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Phonemic Awareness: The missing ingredient in the reading process?

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Abstract

This thesis outlines a self-study action research journey which investigated: *How can I improve the teaching of phonemic awareness using the Heggerty Phonemic Awareness Curriculum (2020) and station teaching in my Junior Infant class?* Reading gives children access to nearly all areas of the school curriculum throughout their education and this is why such emphasis is put on literacy in Junior and Senior Infants. Phonemic awareness became a personal area of interest to me from my experience working as a Special Education Teacher. In this role, I was often in search of alternative literacy interventions that could benefit the children I teach. I began researching factors influencing reading development and found that there are numerous studies outlining the importance of having a solid foundation in phonemic awareness and the potential impact it could have on future reading success. This was where my interest in phonemic awareness began.

From my experience on the Special Educational Needs team, I became passionate about providing for individual needs and ensuring that all children have the skills required for future reading success. As my core values are care and inclusion, literacy seemed like a perfect starting point to try and live more closely to my values. By explicitly teaching phonemic awareness skills to my class, I hoped to develop their reading skills, identify any reading difficulties from the outset and put early interventions in place to help these children reach their potential.

I decided upon two different interventions: a whole class approach using a phonemic awareness program called the Heggerty Phonemic Awareness Curriculum (2020) and employing my own strategies in station teaching of phonemic awareness skills. Professional

development is something I feel passionate about and this influenced my choice of research method. Self-study action research enabled me to examine my own practice and search for ways to improve it.

Three main findings emerged from my research:

- The combination approach of teaching of phonemic awareness using the Heggerty Phonemic Awareness Curriculum (2020) and station teaching have promoted pupil agency.

- Pupil engagement increased (during station teaching) when concrete materials and movement were involved.

- Individual needs can be identified and supported in a more inclusive way in a small group setting than in the whole class setting.

My engagement with the reflective process has enabled me to generate a living theory. This living theory has allowed me to reflect on my practice and identify ways to align my practice with my values of care and inclusion.

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List of Abbreviations

DES   Department of Education and Skills

ELL   English Language Learners

NCCA   National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

NCSE   National Council for Special Education

SEN   Special Educational Needs

SET   Special Education Teacher

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1   Research Background

I am a female self-study action researcher and primary school teacher and I have taught in my current school for four years. This is a large, co-educational school, of Catholic ethos in an urban area. Previously, I taught in other schools in Ireland and internationally for four years. I have had the position of Special Education Teacher (SET) at Junior and Senior Infant level for the past three years and have developed a strong interest in early literacy development as a result. This year, I changed role and became a mainstream class teacher of Junior Infants.

In this introductory chapter, I am going to describe my original concern which inspired my choice of research topic, my values, discuss the format of the study, give a brief overview of self-study action research and explain the layout of this thesis.

1.2   My Original Concern

My original concern stemmed from my three years-experience as a SET, in Junior and Senior Infants. Similar to other schools, my school follows a prescriptive phonics program which works very effectively for the majority of children. From my experience, there were a small cohort in each class who struggled to keep up and I felt that it was very early in these children's education to be perceived to be 'falling behind'

As the class SET, I worked with these children to try and 'close the gap' between their literacy skills and skills already mastered by their peers. However, I was merely repeating the

same phonics program at a slower pace which was not always effective for them. When I initially began working with these children, I don't think they realised that they were being targeted for extra support as they were so young. However, over time, these children grew frustrated by constantly being 'picked' to work with me in a group or on a 1:1 basis. At this point, I felt disheartened as I knew that these children in my care felt different to their peers and were becoming aware that they were experiencing difficulties that others were not.

As a result of these experiences, I wanted to find some kind of alternative intervention that could potentially benefit children who experience difficulty distinguishing letters and their corresponding sounds and consequently feel left out and isolated from their classmates. As I became a class teacher to Junior Infants this year, I decided that I would use this change in role to trial new approaches to supplement the phonics program already in place.

1.3   My Values

This self-study action research sought to create new knowledge about how my teaching of phonemic awareness could be enhanced while also adapting my practice in order to live more closely to my values of care and inclusion. A researcher's values 'provide us with the basic structure for our expectations for ourselves, and also the overarching principles towards which we strive in our practice' (Sullivan et al., 2016: 60). My core values are inclusion and care. To me, inclusion is a process, a never-ending search to find better ways of responding to diversity. I endeavour to create an inclusive learning environment where individual difference is catered for and celebrated. As well as this, I hope to instil a sense of belonging in my students and empower them to celebrate their successes and unique personality. 'Students

who experience acceptance are more highly motivated and engaged in learning and more committed to school' (Osterman, 2000: 359).

Care is a value of equal importance to me and exploring the work of Nel Noddings has helped me deepen my understanding of this value in relation to education. Noddings (1995: 676) discusses the role of care in education and states that when we care, 'we want to do our very best for the objects of our care'. I think at times, it is easy to come pre-occupied with the academic pressures of the curriculum but the work of Noddings (1995) has enabled me to see how important the attitude of the teacher is in creating caring relationships with their students. While academic progression is incredibly important, so is the holistic development of a child and it is essential not to lose sight of that.

Throughout this research, my values have been a constant guide to evaluate my actions, my choice of data collection tools and my interventions. As well as this, my values helped develop my standards of judgement, which were the criteria by which I evaluated my data and resulted in my findings. At stages when I became lost in the 'swampy lowlands' (Schön, 1983: 42) of this research, it was my values that I returned to, to remind me of the 'why' behind my research. Next, I will outline the format of this study.

1.4   Format of the Study

This research took place over the course of one year and was carried out with my Junior Infant class. There were originally twenty-one students in my class but two students left during the year and their data has not been included in this research.

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The two interventions carried out were; a whole class intervention using the Heggerty Phonemic Awareness Curriculum (2020) (please note that all future references to this program will be shortened to the 'Heggerty Curriculum') and a station teaching intervention of phonemic awareness activities. The Heggerty Curriculum was carried out for thirty weeks (as the program was thirty-five weeks in length) but data was only collected after I received ethics approval in January. I stopped collecting data on this intervention after four months. This program incorporates eight phonological and phonemic awareness skills with auditory discrimination and oral activities only. It is modelled by the teacher, involves daily repetition and different hand actions to accompany each skill.

Station teaching was chosen as my second intervention. In the station teaching model, students are divided into three or more small groups. There are usually two or more teachers facilitating the stations, with each teacher taking a group and teaching content for a set amount of time, while the remaining groups complete independent activities. Students then rotate between all of the stations.

This intervention began in February and ran for an eight-week block, twice a week with two stations per day. The station teaching intervention was facilitated by the class SET, myself and a student teacher who was working with the class for four weeks. The station activities were primarily sourced from the program 'A Sound Beginning for Reading' (O'Sullivan, 2021) and online activities from the Florida Centre for Reading Research (2010) website. Next, I will introduce self-study action research as my chosen methodology.

1.5   Self-Study Action Research

Self-study action research is the research paradigm I have chosen. Action research differs to other research paradigms as it is not just studying practice, it is aiming to enhance, change or improve practice (McDonagh et al., 2020). In action research, the researcher is at the centre of the research, and are essentially researching themselves and their practice with the overall aim to improve their teaching. 'Action Research is a powerful tool for change and improvement at the local level' (Cohen et al., 2007: 297). This research methodology allows the researcher to identify if they are living according to their values or if they are as Whitehead (1989: 41) refers to as a 'living contradiction'. This type of research appealed to me as I am passionate about improving my practice for the benefit of my students, with the potential of benefitting others in the educational community.

1.6   Thesis Layout

This thesis consists of five chapters. The first chapter has introduced the reader to the research background, my original concern, my values, the action research model and the format of the research.

In the second chapter, I will outline literature related to inclusion, care, different approaches to teaching reading, definitions of phonemic awareness, the connection between phonemic awareness and reading development, the conflicting views on the role of phonemic awareness, the difficulties with phonemic awareness and methods of teaching phonemic awareness skills.

The research methodology chosen, the standards of judgement, the timeline of the research, the structure of the interventions, the data collection, the validation processes and ethical considerations will be discussed in chapter three.

Chapter four presents the findings of the research to the reader. It provides evidence of enhanced practice, as well as new learning and unanticipated learning from this research project.

Chapter five will conclude with an overview of this thesis outlining limitations of this study, a summary of the research findings, the significance of the research on my own learning, the learning of others and the dissemination of my research findings.

1.7   Chapter Summary

This study had two aims: (i) to identify ways to improve my teaching of phonemic awareness by teaching more inclusively, while (ii) also improving the phonemic awareness of the students I teach. My values of inclusion and care were the constant motive behind my decisions. By undertaking this research, I now claim to have generated my living-theory (Whitehead, 1989), such that I now know how to teach phonemic awareness in a more inclusive and caring way. From personal experience, I can see how easy it is to fall into routine, and become unconsciously passive in your teaching approaches after a few years of teaching. This M.Ed. program has forced me out of my comfort zone and enabled me to become a better teacher. As Greene (1995: 19) states 'to call for imaginative capacity is to work for the ability to look as if they could be otherwise'. My research will affect my future

practice as I endeavour to continue to question my assumptions, think critically and reflect on my actions. By disseminating the knowledge I have learned from this research, I hope to inspire and benefit others.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the literature surrounding my core values of inclusion and care, as well presenting literature on the role of phonemic awareness in reading development.

The importance of enabling children to become proficient readers is a global priority. According to Wyse and Bradbury (2022: 2) 'teaching children to read is one of the most important elements of primary education because it is fundamental to children's educational development'. In Ireland, the National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy Among Children and Young People 2011- 2020 (DES, 2011: 9) highlights that a failure to develop literacy skills is not just 'a loss for the individual: it is also an enormous loss for all of us in Irish society'. Research findings demonstrate that quality literacy instruction in the early years of school is the 'single best weapon against reading failure' (Snow et al.,1998: 343). This is why the role of phonemic awareness is a very topical issue in Ireland currently.

I will now outline some literature on inclusion and care, as well as depicting the link between the topic of phonemic awareness and these values. I will discuss the literature on different approaches to teaching reading, definitions of phonemic awareness and misinterpretations, conflicting views on the role of phonemic awareness, the role and predictive power of phonemic awareness in learning to read, difficulties with phonemic awareness and methods of phonemic awareness instruction.

2.2 Values

Values are the essence that inform and mould our practice. In action research, it is necessary to explore, reflect and evaluate one's values as they become the driving force and focus of the research. As McNiff (2002) states, action research is conducted by the self into the self. Therefore, exploring and reflecting on one's values is pivotal in the self- reflection process required by the researcher in their action research. Whitehead (Podbean, 2016) claims that each person has a unique constellation of values that they bring to their research. Values should be the reason for our actions. I will now detail some literature related to my two values of inclusion and care.

2.3 Inclusive Education

'Children who learn together, learn to live together' (Save the Children, 2017: 1). In 1994, the World Conference on Special Needs Education was held in Salamanca and its outcomes are now referred to as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994). The Salamanca Statement posed a global challenge to the commonly held idea that children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) do not belong in the mainstream setting by recognising that these children should be educated within regular mainstream education systems (Florian, 2019). Inclusion in education is evolving worldwide, resulting in development and change in policy towards children with SEN attending mainstream schools (Griffin & Shevlin, 2011; Anderson et al., 2007). This change 'reflects the evolution of the societal perspective towards people and children with SEN' (Curtin & Egan, 2021: 1).

One of the primary values I aim to live and practice according to is inclusion. In order to understand what inclusive education means in primary education in Ireland, I will first discuss special education in mainstream schools since the introduction of the Special Education Teacher Allocation Model (DES, 2017), and then I will outline some difficulties with inclusive practice and describe inclusion as a sense of belonging.

2.3.1   Special Education Teacher Allocation Model

There have been major policy developments for Special Education in Ireland over the past thirty years with changes to personnel and funding structures which seek to include more students with disabilities into the mainstream classroom (Shevlin & Banks, 2021). The Special Education Teacher Allocation Model (SETAM) was rolled out by the DES (2017) to replace the General Allocation Model (DES, 2005). This new model sought to support inclusion and meet the needs of children with SEN in a more equitable way (Rafferty & Brennan, 2021), by removing the need for a professional assessment in order to access school support (Curtin & Egan, 2021). In this model, the school has greater autonomy and flexibility as they are now responsible for the deployment of their SETs to the different needs within the school (NCSE, n.d.). This model to support inclusion moves away from the idea of withdrawing children with SEN from the class, toward providing support in the same environment as their peers where possible.

Research carried out by Curtin and Egan (2021), provided evidence of a change in practice for teachers with this model, resulting in a more collaborative approach between class teachers and SETs. This model has a strong emphasis on collaborative practice and the

promotion of 'team teaching and small group teaching as effective models of providing additional teaching support to students' (Curtin & Egan, 2021: 10). This movement towards collaborative teaching by station teaching and team teaching allows for the sharing of ideas and 'leads to greater inclusion for students with SEN, whose needs are now increasingly being met within the mainstream class setting' (Curtin & Egan, 2021: 13). Experts and researchers agree that in an inclusive environment, every student is valued, respected, and supported and that inclusion is a collaborative whole school approach (Eredics, 2018).

From my experience working as a SET in both the new and the previous model, I can see the benefits of increased in-class support and the importance of collaboration as well as shared responsibility between class teachers and SETs. This model allowed me to implement station teaching as one of the interventions for my research as I had an in-class support teacher who worked in my class on a daily basis.

2.3.2   Difficulties with Inclusive Practice

Research studies indicate that while teachers do favour an inclusive model of education, there is evidence that teachers experience difficulties in the implementation of inclusive practices (Shevlin et al., 2013). 'Inclusive practice relies to a large extent on teacher knowledge, skills, understanding, capacity and attitudes' (Shevlin et al., 2013: 1119). Training, time, funding for resources, external supports, increased behavioural challenges, teacher resistance and falling standards in literacy and numeracy were some of the barriers to inclusive practice experienced by teachers (Shevlin et al., 2013).

Continuous professional development in most areas generally happens in teachers' free time and this means that it is not appealing or sometimes possible to upskill. The need for professional development to support inclusion is a recurring theme in the international literature on inclusive education (Avramidis & Norwich 2002; Forlin 2010b). Inclusive practice is an ongoing process that is constantly evolving as it requires the teacher to continuously question, reflect and adapt their practice depending on the students they teach. This need for professional development to support inclusion is one barrier to inclusive practices.

According to research, students with SEN were often perceived by class teachers to be the responsibility of the SET, and not their responsibility (Arvamidis et al., 2000; Conway, 2010). Some teachers believe that 'identification, screening and intervening with pupils with special educational needs is the sole responsibility of the special needs team' (Shevlin et al., 2013: 1129). Prior to the implementation of the SETAM (DES, 2017), withdrawal of children with SEN from the mainstream classroom to smaller special education classrooms was far more common. '47% of participants (N = 22) claimed that they 'always' withdrew students with SEN under the previous allocation model (DES, 2005), in comparison to just 11% (N = 5) under the current SETAM (DES, 2017a)' (Curtin & Egan, 2021: 11). This model called for both a shift in structure and in mindset. This collaborative approach meant that the teaching of children with SEN was the responsibility of both the class teacher and learning support teacher. However, there is resistance from some teachers to this model.

This requirement to upskill and adapt one's practice to enable inclusion in the mainstream classroom are challenges and the development of inclusive education is not easy.

However, progress toward more inclusive education is possible everywhere (Artiles et al., 2011).

2.3.3　A Sense of Belonging

A hierarchy of needs of the human was developed by Maslow (1962), beginning with lower level basic needs such as food and water, to higher level needs such as love and belonging. Maslow (1962) believed that achieving these needs made people feel motivated and helped them to reach their potential, with needs for love and belonging being critical for human development (Eredics, 2018). Goodenow (1993: 80) proposed that a sense of belonging at school reflects 'the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others in the school environment'. This is echoed by Florian (2019), when she says that an inclusive environment is one that involves providing rich learning opportunities to everyone, so that all learners are able to participate and feel as though they belong.

In 2011, the NCSE (National Council for Special Education) published the *Inclusive Education Framework*. In this framework, one of the criteria for planning is: '4. Pupil participation, self-esteem, sense of competence as a learner and learning outcomes are enhanced by curriculum planning for inclusion' (NCSE., 2011: 32). I agree with this and feel so strongly about adapting my practices to create more opportunities for children to experience success in as many areas as possible but particularly in phonemic awareness. Phonics, phonological awareness and phonemic awareness are extremely complex skills to be introduced in Junior Infants. I am unwilling to have any student I teach feel as though they

are struggling at the age of five. This is how my passion for inclusion influenced my choice of research topic as I wanted to find a way to help children who struggle with reading.

2.4 Care

Care is basic in human life, all people want to be cared for (Noddings, 2002). The work of Nel Noddings has developed my understanding of what it means to care. Noddings (2005) states that if we truly want to care, we need to be present and not passive, and how claiming that you care without action is meaningless. Noddings (1995), believes that children will not achieve any degree of success unless they believe they are cared for and can care for others.

A care theory was developed by Noddings (2008) as a framework for studying care in education and teaching. This theory outlines four components in how professionals and educators care. These include; modelling, dialogue, practice and confirmation (Noddings, 2008). Demonstrating care by modelling is listening and giving attention to expressed needs, dialogue involves two -way communication to understand what others are going through, practice is the act of caring for others and confirmation is the attempt to identify the good in others (Noddings, 2008). Noddings (2008) care theory relates to Palmer's (2010: 15) opinion that 'teaching mirrors the soul' and how we teach who we are. By showing students care, you are showing them the type of person that you are and teaching them how to care.

Jones (2020) emphasises how important care has been for society during the Covid 19 pandemic. Care was the collective response from society as a whole as everyone was experiencing some sort of disruption and in some cases, devastation to their lives. By

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cultivating care, we can 'we gain deep insight into our circumstances and then respond with greater understanding and compassion' (Wilde, 2012: 2). It is from this lived experience, I can see the importance of care for society and why it is a core value for me.

