had to tackle this issue at a personal level too. I did, and in later reflections (16th June 2022), the benefits of addressing my personal relational issues were clear. In questioning my assumptions and noticing the negative impacts of non-reciprocal relationships at a personal level, as well as facilitating opportunities for the children to do the same, I was striving to live closer to my values and recognise the benefits of Palmer's (1997) ideology of teachers teaching who they are.

5.2.2 Personal Finding 2 – Children as Research Collaborators

Kemmis and Mc Taggart (1988) describe collaboration as crucial to the action research process. From the outset, my critical colleagues, validation groups, other teachers and the parents of the children in my class were invaluable stakeholders in the support, development and validation of my research. Of course, I recognised the children as an invaluable stakeholder as well, but I did not recognise the influence and inspiration that they could provide throughout the process. Previous to and throughout Action-Cycle Two, I found myself, once again, 'tweaking' those assumptions, of which Brookfield (2017) deems so essential to effective action research. As mentioned above, particularly at the beginning of my action research journey, I was neglecting the influence that my relationship had on the perceptions, contributions and actions of the children. Banegas and Castro (2019) reiterate these power-dynamics and emphasise the importance of recognising all stakeholders as collaborators in the action research process. I had not recognised the power-dynamics that were obstructing the relationship between myself and the children, and I also took for granted how intuitive they could be. Alderson (2001) recognises the importance of considering children as subjects and not objects during research projects and reiterates how powerful and inspiring they can be throughout the process.

During Action-Cycle Two, I sought to provide the children with opportunities to identify suitable tools for them to express themselves comfortably. It was necessary to use an

approach that was suitable to their age and developmental stages, and it was here that I was inspired by one of the children in the class:

Whilst having a class discussion on things we can do when we feel sad: *“Tom, a sensitive but extremely self-aware child, put up his hand to tell us that when he feels sad at home he draws or paints. I didn't allude to artwork being a form of expression at all, so Tom sharing this made me question my assumptions in the sense of realising the expressional capabilities of the child even at such a young age.”* (R.J., 20th January, 2022)

Without Tom's perspicacious anecdote and, recognition of creative expression being effective, even at a very young age, this action cycle may not have perturbed from the early stages of my research journey. Liberto (2016) notes the benefits of this child-led learning, and furthermore research, echoic of Froebel's (1899) theory of the child-led classroom. Hayes and Filipovic (2018) reiterate this point in recognition of the importance of valuing the 'present' child, and this personal, learning experience undeniably reinforces this point.

5.2.3 Personal Finding 3 – Teachers as Facilitators for an Opportunities-Based Classroom

Peeters et al. (2014) recognise the central role that the adult plays in the early education environment, and the same can be argued for the junior infant classroom and throughout primary school overall. Hayes and Filipovic (2018) are echoic of this when they regard teachers as 'facilitators' creating learning and developmental opportunities within the classroom. Unbeknownst to myself, at the beginning of my action research journey, I focussed a lot on the outcomes of the research rather than the process itself. This was evident throughout my earlier reflections, and as Hauge emphasises; “Self-study is largely about becoming better informed, gaining expanded understanding, and an effort to improve oneself as a professional education and one's own practice” (2021: 140). During my baseline data collection period and particularly regarding Action Cycle Three, it became apparent that I

was not facilitating these learning opportunities, especially regarding socio-dramatic play. Although socio-dramatic play was incorporated into our daily classroom routine and integrated into a number of subjects, it was clear that I was taking an entirely 'child-led' rather than 'child-centred' approach to its' facilitation. Tarman and Tarman (2011: 325) note that "teacher participation enriches children's play and develops children's intellectual and social skills."

Loughran (2007) emphasises that within self-study projects, the practitioner is seeking to better align their teaching intents (their values) alongside their teaching actions (their practice.) Within Action-Cycle Three and through facilitating and participating in this socio-dramatic world, I was beginning to approach classroom issues in a less didactic and more collaborative way. Not only this, but in becoming a part of the socio-dramatic world, it was evident that the power-dynamics that existed between myself and the children were becoming less apparent - allowing for more comfortable discussion, expression and communication. Although it could be argued that perhaps there were still limitations to the intervention that I applied, I began to realise the benefits of providing the opportunities and trusting the process, rather than seeking that 'winner's narrative' that can easily occur within educational research. As emphasised by McNiff (2007) an essential characteristic to self-study making some steps to create an overview of our practice and in taking this step back, one can form a meta-perspective, a valuable, influential tool to one's future practice.

5.2.4 Teacher Guilt

Throughout my reflective journey, the theme of guilt appeared on a number of occasions. A couple of examples of such reflections are as follows:

"I felt such guilt for prioritising paperwork over this potentially lovely teaching, learning and relational moment between myself and the child." (R.J., 8th September 2021)

“I’ve actually been feeling a bit guilty today. Guilty in the sense that perhaps I have really taken a passive route when it comes to the teaching and exploring of relationships in the class.” (R.J., 18th January 2022)

“I have been left feeling a bit guilty today after my lovely exchange with Michael. He showed a fantastic ability to express himself through construction. In building, it was easier for him to use his language to discuss what he wanted to. (E.L.L.) If only I had tapped into this earlier, would this have improved his social-emotional expression and also supported his E.L.L. development?” (R.J., 5th May 2022)

Day (2000) emphasises that in order for teachers to live up to societal demands for the many forms of education, they are now expected to be much more than just professional and educational experts. Personally, I can now see that there is a clear link between these societal demands and teacher-guilt: a combination of which contributes to teacher-burnout.

Xie et al. (2022) recognise that although teacher burnout has been discussed in psychological studies previously, there has not been much specific research completed to highlight the influencing effects that high societal expectations and pressures have on teachers themselves. Even from a personal point of view, at the end of of my research project this year, I conducted a concluding questionnaire with the parents of my class. There were plenty of positive and helpful insights, but the one that stood out to me the most was:

“Perhaps opportunities for parents to learn more about how best to help with their children's emotions. Personally, I struggled with child's frustration when doing homework and was not sure how best to support and help in the correct way.” (P.Q.; June 2022)

I know this parent is only seeking support, but again I was left with a guilt-stricken feeling. I was unaware these frustrations were occurring, so how could I support at the end of the year? Also, is there not a line between the support I give the children in school and the expectations

of home? Reflecting back upon this brings back that sense of guilt, and it is a pity, to me, that this was the comment I noticed amongst plenty of other positive comments. However, as Hargreaves and Tucker (1991) in their exploration of teaching and guilt suggest – it is often the primary school teacher's open-ended commitment to compassion and care that allows for a reoccurring feeling of guilt throughout their career. Recognising this point throughout the action-research journey has been beneficial, but still remains a factor that will have to be considered throughout my future career.

