



OLLSCOIL NA hÉIREANN MÁ NUAD

THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND

MAYNOOTH

Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

M-Ed (Research in Practice)

(2021-2022)

**How Can I use Professional Agency to Enhance my Teaching of Gaelige?**

**Sandra Champkin**

A Research Dissertation submitted to the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education, Maynooth University, in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education (Research in Practice)

Date: 09.09.2022

Supervised by: Dr. Liam Amhlaigh

## Cover Page

<b>Ainm / Name:</b>	<u>Sandra Champkin</u>
<b>Bliain / Year group:</b>	<u>MH52L 1 Year M-Ed</u>
<b>Uimhir mhic léinn / Student number:</b>	<u>21251728</u>
<b>Ábhar / Subject:</b>	<u>Master of Education (Research in Practice)</u>
<b>Léachtóir / Teagascóir: Lecturer / Tutor:</b>	<u>Dr. Liam Mac Amhlaigh</u>
<b>Spríoclá / Due date:</b>	<u>09.09.2022</u>
<b>Teideal an tionscadail / Assignment title:</b>	How Can I use Professional Agency to Enhance my Teaching of Gaeilge?
<b>Líon na bhfocal / Word Count:</b>	21,998
<b>Líon leathanach / Number of pages:</b>	150

**Aon ábhar eile sa tionscadal / Any other material in the assignment:**

Dearbhaím gur mise amháin / mise mar bhall grúpa (cuir ciorcal timpeall na rogha a bhaineann leis an tionscadal thuas) a rinne an saothar seo. Aithním go soiléir aon chabhair a fuair mé ó aon duine eile, baill fhoirne nó gaol clainne san áireamh. Mo chuid scríbhneoireachta féin atá sa tionscadal seo ach amháin nuair a úsáidtear ábhar ar bith as foinsí eile. Tugtar aitheantas do na foinsí seo sna fo-nótaí nó sna tagairtí. Dearbhaím go bhfuil treoirínthe an choláiste do thionscadail léite agam agus go dtuigim iad. Tá cóip den tionscadal coinnithe agam dom féin.

*I confirm that I alone / ~~I as part of a group~~ (please circle whichever applies in the case of the above assignment) produced this project. I clearly acknowledge any help I received from any other person, staff members or relatives included. This project is my own composition except for material of any kind taken from other sources. These sources are acknowledged in the footnotes or references.*

*I confirm that I have read and understand the Department assignment guidelines. I have also retained a copy of the assignment for myself.*

**Síniú / Signature:** Sandra Champkin

**Dáta / Date:** 09.09.22

## **Turn It In Report**

## **Abstract**

This thesis outlines my engagement with a practitioner based form of research, Self Study Action Research (SSAR). I explore how I use professional agency to enhance my teaching of Gaeilge with my Senior Infant pupils. Empowerment, positivity and creativity are the core values which underpin my research.

Two research questions are investigated. Research question one focusses on how I reflect on policy developments to enhance my teaching of Gaeilge. Suggested best practice is contextualised with reference to the Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) (NCCA, 2019). Research question two seeks to inform whether my engagement with implementing ‘suggested best practice’ can impact upon my sense of professional agency. Policies such as the Cosán Framework (TC, 2016) and the Looking at our Schools document (DES, 2016) situate the conceptualisation of professional development in the current political environment.

In line with the SSAR methodology, three cycles of targeted reflective interventions were trialed within my classroom to enhance my teaching of Gaeilge. This included the use of the Content Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) methodology (NCCA, 2019), alongside an emphasis on empowerment of pupils. Data was collected through the use of a reflective journal and focus group pupil interviews.

Cultivating empowerment to impact upon learning, as well as the benefits of responsive reflective practice, surfaced as findings. The learning environment was identified as a key factor which influences learning experiences and outcomes in the classroom. This finding transferred to possibilities for teachers’ use of professional agency, with school culture highlighted as an enabling factor for such. Findings, in relation to language learning,

highlighted the need for meaningful opportunities to use Gaeilge as a living language. Additionally, the need to cultivate positive dispositions towards Gaeilge was identified.

Interestingly, I noted that my study's findings relating to enhancing my teaching of Gaeilge were very similar to recommendations for the teaching of Gaeilge found within the recent Inspectorate report's (DES, 2022). More significantly, however, it is noted that the experiential process of identifying this learning highlighted the importance of experiential learning to positively impact upon teachers' motivation and perceived ability to implement positive change. It is concluded that professional agency is not just a renewed focus within policy to overcome accountability (DES, 2021), but an essential element of promoting teacher professionalism, an integral component for innovation in education to flourish and a reminder of the inherent importance of teacher voice for positivity and hope within the profession.