2.4.1   Curricular Pressures

There are some teachers who fear digression and are satisfied in knowing that they have covered all of the content required (hooks, 2003). This approach prioritizes curricular objectives, sometimes, at the expense of other aspects of school life. The work of hooks (2003) and Noddings (2006) have caused me to reflect on incidences where I have not lived according to my value of care as I have been too pre-occupied with teaching certain curricular content within a fixed time frame and not giving my students the attention that they need at particular moments of the school day. While it is important to plan lessons, hooks (2003) argues that teachers are missing the most powerful experience of full engagement in the learning process and the opportunity to be fully present and compassionately engaged in learning. Similarly, Noddings (2006: 12) describes the classroom as a space where students feel safe to express 'wonder and curiosity'. If teachers are fearful of digression and are intent solely on covering curricular content without any deviation, they are denying their students and themselves the opportunities to become fully engaged in the learning process. By sticking rigidly to plans, they are missing possibilities for connections with their students which often happen organically outside of curriculum planning.

2.4.2   Care along with Academic Development

When teachers teach with love, care, respect and trust, they can often go the heart of the matter in the classroom. 'This means having the clarity to know what to do on any given day to create the best climate for learning' (hooks, 2003: 134). The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA, 1999; 2009), make many references to balancing education and care.   Through the insights I have gained from working as a SET, I can recognise the value in developing positive and caring relationships with the students I teach. Children with special educational needs often require more encouragement and this caring relationship with their teacher can be hugely important to their development. hooks (2003: 136) states that when love exists between teacher and student, 'it offers a place where the intersection of academic striving meetings the overall striving to be psychologically whole'. According to Noddings (2006), schools need to be environments where human development is of primary importance even above academic development.

Each person has their own 'unique constellation of personal and ontological values we use to give meaning and purpose to our lives'. (Whitehead, 2018: 3). Constant reflection in and on our actions (Schön, 1983) will help to maintain an awareness of our values. My ontological value of care is intrinsically linked to my educational value of inclusion. These values were the framework guiding my action research. I will now move on to discussing literature related to phonemic awareness and the connection between this research topic and my values of care and inclusion.

2.5 Approaches to Teaching Reading

There are various approaches to teaching reading skills in different education systems. Wyse and Bradbury (2022) discuss three approaches: synthetic phonics, whole language and balanced instruction. Synthetic phonics is the teaching of phonemes and letters. Whole text reading in this approach is carried out with 'decodable' books which are based on the key words learned in the phonics program (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022). In this approach, phonics is kept separate from the reading of whole texts. In a whole language approach, the focus is primarily on whole texts and is driven by reading for meaning. Phonics is taught in a non-systematic way and carried out using the books being read (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022). A balanced instruction approach involves balancing the use of whole texts with systematic teaching about the alphabetic principle. The comprehension of written language is balanced with the acquisition of a range of skills in this approach. As I work in a school that teaches reading using the synthetic phonics approach, I will be discussing the role of phonemic awareness in relation to the systematic phonics approach in reading development.

2.6 Defining Phonological and Phonemic awareness

'Phonemic awareness specifically refers to the ability to manipulate and detect the smallest sound units in words, ie. Phonemes' (O'Sullivan, 2019: 25). Phonemic awareness falls under the larger umbrella structure of phonological awareness and is 'considered the most complex phonological skill that children can acquire' (O'Sullivan, 2019: 25). The term phonological awareness encapsulates a hierarchy of skills, starting with more basic skills, such as displaying an awareness of words in a spoken sentence, to the most complex skills

like blending, segmentation and manipulation of individual sounds (Adams, 1990; Anthony et al., 2002; Anthony et al., 2003; Blachman, 1994; Lane et al., 2002). According to O'Sullivan (2017: 95) phonological awareness 'involves the ability to reflect on the sounds of language and to detect and manipulate them at different levels: word, syllable, onset and rime, and phoneme'.

Phonemic awareness encompasses the skills of isolation, blending, segmentation, addition, deletion and substitution. Phonemes are the smallest units of sound and these combine to form syllables and words. The English language consists of forty- one phonemes. Some words only have one phoneme such as 'a' or 'oh' but most words consist of a blend of phonemes such as 'go' with two phonemes or 'check' with three phonemes (Ehri et al., 2001). Phonemes are different to graphemes which are units of written language and represent phonemes in the spellings of words (Venezky, 1970). Snow et al. (1998) describe phonemic awareness as knowledge that words can be broken apart, blended together, and manipulated into a sequence of meaningful units of sounds called phonemes.

2.7 The Connection between Phonemic Awareness and Successful Readers

In 2000, the National Reading Panel was established in the United States to research how children learn to read. The report 'Teaching Children to Read' was published and this still remains the most influential research carried out on teaching people how to read (O'Sullivan, 2017). It identified five key components for learning to read: fluency, vocabulary, reading comprehension, phonics and phonemic awareness. One of the purposes of this report was to seek answers to questions on whether phonemic awareness helped

children to read, under what circumstances it was most effective and for what children, if studies were designed effectively to support their claims and how applicable these findings were to classroom practice (Ehri et al., 2001). There were 52 studies published in peer reviewed journals which were examined in this report (Ehri et al., 2001). 'Correlational studies have identified phonemic awareness and letter knowledge as the two best school entry predictors of how well children will learn to read during their first 2 years in school' (National Reading Panel, 2000: 21). In this quantitative meta-analysis of phonemic instruction, phonemic awareness instruction was proven to help all kinds of children; normally developing readers, readers at risk, disabled readers, pre-schoolers, children in kindergarten and first grade children (Ehri et al., 2001).

2.8 Misinterpretation of Phonemic Awareness

Phonological awareness, phonemic awareness and phonics are often used interchangeably with some educators unclear of the differences between them. Phonics is an understanding of the relationship between printed letters and spoken sounds, 'whereas phonological awareness focuses solely on speech sounds' (O'Sullivan, 2017: 97). Phonics involves both print and sound. 'PA [phonemic awareness] instruction is not synonymous with phonics instruction that entails teaching students how to use grapheme-phoneme correspondences to decode or spell words' (National Reading Panel, 2000: 2-2). According to Walsh (2009) the lack of accurate definition of 'phonemic awareness' is a major contributor to an unresolved debate of the role of 'phonemic awareness' in learning to read. Varying definitions of 'phonemic awareness' make research about its role and importance variable

and uncertain (Walsh, 2009). Wilson (2005) argues that the neglect of definitions of key concepts by professionals demonstrates that people lack clarity which leaves theory and practice disconnected from the real world making it difficult to support productive scientific discourse. Wilson (2005: 73) states 'what we do is driven by how we think, and how we think is largely determined by the concepts we use'. Some researchers equate phonemic and phonological awareness, while others mis-use existing terms or introduce new terms (Walsh, 2009). Personally, I was unsure of the differences between these concepts when I first began teaching infants. During the research process, I also realised that some of my colleagues were also uncertain of the meanings of these terms. In the next section, I will describe my understanding of phonemic awareness that has informed my research.

2.9 The Relationship between Phonemic Awareness and Phonics

A fundamental concept facing beginning readers is the understanding that speech can be segmented, and these segmented phonemes can be represented in print form (Liberman, 1973). Phonological awareness opens the mind to the structure of speech rather than just the meaning of words. For example, a student may be aware that a 'cup' represents an object but phonological awareness will allow them to realise that this word has one syllable and three phonemes /c/u/p/. Developing phonemic awareness skills will also enable this student to isolate the initial, medial and final phonemes in that word and segment this word into parts.

The importance of phonemic awareness in early literacy is that children who do not have an awareness of the sound structure of language cannot attend to the separate sounds in spoken words and are thus unable to establish letter-sound correspondences (Norris &

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Hoffman, 2002). Phonemic awareness is an important prerequisite for reading proficiency (National Reading Panel, 2000).

The alphabetic principle is the idea that alphabetic letters have intentional and conventional connections with the phonemes they represent (Foorman et al., 2003). According to Sulzby and Teale (1991), in an alphabetic system such as English, beginning readers must use the alphabetic code to understand the link between speech sounds and the signs of letters. Snow et al. (1998) state that phonemes are the individual units of sounds that are represented by the letters of the alphabet. Therefore, an awareness of phonemes is key to understanding the logic of the alphabetic principle. Ryder et al. (2008) argue that children who experience difficulties with phonemic sequence in words will not be fully able to comprehend the concept of the alphabetic principle and discover the spelling to sounds relationship. I agree with Foorman et al. (2003), Sulzby and Teale (1991), Snow et al. (1998) and Ryder et al. (2008) as I feel children need some basis of auditory discrimination of phonemes before they can begin to look at a visual symbol and learn the sound it makes. Knowledge of individual phoneme sounds is the most critical skill for grasping the alphabetic principle and learning to use it (Shankweiler & Fowler, 2004).

2.10   Conflicting Views on the Role of Phonemic Awareness in the Reading Process

There is much debate and divergence in opinions on the role of phonemic awareness in the process of reading acquisition. According to Adams (1990), Blachman (2000) and Stanovich (1992), phonemic awareness instruction is necessary but not completely sufficient in the understanding of the alphabetic principle (Foorman et al., 2003). In contrast to this,

Foorman et al. (2003: 290) argue that the alphabetic principle is a 'necessary but not sufficient condition for effective phonemic awareness instruction'. Research carried out by Foorman et al. (2003: 289) found that 'alphabetic instruction without phonemic awareness was not as effective as alphabetic instruction with phonemic awareness'. Many researchers argue that phonemic awareness is a precursor to reading (e.g., Goswami & Bryant, 1990). In contrast to this, others argue that phonemic awareness is an outcome rather than a prerequisite of learning to read (e.g., Bowey & Francis, 1991).

Research was reviewed by Shankweiler and Fowler (2004) in order to identify the role of phonological awareness processes in learning to read. They found that phoneme awareness 'enables learners to penetrate the code that relates speech to print, phoneme awareness is key to reading an alphabetic system' (Shankweiler & Fowler, 2004: 488). I agree with Adams (1990), Blachman (2000), Stanovich (1992) and Shankweiler and Fowler (2004). As a SET, I have experienced how phonemic instruction is a crucial element in understanding the alphabetic principle but I also think explicit phonics instruction is needed to understand the alphabetic principle. I think that some level of phonemic awareness needs to be introduced and embedded before phonics instruction and understanding the alphabetic principle. This belief informs my research.

2.11   Difficulties with Phonemic Awareness Skills

'Learning to read is a key objective of early education and difficulties in learning to read can have serious adverse consequences' (Hulme & Snowling, 2013:1). If children cannot hear the individual sounds in words, they will struggle to relate the sounds to the letters of the

alphabet (O'Sullivan, 2017). This is because there are no breaks in speech to signal where one phoneme ends and the next one begins (Ehri et al., 2001). 'Some children find it very difficult to hear the separate phonemes because the continuous nature of speech compresses them into a series of overlapping sounds through a process called coarticulation' (Konza, 2010: 2). Speech is continuous and rapid in order to be comprehensible and coarticulation helps in this process. While this coarticulation makes it easier for the listener, it disguises the segmental nature of speech (Konza, 2010). Therefore, if children cannot hear the segmented sounds in words, they cannot relate these sounds to letters (Konza, 2010). The ability to distinguish the separate phonemes in pronunciation of words and to match them to corresponding graphemes is very difficult (Ehri et al., 2001). According to Norris and Hoffman (2002), phonemic awareness is crucial as children who do not have an awareness of the sound structure of language cannot attend to the separate sounds in spoken words and are unable to establish letter-sound correspondences.

Yopp and Yopp (2000) state that without phonemic awareness the alphabetic code can be entirely arbitrary to a struggling reader and the task of dealing with the symbol system can be overwhelming. I agree with Yopp and Yopp (2000) as I found this to be the case when I taught children with literacy difficulties in a SEN setting. Many of the children I taught had great difficulties with the alphabetic principle but it is only now from my research that I can see the role phonemic awareness plays in understanding of the alphabetic principle.

2.12   Teaching Phonemic Awareness Skills

A number of studies were examined to investigate the key points to consider when planning and providing instruction in phonemic awareness (Phillips et al., 2008). These include instructional sequencing, modelling and explaining, scaffolding and providing corrective feedback (O'Sullivan, 2019). Instructional sequencing involves planning ahead what is taught and in sequential order of complexity. In contrast to this, incidental instruction relies on seizing the moment to teach a phonological awareness skill (Phillips et al., 2008). This was the way in which I used to teach phonological awareness which lacked planning, clarity and progression. I have chosen a mixed methods approach using both station teaching in small groups and whole class teaching using the Heggerty Curriculum in my continuous effort to be inclusive.

2.13   The Station Teaching Model

In this teaching approach, children are divided into small groups and there are usually two or more teachers facilitating the stations. Some groups work with teachers, while the remaining groups carry out tasks independently for a set period of time until the groups rotate activity. 'Station Teaching is particularly suitable as a model of in-class support for development of early literacy skills in the infant classes, as it allows for variation in activities and for pupil movement in the classroom after relatively short intervals' (Kerins & Tiernan, 2014: 4). According to O'Sullivan (2019: 68), a classroom that supports a systematic and explicit approach to phonological awareness would ensure that instruction: 'takes place with small groups of children, is modelled by the teacher, is fast-paced, provides visual, active,

hands-on learning activities, is reinforced informally throughout the day, provides feedback to children'. It was based on O'Sullivan's work and recommendations that I decided to use this type of intervention. I sourced many activities for my station teaching from O'Sullivan's (2021) phonological awareness program: A Sound Beginning for Reading.

2.14   The Heggerty Curriculum

Dr. Michael Heggerty first published the Heggery Phonemic Awareness curriculum in 2003 which has since been modified. The Heggerty Curriculum is thirty-five weeks in length with daily lessons that cover eight phonological awareness skills in each lesson. These skills include letter rhyming, blending, isolating initial, final and medial sounds, segmenting, adding and deleting. The skills are taught through auditory discrimination activities only and are modelled by the teacher. 'Empirically supported instructional methods rely on very consistent, but brief and interactive, small group or individual sessions lasting no longer than 10 to 15 min. a day (Ehri et al, 2001)' (Phillips et al., 2008: 6). I chose this intervention for my research as it is a consistent, brief and interactive program involving whole class daily practice. The children are taught hand actions to accompany each of the skills. Phillips et al. (2008: 10) echo the benefits of nonverbal cues as they can 'support children's task engagement and understanding, to maintain good pacing, and to minimize behavioural issues during instruction'. The complexity of the skills increases as the year goes on.

2.15   My Values and Chosen Interventions

I chose two different interventions; a combination of both whole-class teaching using the Heggerty Curriculum and station teaching of phonemic awareness skills. The National Reading Panel (2000: 2-6) acknowledged 'that children will differ in their phonemic awareness and that some will need more instruction than others'. O'Sullivan (2019) advocates that explicit instruction is more effective in a small group where the teacher can attend to the individual needs of the child. However, I thought that initial instruction as a whole class would provide each child with some level of phonological skills which can be built on in a station teaching environment. This program involves whole class instruction where no individual is called upon, all the children are at ease and comfortable in knowing that the whole class are participating together. Therefore, no child should feel under pressure but would still be able to participate in the class. This choice of intervention is in direct response to my values of care and inclusion. Shankweiler and Fowler (2004: 490) argue that 'phoneme awareness is necessary and will rarely develop spontaneously, instruction must be available to all beginning readers'. I chose to implement these interventions as they are commensurate with my values of inclusion and care.

2.16   Conclusion

Over the past forty years, there has been huge interest in the role of phonemic awareness in reading development, with research findings demonstrating the causal relationship between a child's phonemic awareness ability and their future reading success (Bryant et al.,1990; Gillon, 2004; Ehri et al., 2001; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002; Snow et al., 1998; Adams, 1990;

Yopp, 1995; Carroll & Snowling, 2004). 'Faced with an alphabetic script, the child's level of phonemic awareness on entering school may be the single most powerful determinant of the success she or he will experience in learning to read and of the likelihood that she or he will fail' (Adams, 1990: 304).

The children I teach are only embarking on their reading journey and beginning to experiment with different sounds and how sounds are represented by various symbols. Some of the children will have a relatively smooth reading journey, acquiring skills seamlessly but there will be others who will struggle with these complex skills and need much more support and consolidation. Although I am aware that there will always be differing abilities and talents, I feel very passionately about transforming my practice and enabling the children I teach to have a solid foundation in phonological and phonemic awareness in order to set them up with the skills required to become successful readers. For this research project, I chose a combination of both whole class teaching using the Heggerty Curriculum and station teaching to enable the children to develop their phonemic awareness skills and experience success in an inclusive learning environment.

In this chapter, I have discussed literature surrounding my values, approaches to teaching reading, the role of phonemic awareness in becoming a successful reader, conflicting views on the role of phonemic awareness, the relationship between phonics and phonemic awareness, difficulties with phonemic awareness, phonemic awareness instruction, the Heggerty Curriculum and the reasons for my chosen interventions. In Chapter 3, I will discuss my chosen research methodology, timeline of my research, structure of the interventions, data collection and validation processes, as well as ethical considerations.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

In this section, I discuss why I choose an action research method as opposed to more traditional research approaches as well as describing the influence of my values on my chosen methodologies and standards of judgement. I will describe my data collection tools, the timeline of my research, how I established validity and the ethical considerations involved in my research. I acknowledge that action research goes beyond the notion that theory can inform practice, to a recognition that theory can and should be generated through practice (Brydon Miller et al., 2003). I chose to do this type of research because I am interested in researching my practice, examining it and findings ways to enhance it for my students.