5.2.4 Action research; A Challenging, Messy and Enlightening Experience

Back in August 2021, when this course commenced, my first reflection was written based on the work of Jean McNiff (2002) and how she recognises that action research is a messy, and sometimes frustrating, journey. Previous to this course, I was very much focussed on the 'linear' of my teaching and practice. I found it very difficult to accept that showing changes and understanding in my practice is not a linear process, but, in fact, a chaotic and sometimes frustrating journey.

I have already referenced a number of challenges that I faced throughout this action research project. Teacher guilt, questioning the children's perception of you, questioning the perception I had of myself and identifying gaps in relationships from a personal and also professional context are only but a few of these challenges. However, in combining these challenges together, it has been clarified that one of the biggest challenges of self-study action research is identifying oneself as a living contradiction (Whitehead, 1989). Whilst some practitioners find it difficult to determine their values, I claimed to have a huge number of values, but when I commenced the reflective journey, and examining my practice, I found that I was not living true to all of these values and that often, some of the values that we state to have, fall under an 'umbrella' or 'over-arching' set of values. Koster and van den Berg (2014) recognise the challenge in questioning the values that one claims to hold, but also

emphasise that this in itself can be a significant learning opportunity. Engaging in self-study allows teachers to explore their identity as teacher educators, and also supports them in recognising what their core values are (Hauge, 2021). In recognising oneself as a living contradiction, the teacher is facing up to both a personal and professional conflict or challenge, and as Dewey (1933) emphasised, the most significant learning and knowledge development arises from people facing up to challenges or problems.

LaBoskey (2004) recognises that critical thinking and critical questioning is another significant challenge whilst conducting a self-study. This was a significant challenge within my action research journey too. I was seeking to establish a nurturing environment within my practice and classroom, a very complex ideology. At the beginning of my research project, specifically with the collection of data, I was not entirely sure what I was looking for within my reflections, observations and questionnaires. Loughran (2007) emphasises how this level of self-questioning can often lead us down a path of critiquing our practices and querying if we are not only good enough to conduct the research, but our abilities as a teacher educator too. In contrast, questioning ourselves within the data we gather can also veer us towards a pathway of self-justification (Loughran, 2007; Loughran and Northfield, 1996) and seeking that 'winner's narrative' was something that I really did not want to do within this action research project. It was at this point that I began to truly witness the benefits of reflective practice. As Davies (2012) states, reflective practice allows the practitioner to engage with deeper, rather than superficial learning, which in turn, heightens the learning experience leading to the formation of new knowledge. In forming this new knowledge, the practitioner is engaging with transformative change, and one of the most enlightening insight I gained from this self-study project was how it altered and changed my way of thinking. As Priebe et al. (2022: 1) state "Transformation acquires its meaning within contexts and particular

settings where transformative change is experienced, and where people engage in meaning-making.”

5.3 ‘AN OVER-ARCHING FINDING’ – THE FORMATION OF NEW THEORY

Fetterman (2015) notes that seeking improvement in our practice is a driving force within action research. In short, the practitioner is helping themselves to help others. A core driving-force behind my research journey was seeking to establish a nurturing classroom environment that was more conducive to the well-being of the children. At the beginning of my research journey, I thought an examination of my well-being practices was going to occur. However, as I engaged with the process, I was actually led to explore the relationships between the children themselves and the children and I, as well as recognising how I can facilitate the agency of the child and promote their voice. I began to recognise that well-being is difficult to measure, but in enhancing these factors of my practice, I could contribute to establishing the nurturing environment within this classroom that was, hopefully, more conducive to the well-being of the children. The most significant change in my practice and thinking was shifting from an outcomes-based approach to providing opportunities for the children to explore emotional, social and relational concerns and structures within the classroom environment. I was trying to approach aspects of my practice less didactyl and use a more collaborative approach to establish a nurturing environment within the class, thus benefitting the well-being of not only the children, but myself as their teacher too. On the 28th April 2022, I had a critical conversation with my supervisor and she noted that I had created a “*solar-system of sorts*” (Meeting Notes, 28th April 2022.) This idea of a solar-system is illustrated below:

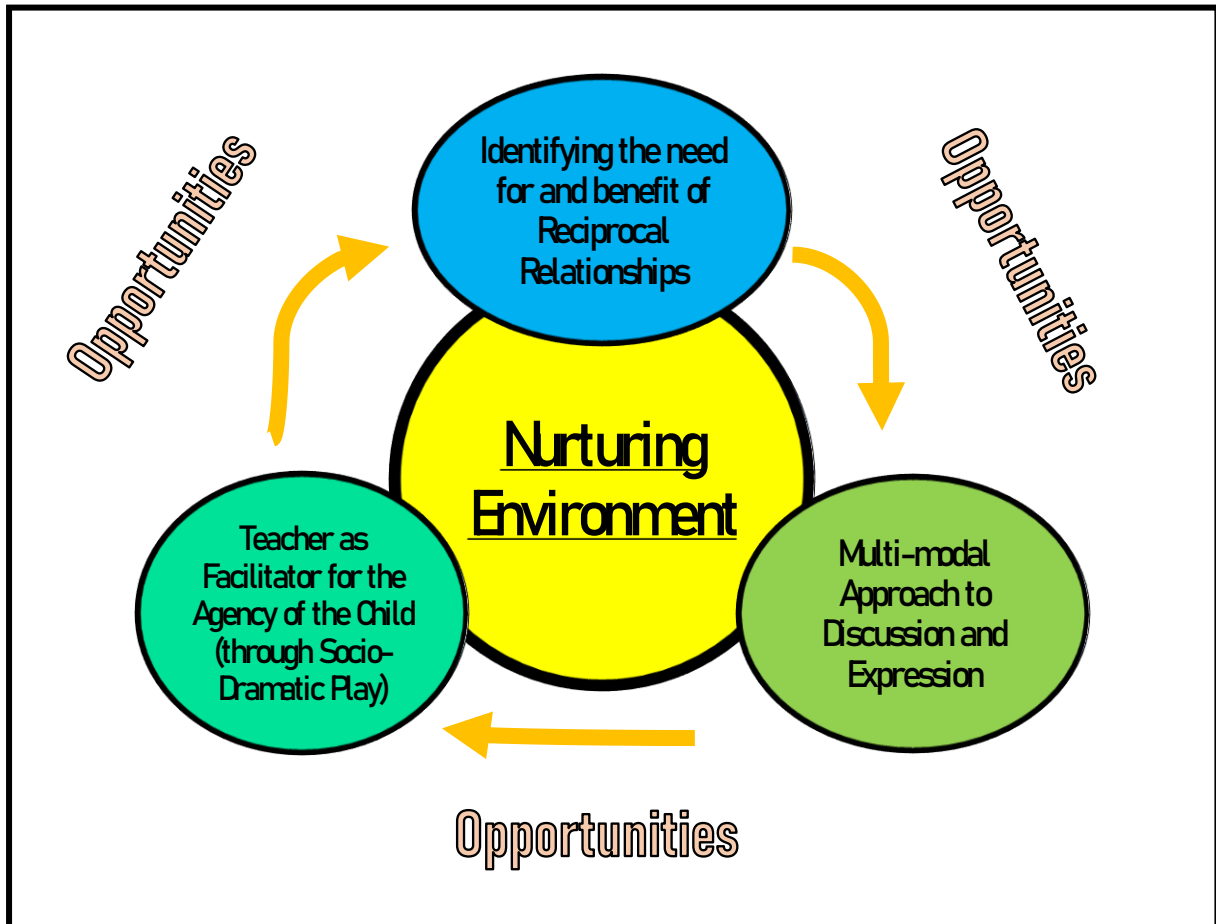


Fig 5.1 – The Solar-System” of a Nurturing Environment of my Current Class

At the epicentre of my solar-system is the nurturing environment that I sought to establish. Through rigorous data collection and analysis, it became apparent that in order to create such an environment within these specific conditions, it was essential to provide opportunities for the children to identify the need for and benefit of reciprocal relationships, a multi-modal approach to discussion and expression and facilitate an active approach to socio-dramatic play to encourage the agency of the child and their social-emotional development. In providing such opportunities to the children and supporting them to find their own meanings in a shared learning environment, the practitioner is manifesting a nurturing pedagogy and truly embodying the educative value of care (Hayes and Filipovic, 2018).

However, as Hauge (2021) emphasises, self-study action research is based on the practitioner’s environment at the time of conduction. Engestrom and Sannino (2010: 2) recognise the idea that in conducting this form of research, the practitioner is generating new

theory and knowledge that can be used for “something that is not yet there.” This idea of experimentation did take me out of my comfort zone, but also allowed me to generate new ideas and changes in my thinking within my practice. This is echoic of McNiff (2002) as she identifies the formation of new knowledge or theory as a fundamental role of self-study action research. With this in mind, it is essential to note, that this ‘nurturing environment’, illustrated above, was based on my local classroom and stakeholders at that time. The biggest transformative change that I will take going forward, is that the establishment of a nurturing environment could look very different in every classroom, and is very much dependent on an opportunities-based approach within one’s practice, but also on the circumstances and the stakeholders within, as illustrated below:

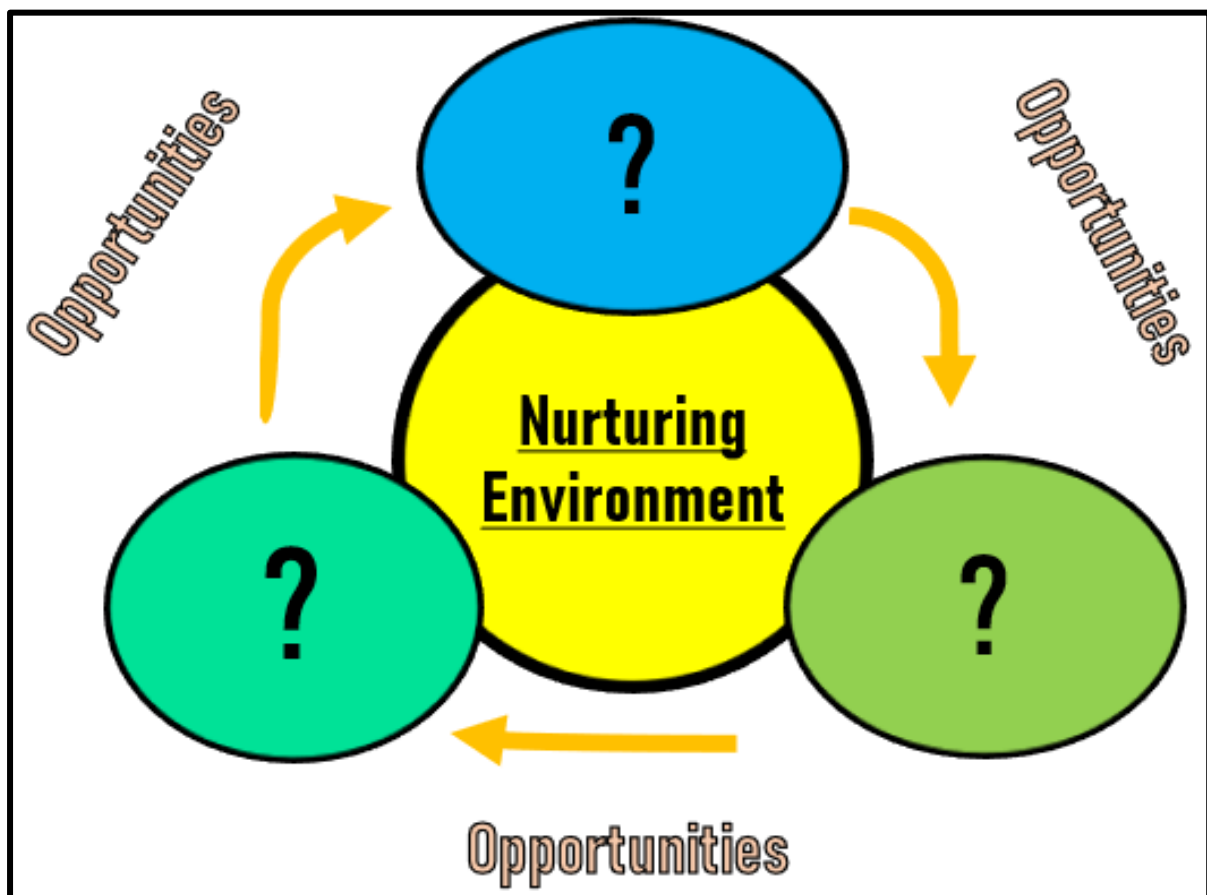


Fig 5.2 – “The Solar-System” of a Nurturing Environment (New Theory)