## Acknowledgements

Ba mhaith liom míle buíochas a ghabháil le mo stiúrthóir Dr Liam Mac Amhlaigh. Bhí tú chomh foighnach i gcónaí. Thacaigh tú liom trí smaointe iontach a chur ar fáil dom chomh maith leis an gcaoi a cabhraigh tú liom breathnaigh ar mo smaointe.

I would like to thank each of the lecturers on the Research in Practice MEd. It has been a learning opportunity like no other. The discovery of an MEd which promotes teachers as researchers, allowing for the voices in the classroom to be heard greatly appealed to me. I would like to thank Máirín Glenn, Bernie O'Sullivan and Caitríona Mc Donagh, Séamie O'Neill, Dr Bernadette Wrynn and any others involved, for their promotion of the Action Research methodology within the teaching profession in Ireland. Your dedication to this work is inspirational. You have instilled a renewed passion for theory upon me, highlighting the possibilities in this as a practising teacher. Thank you.

I would like to thank my school, including my inspirational, wise principal alongside my supportive colleagues. I am lucky to be a part of such a positive, proactive, caring learning community. I would also like to thank my pupils who wholeheartedly engaged with this project. Maith sibh!

I would like to thank my twin sister Linda for her support throughout, for proofreading, for discussing ideas and for encouraging me to complete this MEd. Finally I would like to thank my brother in law Jason for the dinners and tea, much needed fuel to keep going!



## Declaration

I certify that this research, submitted for the degree of Master of Education, Maynooth University, is entirely my own work, has not been taken from the work of others and has not been submitted in any other university. The work of others, to an extent, has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

A photograph of a handwritten signature in black ink on lined paper. The signature reads "Sandra Champkin" in a cursive script.

Date: 09/09/2022

## Table of Contents

Cover Page	ii
Turn It In Report	iii
Abstract	iv
Acknowledgements	vi
Table of Contents	viii
List of Appendices	xii
List of Tables and Figures	xiv
Abbreviations and Acronyms	xvi
<b>Chapter One: Introduction</b>	
<b>1.1. Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1.2. Focus, Aims and Values</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>1.3. Research Background</b>	<b>3</b>
1.3.1. Professional Context: Why Professional Agency?	3
1.3.2. Personal Experience: A Renewed Focus on Gaeilge	5
1.3.3. The Influence of External Political Environment	6
<b>1.4. Research Context and Intervention</b>	<b>7</b>
1.4.1. Current Context: Covid-19 Pandemic	7
<b>1.5. Thesis Structure</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>1.6. Conclusion to Chapter One</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Chapter Two: Literature Review</b>	
<b>2.1. Introduction</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>2.2. Section One: Professional Development</b>	<b>10</b>
2.2.1. Cosán: A Framework for Professional Development	10
2.2.2. Evolving needs of CPD	12
2.2.3. Accountability: A Barrier Towards Professional Agency	13
2.2.4. School Culture	14
2.2.5. Teacher Identity Theory	16
2.2.6. Teachers as Agentic Professionals	16
2.2.7. Promoting Professional Agency	18



2.2.8. Conclusion to Section One	19
<b>2.3. Section Two: Gaeilge</b>	<b>20</b>
2.3.1. Context of the Irish Language: Recent Policy	20
2.3.2. Promoting the Irish language: The Primary Language Curriculum (2019)	22
2.3.3. Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)	23
2.3.4. Positivity: Creating Positive Dispositions in Children	24
2.3.5. Empowerment	25
2.3.6. Conclusion to Section Two	27
<b>2.4. Conclusion</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Chapter Three: Research Methodology</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>3.1. Introduction to Chapter Three</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>3.2. Self Study Action Research</b>	<b>29</b>
3.2.1. Rationale	29
3.2.2. Action Research Paradigm	33
3.2.3. Living theory approach	35
<b>3.3. Research Questions</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>3.4. Data Collection</b>	<b>38</b>
3.4.1. Qualitative Data	38
3.4.2. Research Site and Participants	39
<b>3.5. Data Collection Tools</b>	<b>39</b>
3.5.1. Teacher Reflective Journal	39
3.5.2. Focus Group Interviews with Pupils	41
<b>3.6. Research Design and Process</b>	<b>42</b>
3.6.1. Research Design	42
3.6.2. Evolution of Action Cycles	42
3.6.3. Action Cycle One	43
3.6.4. Action Cycle Two	46
3.6.5. Action Cycle Three	47
<b>3.7. Ethical Considerations</b>	<b>49</b>
3.7.1. Ethics Approval Process	49
3.7.2. Informed Consent	49