3.2 Research Paradigms

The methodology a researcher chooses should not solely be based on the subject being researched but also informed by a research paradigm (McDonagh et al., 2020). Cohen et al. (2011) describe a 'paradigm' as a shared belief system or set of principles, a consensus of what problems are to be investigated and how. There are many paradigms, Cohen et al. (2018) discuss six but Bassey (1990) describes three main paradigms: positivist, interpretative and critical theory (action research). To positivist researchers, the world is rational and reality exists regardless of people and discoveries are made from quantitative data resulting in factual statements (Bassey, 1990). In the interpretive approach, the researcher views reality as a construct of the human mind and is open to interpretation.

(Bassey, 1990). As well as this, the interpretive paradigm is concerned solely with qualitive data (Bassey, 1990). The action research paradigm is 'research designed to improve action' and theory is created in order to improve practice (Bassey, 1990: 3).

According to McNiff and Whitehead (2009), it is important to be informed what is involved in all kinds of research when choosing your research methodology. However, Cohen et al. (2018: 9) advocate that paradigms should not 'drive the research' but can help clarify and organise thinking around the research.

3.2.1 Action Research Paradigm

Action research aims to enhance, change or improve practice and differs to other research paradigms in this regard (McDonagh et al., 2020). The researcher is active in the research process as they are carrying out research on themselves and this differs to traditional approaches in which researchers carry out research on other people (McNiff, 2002). The positivist and interpretive paradigms did not appeal to me as I did not wish to be an observer of my surroundings, I wanted to research my practice with the aim of improving it. Action research enabled me to act on my concern for children feeling excluding and to do something in my practice to improve this situation.

The action research method also allows for mixed method approach to data collection, utilising both quantitative and qualitive data sources. I think using quantitative and qualitive data sources in classroom-based research is beneficial and this is another reason why action research appealed to me. This approach allows teachers to develop personally and

professionally, and build their own theories of practice (McNiff & Whitehead, 2005). According to Cohen et al. (2018), a person's choice of research paradigm is influenced by their epistemological and ontological values. I chose this methodology as I wanted to enhance my practice by actively trialling interventions, while simultaneously endeavouring to live closer to my values of care and inclusion.

3.3 Values

The fundamental question that underpins self-study action research is 'how can I improve my practice?' (McNiff, 2014: 55). It involves undertaking research in one's educational practice and is grounded in the desire for enhancement of this practice which I think is hugely beneficial to me and my students, my colleagues and others in educational settings. The starting point for this method of research is reflecting on one's values, choosing the most significant and articulating these values. Values are the essence that inform and mould our practice so it is necessary to interrogate, dissect and evaluate one's values as they become the driving force and focus of our research. As McNiff (2002) states, action research is conducted by the self into the self. Therefore, exploring and reflecting on one's values is pivotal in the self- reflection process required by the researcher in their action research.

The primary value I endeavour to achieve in my classroom is inclusion. To me, inclusion is a continuous cycle, searching for better ways of responding to the increasingly diverse needs of my students. I want my students to celebrate difference while simultaneously experience a sense of belonging in their classroom. Inclusive practice 'involves providing

rich learning opportunities that are sufficiently made available for everyone, so that all learners are able to participate and feel they belong' (Florian, 2019: 701).

The ontological value of care is of equal importance to me. I strive to create a safe learning environment where there is mutual respect, interdependence and children feel happy and relate positively to one another. Before beginning this research project, I followed prescriptive program rigidly without too much thought or reflection on how exclusive some of my practices were. I quickly came to realise that I was as Whitehead (1989: 41) describes a 'living contradiction' as I was not living according to my values.

However, this research has forced me to examine my core values and scrutinize my practice through the lens of these values. This process of critical reflection as part of this research methodology has highlighted contradictions in my teaching. Zeichner (1999: 8) claimed that self-study research 'the single most significant development ever in the field of teacher education research'. This methodology is in line with my values of care and inclusion as in this research paradigm, children are regarded as knowledge creators and learning is a non- coercive and positive experience. In this research method, as the researcher I am holding a mirror up to my individual practice, delving into and critiquing contradictions in my teaching in order to generate resolutions and alternatives to enhance my practice. 'In self-study action research you, as researcher, can be at the heart of the action and at the heart of the research' (McDonagh et al., 2020: 136).

3.4 Reflective Practice

An integral part of self-study action research is self-reflection on one's values and practices. 'Reflection is an important human activity in which people recapture their experience, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it. It is this working with experience that is important in learning' (Boud et al., 1985: 19). Whitehead (1989) introduced the Living Theory approach to action research where individuals are empowered to develop their own explanations of their educational influences in learning enquiries which ask 'how can I improve my educational practice' (Whitehead, 2018: 9). Whitehead (1989) suggests that a living educational theory is produced from systematic reflection on a process (the aspect of your practice you want to improve) and outlines descriptions and explanations of this process. In this dissertation, I have produced my living-theory and I have given descriptions and explanations of my new learning to support this. These interpretations and experiences of the process are then accepted as valid accounts of educational development. Reflection on practice and critical reflection are key components in the self-study action research process and Living Theory (McDonagh et al., 2020).

3.5 My Original Concern and the Development of the Research

This research focused on the enhancement of my practice in the area of phonemic awareness. The research question grew from my own experience in the role of SET and the concern I had about teaching a fast-paced phonics program to Junior Infants. From my experience as a SET in the junior classes, many children fell 'behind' their peers as they

struggled to keep up with the pace of the phonics program. This had a knock -on effect of some children requiring learning support from very early on in their education.

This year, I changed role from SET to class teacher and I thought it would be an opportunity to experiment with an additional program to supplement the phonics program already in place in order to be more inclusive. I had heard of the important role of phonemic awareness in learning to read in an alphabetic writing system (Brady & Shankweiler, 1991) and I decided that this would be the focus of my research. I value inclusion and instilling a sense of belonging in a child from an early stage in their education, as outlined in earlier sections. I wanted to fight against the negative effects of segregating and stigmatizing children from a young age so I felt this was ideal area to improve my practice. I will now discuss the timeline of my research and research cycle.

3.6 Timeline for Research Project

My action plan from August 2021- September 2022 can be seen in Table 3.1 below:

Action Plan: August 2021- September 2022	
August 2021 – October 2021	The research topic was identified. Critical engagement with relevant literature occurred. Reflective journaling began.
November 2021	Ethical approval was received from Maynooth University. Permission granted from the Board of Management to carry out research.
December 2021	Consent from parents, critical friends and validation group as well as assent from children was received.
January 2022	Observed and reflected on effectiveness of Heggerty Curriculum. Initial data was collected using student questionnaires about children's feelings about school.
February 2022	Continued to use Heggerty Curriculum (10 minutes daily). Initial teacher assessment to check current level of skill mastery.

	Implemented action cycle for station teaching (8 weeks). Station teaching of segmentation and blending activities.
	o Observation sheets were used by SET, researcher and student teacher.
	o Week 2: Critical friend observed and critiqued activities and gave guidance on possible modifications.
	o Changed activities every 1-2 weeks depending on skill mastery.
	o Week 3 and 4: identified children who require additional support.
March 2022	Continue with Heggerty Curriculum (10 minutes daily). Continued with station teaching, made adjustments to activities based on critical friends input, SET input, reflections and observation sheets. Gathered, analysed and interpreted data.
April 2022	Completed the initial assessment again after the final week of station teaching. Correlated and reflected on the data gathered. Met with validation group: discussed data and initial findings.
May 2022	Reflected on the data gathered and the emerging findings.
June 2022	Research findings were presented to a public audience.
July 2022- August 2022	The self-study action research thesis was written.
September 2022	The results of the thesis will be published.

Table 3.1 Timeline for Research Project

3.6.1 Research Cycle

There are a variety of approaches in action research, I chose the action–reflection cycle as set out by Whitehead and McNiff (2006). This cycle has five steps: observing, reflecting, acting, evaluating and modifying the action in order to move in new directions. The sixth step in this process is a transition step into the next action cycle with the new knowledge gained. This final step reflects the continuous nature of action research. The model most accurately encapsulates my attitude toward this research as it is ongoing. I will continue to implement what I have learned going forward into the next academic year and in doing so, begin a new action cycle with modified actions based on what I have learned.

This is a cyclical process as illustrated below in Figure 3.1:
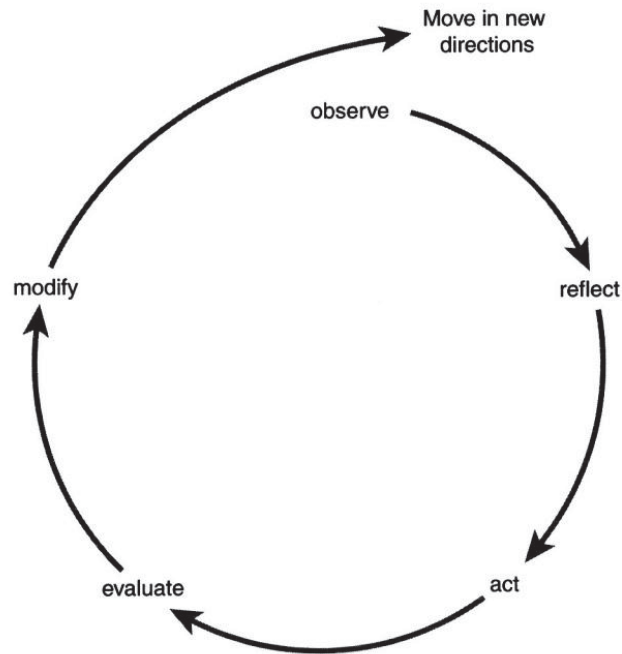
Figure 3. 1 Whitehead and McNiff's (2006) Action Research Cycle

3.6.2   Research Setting

The research was conducted in a large co-educational, Catholic school in an urban area. Over seven hundred children attend the school and there are forty-three staff members. The school has a middle socio-economic status and aims to provide equal opportunities for all students where holistic development is paramount.

3.6.3   The Researcher

I am a female self-study action researcher who has worked in my current school for four years. I taught in other schools in Ireland and internationally for the previous four years. I have been a SET at Junior and Senior Infant level for the past three years and have developed a strong interest in early literacy development as a result.

3.6.4   Research Participants

The research participants in this project were the children in my Junior Infant class, critical friends and other colleagues who formed my validation group. The children engaged in literacy activities in the classroom and this provided data through research instruments. Critical friends observed and critiqued my practice throughout the research process and offered suggestions for further modifications. A validation group consisting of some class teachers of Junior and Senior Infants, as well as members of the SEN team, tested the accuracy and reliability of my research. The scheduling of these meetings is included in Chapter 4 and transcripts from them are available in my data archive. Collaboration and dialogue were a vital element in this research process. Educational researchers Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) describe collaboration as crucial to the action research process.

3.6.5 Research Schedule

The research project took place over the course of a year. Pre-research took place between September-December while the action research cycle began in January and concluded in April.

3.7 Structure of the Interventions

3.7.1 Intervention 1: The Heggerty Curriculum

Currently, there are many phonological and phonemic programs available in Ireland. However, after extensive research into the programs, I chose the Heggerty Curriculum for the following reasons; it involves daily practice, it incorporates hand actions to learn each skill, it involves only auditory and oral activities, it takes ten minutes a day to teach (slightly more initially), there is constant revision of skills, complexity of skills increases over time and it is a very accessible program for the teacher to implement. It is also a non-threatening program for all children, especially those who are finding reading skills challenging and are shy by nature. As well as these reasons, it has grown increasingly popular in Ireland and when I contacted teachers in other schools about it, they all recommended it.

This intervention was implemented since mid-September as it is a thirty-five-week program. However, I did not begin to collect data until I had ethics approval in January. I chose to use the Heggerty Curriculum in a whole class setting in order to provide a basis for phonological and phonemic skills which can be built on in a station teaching environment.

An example of the skills covered in a Heggerty Curriculum lesson can be seen below in Table 3.2.

	Skills:	Activities:
Phonological awareness skills	Rhyme Repetition	Identify if words rhyme Rhyme production
Phonemic awareness skills	Initial Phoneme Isolation	Identify initial phonemes in words
	Blending Words	Blend phonemes together to produce a word
	Phoneme Isolation: Final Sounds	Identify final phonemes in words
	Segmenting into Words	Segment a word into phonemes
	Adding Words	Add to the end of a word to make a compound word
	Deleting Words	Delete a word from a compound word
	Substituting Words	Change part of a word to make a new word
Early literacy skills	Alphabet knowledge	Show alphabet cards and say the sounds
	Language awareness	Sentence segmentation, nursery rhyme activities

Table 3.2 Sample of Skills included in a Daily Heggerty Curriculum Lesson

* Alphabet knowledge was an element that I left out as a different phonics program was being used simultaneously to this program.

3.7.2   Intervention 2: Station Teaching of Phonemic Awareness Skills

This intervention consisted of four phonemic awareness lessons each week for eight weeks (two station lessons on two days each week). It ran concurrently with my whole class

intervention using the Heggery Curriculum. I chose to target phonemic awareness skills of isolating, blending and segmenting. I chose activities to suit my class, primarily from the program 'A Sound Beginning for Reading' (O'Sullivan, 2021) and activities sourced from the website 'Florida Centre for Reading Research' (2010). I also used other online sources for two activities (Appendix L).

After the first few weeks, I modified my practice so that any child who had not mastered the appropriate skill at this group level were targeted for additional support. This tiered grouping system allowed for flexibility and ensured that each pupil received instruction at an appropriate level. This was in line with my values as inclusion can often mean treating people differently to cater for their individual ability in order for them to experience success.

The children were in four mixed ability groups and there were three teachers for the first four weeks and two teachers for the remaining four weeks. While I had hoped to solely focus on phonemic awareness activities, it was quite challenging to source activities for the children to work on in the independent stations that were based on phonemic awareness and didn't require teacher support. For this reason, I chose to incorporate other phonological skill-based activities that the children could work on independently and found engaging. These station activities (Appendix L), focused on the skills of; rhyming, syllabic awareness and sentences segmentation. While many children were not proficient with the skills of syllabic awareness and sentence segmentation, these activities had answers on the back of cards so children could have a go and see if they were right. While ideally, it might have been best to have a teacher at every station, it was not practical in my school at that time. I do think the children

gained in independence skills through this independent station and learned to work together without the need of constant teacher support and guidance.

Table 3.3 below is a schedule of skills and activities covered over the eight weeks. The tasks became more challenging as time went by.

	Phonological and phonemic skills:	Activities used:
Week 1	1. Identifying the initial sound 2. Sentence segmentation 3. Rhyming	1. Feed the Monster 2. Nursery Rhyme Segmentation 3. Rhyme Time 4. Memory Match (Ind.Station)
Week 2	1. Identifying the initial sound 2. Sentence segmentation 3. Rhyming	1. Feed the Monster 2. Nursery Rhyme Segmentation 3. Rhyme Time 4. Memory Match (Ind.Station)
Week 3	1. Blending 2. Identifying the final sound 3. Syllabic awareness 4. Rhyming	1. Blending bingo 2. Feed the Monster 3. Feed the Animals 4. Rhyme Time (Ind.Station)
Week 4	1. Identifying the initial/ final/ medial sound 2. Blending 3. Identifying the medial sound 4. Rhyming	1. Doggie, Where's My Bone? 2. Blending Bingo 3. Feed the Monster 4. Memory match
Week 5	1. Segmenting 2. Segmenting 3. Rhyming 4. Identify the final sound	1. Phoneme Fries (1-3 phoneme words) 2. Carpark Segmentation 3. Rhyming Bingo 4. Feed the Monster (Ind.Station)
Week 6	1. Segmenting 2. Segmenting 3. Rhyming 4. Identify the final sound	1. Phoneme Fries (1-3 phoneme words) 2. Car Park Segmentation 3. Rhyming Bingo (Ind.Station) 4. Feed the Monster (Ind.Station)
Week 7	1. Segmenting 2. Segmenting	1. Pom Pom Picker 2. Phoneme fries

	3. Segmenting	3. Carpark Segmentation (Ind.Station)
	4. Rhyming	4. Rhyme Time (Ind.Station)
Week 8	1. Segmenting 2. Substituting sounds 3. Segmenting 4. Blending	1. Pom Pom Picker 2. Change it! 3. Carpark Segmentation (Ind.Station) 4. Blending bingo (Ind.Station)

Table 3.3 Schedule of Station Teaching Skills and Activities

3.8 Data Collection Process and Tools

I collected data throughout this research to track the story of my learning in order to support any claim to knowledge. I used a variety of research instruments to collect data. According to McDonagh et al. (2020), the appropriateness of data collection must be checked on three levels. Firstly, data collection should be appropriate at a practical level. Secondly, the data should be relevant to its context and thirdly the data should be in line with one's values. I addressed all three levels by constantly reviewing my actions against my values.

3.8.1   Research Instruments

I used a mixed method approach to collecting data with both quantitative and qualitative data types. The research instruments used were: my reflective journal, observation sheets, a phonemic awareness assessment, a student survey, student drawings and a colleague questionnaire. Educational researchers, Cohen et al. (2011) and Mertens (2007) have suggested that a mixed method approach to data collection can strengthen the research and lead to less biased conclusions. According to McDonagh et al. (2020), in order not to collect too much data, I must constantly question myself, asking: will this data demonstrate that I am

realising my values in my practice? Will this data contribute to exposing an improvement in my practice? I will now categorise my research instruments into quantitative and qualitative types.

3.8.2   Quantitative Data

Quantitative data can be effective in evaluating new practices in the classroom. Dadds and Hart (2001) suggest that classroom action research can employ an eclectic mix of data-gathering methods. I collected quantitative data through a teacher designed assessment (Appendix F) to assess the individual's current level of phonemic awareness before beginning my station teaching intervention. To examine the effectiveness of the activities used, I used the same task to assess the skill level of each participant at the end of research. I then used these results to inform my thinking and my understanding of how I am enhancing my practice and holding myself accountable to my values.