5.4. RECOMMENDATIONS

Nilsson and Loughran (2008) argue that it is teachers themselves who have control over the generation of new teacher knowledge, and that their experiences and engagement with research that should inform teacher training and policy formation. Going forward, I feel it would be insightful for all educators to observe teacher experiences in the formation of D.E.S. implemented policies and guidelines, particularly around relational education, the agency of the child and the well-being of the child. Not only this, but there should be more considerations for the well-being of the teachers. As argued previously, guilt, and other such feelings, is a huge contributor to teacher burnout (Xie et al., 2022).

Holmes (2005) asserts the need for teachers to look after their own well-being, so that they can provide for the well-being of the children in their care – and this is something that I will be taking into my future practice and career. The complexity of the 21st century classroom cannot be denied, and the teacher educator must remember that they will not solve every problem that they, or the children in their care, will encounter on a day-to-day basis. There could be a magnitude of feelings experienced by each stakeholder in the classroom each day, and it is important to remember that the teachers may not reach every single one of these on a daily basis. Feelings, emotions, well-being and other such complexities should not be treated as outcomes, but in recognising the significance of relationships in education and creating opportunities for the children's own-learning, the teacher can provide more wholly for the holistic education of the child (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018).

Cochran-Smith et al. (2016) highlight the need for teacher agency in creating new research-based knowledge and seeking to enhance one's practice. Teacher agency is arguably hindered by neoliberal policies and agendas, but as Biesta et al. (2015) emphasise: teacher agency not only enhances the teacher's practice, but also inform the practices of others. This year, I have worked closely with a number of critical colleagues, of whom identified the

benefits of the changes and enhancements I was hoping to make to my practice. By inspiring other teachers, it would also motivate me to continue seeking to establish a nurturing environment, with every class I encounter. In doing so, I will be attempting reduce the tension between and, furthermore, amalgamate my personal and professional identities, (Kelchtermanns, 2018) in the hope to live closer to my core values of care and relationships.

5.5 CONCLUSION

The final chapter of this self-study action research project began with a narration of personal findings and meanings determined throughout the research journey. Within this section, teacher guilt, and other such negative feelings coming to the fore during this self-study project were explicated too. This section concluded with an exploration of my action research journey as a messy and challenging experience, but ultimately an enlightening odyssey leading to the formation of new knowledge and theory within my practice.

The second section of the concluding chapter elucidated upon the new theory and my claim to new knowledge that I had formed within my local classroom at the time. The idea of a nurturing environment being a solar-system, surrounded by opportunities and the applied interventions was illustrated. Furthermore, there was an interpretation made on how a nurturing environment could look very different in other contexts. Here, the practitioner would need to take a step-back, observe and reflect on the children in the class, and establish their own solar-system depending on the stakeholders involved.

Thoughts for my future practice and policy were expanded upon in the final section of this chapter. I mentioned how I sought to continue establishing nurturing environments with all the classes that I encounter, and how I wished to motivate and encourage others to do so too. Teacher agency and how teachers should be informants of future policies, particularly around relational education, the agency of the child and well-being were also discussed.

Throughout this complex and insightful journey, I was very sensitive to spotting inspirational quotes around the ideology of nurturing. The social media algorithm seemed to know exactly what I was in search for, and as cliché as it sounds, I did stumble across something that struck me in terms of my research and carrying it forward into my future practice. John Lennon, on the 30th December 1969 in a television interview stated:

“We've got this gift of love, but love is like a precious plant. You can't just accept it and leave it in the cupboard or just think it's going to get on by itself. You've got to keep watering it.

You've got to really look after it and nurture it.” (Lennon, 2020).

I hope to continue caring, encourage caring and nurture caring – including for myself – as much as I possibly can.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Ethics Statement



Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education Master of Education (Research in practice) (MEd)

Ethics Approval for Master of Education (Research in Practice)
(Please read the notes in the course handbook before completing this form)

Student name:	Gavin O'Grady
Student Number:	21251568
Supervisor:	Leah O'Toole
Programme:	Master of Education (Research in Practice) MH52L
Thesis title:	Establishing Nurturing Environments in the Junior Infant Classroom
Research Question(s):	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>How can I establish a nurturing classroom environment that caters for the individual well-being needs of the child?</i> • <i>How can I challenge the neoliberal view on well-being in the classroom?</i> • <i>How important is my individual relationship with each child in supporting the development of their unique well-being needs?</i> • <i>How can I access the voice of the child beyond direct questioning?</i>
Intended start date of data collection:	3 rd January 2022
Professional Ethical Codes or Guidelines used:	Maynooth University Guidelines

1(a) Research Participants: Who will be involved in this research?

Participants/group (*tick all that apply*)

Early years / pre-school	
Primary school students	✓
Secondary school students	

Young people (aged 16 – 18 years)	
Adults	✓

Provide a brief description of the individuals and their proposed role in your research below [Max 50 words]:

The individuals involved in my research will be a group of children in my Junior Infant class. I have two critical friends who work on the SEN Team and one of which is a School Leader with a focus on the well-being of the children in my school. A third critical friend is a colleague who is also taking part in Self-Study Action Research. The parents of the children will provide invaluable information that can contribute to my initial understanding of the children's well-being. Throughout the research process, I will also communicate with consenting parents as they may contribute to the validation of my research. also provide me with I will form a validation group with the other Junior and Senior Infant teachers.