3.7.3. Child Assent	50
3.7.4. Data Storage	50
3.7.5. Confidentiality and Anonymity	51
3.7.6. Ethical considerations for voice recording with children	51
3.7.7. Ethical consideration for interviews with children	51
<b>3.8. Data Analysis</b>	<b>52</b>
3.8.1. Thematic Analysis	52
3.8.2. Validity	53
3.8.3. The Formation of a Learning Community	54
3.8.4. Critical Friend	55
<b>3.9. Conclusion</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>Chapter Four: Data Analysis and Findings</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>4.1. Introduction to Chapter Four</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>4.2. Data Analysis Learning Journey</b>	<b>59</b>
4.2.1. Coding Process	61
4.2.2. Identification of Themes	61
<b>4.3. Theme One: Teacher as Learner</b>	<b>66</b>
<b>4.3.1. Subtheme One: Learning environment</b>	<b>66</b>
<i>Match of Values with my School</i>	67
<i>Positive Culture</i>	69
<i>Professional Conversations</i>	70
<i>Leadership</i>	70
<b>4.3.2 Finding One</b>	<b>71</b>
<i>A Change of Focus</i>	72
<i>A Supportive Atmosphere</i>	72
<i>Possibility and Interest</i>	73
<b>4.3.3. Subtheme Two: Experiential Learning</b>	<b>73</b>
<i>The Inevitability of Disappointment</i>	73
<i>Creative Problem Solving</i>	75
<i>Individual and Shared Reflective Practice</i>	76
<i>Committed, Skillful, Agentic Professional</i>	77

<b>4.3.4. Finding Two</b>	<b>77</b>
<i>Living Theory</i>	78
<i>Leading Change</i>	79
<b>4.4. Theme Two: Gaeilge as a Living Language</b>	<b>80</b>
<b>4.4.1 Subtheme One: Meaning</b>	<b>80</b>
<i>Student Voice</i>	80
<i>A Communicative Approach</i>	82
<i>Commitment Towards a Meaningful use of Gaeilge</i>	83
<b>4.4.2 Subtheme Two: Personal Mastery Experiences</b>	<b>84</b>
<i>Empowerment</i>	84
<i>Impact</i>	86
<b>4.4.3 Finding Three</b>	<b>87</b>
<i>Enhancing Practice</i>	88
<i>Focus on Process</i>	89
<b>4.5 Finding Four: Innovation and Transformational Change</b>	<b>90</b>
<b>4.6. Conclusion</b>	<b>92</b>
<b>Chapter Five: Conclusion and Recommendations</b>	<b>93</b>
<b>5.1. Introduction</b>	<b>93</b>
<b>5.2. Summary of findings</b>	<b>93</b>
<b>5.3. Limitations</b>	<b>95</b>
<b>5.4. Recommendations for Future Educational Research</b>	<b>96</b>
<b>5.5. Conclusion</b>	<b>97</b>
<b>Reference List</b>	<b>99</b>
<b>Appendices</b>	<b>111</b>

## **List of Appendices**

**Appendix A:** Example of Meta-reflection within my Teacher Reflection Journal

**Appendix B:** Interview Questions used During Focus Group Discussions with my Pupils

**Appendix C:** Experiential Learning: A Comparative Overview of my Final Action Research Cycles with their Pre Planned Counterparts

**Appendix D:** Example of Gaeilge Vocabulary Targeted in Action Cycle One during PE, as Shown in my Fortnightly Plan for January 2022

**Appendix E:** Visual Representation of Vocabulary Used in Action Cycle One as seen from a Child's Perspective Displayed Within my Classroom

**Appendix F:** Excerpt from my Fortnightly Plan from January 2022: Plan for Aistear Integrated Teaching Time, Including Integration of Gaeilge & Related Foclóir

**Appendix G:** Screenshot of Google Slides Art CLIL Lessons from Action Cycle Two

**Appendix H:** Repeated Vocabulary in AC2 Art Lessons Which used the CLIL Methodology

**Appendix I:** Description of Games used within Action Cycle Three

**Appendix J:** Sample of Letter to Board of Management to Seek Permission to Conduct Research Study

**Appendix K:** Sample of Letter to Parents to Seek Consent for Child's Participation in my Study

**Appendix L:** Information Sheet for Parents with Regards to my Study

**Appendix M:** Sample of Letter Regarding Child Assent for my Study

**Appendix N:** Sample of Slides as seen in my College Presentation from June 2022 with Regards to Validating my Research

**Appendix O:** Informal Message Which I Sent to my Colleagues in Relation to my Research (May 2022)

**Appendix P:** Letter of Consent for Critical Friend

**Appendix Q:** Sample Excerpt of Teacher Reflective Journal with Initial Codes Indicated Throughout

**Appendix R:** Excerpt of the Transcript of Interviews with Pupils (January 2022) Prior to the Action Research Intervention Cycles