3.8.3   Qualitative Data

Qualitative methods allow for fluidity, an understanding that knowledge is subject to change and can be regenerated constantly. Qualitative data was collected in the form of my reflective journal to critically reflect on my practice and to archive my observations and conversations. I used observation sheets during station teaching to identify how effective or ineffective certain activities are in the mastery of a certain skill. I collected drawings by the children and carried out student questionnaires and teacher questionnaires to gather evidence

of enhanced practice, as well as documenting conversations in my reflective journal with my critical friends.

3.8.4   Reflective Journal Entries

I found reflection to be a key aspect of my research project (Moon, 2006; Brookfield, 2009) and many educational researchers (Moon, 2006; Brookfield, 2009; Sullivan et al., 2016) discuss the benefits of using a reflective journal in the reflection process. The act of writing in my reflective journal inspired me to question my values, helped me to monitor changes in my thinking and record incidences when I was living according to my values and times when I was a 'living contradiction' (Whitehead, 1989: 41).   I reflected and recorded my conversations with my critical friends in my reflective journal. Dialogue and critique must walk hand in hand to avoid 'navel-gazing' (McDonagh et al., 2020). Extracts from my journal to show this will be discussed in Chapter Four.

Reflecting in my journal gave me the space to think of alternative teaching practices that are more in line with my values. Minott (2019) emphasises the symbiotic relationship between reflective teaching and inclusive teaching and how one works in tandem with the other. As one of my values is inclusion, I found that self- reflection inspired me to consider and seek inclusive methods of teaching.

3.9 Data Analysis Process

In self-study action research, the researcher's values provide the criteria or standards of judgement by which the quality of the research can be evaluated (McDonagh et al., 2020). In order to identify if I have improved my practice, I examined my data and searched for evidence of enhanced practice. 'It requires that you subject your data to detailed scrutiny as you seek to interpret your actions and produce explanations for them' (McDonagh et al., 2020: 156). I established my standards of judgement which I drew from my values, in order to establish the quality of my research. As well as searching for evidence of enhanced practice, my actions were measured against my values to see if I was living according to them.

My values can be seen below in Figure 3.2.

Inclusion:
- All children should feel a sense of belonging in their class.

Inclusion:
- Differentiated teaching to facilitate individual needs.

Care:
- Each student feels a sense of belonging and has positive experiences in school.

Figure 3. 2 My Values

My standards of judgement developed from these values which can be seen below in Figure 3.3.

| 1. All children can participate comfortably in a phonemic awareness program in a very non-threatening environment where no one is called upon individually and feels under duress and vulnerable. | 2. All children can participate in small groups where individual needs will be catered for. |

| 3. All children enjoy most activities and feel validated during the station teaching interventions. | 4. I will see that my practice is improving when the majority of children can blend and segment three and four phoneme words. | 5. I will see that my practice is improving when all of the children can isolate the medial and final sounds in words. |

Figure 3. 3 My Standards of Judgement

Using my standards of judgement, I combed through my data looking for evidence and used questions outlined by McDonagh et al. (2020). I selected the following questions and kept them in mind to ensure that I did not deviate far from my standards of judgement.

o   'Can I show evidence of enhanced practice?

o   Can I identify a link between this improvement and my values?

o   Can I show that there is an improvement in my understanding of my practice?

o   Does my reflection on my practice indicate an enhancement in my thinking

processes?' (McDonagh et al., 2020: 150)

45

In chapter four, I will use these standards to analyse my data and explain how my findings came about.

3.10   Validation Process for My Claim to New Knowledge

Validity is the action of 'showing the truthfulness of something' (McNiff and Whitehead, 2010: 190). A mixture of personal validity and social validity was used in this research. Personal validity was achieved as I now feel that I am living more in the direction of my values (McNiff and Whitehead, 2010: 195). Habermas (1976) advocates that validation may be achieved through dialogue with others. Validity was acquired by means of critical friends, public critique and triangulation. When qualitative data comes from a number of perspectives, it's accuracy and validity are enhanced. Triangulation can help explain the complexity of what is being described as it studied from more than one perspective (Cohen et al., 2018). To ensure validity, critical friends participated in my research and a validation group was established.

3.10.1 Critical Friends

Researchers in action research advocate for the use of a critical friend to discuss and review your research throughout the process (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010; McNiff, 2013; Sullivan et al., 2016). The role of the critical friend is to observe your practice, give feedback and critique based on their observations. I had three critical friends; one colleague teaching in Junior Infants, my class SET and a post holder with a special interest in phonemic

awareness. These critical friends provided their perspectives during data collection and analysis of data and transcripts of our conversations can be found in my data archive.

3.10.2 Validation Group

In order to facilitate dialogue and gain multiple insights, Glenn et al. (2017) promote the use of a validation group. Research is always in conjunction with others and never in isolation. I established a validation group by asking two Junior Infant teachers, three Senior Infant teachers and two SETs to form a group that would provide feedback and critique my research on a voluntary basis. The aim of this group was to critically consider my actions and interventions to see if I was living in the direction of my values, while also improving my practice. Three meetings were held during the research; an initial meeting where I explained my research, the planned interventions and how I hoped to carry out my interventions, a second meeting to discuss the data collected during the station teaching intervention and a final meeting to present my findings. The validation group were invited to ask questions and offer feedback during these meetings. This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

3.10.3 Reliability and Credibility

The reliability and credibility of the research are concerned with how accurately the research has been conducted (Sullivan et al., 2016). Reliability and credibility of the research can be attained both on a personal level and on a social level (Sullivan et al., 2016). To demonstrate personal reliability and credibility, I have ensured that all of my data is dated and

stored securely. Sullivan et al. (2016: 106), suggest that the reliability and credibility of the research is achieved socially by 'making our research public and open to critique'. I have made my research public by presenting it to my critical friends, my validation group and to my staff. In addition to this, I have presented my findings to my peers in June by means of a presentation. I received feedback based on my presentation and answered questions based on my research. These methods supported me in validating my claim to knowledge.

3.11 Ethical Considerations

Prior to beginning this study and the process of data collection, I received Ethical Approval from Maynooth University. I received approval from the Principal of my school and Board of Management (Appendix C). As children are co-participants in this study, there are many ethical issues considered. I will explain the consideration given to informed consent, child assent, data storage, confidentiality and anonymity.

3.11.1 Informed Consent

In order to gain informed consent, parents of participants should be provided with accessible knowledge, they should understand that participation is voluntary, that they have the right to withdraw from the research at any stage and they have the right to choose to participate freely (Brooks et al., 2014). Parents of participants were provided with an information letter (Appendix A) and a consent document (Appendix B) to sign. This study involved minors, consent was given by the child's responsible adult for the child to take part

in the study (Palaiologou, 2012). These letters were written in accordance with Maynooth University Ethical Guidelines and have been approved by the ethical committee.

3.11.2 Child Assent

'The researcher has an immense responsibility to ensure that the best interests of the child are paramount and take priority over those of the research' (Green, D, cited in Palaiologou, 2012: 29). I had a verbal conversation with the children using child appropriate language and explained my research. Throughout the research process, I used a form with a 'smiley' face or an 'unsure' face to determine if the children are happy to participate in my research (Appendix B). 'Seeking assent requires the researcher to remain consistently vigilant to the responses of the child at all times: it is not something gained at the beginning of the research and then put aside' (Cocks, 2006: 257-258). I updated the parents and children regularly throughout my research and reassured them that all data will remain anonymous and that they could stop participating at any point.

3.11.3 Data Storage

Participants and parents of participants were assured that any data collected will continue to remain anonymous in line with School Policy and Data Protection Guidelines. Any data collected during my research is stored carefully and appropriately depending on the nature of the data. Any hard data collected, such a pupil work is stored in a locked cabinet in my room that only I have a key for. Data is stored online in an encrypted device and is password

protected. I adhered to the GDPR guidelines and to the Data Protection policy of my school. Data will be kept for ten years and then will be destroyed as outlined by the National University of Ireland Maynooth (2021).

3.11.4   Confidentiality

I have ensured that all data collected in my journal, observation notes, surveys and dissertation are anonymised using pseudonyms for all participants. I will continue to treat all data with respect and ensure confidentiality.

3.12   Conclusion

The primary goal of my research was to enhance and improve my practice for my students and myself. In this chapter, I have described the methodological considerations, my values and reasons for my choice of self-study action research. I have outlined the timeline of my research and justified my choice of data collection tools, as well as explained my standards of judgement. I have explained how I ensured validity and rigour in my data analysis and the ethical considerations involved in my research. Throughout this process, I reflected on the relationship between what I was doing and my core values of inclusion and care. Self-study action research was my chosen methodology as it is most suitable to classroom research, enabled me to be part of the research process and actively search for ways to improve my practice.

Chapter 4: Analysis and Discussion of Findings

4.1   Introduction

This self-study action research project was undertaken to improve my teaching of phonemic awareness in my Junior Infant classroom as I try to live my values in my practice. The first section of this chapter outlines my values and the standards of judgement which have formed my criteria by which the quality of my research can be evaluated (McDonagh et al., 2020).   From analysing my data, I have generated three key findings which relate to my research question 'How can I improve the teaching of phonemic awareness using the Heggerty Curriculum and station teaching in my Junior Infant class?'. I describe my critically reflective journey, analyse my findings in terms of my standards of judgement, provide data sources to support my findings and discuss the validation process. Finally, I discuss my new learning and the unanticipated learning that has emerged from this process.

4.2   My Values

An integral part of self-study action research is self-reflection on one's values and practices. My values of inclusion and care are the primary elements navigating my research project. Throughout this process, I have been continuously reflecting on my actions to ensure that I have been living according to my values. The interventions I used were a combination approach using the Heggerty Curriculum and station teaching using phonemic awareness activities. These station activities were primarily sourced from the program 'A Sound

Beginning for Reading' (O'Sullivan, 2021) and online activities from the 'Florida Centre for Reading Research' website (2010).

On occasion during my interventions I was so overwhelmed with data sources that I lost sight of the 'why' behind this research project. At times like this, it was necessary to return to my values and reflect on my actions. This process me enabled me to consider how I could improve my practice going forward without losing sight of my core values of inclusion and care. Exploring and reflecting on one's values is an ongoing practice throughout the self-reflection process required by the researcher in their action research.

4.3   My Standards of Judgement

A researcher's values form the foundation of their self-study action research. Therefore, it is these values that provide criteria for evaluating the research (McDonagh et al., 2020). My standards of judgement developed from my values and are outlined below.

1. All children can participate comfortably in a phonemic awareness program in a very non- threatening environment where no one is called upon individually and feels under duress and vulnerable.

2. All children can participate in small groups where individual needs will be catered for.

3. All children enjoy most activities and feel validated during the station teaching interventions.

4. I will see that my practice is improving when the majority of children can blend and segment three and four phoneme words

5. I will see that my practice is improving when all of the children can isolate the medial and final sounds in words.

In order to identify if I have improved my practice, I examined my data and searched for evidence of enhanced practice. 'It requires that you subject your data to detailed scrutiny as you seek to interpret your actions and produce explanations for them' (McDonagh et al., 2020: 156). As well as searching for evidence of enhanced practice, my actions were measured against my values to see if I was living according to them. In the next section, I will discuss my findings, the connection between these findings and my standards of judgement and I will provide evidence to support these claims.

4.4 My Findings:

This section will describe my three main findings, seen below in Figure 4.1. Data related to these findings will be provided and discussed. My standards of judgement were interconnected, as were my findings.

Finding 1	• The combination approach of teaching of phonemic awareness using the Heggerty Curriculum and station teaching have promoted pupil agency.
Finding 2	• Pupil engagement increased (during station teaching) when concrete materials and movement were involved.
Finding 3	• Individual needs can be identified and supported in a more inclusive way in a small group setting than in the whole class settting.

Figure 4. 1 Research Findings

4.4.1   Finding One

The combination approach of teaching of phonemic awareness using the Heggerty Curriculum and station teaching have promoted pupil agency.

The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) published a second edition of good practice guide 'A Balanced Approach to Literacy Development in the Early Years' in 2019. The document advocates that 'even the most able pupils will need explicit instruction particularly in the higher levels of phonemic awareness' (NEPS, 2019: 35). The Heggerty Curriculum is a Phonological and Phonemic Awareness program that I began implementing in mid-September. Initially I thought starting the Heggerty Curriculum in September was not the ideal situation for my research as I was not yet in a position to collect data. Therefore, I could not assess their initial level of phonemic awareness for the purpose of this research before beginning the Heggerty Curriculum.

Upon later reflection, I feel that the constant repetition of skills in the Heggerty

Curriculum on a daily basis proved quite effective in the mastery of the phonological and

phonemic awareness skills. The children already had a solid foundation (Appendix K) of

phonemic awareness skills by the time we began the station teaching intervention which was

hugely beneficial for their confidence.

4.4.2   Finding One and My Standards of Judgement

The combination approach of using whole class teaching and station teaching allowed

me to live according to my values of care and inclusion and this is how I experienced this to

take place. The whole class teaching of the Heggerty Curriculum allowed us to continually

revise the skills each day and enabled the children in my class to develop their phonemic

awareness skills in a comfortable environment where no child was questioned individually

which is aligned with my first standard of judgement 'All children can participate

comfortably in a phonemic awareness program in a very non- threatening environment where

no one is called upon individually and feels under duress and vulnerable'. By mastering

many of these skills, the children became increasingly confident manipulating the phonemic

parts of whole words which had the ripple effect of enabling them to become more and more

independent.

However, I found that this style of whole class teaching made it difficult to assess which

children were grasping the skills and which children were unresponsive or mimicking others.

The station teaching, which ran concurrently, allowed me to build on this knowledge from the

whole class approach and progress to catering for individual needs and I learned that one

program complemented the other. The station teaching setting allowed the learning support teacher and myself to facilitate teaching children with different abilities and highlighted areas of difficulty which we could then make provisions for. Although I do think the Heggerty Curriculum has many benefits, I think it is very challenging to assess who is having difficulties and to determine the exact area of difficulty. However, in the station teaching, this was easier to assess. I think the station teaching allowed for inclusive teaching as games could be adapted and support given to children experiencing difficulty. This is commensurate with my second standard of judgement 'All children can participate in small groups where individual needs will be catered for' which I will discuss later in this chapter. The theme of pupil agency will now be discussed in two separate themes: (4.4.3- 4.4.9) pupil agency overall and (4.4.9-4.4.11) increased independency of English Language Learners (ELL).

4.4.3   Increased Pupil Agency

The Heggerty Curriculum and station teaching approach have enabled the children in my class have become increasingly agentic. Data sources in the next section support this claim. Initially, I was concerned that the children would find it difficult to work in an independent station as this approach was new to them and they are usually very dependent on teacher guidance. I also thought the activities may be too difficult for them to manoeuvre without a teacher to guide them. However, I was surprised at how independent they were and how they guided each other, evidence of this can be seen in the extract from my reflective journal below. They were confident at transferring their phonemic awareness skills from the Heggerty Curriculum and applying them to their station activities to carry out the task. Data

collected from my reflective journal, teacher survey and observation notes provide evidence of increased independence and will be discussed in detail in the next section.

4.4.4   Developing My Critical Thinking around Pupil Agency

My reflective journal was the main source of documenting my changes in thinking and practice. Initially, it mostly featured recounts of events but then I became increasingly critical in my thinking and this outlet helped me to document changes in my thinking processes. I have drawn evidence from my reflective journal to support the claim of increased pupil agency.

> *While observing independent groups during station teaching, I saw one child using the teacher hand actions from the Heggerty Curriculum at the independent station. She was showing the other children why a word did not rhyme using the teacher hand actions. The teacher hand actions to explain concepts are more complex than the student hand actions. I have underestimated how capable the children are and possibly spoon feed them too much at times. Peer learning and group work are areas that I don't incorporate enough into my teaching because of their age but I can see that this is an assumption of mine that has no basis.*

> (Reflective Journal, 10/03/22)

I also had assumed that the children would need modelled support in applying the skills they have learned in the Heggerty Curriculum to other tasks. However, individual children started using their hand signals during a dictation lesson to figure out the medial sound in

words and others began to copy them without prompting. Similarly, a parent recalled during a meeting that their child was using their '*choppers to break up the word'* to spell it while writing a card at home. This demonstrates increased independence as the children used the skills they have learned from the Heggerty Curriculum to identify and segment the sounds in words without support. This is not only being used in station teaching but in other lessons and in environments outside of school.

4.4.5   Critical Views of the Heggerty Curriculum

A month after I started trialling the Heggerty Curriculum, my colleagues working with me in Junior Infants decided to start using it in their classrooms based on my recommendations. Two months later, three Senior Infant teacher and three learning support teachers also began to implement the program. This was incredibly helpful for me as we could discuss the advantages and limitations of the program together. My colleagues completed a questionnaire about their experience of the effectiveness and limitations of the Heggerty Curriculum for my research. Some of the responses to the question 'In your opinion, what are the benefits of the Heggerty Curriculum?' also provide evidence of increased pupil independence in their context too. This can be seen below in Figure 4.2.

'Children are able to identify words families when writing'. (Senior Infant teacher)

'Children's ability to identify rhyming words is much improved compared to previous years'. (Senior Infant teacher)

'The Heggerty curriculum has benefitted my student's independent writing'. (Senior Infant teacher)

'The children are transferring their (P.A.) skills while engaging in the phonics program'. (Junior Infant teacher)

'The added benefits of using a specific phonemic awareness program can really be seen in dictation activities where children have to segment the word'. (Junior Infant teacher)

'The children have become confident isolating the initial sound in a word and coming up with other words starting with that sound'. (Junior Infant teacher)

Figure 4. 2 Colleague Questionnaire: Benefits of the Heggerty Curriculum

From these responses, the development of independence for students in their classes can be seen.