1(b) Recruitment and Participation/sampling approach: *How will these participants become involved in your research? What type of sampling is involved? Please describe the formal and informal recruitment processes? Please describe the type of participation and level of engagement of participants? Are there gatekeepers and what is their part of sampling process? [Max 100 words]*

I will use both formal and informal recruitment processes. Initially, I will have a conversation with my principal and after this, I will send a letter outlining the nature of my research and request permission to conduct my research in my class. This will be addressed to the principal and the Board of Management.

I will request parental consent for each child's participation in my research through written letter. After receiving consent from the parents, I will verbally request assent from the children in my class using appropriate language suited to their level. With this discussion, I will have a child-friendly form to receive 'written' assent from the children in the form of a smiley-face or sad-face. It is essential to remember the power dynamics that exist between the teacher and the students, so as the researcher, I will use my 'ethical radar' wisely and if I feel a child does not want to participate, even if they have assented, I will allow them to leave the research activity.

As I plan to do my research through focus-groups, I will be integrating it into our structured play-time. The children are used to having a teacher-led activity within our structured-play, so this will allow them to feel comfortable during the process. As well as this, if consent or assent is not received from the parents or the children, the children will have the other playtime activities available to them that will ensure they don't feel excluded or that they are being punished.

From a sampling point of view, I will conduct my research with the whole-class, as I feel it would be important to include every child in the Junior Infant classroom. However, if assent or consent is not received, I will ensure that no data is gathered from these children. As I am aiming to conduct my research through everyday practice, I hope to have the full participation and engagement of the class throughout.

I will request consent from my critical friends through conversation and provide them with the adequate information sheets and consent forms. An email will also be sent to my colleagues in junior/senior infants asking them if they were interested in participating and contributing to my research in the form of a validation group. If they express an interest, they will also be provided with the adequate information sheets and consent forms.

2. Summary of Planned Research (please indicate anonymised location type, purpose and aims of research, research questions and design, methods to be used and time frame, process of analysis) [250 words]

I work in a large, co-educational, catholic primary school. We have over 700 children, and a staff consisting of 42 (including non-teaching staff.) The school has a fantastic sense of community and collaboration and encourages the involvement of parents and guardians in the education of their children. school has a middle socio-economic status. I have taught in the school for seven years in a number of positions. This year, I am teaching a class of 21 junior infants.

The purpose and aims of my research are to investigate how a nurturing classroom environment can be established to cater for the individual and unique well-being needs of the child. In a sense, I am challenging the neoliberal approach to providing for the well-being of the child and the notion that all children should be treated the same regardless of their emotional needs. I feel that well-being has slowly started to become a subject and the purpose of my research would be to identify how creating a nurturing environment within the class would be of more benefit to my practice, to the well-being of the children and to the practitioner's well-being too.

Initially, I will conduct focus-groups with the class mainly based on dialogue and discussion. When I have made observations and gathered data from these, I will explore relational education, reciprocal roles and accessing the children's voices beyond dialogue throughout my research. Using scrap-books, the class will create and design journals exploring different aspects of well-being and allowing them to voice their opinion through a number of mediums.

I will be using self-study action research as my methodology. Qualitative data will be gathered through my research journal, interviews with the children and samples of their work as I feel they are appropriate for the age/level of the junior infant children. When gathering data from my critical friends and colleagues, I will ensure to take notes and possibly record our conversations if they give consent. My reflective journal will allow me to be critically reflective throughout the process. My reflective journal will also allow me to reflect on conversations that I have with critical friends and colleagues. This reflective process is fundamental to the nature of my research.

3. Ethical Issues: Please outline the main ethical issues which may arise while undertaking this research. *Outline the nature of consent and assent about participants. (You should discuss these concerns and outline the responses/supports you will provide in the boxes below)*

Parental consent, children's assent and the emotional well-being of the participants are the main ethical issues within my research. It is essential that parent's consent for their child's participation in my research but also that I update the parents regularly so that they are aware they can remove the consent at any time. I will also ensure that the children are reminded regularly that this research is based on me, and that they are helping me in learning new things about myself. Assent will be requested from the children regularly and not just at the start of my research. If any issues arise throughout my research, the DLP will be contacted for support and the incident report protocol of the school will be followed.

Vulnerability (*minimising risk, discomfort, coping with unforeseen outcomes, can any aspect of the research give rise to any form of harm to participants, including the researcher?*) [Max 100 words]

The power-dynamics that exist between teacher and student could be an aspect of vulnerability. It is vital that we use our 'ethical radar' and observations wisely. At times, children may assent because they feel that is what you want them to do. If they appear disinterested or uncomfortable during the research, it may be necessary to allow them to exit the research, even if it is just on that day.

As mentioned, I will be conducting focus-groups throughout my research. From speaking with my supervisor, I have identified how these groups need to be framed and structured properly. The teacher should guide and structure the focus-group discussion, but should never influence the answers of the participants. This is something that I will have to be very aware of as I carry out my research.

Another area of potential vulnerability would be in the case that a parent doesn't consent to their child participating in my research. In this case, I would aim to ensure that the child themselves doesn't feel excluded in the classroom but that I ensure no data is collected, stored or used on them.

Outline the potential for increased risk to participants considering changing circumstances in the school environment because of immediate closure or threat to privacy or anonymity. Consider implications for a change or changes in methodological tools (virtual formats). [Max 50 words]

It is a possibility, due to the nature of the world-wide pandemic, that schools may be forced to close during the course of my research. If it was necessary for me to gather data using online platforms, it would be essential that I ensured everything remained anonymous. I would also have to factor in that conversing online might remove some of the authenticity behind conversation which will be my main tool for gathering data. All ethics forms, including permission from the Board of Management and parental consent forms will need to be updated and resent before the research could continue.

Power dynamics (*between researcher-participants, amongst participants, insider-research, reflexivity, gatekeepers, working with your colleagues, working with students, etc*): [Max 100 words]

The power-dynamics that exist between the researcher and the participants should always be democratic. The children that I am working with are very young, so they will need regular reminding that they do not have to take part if they do not want to and that this study is based on the researcher and to help my practice and not based on their performance.

Reflection and being reflexive is at the centre of this research and as the researcher, it is essential not to engage in constant, harsh, self-critique as this could cause a negative internal power-dynamic. The same can be mentioned as regards our critical friends and colleagues in that their critiques should remain professional and shouldn't be taken personally.