4.4.6   Disengagement with the Program

As a result of the repetitive nature of the Heggerty Curriculum, I experienced disengagement of the pupils with the program. While some children found comfort in its routine nature, others grew tired and bored of it. This was also experienced by my colleagues. While they do all recommend the program, they identified several limitations which can be seen below in Figure 4.3.

'The physical layout of the manual is awkward'.

'While repetition is good, sometimes it feels like there's too many examples and it feels a bit lengthy'

'Some of the american words used in the program are not known to my students'.

What are the elements of the program that you do not like?

Four teachers noted that 'five days is a lot and it could be condensed to four days and be as effective'.

'Having to look at the book constantly, makes it difficult to watch the children and assess who knows what'.

'As weeks go by, some children have become less engaged'.

Figure 4. 3 Colleague Questionnaire: Limitations of the Heggerty Curriculum

4.4.7   Adaptation of the Heggerty Curriculum

To overcome this challenge, I adapted the way I taught the Heggerty Curriculum every week by changing the position of the children's chairs. Initially, the children turned their chairs towards me and pretended to be on an airplane called Heggerty Airways. This involved some airplane passenger and cabin crew role play at the beginning of each lesson. As the weeks went on, this was then adapted and some children sat on the floor pretending to be pets on a plane while the others were the passengers. This added an element of excitement for the children as they moved to a new space within the classroom and resulted in increased pupil

participation and engagement. I now realise that I was drawing on Schön's (1983) 'reflection-in-action' here as I adapted my practice in the moment while teaching.

I also created another incentive 'The Heggerty Star', where the pupil receives the title each day for performing the actions and demonstrating good listening skills. This proved quite effective at keeping he children engaged. I used Schön's (1983) 'reflection-on- action' as I tried to think of new incentives to keep the children engaged as it a lengthy and repetitive program. I was drawing on my values of care and inclusion by adapting the program to meet their needs.

4.4.8   Pupil Confidence and Skill Competency

Within the first week of my station teaching interventions I realised that some of the activities I had planned on using were too easy as the children were more competent in the skills than I had anticipated them to be. The Heggerty Curriculum had enabled many of them to master many skills such as blending and isolating initial sounds. This meant that some activities needed to be adapted and changed to challenge them further. Examples of activities used can be found in Appendix L. Some observations about the complexity of activities are recorded below in Figure 4.4.

15/02/22- Children found the activity 'Feed the Monster' to identify the initial and final sound, was too easy.

17/02/22- Children could work independently at the game rhyme time with no adult intervention.

1/03/22- Children could play the game 'Memory Match' after a quick demonstration.

3/03/22- SET noted that the activity 'Blending Bingo' was very easy as a teacher led station as all children could blend without any support.

Figure 4. 4 Observation Sheet Record: Incidences of Pupil Agency

4.4.9   Increased Participation of English Language Learners (ELL):

It is important to note that the phonics program was also being carried out on a daily basis but it was separate to my interventions. Throughout my research, evidence of increased confidence and participation of multilingual children can be seen. The children seemed to engage well in the routine nature of the Heggerty Curriculum and became increasingly responsive as they began to comprehend the various skills. I noticed that these children didn't interact as often in the phonics program as they did in the Heggery Curriculum. This could have been because in a phonics lesson, new sounds were being introduced so frequently that they were not confident enough to participate. As a result, they often became disengaged. I found evidence to support this finding in my reflective journal in the following instances:

Child A: *is always very vocal during the Heggerty Curriculum and often stays*

engaged for duration of activity. This is in contrast with their disengagement in other

curricular areas after one to two minutes. He also commented during the lesson saying 'I

am the bestest at this teacher'.

<div align="right">(Reflective Journal, 7/01/22)</div>

Child B**:** *is participating more often in Heggerty now than when it was initially*

introduced. She often asks what some of the words mean and this is a great opportunity to

discuss common nouns each day.

<div align="right">(Reflective Journal, 17/02/22)</div>

Child B: *is experiencing difficulty identifying the digraph sounds. However, she is*

very confident at blending and if the digraph is read for her, she can read the words

confidently. She has developed the skill of blending and now she needs support in revising

the digraphs.   (Reflective Journal, 28/02/22)

As a result of the constant repetition, these children grew in confidence and their

interactions demonstrate the success they felt while participating in the program.

4.4.10 Views of Multilingual Students:

The responses of the multilingual children in my class to the question on the student

questionnaire (Appendix G) 'Do you like doing the Heggerty Curriculum each morning?

Why?' can be seen below in Figure 4.5.
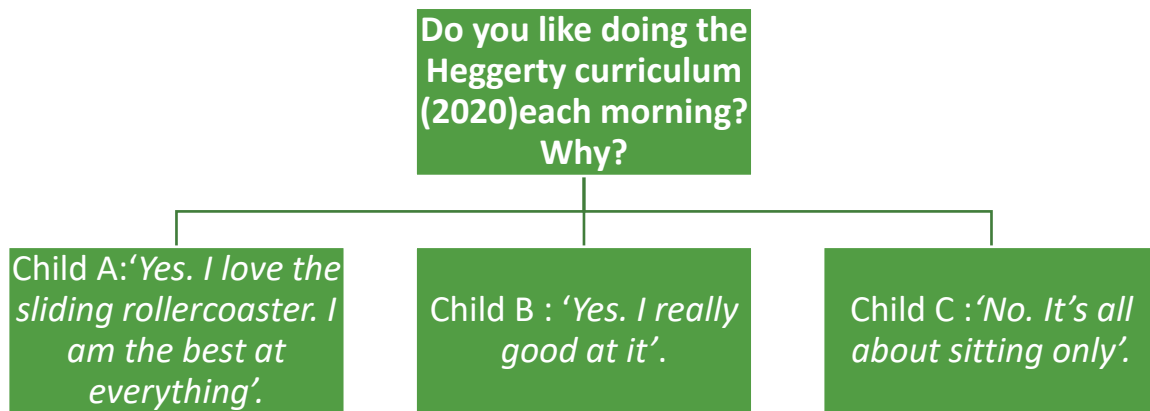
Figure 4. 5 Student Questionnaire: ELL Opinions of the Heggerty Curriculum

Child C does not like the program and often does seem quite bored during it. This child does have a high level of English and scored highly in the teacher designed assessment, (results can be seen Appendix K) which demonstrated to me that she is competent with these skills but she doesn't enjoy the program.

4.4.11 Colleague's Views on the Impact of the Program on Multilingual Children

The survey completed by my colleagues also provided evidence of the benefits of the program for multilingual children and their responses can be seen below:

- *'Easily accessed by ELL children.'*
- *'Oral language development and repetition of language is particularly beneficial for children with limited English.'*
- *'Huge opportunities and exposure to vocabulary and conventions of language for ELL'.*

All children could participate comfortably in the Heggerty Curriculum because it was inclusive of different needs, such as ELL students. From my own experience and from colleagues' feedback, this intervention has enabled children in my class and in other classes to become more independent and particularly benefitted ELL children in this setting also.

4.5   Finding Two

Pupil engagement increased (during station teaching) when concrete materials and movement were involved.

The phonemic awareness stations were generally greeted with enthusiasm when they were carried out twice a week. The children were more responsive when they were excited about handling concrete materials, earning an award or when moving physically during the activity. It was noted that the opposite effect happened and disengagement was evident when activities were introduced that had no concrete materials and involved no movement. I will now explain the connection between this finding and my standard of judgement.

4.5.1   Finding Two and My Standards of Judgement

This finding links with my third standard of judgement 'All children enjoy most activities and feel validated during the station teaching interventions' and is drawn from my value of inclusion. The children were praised highly during these interventions and seemed to have positive experiences. The children were asked about the station teaching in a survey (Figure 4.6), 94% of the children (17 out of the 18 children present in the class that particular

65

day), enjoyed the activities. I will provide evidence of this finding through data provided by the children's responses of their favourite activity, evidence from the teacher's observation sheets and my reflective journal.

4.5.2   Unclear Data in Relation to Pupil Enjoyment

At the end of the station teaching intervention, I initially used a ranking questionnaire (Appendix H) where the children picked their top three activities. However, I felt that this was too complex a task and some children were discussing what they were picking saying *'I'll pick this one because I don't want teacher to be sad that no one picked it'*. I felt this statement reflected the power dynamic at play that I was the authoritative figure. Although I had assured the children that this was their decision, they still were trying to 'please me' because I am their teacher. After reviewing this data, and considering its implications for my data collection process, I decided to try a different approach and carried out a survey where I gave the children a blank page and put pictures of all of the activities on the interactive whiteboard. They were then asked to draw themselves playing their favourite activity and think about how they felt during it (see Drawings A, B, C, D below). I discussed their pictures with each of them and recorded their responses. I feel that this was a more accurate portrayal of their favourite activity and it also provided me with data about how they felt during the stations.

4.5.3   Favourite Activities

While asked to draw their favourite activity and how they felt, all of the children choose activities involving concrete materials and movement which can be seen below in Figure 4.6.
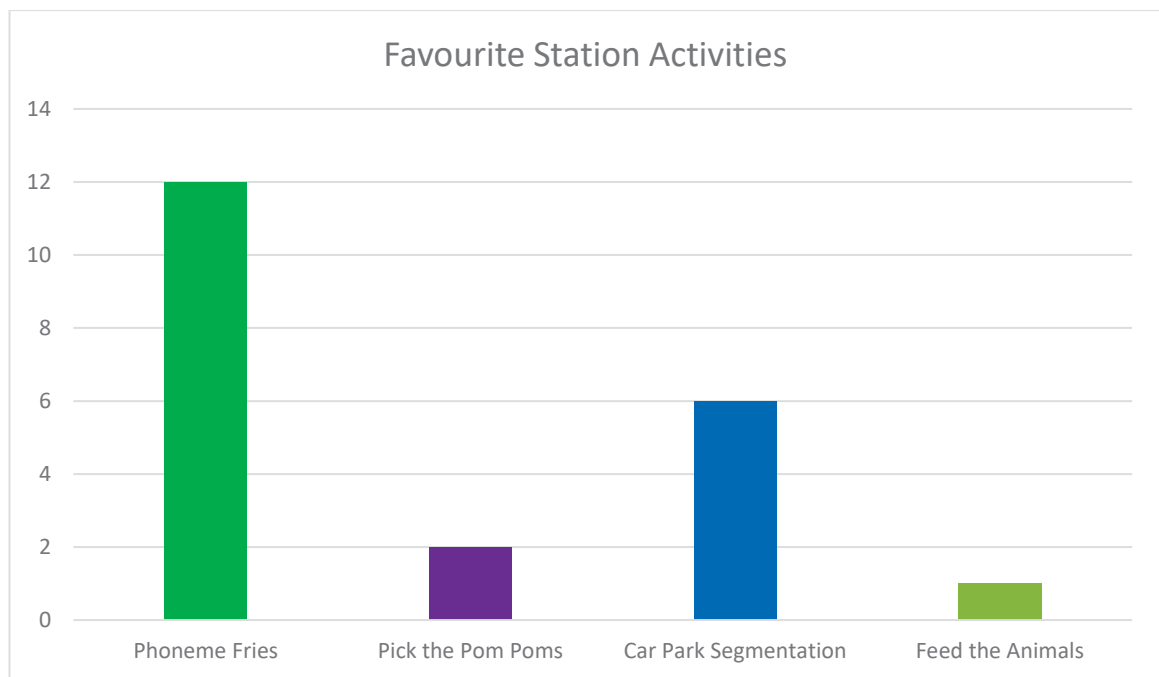
Figure 4. 6 Favourite Station Activities

Figure 4.7, 4.8, 4.9 and 4.10 are drawings of children's favourite activities and responses of how they felt during station activities.

Figure 4. 7 Drawing A

Drawing A: 'I felt happy playing the pom pom game because I liked to pick them up' (B.T. 28/04).

Figure 4. 8 Drawing B

Drawing B: *'I love chips and these are the boxes. I love counting them and putting them in the box. It makes me so happy' (L.M. 28/04).*

Figure 4. 9 Drawing C

Drawing C: *'I feeled a bit sad because the car game was hard' (P.B. 28//04).*

Figure 4. 10 Drawing D

Drawing D: *'I love playing all the games. We got to play in our groups with teacher by herself and it was fun' (A.P. 28/04).*

These drawings represent the different emotions experienced during station teaching. I found this activity a very affirming process for me as I hadn't realised how much the children had enjoyed the activities.

These drawings were also an insight into my students' perspectives which caused me to reflect and observe certain children more closely. Drawing C was interesting as I hadn't realised that this child was finding the task challenging or was worried during the activity. From then on, I made sure to check in on this child when introducing new topics as I then understood that she found new concepts overwhelming initially and could be quite anxious.

Drawing D made me reflect on how this child had said she enjoyed playing with me in a small group and it made me consider my relationship with this child. This child is quite capable and very quiet by nature and as a result often does not get as much of my attention as other children. This reminded me of the work of Noddings (1995) and how the attitude of the teacher can affect the relationship between the child and the teacher. This student's statement made me reflect on how I need to be more aware of the quieter, more able children in my class. They still need attention and care regardless of their academic abilities. From this point on, I will continue to try to interact more frequently with this cohort of children.

4.5.4   Lack of Pupil Engagement

Despite the overall positive feedback from the children, not all of the children were happy all of the time. The SET and I found it difficult at times to engage the children when

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there was a more appealing game happening at another table and such incidences were noted on the observation sheets which can be seen in Figure 4.11 below.

17/2/22: Rhyme Time game- '*we never get to play any of he funner games with the stuff*'- L.K .

15/2/22: Blending bingo activity- '*Children found this activity boring as it was too basic for them. They were all distracted with the 'Feed the Monster' activity that was happening at the next table'.*

4/4/22: Children did not enjoy the new game of sound substitution as much. '*Do we get to take some things with this game?*'- K.P.

Figure 4. 11 Observation Sheet: Instances of Disinterest/Disengagement.

The children tended to be less interested in games that had no objects to earn or pick up.

4.5.6   Reflections on Finding Two

The extracts from my reflective journal below detail incidences where the children who often can be disengaged and at times disruptive, were more engaged during activities with objects to manipulate and having the freedom to move. It was very obvious that the children preferred certain games as they would often squeal with excitement or move about excitedly on their chair when they found out they were about to play a certain game.

The activities where the children were getting up and manipulating concrete materials engaged children who often are disengaged (P.D., K.S., L.M., S.C.). These children had to be kept on task during the other less tactile activities.

(Reflective Journal, 29/03/22)

The SET carried out my game from last week (Phoneme Fries). All of the children were so excited when he taught their group. After discussing it with the SET, we both agree that the children prefer the games like Pom Pom Picker, Phoneme Fries and Carpark Segmentation where they are manipulating concrete materials.

(Reflective Journal, 30/3/22)

From these extracts, evidence of increased engagement was apparent when games with concrete objects were used. Children who were often distracted during lessons were more attentive when engaging in activities involving objects they had to earn.

4.6 Finding Three

Individual needs (in terms of phonemic awareness) can be identified and supported in a more inclusive way in a small group setting than in the whole class setting.

From my experience as a SET, I am aware of the benefits of station teaching. However, from a class teacher's perspective, I had not expected to learn quite so much from this intervention. The small groups gave me an opportunity to pinpoint the exact areas of confusion as well as highlighted areas of difficulty unrelated to phonemic awareness. I will

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discuss my standards of judgement related to this finding and then discuss the data sources to support this claim.

4.6.1   Finding Three and My Standards of Judgement

My fourth standard of judgement 'I will see that my practice is improving when the majority of children can blend and segment three and four phoneme words' and my fifth standard 'I will see that my practice is improving when all of the children can isolate the medial and final sounds in words', are inextricably linked to this finding. These standards are drawn from my value of inclusion. This finding that individual needs can be identified and supported in a more inclusive way in a small group setting is connected to these standards as they were the criteria by which I have evaluated the effectiveness of my interventions.

The data sources of the pre-intervention and post-intervention test (Appendix K) and observation notes (Figure 4.13) provide evidence that most children can blend and segment three-and four-letter words as well as isolate the medial and final sounds in words. The insights gained outside the remit of phonemic awareness (Figure 4.14) and my reflections on the small group setting also provide evidence that individual needs were supported in the small group more effectively than in the whole class setting.

4.6.2   Changing My Mindset

At the beginning of my research, I believed that this phonemic awareness assessment (Appendix F) would be the primary source of evidence of enhanced practice. In Figure 4.12

(which is also included as Appendix K for ease of reading) below, you can see the accumulative results of the pre-intervention and post-intervention tests to assess the levels of phonemic awareness. While this data is informative and shows that the children did improve in all areas, it has limitations. On reflection, it is not conclusive that the score increases are solely linked to the station teaching interventions. These improvements could be a result of continuing to participate in the Heggerty Curriculum each day, participating in the station teaching activities or a consequence of maturity and everyday experiences both at school and at home. There was three months between the pre-intervention and post intervention tests and any individual improvement or regression could be influenced by any of these factors.