Informed consent and assent (*for participants - and guardians where appropriate. Please also note any other approvals that may be required from other bodies (i.e. Board of Management)*): [Max 100 words]

Initially, I will have a conversation with the principal outlining my research questions and methodologies. This will be formatted into a letter and presented to the Board of Management to receive formal consent. Another letter explaining the details of my research will be formed and sent to the parents of the children in my class. Upon receiving this written assent, I will then have a verbal conversation with the children ensuring to use child-friendly and understandable language. Throughout the research, I will use a form with a smiley-face or a sad-face to determine whether the children are still comfortable in participating in my research. It is important to note that the parents and children will be updated regularly and that they are aware that everything will remain anonymous and that they can remove assent or consent at any time

Consider if consent of participants may need to include a list of any new scenarios/situations that may be required for data collection activity in light of school closures or short-term illness of school members (teachers/SNA) and how this may impact the research. Outline below; [max 50 words]

In the case of school closure, data collection may need to occur online. If this is the case, I will ensure that all ethics approval forms are updated and assent and consent is received again. A list of alternative data collection tools which may need to be implemented will be included in these updated forms. For example, if interviews need to be conducted online, it may be necessary that video is turned off. All participants will need to be reminded of audio being recorded if that is a chosen data collection tool. Teams Software is recognised for its safety as an online data collection tool.

Sensitivity (topics that may be potentially sensitive, intrusive or stressful, have you considered what to do in relation to dealing with the aftermath of a sensitive disclosure? how do you intend to deal with unexpected outcomes?) [Max 100 words]

Throughout the research process, it is essential that one uses their ethical observations wisely. If a child seems uncomfortable or unwilling to participate, I may ask them, in an appropriate manner, to leave the research scenario. As mentioned, I will be conducting my research through focus-groups during structured playtime. If the children would like to leave, I will reassure them that they will not be punished and allow them to choose one of the other many activities happening at this time.

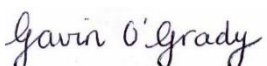
Giving the nature of my study and encouraging children to use their voice and express their emotions, I will need to be prepared for the chance that some children may become upset or otherwise need support. Depending on the nature of the upset, I may need to call on the SET or a member of the Leadership and Management Team, to assist me when I talk to the child, document the incident and inform the child's parents. I will ensure to reassure the child and remain calm throughout the process. As well as this, if something that is sensitive, intrusive or stressful is disclosed, it is essential that I follow the appropriate protocol as per my school's Child Safeguarding Statement and report it to the Designated Liaison Person as per this statement.

Data storage (where will the findings be stored; will they be potentially published in future? And by whom?) [Max 100 words]

Any data that is collected throughout my research will be stored and protected appropriately. Any hard copies of data will be stored in a locked cabinet in my classroom of which only I have a key for. Any soft copies of data will be stored in an encrypted folder on my laptop which is also password-protected. Microsoft Office allows me to create encrypted and protected folders for such data. As well as this, Microsoft Teams is a safely encrypted platform for gathering data online if required (e.g. if I need to run my focus-groups online I may need to use Microsoft Teams.) Throughout my research, I will ensure to adhere by the General Data Protection Regulation guidelines and the Maynooth University Research Ethics Policy throughout my research process. I will also refer to the Acceptable Usage Policy and Data Protection Policy of my school throughout the research. The data will be kept for ten years and pseudonyms will be used in all areas of my research to ensure anonymity of all participants.

Declaration (Please sign and date)

'I confirm that to the best of my knowledge this is a full description of the ethical issues that may arise in the course of undertaking this research.' If any of the conditions of this proposed research change, I confirm that I will re-negotiate ethical clearance with my supervisor.

Signed: 

17th November 2021

Supervisor use only:

Date Considered: _____

(Tick as appropriate)

Recommendations:

Approved	
Approved with recommendations (see below)	X (See attached comments above and comments in information sheet / consent form docs)
Referred to applicant	
Referred to Department Research and Ethics Committee	



Signature of supervisor: _____

Department use only: *(only where applicable)*

Date Considered: _____

Approved by Froebel Department Research and Ethics committee	
Approved with recommendations (see below)	
Referred to applicant (changes to be approved by supervisor)	
Referred to Maynooth University Social Research Ethics Subcommittee	

(Tick as appropriate)

Recommendations:

Signature of Dept. Ethics Committee Chair: _____

Approved by Froebel Department Research and Ethics committee	
Referred to applicant (changes to be approved by supervisor)	

(Tick that apply)

Maynooth University Social Research Ethics Subcommittee use only *(only where applicable)*

Date Considered: _____

Signed:

FSS Research Ethics Committee nominee

Checklist for students

<p>Please complete the checklist below to confirm you have considered all ethical aspects of your research.</p> <p>(Note that the consent form/s, assent form/s and information sheet/s that must accompany this application will be scrutinised and any omission or inadequacy in detail will result in a request for amendments).</p>	<p>Please tick</p>
I have attached (an) proper consent form/s, assent form/s and/or information sheet/s	
Each form and sheet is presented to a high standard, as suitable work carried out under the auspices of Maynooth University	
Each consent form has full contact details to enable prospective participants to make follow-up inquiries	
Each consent form has full details, in plain non-technical language, of the purpose of the research and the proposed role of the person being invited to participate	
Each consent form has full details of the purposes to which the data (in all their forms: text, oral, video, imagery etc) will be put, including for research dissemination purposes	
Each consent form explains how the privacy of the participants and their data will be protected, including the storage and ultimate destruction of the data as appropriate	
Each consent form gives assurances that the data collection (questionnaires, interviews, tests etc) will be carried out in a sensitive and non-stressful manner, and that the participant has the right to cease participation at any time and without the need to supply a reason	
Please include here any other comments you wish to make about the consent form(s) and/or information sheet/s.	

Appendix 2: Board of Management Consent Forms

3rd December 2021



RE: Permission to Conduct Research Study

Dear Principal and Board of Management,

I am writing to request permission to conduct a research study in my Junior Infant class here. I am a student on the Master of Education programme at Maynooth University, and I am in the process of writing my Master's thesis. The study is entitled "*Developing a Nurturing Classroom Environment in the Junior Infant Classroom.*"

In order to do this, I intend to carry out research in the classroom by conducting focus-groups focussing on the different elements of well-being. As well as this, the children will be constructing 'Well-being Journals' using Scrapbooks. The focus-group will become part of their structured playtime. The data will be collected using observations, a daily teacher journal, conversations with the children and photos of the children's work. The children's faces will not be included in these photos and no other identifiable features, such as their names, will be included in these photos. I will be collecting consent from their parents' participation and for their child's participation in my research. Data will also be collected from teachers and an information sheets and consent forms will be collected from participating colleagues too.

The child's name and the name of the school will not be included in the thesis that I will write at the end of the research. The participants will be allowed to withdraw from the research process at any stage and are under no obligation to take part at all. All information will be confidential, and information will be destroyed in a stated timeframe in accordance with the University guidelines. The correct guidelines will be complied with when carrying out this research. The research will not be carried out until ethical approval is granted by the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education.

Your approval to conduct this study will be greatly appreciated. If you have any queries on any part of this research project, feel free to contact me by email at

If you agree, kindly sign below and return the signed form.

Yours faithfully,

Gavin O'Grady

Approved by:

Print your name and title here

Signature

Date

Appendix 3: Parental Consent / Children's Assent Forms



**Maynooth University Froebel Department of
Primary and Early Childhood Education**

**Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas
Ollscoil Mhá Nuad.**

Dear Parent(s)/Guardian(s),

I am a student on the Master of Education programme at Maynooth University. As part of my degree I am doing a research project. The focus of my research is based on establishing a nurturing environment in the classroom and whether this leads to supporting the individual well-being needs of your child.

In order to do this, I intend to carry out research in the classroom, initially, by conducting small-group focus groups. We will discuss and explore different areas of well-being such as our feelings, our relationships with others and ways in which we can care for one another. We will create and design well-being journals and include drawings, artwork, photographs, writing etc. to construct these.

The data will be collected using observations, a daily teacher journal and photographs of the children's work. The children will be asked their opinions through a number of mediums. Some of it will be conversation-based, some will be communicated through artwork and alternatively, the children will use different aspects of their structured play, such as construction, to express their opinion.

The child's name and the name of the school will not be included in the thesis that I will write at the end of the research. Your child will be allowed withdraw from the research process at any stage.

All information will be confidential and information will be destroyed in a stated timeframe in accordance with the University guidelines. The correct guidelines will be complied with when carrying out this research. The research will not be carried out until approval is granted by the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education.

I would like to invite you and your child to give permission for him/her to take part in this project.

If you have any queries on any part of this research project feel free to contact me by email at gavin.ogrady.2022@mumail.ie

Yours faithfully,

Gavin O'Grady

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gavin O'Grady". The signature is written in a cursive style with a loop at the end of the last name.



Child's Name: _____.

I am trying to find out how children can feel their best and care for one another in primary school. I would like to find out more about this. I would like to watch you and listen to you when you are in school and to write down some notes about you. We will also be doing some artwork, drawings and construction based on this, and I might take some photos of your work.

Would you be ok with that? Pick a face:



I have asked your Mum or Dad or Guardian to talk to you about this.

If you have any questions I would be happy to answer them. If you are happy with that could you sign the form that I have sent home?

If you change your mind after we start, that's ok too.



**Maynooth University Froebel Department of
Primary and Early Childhood Education**

**Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas
Ollscoil Mhá Nuad**

PARENTAL CONSENT FORM

I have read the information provided in the attached letter and all of my questions have been answered. I voluntarily agree to the participation of my child in this study. I am aware that I will receive a copy of this consent form for my information.

Parent / Guardian Signature _____

Parent / Guardian Signature _____

Date: _____

Name of Child _____

Child's signature: _____

Date: _____

Maynooth University Froebel Department of
Primary and Early Childhood Education



Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas
Ollscoil Mhá Nuad.

Information Sheet

Parents and Guardians

Who is this information sheet for?

This information sheet is for parents and guardians.

What is this Action Research Project about?

Teachers Master of Education in the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood, Maynooth University are required to conduct an action research project, examining an area of their own practice as a student teacher. This project will involve an analysis of the teacher's own practice. Data will be generated using observation, reflective notes and questionnaires. The teacher is then required to produce a thesis documenting this action research project.

What are the research questions?

- *How can I establish a nurturing classroom environment that caters for the individual well-being needs of the child?*
- *How can I challenge the neoliberal view on well-being in the classroom?*
- *How important is my individual relationship with each child in supporting the development of their unique well-being needs?*
- *How can I access the voice of the child beyond direct questioning?*

What sorts of methods will be used?

- Observation, Reflective Journal, Samples of Work, Conversations

Who else will be involved?

The study will be carried out by me, Gavin O'Grady, as part of the Master of Education course in the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education. The thesis will be submitted for assessment to the module leader Dr Bernadette Wrynn and will be examined by the Department staff. The external examiners will also access the final thesis.

What are you being asked to do?

You are being asked for your consent to permit me to undertake this study with my class. In all cases the data that is collected will be treated with the utmost confidentiality and the analysis will be reported anonymously. The data captured will only be used for the purpose of the research as part of the Master of Education in the Froebel Department, Maynooth University and will be destroyed in accordance with University guidelines.

Contact details: Student: Gavin O'Grady **E:** gavin.ograde.2022@mumail.ie



Maynooth University Froebel Department of
Primary and Early Childhood Education

Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas
Ollscoil Mhá Nuad.

Child's assent to participate

**My parent/guardian has read the information sheet with me and
I agree to take part in this research.**

Name of child (in block capitals):



Signature: _____

Date: _____



**Maynooth University Froebel Department of
Primary and Early Childhood Education**

**Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas
Ollscoil Mhá Nuad.**

Declaration by Researcher

This declaration must be signed by the applicant(s)

I acknowledge(s) and agree that:

- a) It is my sole responsibility and obligation to comply with all Irish and EU legislation relevant to this project.
- b) I will comply with Irish and EU legislation relevant to this project.
- c) That the research will be conducted in accordance with the Maynooth University Research Ethics Policy.
- d) That the research will be conducted in accordance with the Maynooth University Research Integrity Policy.
- e) That the research will not commence until ethical approval has been granted by the Research and Ethics committee in the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education.