My mindset at the beginning of this research was linear as I expected to put an intervention in place and then assess if it was effective or not. I assumed that quantitative data was more reliable than qualitive data as it was systematic and not influenced by personal interpretation. The process of analysing my data has compelled me to reflect on my previous mindset and explore how my thinking has evolved greatly since the start of this research process. Through the accumulation of different data sources and the subsequent analysis of each data type, I now recognise the value of qualitive data sources and how they are actually more insightful than any graph depicting numerical progression or regression. The graph below in Figure 4.12 is a visual representation of the changes in skill attainment and is a data source but it is only a small piece of this research journey and not the primary data source I had previously championed it to be.
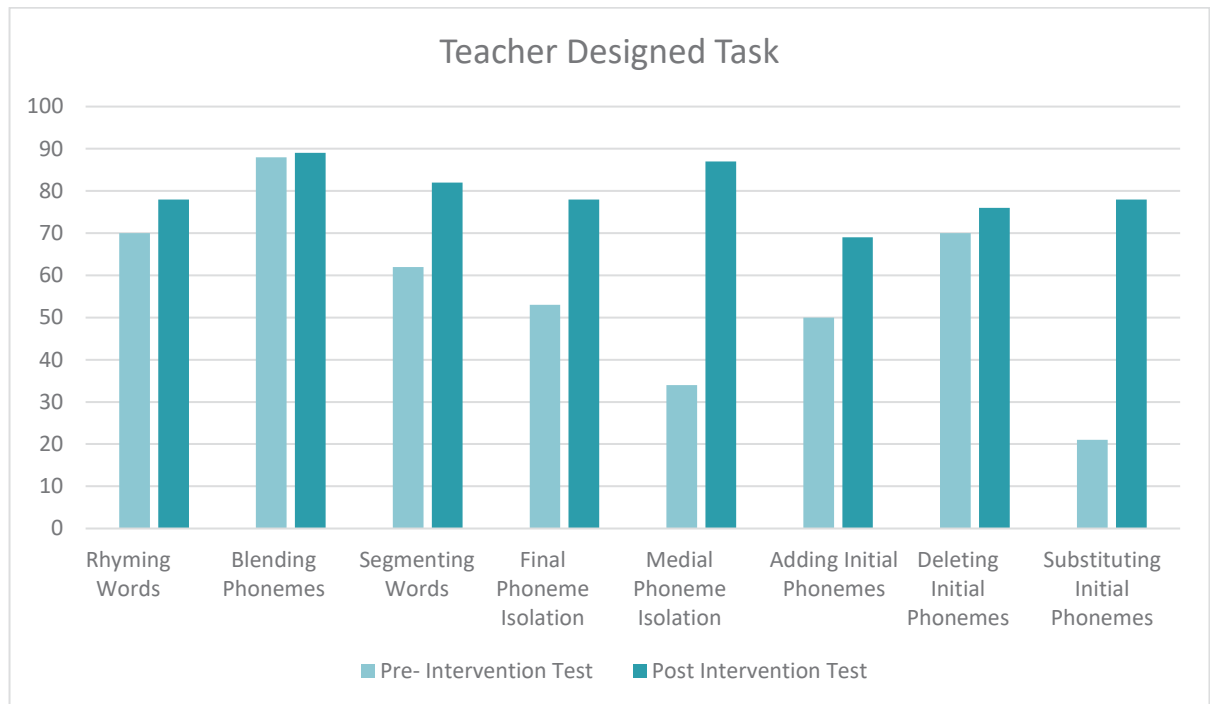
Figure 4. 12 Results Pre-Intervention and Post-Intervention Assessments

4.6.3 Reflection on the Effectiveness of Station Interventions

The observation sheets (Appendix J) enabled me to reflect on different incidences noted by my learning support teacher and me. This data source contained information on each student in my class during each station session; their level of skill proficiency and the exact details of their difficulty. They were incredibly important in enabling me and the SET in supporting these children on a 1:1 basis after this intervention. Specific targets for these children were put in place based on the information from these observation sheets. They also informed my choice of activities as I could reflect on what activities were enjoyable and to

gauge whether they were too easy or too difficult. Below in Figure 4. 13 are some examples of information noted on these observation sheets.

3/03/22: P.D. was very inconsistent in responses. Copied others a lot and didn't say sounds out loud even when prompted to do so.

27/03/22: C.A. experiencing difficulties with the final sound in words. Struggled to segment 'hand' and 'tin' and left the last phoneme out. Depends on others to give her the answer and speaks very quietly so it's difficult to assess her level of understanding.

29/03/22: G.L. needed support to segment. Added in extra sounds at the end of each of the words.

29/03/22: L.D. is usually disengaged during the Heggerty curriculum but excelled in the small group. She segmented 'brush' independently.

Figure 4. 13 Observation Sheet Record: Student Difficulties and Strengths

It also highlighted areas that were not directly linked to phonemic awareness as outlined in Figure 4.14. This was also incredibly insightful for me as these were behaviours and tendencies which I had not yet noticed in a whole class setting. This led me to observe these children more closely and record further incidences of such behaviour. Some behaviours could just be a result of immaturity as the children are still young. However, it is important to

have a record of such information for future teachers, in the event that certain interventions need to be put in place. Below is an example of such notes in Figure 4.14.

3/03/22: C.S. was quite fixated on colour and was very distracted while using concrete materials. He only wanted the red one (pom pom) and played with it throughout the task and didn't engage with the activity.

11/03/22: A.P. needed 1:1 support as her comprehension of the task was quite poor.
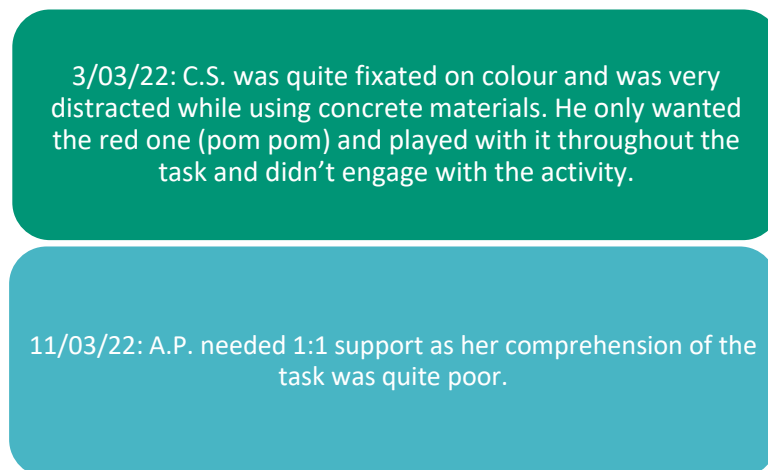
Figure 4. 14 Observation Sheet Record: Observations Unrelated to Phonemic Awareness

4.6.4   Unexpected Learning

I observed some patterns of behaviour that were of concern. These patterns had been unnoticed until this station teaching approach. My reflective journal stated:

> *I am really surprised at the poor comprehension skills of A.P. Since I realised that she didn't understand the task on more than one occasion during station teaching, I've been observing her. She seems to always be on task but I've started to question her to check for comprehension and she has struggled to answer. She has masked these difficulties until now by copying others. This is particularly noticeable in Irish lessons and she often is quite unaware of what is being taught.*

4.7 Critical Reflection and Changes to My Initial Interventions

The research journey was not without its challenges. One of which was sourcing appropriate, effective and engaging activities for the station teaching. The two most important skills that directly affect future reading, which it is crucial to develop in young children are blending of phonemic components into whole words and segmenting of words into their phonemic components (Yopp, 1988). For this reason, I wanted to focus solely on phonemic awareness for my station intervention. Despite planning on focusing on blending and segmentation, in reality I found it quite difficult to find activities that focused on blending and segmentation that did not require teacher support.

Another challenge I faced was Covid 19 guidelines, which prevented me from trialling ability-based groups for some of the station teaching. The guidelines released by the Department of Education (2021) advised that children sit in the same seat and group each day. Reflecting on this intervention, ability-based groups may have been a more inclusive approach as the children would be learning at the same pace as some of their peers. I found it difficult to engage all of the children in the activities as some were more able than others and therefore became less engaged more quickly than others. If the children had been grouped according to ability, perhaps the pace of each activity may have been more appropriate for all of the children.

4.8   Validation Processes

Dialogue is a primary element of action research as it clarifies and validates, helps with problem solving and offers a multi-lens approach. My three colleagues in Junior Infants, three Senior Infant teachers as well as two SETs formed my validation group. My validation group were a brilliant support to my research and their enthusiasm to trial the Heggerty Curriculum in their classes demonstrates how dialogue leads to critical discussion and new learning.

I met with my validation group three times during the research process. The aim of these meetings was to validate and critique the truthfulness of my research story and to check if I was living in the direction of my values. We met on the 12/03/22, 25/04/22 and the 15/06/22 to present an account of my research and discuss my observations and findings. Questions such as 'is there evidence of improved practice?' and 'am I living according to my values?' were discussed. The validation group were invited to ask questions, critique my work and offer feedback. Examples of accounts of this criticality can be seen in Appendix N. They agreed that my data supports my findings and that there is evidence of enhanced practice.

4.9   Evidence of Enhanced Practice

In order to establish if there is evidence of enhanced practice, I must return to the questions outlined in (McDonagh et al., 2020:150). In relation to the question 'Can I show evidence of enhanced practice?' (McDonagh et al., 2020:150). I suggest that my data archive

demonstrates that my teaching of phonemic awareness has improved through the implementation of a combined approach of whole class and station teaching.

The second question I referred to in the beginning of this chapter 'Can I identify a link between this improvement and my values?' (McDonagh et al., 2020:150) and I feel as though my values have remained central to my research by constantly reflecting on my practice. I have drawn evidence from my reflective journal to support this claim:

> *I felt as though some of the activities in the teacher led stations are too easy for some of the children. I was thinking of adapting activities to make them increasingly complex. I discussed this challenge with my critical friend who reminded me that I chose to implement the station teaching approach to ensure inclusion in my teaching. If I was to change activity for the minority of children who were finding it too easy, I would be negatively impacting the others in my class and would not be living according to my values of inclusion and care.*

(Reflective Journal, 17/02/22)

In relation to the third question 'can I show that there is an improvement in my understanding of my practice?' (McDonagh et al., 2020:150) I now understand the value of critical reflection and dialogue when trying to improve my practice. Being critical and the sharing of new learning leads to new perspectives and is a new mode of professional development that I have incorporated into my practice.

The final question I chose to reflect upon while searching for evidence of enhanced practice 'Does my reflection on my practice indicate an enhancement in my thinking

processes?' (McDonagh et al., 2020:150). I am becoming increasingly aware that I need to check that my work is commensurate with my values' and this extends beyond the content of my teaching activities and influences the atmosphere I endeavour to create of inclusion and care.

4.10 My New Learning

Through the examination of my data sources, I now claim to know how to teach phonemic awareness in an inclusive way using a mixed methods approach which caters for individual needs. While I think the whole class approach had many benefits, I do think a limitation was the difficulty of assessment and identifying which children needed extra support and in which areas. The station teaching gave me great insights into difficulties linked to phonemic awareness and unrelated issues. Some children really enjoyed the repetitive nature of the Heggerty Curriculum and the daily practice. Others grew tired of this approach and station teaching using phonemic awareness activities allowed them to develop these skills in new exciting ways. I have learned so much about the complexity of teaching and how one approach will never appeal to all individuals in a class. I realise that this research is unique to me, my classroom environment and the individual needs within my class. I have given a validated account of my research in terms of offering descriptions and explanations of my new learning and in the next chapter, I will discuss the potential significance of this.

4.11 Unanticipated Learning

My research journey has been a very interesting experience and very unlike what I imagined it might be. I became increasingly aware of the importance of the student voice regardless of age. At the beginning of this research process, I disregarded the use of a student questionnaire as I thought the children were too young. However, from the student questionnaire about school and the drawing survey, I realised that my students are the most important source of data as they have been active participants in my interventions for months. I learned so much about their perspective of school in general from the student questionnaire about topics of importance that were unrelated to phonemic awareness. The response of some children made me aware of how some of them didn't like yard time because they had no one to play with. Going forward, I need to consider inclusion and care as values that are not solely influencing my choice of teaching activities, but values to integrate into school experience as a whole. I need to consider inclusion and care as over-arching principles to create a classroom environment that models social skills and promotes effective communication. I had overlooked the effect of Covid 19 on the social skills of children in my class and as I value inclusion, this is an area of future development for me.

4.12 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented and discussed the main findings that arose from my research. I feel that my findings promoted and upheld my values of care and inclusion. Through the examination of my data sources, I now claim to know how to teach phonemic awareness in a more inclusive and caring manner. I am satisfied that the combination of both

interventions was successful at improving phonemic awareness in the Junior Infant classroom. The next chapter will summarise these findings, discuss strengths and limitations of this study, discuss the significance of this research on my learning and the learning of others and the dissemination of my research findings.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

This self-study action research project sought to enhance my teaching of phonemic awareness. I have now generated a living-theory around the role of phonemic awareness in my Junior Infant classroom. I have offered descriptions and explanations of how my values of care and inclusion inspired me to work in a fairer, better and more sustainable way. Working within an action research paradigm has influenced me and my practice in many ways. I will begin this chapter by reflecting critically on the 'messiness' of the action research process. Next, I will discuss my findings and some limitations of this study. Following this, I will discuss the significance of my research in terms of my own learning, the learning of others and how I plan to disseminate my research. Finally, I reflect upon how I have discovered new knowledge about my teaching practice and how I plan to continually enhance my practice through engagement with action research.

5.2 My Experience of Action Research

The uncertainty of this research paradigm was something I initially struggled with, as I was conditioned to think that following sequential steps which resulted in linear progress was the only form of effective research. The 'messiness' of the action research process according to Whitehead (2016: 5) 'includes a feeling of chaos and of not immediately finding order'. I felt overwhelmed when choosing the activities to use in my station teaching interventions as I was hesitant of which activities would be effective and beneficial. I quickly learned that

some of the activities were not suitable as I had underestimated the skill level of the majority of the class in blending and isolating skills. As a result of this, I felt that the data collection process in the first two weeks was at times 'like nailing jelly to a tree' (Sullivan et al.,2016: 29) as the activities were too simple leaving the children unengaged. McDonagh et al. (2020) suggest that times like this when things are not going as planned, the researcher should engage with their critical friend and literature.

After discussing my concerns with my critical friend, I was able to refocus my thoughts and engage once again with the 'why' behind my research. I was reminded that my research was inspired by my concern that some children were being excluded and feeling 'left behind' during the phonics program. My critical friend reminded me to keep this original concern to the forefront of my mind when planning activities, and in doing so would enable me to live closer to my values of care and inclusion. By articulating my thoughts, I was able to clarify my thinking (Sullivan et al., 2016). I chose new activities that were more suitable to the needs within my class. Although sourcing appropriate activities was an ongoing challenge throughout this intervention, I continued to seek advice from colleagues. Before beginning this process, I would have been reluctant to admit that I was struggling in my practice. However, I now appreciate the benefits of dialogue and critical discussion to 'help dislodge any fixed assumptions you have around your practice and see through 'new eyes' (Sullivan et al., 2016: 53).

5.3 A Summary of My Findings

In this research project, I wanted to find ways to improve my teaching of phonemic awareness in a manner that reflected my core values of inclusion and care. This research project began as I experienced myself as a 'living contradiction' (Whitehead, 1989: 41). I claimed to value inclusion and care but I was teaching a phonics program that I knew was too fast paced for some children, thus excluding them and alienating them. I felt passionately about enhancing my practice by finding an intervention that would help children with the phonemic awareness skills of blending and segmenting. My values determined my choice of interventions of whole class teaching of the Heggerty Curriculum and station teaching of phonemic awareness activities.

Data was collected from quantitative and qualitive data sources and evaluated using my standards of judgement. Data analysis and triangulation generated three main findings:

1. The combination approach of teaching of phonemic awareness using the Heggerty Curriculum and station teaching have promoted pupil agency.

2. Pupil engagement increased (during station teaching) when concrete materials and movement were involved.

3. Individual needs can be identified and supported in a more inclusive way in a small group setting than in the whole class setting.

I will now summarise and discuss each of these findings.

5.3.1 Pupil Agency

This new practice of teaching phonemic awareness empowered my students to become more independent in literacy activities. The constant repetition of skills in the Heggerty Curriculum on a daily basis proved effective in the mastery of the phonological and phonemic awareness skills. The children grew increasingly confident at transferring their phonemic awareness skills from the program and applying them to their station activities. Multilingual children also benefitted from these interventions and grew increasingly confident and independent. The students became agentic as they began independently recognising situations where they could use their skills during other literacy activities both in school and at home. Evidence of this was recorded in my reflective journal, colleagues' responses and observation sheets.

5.3.2 Pupil Engagement Increased when Concrete Materials and Movement were Involved

The children were increasingly engaged during activities involving concrete materials and movement. Each child chose their favourite activity at the end of the intervention and all of the children chose activities that involved earning a concrete award. The disengagement and distraction of some children watching other activities was noted by the SET and me at several stages throughout the intervention while participating in activities that didn't involve concrete materials.

5.3.3 Individual Needs can be Identified and Supported More Inclusively in a Small Group Setting

While the whole class intervention was effective at introducing the skills to the children, it was challenging for me to assess which children were mastering the skills and which children were experiencing difficulty. In this way, I don't think this intervention was fully inclusive as it treated all children the same, while being inclusive means treating children differently to cater for their individual needs for them to experience success. However, I do acknowledge that the Heggerty Curriculum was non-threatening and no child felt excluded or neglected during it which is in line with my value of care. This was why the station intervention complemented the whole class intervention as it allowed me to differentiate and identify exact areas of difficulty. It also provided me with important data unrelated to phonemic awareness, on issues related to social and comprehension difficulties which had been unnoticed until this point.

All of the pupils progressed in their level of phonemic awareness and these results are indicated in Appendix K. Therefore, the interventions used had a positive impact on the children's learning.

5.4 Limitations of the Study

A significant limitation when working as a researcher within your own classroom is the potential for bias in responses from the children. My students were the main participants in my research but it is possible that some of them were trying to say the 'right' answer in some

of their responses to questionnaires and surveys. Similarly, this limitation exists between my colleagues (critical friends and validation group) involved in the research as their responses many have been influenced by their professional and personal relationship with me.

Another limitation was the restriction of children to the same groups because of DES (2021) Covid 19 guidelines. This intervention could have been more inclusive if children were working with children of a similar ability and the pace of each activity could have been more appropriate for all of the children. This is something I intend to explore with my class next year.

While these interventions proved effective in my class, all classrooms are unique learning environments in which replicability of teaching is impossible. However, these interventions might be effective if adapted to suit other educational contexts. In the next section I will be discussing the implications of my research on my own learning, on the learning of others, its potential influence on policy and how I plan to disseminate my research.

5.5 Significance of My Research on My Own Learning

This research process has been incredibly rewarding and I have experienced significant benefits both personally and professionally. Critical thinking and meaningful reflection were not processes' which I had consciously considered as methods of improving my practice before starting this M.Ed. program. 'Critical reflection is, quite simply, the sustained and intentional process of identifying and checking the accuracy and validity of our teaching

assumptions' (Brookfield, 2017: 3). Brookfield's (2017) four lenses have developed my understanding of my teacher identity further as they enabled me to reflect on different perspectives and how there is no shared reality as we construct our own.

Reflection based on colleagues' perceptions was the area of reflection that I was most apprehensive about. However, I have found this experience to be the most empowering and enlightening aspect of my reflective journey so far. 'Self-understanding acknowledges the part of teachers in constructing their sense of self through active sense-making of their interactions and experiences with others' (Kelchtermans, 2018: 232). Although my critical friends and validation group have critiqued my practice and research, they have also affirmed my actions, supported and commended my efforts throughout my research. It was one of my critical friends who highlighted the positive impact of my research in enabling me to roll out a phonemic awareness program in three other Junior Infant classes, three Senior Infant classes as well as introducing this intervention to the SEN team. I feel that this collegial lens of reflection has strengthened my interactions with colleagues and instilled in me a sense of belonging in my school as I feel valued. In this way I have negotiated my self-understanding and now have a more desirable working environment (Kelchtermans, 2018).

I have become increasingly agentic in the past few months as a result of my research project. 'The combination of the lenses of identity and agency provide an opportunity to see the process of self-formation in action' (Buchanan, 2015:705). I now claim to teach phonemic awareness in a more inclusive way and in making this claim, I have 'brought new knowledge to the world' (McNiff, 2017: 258). I feel that this M.Ed. has given me the confidence I needed to try something different and I now feel as though I am showing what it

means to live my values in practice (McNiff, 2017). I feel validated in my practice and feel supported by my colleagues in a new way.

5.6 Significance of My Research for Others

This research process has been transformative for my practice and forced me to unearth my assumptions, critically question them and identify areas of contradiction within my practice. I hope to have had a positive influence on the children I teach. Their reading skills have improved and there appears to be little or no anxiety around phonics in the group.

My principal has invited me to support the other teachers in Junior and Senior Infants and some of the SEN team in implementing this program and my station teaching approach because of the positive influence it has on my students' learning. We will use the program in all four Junior Infant and three Senior Infants in the next academic year. In addition, the SEN team will use the program with older children experiencing literacy difficulties. The station activities I have made have also become a shared resource which will be used for an eight-week block in Junior Infants and also in small learning support groups at other class levels. My research has influenced my colleagues as they see the importance of phonological awareness and phonemic awareness in learning to read. As McNiff (2017: 259) states, as a researcher you can feel validated when you have 'exercised your influence on other people's thinking'.

Through discussion and critique of my practice, I have influenced the thinking of some of my colleagues and they have questioned their practice. 'Meaning emerges through

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interaction' (McNiff, 2017: 260). Brookfield (2017) states through dialogue with others, we are forced to question our assumptions regularly. In this way, I have influenced other people's thinking and practices (McNiff, 2017). By undertaking this research, I have encouraged my colleagues 'to speak and act for themselves' (McNiff, 2017: 260) and in doing so enabled them to realise that they too can bring about a change in their practice.

By undertaking this research, I have developed my consciousness and am now increasingly aware of educational issues and injustices. I imagine a future where are all students (especially Junior Infants) are actively cared for and wholly included in all class activities by a consciously caring and educationally aware teacher. By sharing my research, I hope to inspire other educators to do the same.

5.7 Dissemination of My Research Findings

I plan on sharing my findings with the wider educational community as I am aware of the benefits of engaging in collaborative and cooperative initiatives and recognise the importance of sharing my research with others. Gewirtz et al. (2009: 571) describe the teacher as a 'capable producer to knowledge, not reliant on experts elsewhere but as an active partner in dialogue with critical others'. My research may be of interest to other people in the wider educational context, for example teachers outside my school, policy makers and researchers in literacy.

Other teachers with similar concerns about how to improve their teaching of phonemic awareness skills could take inspiration from the interventions I used and adapt them to suit

their students. The findings of my research could be of benefit to policy makers with an input into the new curriculum. I plan on sharing my research by writing an article on inclusion in an educational journal. As well as this, I hope to present an account of my research at an educational conference. This will provide an opportunity for me to 'share my experiences and compare findings with other educators' (McDonagh et al., 2020: 183).

5.8 Conclusion

From undertaking this action research project, I have learned the value of critical reflection, dialogue and collaboration with others. I will continue to incorporate critical reflection into my daily practice as well as engage in the sharing of ideas with colleagues. I am now living closer to my values of care and inclusion and am no longer as Whitehead (1989: 41) describes a 'living contradiction'.

To conclude, I have come to realise that this process of trying to achieve educational improvement and the enhancement of my practice is not ending when I submit my thesis, but marks the beginning of my journey towards the continued enhancement of my practice. 'Teachers must be open at all times, and must be willing to acknowledge what we do not know' (hooks, 2010: 10). Teaching and learning are continuous processes and it will continue to be a challenge to live to my core values of inclusion and care. However, from the skills I have learned from engaging in this research, I feel equipped to question the structures and assumptions that shape my reality and will continue to engage in research projects to improve my practice.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Parent Letter and Information Sheet

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 improving phonemic awareness in children in Junior Infants to develop their reading ability.

In order to do this, I intend to carry out research in the classroom using the Heggerty Phonological and Phonemic Awareness Curriculum and station teaching. I will be using a range of different activities to develop the phonemic skills of segmenting and blending while reflecting on the effectiveness of my lessons and approaches.

The data will be collected using observations, samples of the children's work, voice recordings, a daily teacher journal and the pupils test scores. All data collected will be securely maintained and accessible only by me. 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. In the event of my research being published, it only be published in an educational and academic SETting and will not enable the actual or potential identification of the child. 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 moconnor@scoilmochua.com

Yours faithfully,

Meg O'Connor

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, voice recordings and samples of the children's work. The teacher is then required to produce a thesis documenting this action research project.

What are the research questions?

- How can I improve the teaching of phonemic awareness using the Heggerty Curriculum and station teaching in my Junior Infant class?

What sorts of methods will be used?

- Observation notes, reflective journal, samples of children's work, voice recordings checklists, pupil test scores

Who else will be involved?

The study will be carried out by me Meg O'Connor 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: moconnor@scoilmochua.com

Appendix B: Consent and Assent Forms

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 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: _____

Child's name ……………………….

I am trying to find out how children learn the different ways to break up words into smaller words and sounds. 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.

If that is ok with you, choose the smiley face.

If that is not ok with you, choose the unsure 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.

Appendix C: Letter to the Board of Management

Maynooth University Froebel Department of
Primary and Early Childhood Education
Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas
Ollscoil Mhá Nuad.

3ʳᵈ December 2021

Dear Principal and Board of Management,

I am currently studying for a Master of Education in Self-Study Action Research through Maynooth University. As a Junior Infant teacher, I am looking to research how I can help Junior Infant children improve their phonemic awareness skills. I intend to carry out research in the classroom by using the Heggerty Curriculum and station teaching to develop the children's phonemic awareness skills and reflecting on the effectiveness of my approaches and lessons.

The data will be collected using a mixed-methods approach, primarily focusing on Self-Study Action Research and keeping my own reflective journal. I will also be collecting data in the form of observations, reflective journal notes, voice recordings, checklists and samples of the children's work.

The children's names and the name of the school will not be included in the thesis. Before embarking on data collection, I will seek consent from both the children and parents of my class. Children (and parents) will be able to withdraw from the research process at any stage.

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

I would like to request permission from the Board of Management to embark on this research. If you have any queries on any part of this research project please feel free to contact me by email at: moconnor@scoilmochua.com

Yours faithfully,

Meg O'Connor

Approved by: _____   Date: _____

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Appendix D: Colleague Consent Form

Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education
Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas Ollscoil Mhá Nuad.

9th March 2022

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 titled *'How can I improve the teaching of phonemic awareness using the Heggerty Program and station teaching in my Junior Infant class?'*.

In order to do this, I intend on carrying out research in the classroom using the Heggerty Phonological and Phonemic Awareness Curriculum and station teaching. I will be using a range of different activities to develop the phonemic skills of segmenting and blending while reflecting on the effectiveness of my lessons and approaches. The data will be collected using observations, samples of the children's work, a daily teacher journal, notes and questionnaires from the validation group meetings and the pupils test scores. All data collected will be securely maintained and accessible only by me. 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 children's names 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: moconnor@scoilmochua.com.

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

Yours faithfully,

Meg O'Connor

Approved by:

_____ _____ _____

Print your name and title here   Signature   Date

Appendix E: Declaration by Researcher

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: *Meg O' Connor*

Date: 11.11.21

Appendix F: Teacher Design Task (Pre-and Post- Intervention Assessment)

Phonemic Awareness Assessment

(Adapted from the Heggerty Phonemic Awareness Assessment, 2020)

Name: _____   Date: _____

1. **Identifying rhyming words:**
   Do these words rhyme?

		Student response	Results
Cake	Snake		
Boat	Bear		
Fox	Box		
Chick	Stick		
Pink	Chair		

2. **Blending phonemes into words:**

Sounds	Correct Response	Student Response	Results
1. /m/ – /ī/	my		
2. /n/ – /ō/	no		
3. /ŏ/ – /d/	odd		
4. /s/ – /ă/ – /t/	sat		
5. /m/ – /ŏ/ – /p/	mop		___/5

3. **Final phoneme isolation:**

Word	Correct Response	Student Response	Results
1. bag	/g/		
2. safe	/f/		
3. walk	/k/		
4. mad	/d/		
5. guess	/s/		___/5

4. **Segmenting words into phonemes:**

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	Word	Correct Response	Student Response	Results
1.	bow	/b/ – /ō/		
2.	zoo	/z/ – /oo/		
3.	up	/ŭ/ – /p/		
4.	had	/h/ – /ă/ – /d/		
5.	big	/b/ – /ĭ/ – /g/		

5. Isolating the medial sound in words:

	Word	Correct Response	Student Response	Results
1.	hot	/ŏ/		
2.	map	/ă/		
3.	cut	/ŭ/		
4.	kick	/ĭ/		
5.	bed	/ĕ/		___/5

6. Adding initial phonemes:

	Word Part/Rime	Add /*/	Correct Response	Student Response	Results
1.	–at	/b/	bat		
2.	–in	/f/	fin		
3.	–ot	/n/	not		
4.	–up	/k/	cup		
5.	–ed	/h/	head		___/5

7. Deleting initial phonemes:

	Word	Without /*/	Correct Response	Student Response	Results
1.	nod	/n/	–od		
2.	jam	/j/	–am		
3.	boat	/b/	–oat		
4.	dig	/d/	–ig		
5.	fun	/f/	–un		___/5

8. Substituting initial phonemes:

	Word	Change /*/ to /*/	Correct Response	Student Response	Results
1.	see	/s/ to /m/	me		
2.	low	/l/ to /b/	bow		
3.	day	/d/ to /p/	pay		
4.	high	/h/ to /s/	sigh		
5.	cow	/k/ to /n/	now		___/5

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Appendix G: Student Questionnaire

Children's Questionnaire

1. What do you like most about school?
2. What do you really dislike about school?
3. What things do you find easy in school?
4. What things do you find hard in school?
5. Do you like doing the Heggerty Program each morning? Why?
6. How do you feel when you have to work with a teacher on your own?

Appendix H: Student Survey on Favourite Activity

<p style="text-align:center;color:green;">Student Survey</p>

Name:_____

Number the games 1-3 that you liked most.

Colleague Questionnaire

In your opinion, what are the benefits of the Heggerty program?
What are the elements of the program that you do not like?
Do you think there are any disadvantages/advantages of covering that many skills at once?
Do you explicitly name each skill when teaching the children?

Appendix J: Station Teaching Observation Sheet

Teacher: _____ Weeks: _____

Day	Group				Proficient	Developing	Experiencing difficulties	Notes
	R	G	B	Y				
	R	G	B	Y				

Day	Group				Proficient	Developing	Experiencing difficulties	Notes
	R	G	B	Y				
	R	G	B	Y				

Day	Group				Proficient	Developing	Experiencing difficulties	Notes
	R	G	B	Y				
	R	G	B	Y				

Day	Group				Proficient	Developing	Experiencing difficulties	Notes
	R	G	B	Y				
	R	G	B	Y				

Appendix K: Results of Pre-Intervention and Post- Intervention Phonemic Awareness
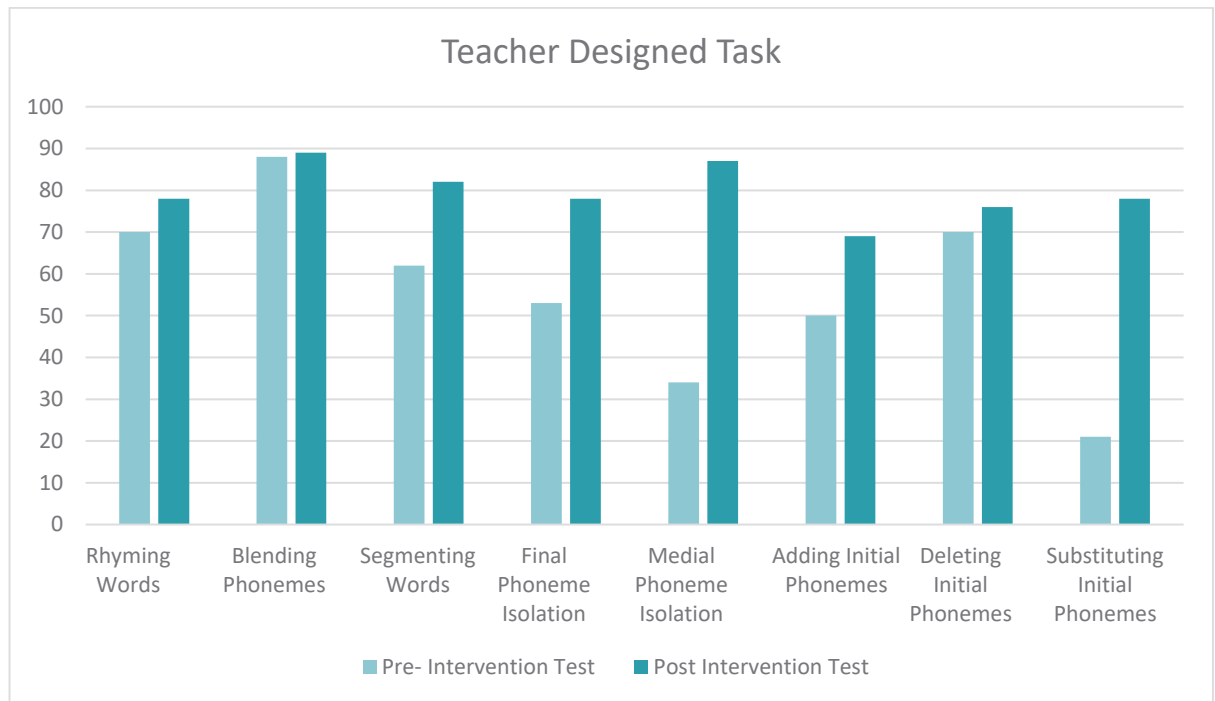
Assessment

Teacher Designed Task

Feed the Monster (O'Sullivan, 2021)
- Identifying the initial, final and medial phoneme

Feed the Animals (O'Sullivan, 2021)
- Counting the syllables

Blending Bingo (O'Sullivan, 2021)
- Blending phonemic parts into whole words
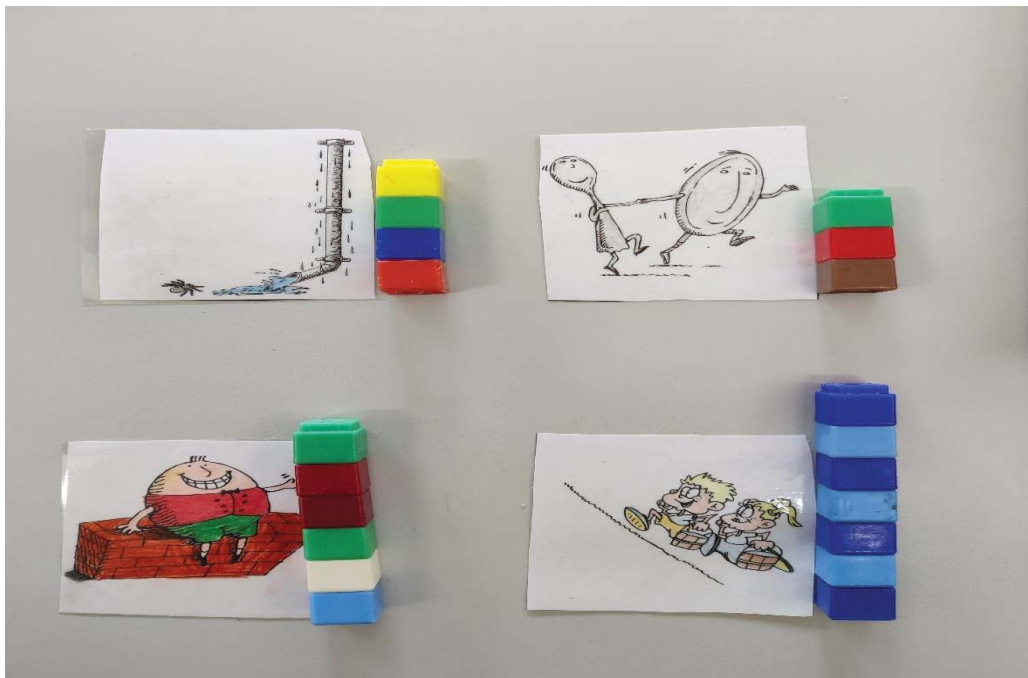
Nursey Rhyme Towers (Florida Centre for Reading Research, 2010)
- Sentence segmentation