Signature of Student: *Gavin O'Grady*

Date: 6th November 2021

Appendix 4: Collegial Consent Forms

22nd November 2021



RE: Self-Study Action Research Letter of Consent

Dear Colleagues,

This year, I am conducting a research study in my Junior Infant class. I am a student on the Master of Education programme at Maynooth University, and I am in the process of writing my Master's thesis. The study is entitled "*Developing a Nurturing Classroom Environment in the Junior Infant Classroom.*"

In order to do this, I intend to carry out research in the classroom by conducting focus-groups focussing on the different elements of well-being and the importance of relationships. As well as this, the children will be constructing 'Well-being Journals' using Scrapbooks. The focus-group will become part of their structured playtime. The data will be collected using observations, a daily teacher journal, conversations with the children and photos of the children's work. The children's faces will not be included in these photos and no other identifiable features, such as their names, will be included in these photos. I will be collecting consent from their parents' participation and for their child's participation in my research.

As part of the research process, critical reflection through the lens of my colleagues is a necessity for validating my research and strengthening the new knowledge that I aim to construct. I may collect data from teachers in the form of questionnaires, notes on discussions and from my reflective journal. Please see the attached information sheet for further details.

Your name, as well as the child's name and the name of the school will not be included in the thesis that I will write at the end of the research. The participants will be allowed to withdraw from the research process at any stage and are under no obligation to take part at all. All information will be confidential, and information will be destroyed in a stated timeframe in accordance with the University guidelines. The correct guidelines will be complied with when carrying out this research. The research will not be carried out until ethical approval is granted by the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education.

Your approval to conduct this study will be greatly appreciated. If you have any queries on any part of this research project, feel free to contact me by email at

If you agree, kindly sign below and return the signed form.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads "Gavin O'Grady". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Gavin O'Grady

Approved by:

Print your name and title here

Signature

Date

Information Sheet - Teachers



Who is this information sheet for?

This information sheet is for teachers and colleagues of Gavin O'Grady.

What is this Action Research Project about?

Teachers partaking in the Masters of Education in the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood, Maynooth University are required to conduct an action research project, examining an area of their own practice as a teacher. This project will involve an analysis of the teacher's own practice. Data will be generated using observation, reflective notes, questionnaires and samples of students' work. The teacher is then required to produce a thesis documenting this action research project.

What are the research questions?

- *How can I establish a nurturing classroom environment that caters for the individual well-being needs of the child?*
- *How can I challenge the neoliberal view on well-being in the classroom?*
- *How important is my individual relationship with each child in supporting the development of their unique well-being needs?*
- *How can I access the voice of the child beyond direct questioning?*

What sorts of methods will be used?

- Observation, Reflective Journal, Samples of Work, Conversations , Focus-Groups

Who else will be involved?

The study will be carried out by me, Gavin O'Grady, as part of the Master of Education course in the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education. The thesis will be submitted for assessment to the module leader Dr Bernadette Wrynn and will be examined by the Department staff. The external examiners will also access the final thesis.

What are you being asked to do?

You are being asked for your consent to permit me to gather data in the form of questionnaires and notes taken based on discussions that we may have. Along with my personal critical reflection, incorporating your views and insights will add to the validation of my work. In all cases the data that is collected will be treated with the utmost confidentiality and the analysis will be reported anonymously. Any information gathered will only be used for the purpose of the research as part of the Master of Education in the Froebel Department, Maynooth University and will be destroyed in accordance with University guidelines. As well as this, the findings may be presented at conferences or submitted in academic journals. If this is the case, the confidentiality and anonymity of the research will be strictly adhered to.

Contact details: Student: Gavin O'Grady

E: gavin.ogrady.2022@mumail.ie

Appendix 5: Parental Questionnaire 1

Introduction:

Dear Parents,

As part of my research into relationships and well-being in the Junior Infant classroom, I would really appreciate some invaluable feedback. There's no denying the importance of relationships and connections in the classroom and the influence that this has on our individual, personal well-being.

At the moment, I am gathering the data for my research through observations and reflections in the classroom. These tools allow me to gather evidence from my perspective and the perspective of your children. However, this questionnaire will provide extremely helpful information from your important perspective. There are only seven questions, but I would appreciate answers that are as open and honest as possible.

It is also worth noting that there is no denying the impact the pandemic has had on everyone's well-being and, at times, ability to establish connections. In answering these questions, it would be worthwhile to think about answering based on your child's school experience so far and for the rest of their time in Junior Infants.

Question 1: What do you think your child looks forward to most coming into school every day?

Question 2: What do you think your child likes least about coming into school every day?

Question 3: What do you think supports your child's ability to create positive connections/relationships in the Junior Infant classroom?

Question 4: What do you think hinders your child's ability to create positive connections/relationships in the Junior Infant classroom?

Question 5: What do you think are the positive influences on your child from their relationships/connections in the classroom?

Question 6: What do you think are the negative influences on your child from their relationships/connections in the classroom?

Question 7: Do you have any other comments about relationships, connections and well-being in the classroom?

Appendix 6: Parental Questionnaire 2

Introduction:

Dear Parents,

As you are aware, I have been conducting research into relationships, feelings/emotions and well-being in the Junior Infant classroom. Over the last few months, I have been gathering data and from this, I facilitated a number of classroom activities (e.g. puppet-work, expressive art etc.) Using these activities, I hope the children have been provided with opportunities to explore their relationships and express their feelings and emotions in a number of different ways.

At the moment, I am finalising my data collection and analysis. At the early stages of my data collection, your opinions and perspectives provided me with invaluable information and I would appreciate this perspective again as I come towards the end of my study. There are only six questions, but I would appreciate answers that are as open and honest as possible.

Question 1: Do you think your child has been provided with opportunities to support them in forming connections/relationships?

Question 2: Do you think there have been any experiences that negatively impacted your child's ability to form connections/relationships?

Question 3: In your opinion, are there any other ways that your child could have been supported in establishing these connections/relationships?

Question 4: Do you think your child has been provided with opportunities to enable them to express their feelings and emotions this year?

Question 5: Do you think there have been any experiences that negatively impacted your child's ability to express their feelings and emotions this year?

Question 6: In your opinion, are there any other opportunities that could have been provided to your child to benefit you're their ability to express their feelings and emotions?