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Rhyme Time (Florida Centre for Reading Research, 2010)
- Matching pairs of rhyming words

Memory Match (Florida Centre for Reading Research, 2010)
-Matching pairs of rhyming words

Phoneme Fries (O'Sullivan, 2021)
- Segmenting words into phonemic parts

Pom Pom Picker (O'Sullivan, 2021)
-Segmenting words into phonemic parts

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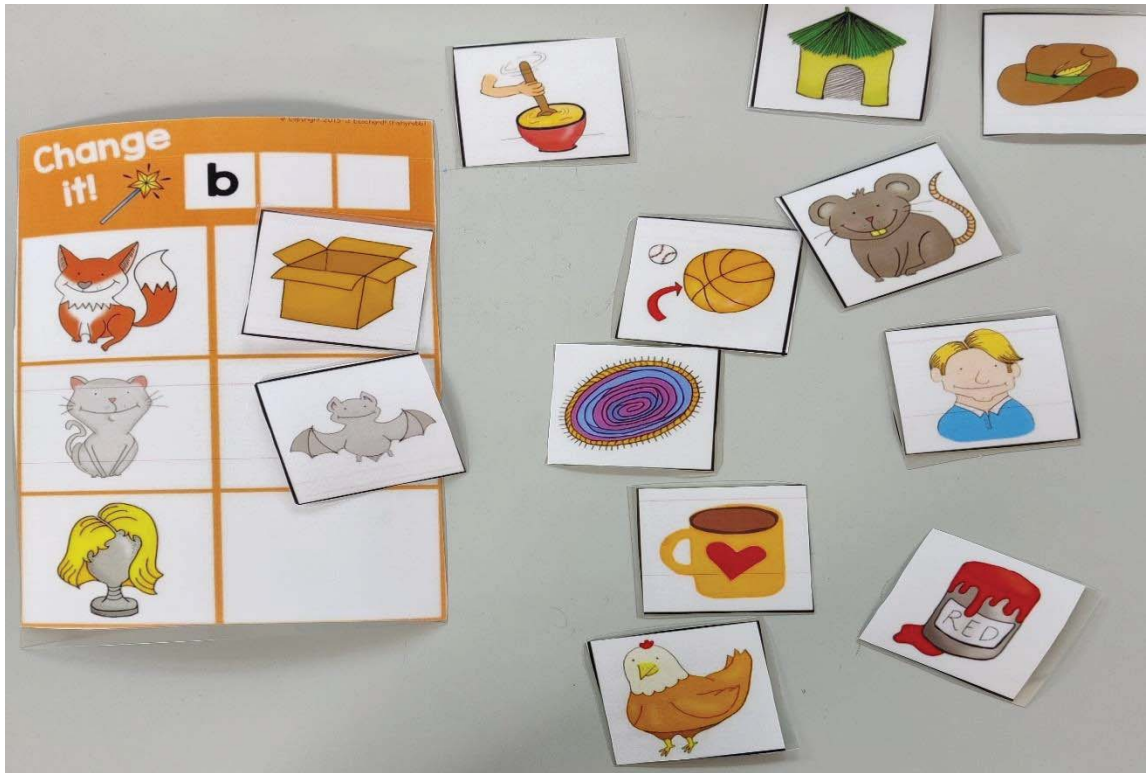**Car Park Segmentation** (O'Sullivan, 2021)
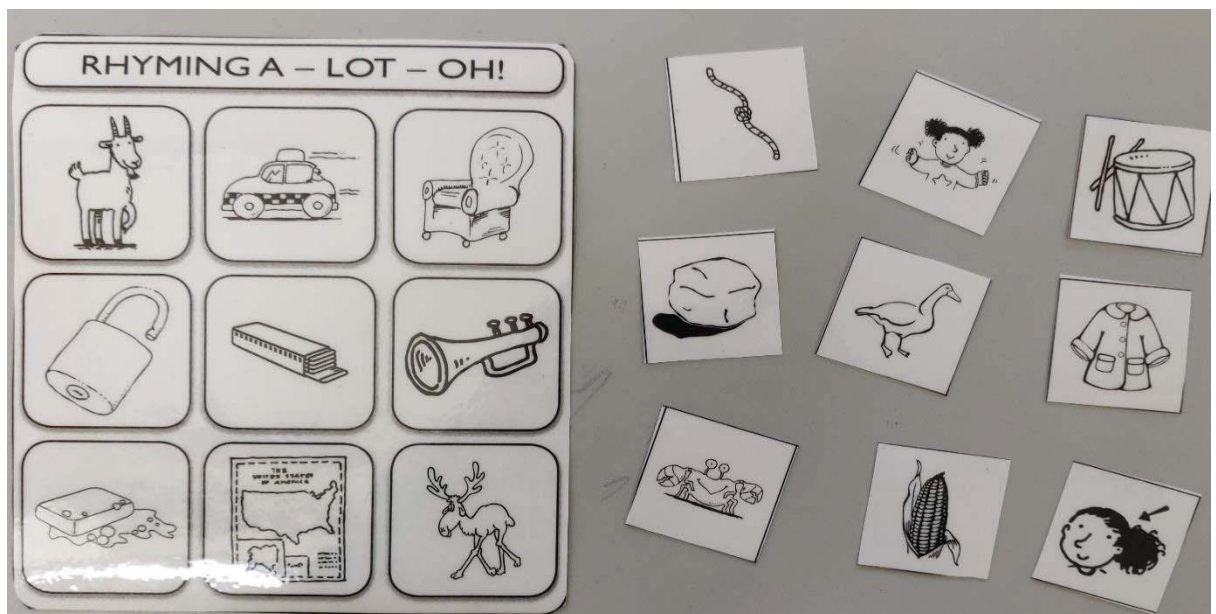-Segmenting words into phonemic parts

Doggie, Where's My Bone? (Make, Take & Teach, 2021)
- Identifying the position of a target sound

Change it! (Teachers Pay Teachers, 2022)
-Phoneme Substitution

Rhyming A-Lot- Oh! (Florida Centre for Reading Research, 2010)
-Rhyming Bingo

Appendix M: Curriculum Planning for Station Teaching

Phonological & Phonemic Awareness Stations				
Week 1	**Station 1:** **Class teacher** **Feed the Monster-** Identifying the initial and final sounds in words Reading: *Understanding- Phonological and Phonemic Awareness* *D-* distinguishes between two spoken sounds. demonstrates an awareness of changes in sounds of words.	**Station 2** **SET** **Rhyme Time-** Matching pairs of rhyming words. Reading: *Understanding- Phonological and Phonemic Awareness* *D-* Identifies and generates rhyming words, recognising onset. -rime.	**Station 3** **Student teacher** **Nursery Rhymes: Sentence Segmentation** Reading: *Understanding- Phonological and Phonemic Awareness* C –completes missing lines in nursery rhymes and recognises sounds of familiar letters. identifies words as sound units within sentences. demonstrates the ability to clap a rhythm.	**Station 4** **Independent** **Memory Match-** Rhyming pairs Reading: *Understanding- Phonological and Phonemic Awareness* *D-* Identifies and generates rhyming words, recognising onset- rime.
Tuesday:				
Station 1	Red	Blue	Green	Yellow
Station 2	Yellow	Red	Blue	Green
Thursday:				
Station 1	Green	Yellow	Red	Blue
Station 2	Blue	Green	Yellow	Red

Phonological & Phonemic Awareness Stations

Week 2	Station 1: Class teacher	Station 2 SET	Station 3 Student teacher	Station 4 Independent
	Feed the Monster- Identifying the final and medial sounds in words Reading: *Understanding- Phonological and Phonemic Awareness* D- distinguishes between two spoken sounds. demonstrates an awareness of changes in sounds of words.	**Blending Bingo-** Blend 3- phoneme words together Reading: *Understanding- Phonological and Phonemic Awareness* E identifies initial, terminal and medial sounds in words of three phonemes and segments and blends spoken words of two, three, four and five phonemes.	**Feed the Animals- counting syllables** Reading: *Understanding- Phonological and Phonemic Awareness* H-breaks new words into syllables, with confidence.	**Rhyme Time-** Matching pairs of rhyming words. Reading: *Understanding- Phonological and Phonemic Awareness* *D-* Identifies and generates rhyming words, recognising onset-rime.

Tuesday:

Station 1	Red	Blue	Green	Yellow
Station 2	Yellow	Red	Blue	Green

Thursday:

Station 1	Green	Yellow	Red	Blue
Station 2	Blue	Green	Yellow	Red

Phonological & Phonemic Awareness Stations				
Week 3	 **Doggie,** **Where's my Bone?** Reading: *Understanding-Phonological and Phonemic Awareness* E identifies initial, terminal and medial sounds in words of three phonemes and segments and blends spoken words of two, three, four and five phonemes.	 **Blending Bingo-** Blend 3- phoneme words together Reading: *Understanding-Phonological and Phonemic Awareness* E identifies initial, terminal and medial sounds in words of three phonemes and segments and blends spoken words of two, three, four and five phonemes.	 **Feed the Monster-** Identifying the medial sounds in words Reading: *Understanding-Phonological and Phonemic Awareness* D- distinguishes between two spoken sounds. demonstrates an awareness of changes in sounds of words.	 **Memory** **Match-** Rhyming pairs Reading: *Understanding-Phonological and Phonemic Awareness* *D*- Identifies and generates rhyming words, recognising onset-rime.
Tuesday:				
Station 1	Red	Blue	Green	Yellow
Station 2	Yellow	Red	Blue	Green
Thursday:				
Station 1	Green	Yellow	Red	Blue
Station 2	Blue	Green	Yellow	Red

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Phonological & Phonemic Awareness Stations

Week 4	Station 1: Class teacher Phoneme Fries Reading: *Understanding-Phonological and Phonemic Awareness* F- verbally segments spoken single and multi-syllable words into their complete sequence of individual sounds. verbally deletes and substitutes individual sounds to make new words.	Station 2 SET Carpark Segmentation Reading: *Understanding-Phonological and Phonemic Awareness* E- blends onset-rime and counts, pronounces, segments and blends syllables in spoken words.	Station 3 Student teacher Rhyming Bingo Reading: *Understanding-Phonological and Phonemic Awareness* *D*- Identifies and generates rhyming words, recognising onset-rime.	Station 4 Independent Feed the Monster- Identifying the initial and final sounds in words Reading: *Understanding-Phonological and Phonemic Awareness* D- distinguishes between two spoken sounds. demonstrates an awareness of changes in sounds of words.
Tuesday:				
Station 1	Red	Blue	Green	Yellow
Station 2	Yellow	Red	Blue	Green
Thursday:				
Station 1	Green	Yellow	Red	Blue
Station 2	Blue	Green	Yellow	Red

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Phonological & Phonemic Awareness Stations

Week 5	Station 1: Class teacher Phoneme Fries Reading: Understanding- Phonological and Phonemic Awareness F- verbally segments spoken single and multi-syllable words into their complete sequence of individual sounds. verbally deletes and substitutes individual sounds to make new words.	Station 2 SET Carpark Segmentation Reading: Understanding- Phonological and Phonemic Awareness E- blends onset-rime and counts, pronounces, segments and blends syllables in spoken words.	Station 3 Independent Rhyming Bingo Reading: Understanding- Phonological and Phonemic Awareness D- Identifies and generates rhyming words, recognising onset-rime.	Station 4 Independent Feed the Monster- Identifying the initial and final sounds in words Reading: Understanding- Phonological and Phonemic Awareness D- distinguishes between two spoken sounds. demonstrates an awareness of changes in sounds of words.
Tuesday:				
Station 1	Red	Blue	Green	Yellow
Station 2	Yellow	Red	Blue	Green
Thursday:				
Station 1	Green	Yellow	Red	Blue
Station 2	Blue	Green	Yellow	Red

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Phonological & Phonemic Awareness Stations				
Week 6	**Station 1:** **Class teacher** **Pom Pom Picker** Reading: *Understanding-Phonological and Phonemic Awareness* F- verbally segments spoken single and multi-syllable words into their complete sequence of individual sounds. verbally deletes and substitutes individual sounds to make new words.	**Station 2** **SET** **Phoneme Fries** Reading: *Understanding-Phonological and Phonemic Awareness* F- verbally segments spoken single and multi-syllable words into their complete sequence of individual sounds. verbally deletes and substitutes individual sounds to make new words.	**Station 3** **Independent** **Carpark Segmentation** Reading: *Understanding-Phonological and Phonemic Awareness* E- blends onset-rime and counts, pronounces, segments and blends syllables in spoken words.	**Station 4** **Independent** **Rhyme Time-** Matching pairs of rhyming words. Reading: *Understanding-Phonological and Phonemic Awareness* *D*- Identifies and generates rhyming words, recognising onset-rime.
Tuesday:				
Station 1	Red	Blue	Green	Yellow
Station 2	Yellow	Red	Blue	Green
Thursday:				
Station 1	Green	Yellow	Red	Blue
Station 2	Blue	Green	Yellow	Red

Phonological & Phonemic Awareness Stations

Week 7	Station 1: Class teacher Pom Pom Picker Reading: *Understanding-Phonological and Phonemic Awareness* F- verbally segments spoken single and multi-syllable words into their complete sequence of individual sounds. verbally deletes and substitutes individual sounds to make new words.	Station 2 SET Change it! (Phoneme Substitution) Reading: *Understanding-Phonological and Phonemic Awareness* F- verbally segments spoken single and multi-syllable words into their complete sequence of individual sounds. verbally deletes and substitutes individual sounds to make new words.	Station 3 Independent Carpark Segmentation Reading: *Understanding-Phonological and Phonemic Awareness* E- blends onset-rime and counts, pronounces, segments and blends syllables in spoken words.	Station 4 Independent Blending Bingo- Blend 3-phoneme words together Reading: *Understanding-Phonological and Phonemic Awareness* E identifies initial, terminal and medial sounds in words of three phonemes and segments and blends spoken words of two, three, four and five phonemes.
Tuesday:				
Station 1	Red	Blue	Green	Yellow
Station 2	Yellow	Red	Blue	Green
Thursday:				
Station 1	Green	Yellow	Red	Blue
Station 2	Blue	Green	Yellow	Red

Phonemic Awareness Stations				
Week 8	**Station 1:** **Class teacher** **Change it!** **Phoneme Substitution** Reading: *Understanding-Phonological and Phonemic Awareness* F- verbally segments spoken single and multi-syllable words into their complete sequence of individual sounds. verbally deletes and substitutes individual sounds to make new words.	**Station 2** **SET** **Phoneme Fries** Reading: *Understanding-Phonological and Phonemic Awareness* F- verbally segments spoken single and multi-syllable words into their complete sequence of individual sounds. verbally deletes and substitutes individual sounds to make new words.	**Station 3** **Independent** **Feed the Monster-** Identifying the medial sounds in words Reading: *Understanding-Phonological and Phonemic Awareness* D- distinguishes between two spoken sounds. demonstrates an awareness of changes in sounds of words.	**Station 4** **Independent** **Feed the Animals- counting syllables** Reading: *Understanding-Phonological and Phonemic Awareness* H-breaks new words into syllables, with confidence.
Tuesday:				
Station 1	Red	Blue	Green	Yellow
Station 2	Yellow	Red	Blue	Green
Thursday:				
Station 1	Green	Yellow	Red	Blue
Station 2	Blue	Green	Yellow	Red

Appendix N: Notes from Validation Group Meetings

12/03/22

- One of my colleagues questioned my choice of activities in the first two weeks of my interventions, pointing out that introducing sentence segmentation while teaching word segmentation in the Heggerty Curriculum each day was probably too similar for Junior Infants to grasp.
- Another colleague suggested that I maybe should have considered having the two teachers teach the same skill using different activities for consolidation purposes.
- All teachers liked the use of the same game 'Feed the Animals' for isolating sounds. They agreed it would also be suitable and effective when progressing on to isolating final and medial sounds.
- While all colleagues in the validation group enjoy the Heggerty Curriculum, we discussed if whether five days was too much and perhaps four days would be sufficient which is something to consider next year.

25/04/22

- During this meeting, I was asked by a colleague if it would have been more beneficial to have the independent groups carry out different literacy activities such as handwriting rather than continuing to focus on phonemic awareness in these groups. It was my critical friend who pointed out that the whole aim of these interventions is to be inclusive of different needs and if I changed the activity in favour of progressing other literacy areas for the majority of children, it would not be inclusive. It would not be allowing the children with SEN the opportunity to continue practising phonemic and phonological skills.
- The limitations of the Heggerty Program were also discussed and we shared ideas of how to improve engagement levels as we were all experiencing disengagement and boredom of the children.
- The SEN team have begun to use the activities for their literacy groups in Senior Infants and have found them to be very effective.

15/06/22

- One of my colleagues asked if I thought that the station teaching of skills such as blending would have been more beneficial if carried out earlier in the year. I agreed with her as the children already had mastered this skill at this point.
- A colleague also asked if I thought that maybe eight weeks was too long to run a station block for and if it would have been more effective if broken into two four week blocks of station teaching with a break in the middle. I did actually agree with this as I felt that with school holidays and different events, it was hard to keep up the momentum after week 6. In the future, I think I would definitely consider this when planning station teaching.
- After providing evidence of the graph of improved phonemic awareness skills, they all agreed that I have improved my practice. As well as this, they agreed that it is clear from my actions throughout my research that I am now living according to my values of care and inclusion.