## **List of Tables and Figures**

**Figure 1.1:** Overview of my Experience of Resigning a Permanent Job in 2019

**Figure 1.2:** Example of CPD Undertaken as Shown in my Standard Application Form, 2020

**Figure 2.1:** Key Elements of Cosán Framework for Teachers' Learning (TC, 2016b: 28)

**Figure 2.2:** Key Pillars of Teaching and Learning (DES et al., 2021: 7)

**Figure 3.1:** Illustration of Kolb's Learning Cycle (Kolb, 1984: 97)

**Figure 3.2:** Interpretation of Action Research Spiral (Kemmis et al, 2004)

**Figure 3.3:** Hallmarks of a Living Theory Approach in my Research (Huxtable & Whitehead, 2021)

**Figure 3.4:** Three Components of Action Cycle One

**Figure 3.5:** Features of Action Cycle Two

**Figure 3.6:** Features of Action Cycle Three

**Figure 3.7:** Overview of Braun and Clarke's (2019) Six Step Process of Thematic Analysis

**Figure 3.8:** Brookfield's (2017) Four Lenses of Critical Reflection

**Figure 4.1:** Overview of Themes and Subthemes Within my Data

**Figure 4.2:** The Link Between the Themes in my Data and my Identified Values

**Figure 4.3:** An Overview of my Use of Braun & Clarke's (2019; 2021) Six Step Thematic Data Analysis Process

**Figure 4.4:** Correlation of Initial Codes with my Two Themes

**Figure 4.5:** Categorisation of Initial Codes with Examples of Critical Reflective Questioning

**Figure 4.6:** Macro Level Thematic Map on the Learning Process and Improving Practice,  
Source: Developed by author, informed by Kiger & Varpio (2020)

**Figure 4.7:** Micro Level Thematic Map on the Learning Process and Improving Practice

**Figure 4.8:** Environmental Factors Which Impacted my *use* of Agency

**Figure 4.9:** Obstacles which Arose in my Experiential Learning Journey

**Figure 4.10:** Features of my Art Lessons using CLIL Approach within Action Cycle Two

**Figure 4.11:** Influencing Factors upon the Possibility for Innovation in Education

## Abbreviations and Acronyms

<b>AC1</b>	Action Cycle One
<b>AC2</b>	Action Cycle Two
<b>AC3</b>	Action Cycle Three
<b>AR</b>	Action Research
<b>CLIL</b>	Content and Language Integrated Learning
<b>CPD</b>	Continuing Professional Development
<b>DCHG</b>	Department of Culture, Heritage and Gaeltacht
<b>DEIS</b>	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
<b>DES</b>	Department of Education and Skills
<b>DTCAGM</b>	Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht and Media
<b>LAOS</b>	Looking at our School
<b>MEd</b>	Masters of Education
<b>NCCA</b>	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
<b>NUIM</b>	National University of Ireland, Maynooth
<b>PAR</b>	Participatory Action Research
<b>PE</b>	Physical Education
<b>PLC</b>	Primary Language Curriculum
<b>SEN</b>	Special Educational Needs
<b>SSAR</b>	Self Study Action Research
<b>SSARP</b>	Self Study Action Research Project
<b>SMART</b>	Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Time Bound
<b>TC</b>	Teaching Council



**USA**      United States of America  
**TRJ**      Teacher Reflective Journal

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **1.1. Introduction**

This thesis outlines my Self Study Action Research Project (SSARP) which was undertaken as part of a Masters of Education (MEd), Research in Practice programme in the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education, Maynooth University. The chosen title for my thesis was ‘How can I use professional agency to enhance my teaching of Gaeilge?’ This chapter begins by outlining the focus, aims and values of the two areas of my study: professional agency and Gaeilge.

My interest in professional agency is framed amidst an emergence of a very recent policy focus on teachers as agentic professionals (NCCA, 2019; DES et al 2021). This focus was impacted by over a decade of teaching experience which was directly influenced by a market led, performative focused approach to education (Kirwan & Hall, 2016). In this time, I experienced the living reality of the definition for ‘good teaching’ habitually sought and answered by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) inspectorate to prioritise accountability and performativity (Simmie et al., 2016: 14). Conversely, and in line with my beliefs, Devine et al (2013) suggest that ‘good teachers’ are in fact passionate about teaching and learning, have a social and moral dimension, are reflective practitioners, can plan and manage learning effectively and have a love for children. This conflict frames my experience and the context for my research.

The acknowledgement of teacher agency within policy is also set alongside a change in my professional context as I recently relocated to a new school environment (NCCA, 2019; DES et al 2021). I outline my personal experience in this regard in order to provide a background

context for my research. I then explore my renewed focus on Gaeilge in my new professional context. Finally, a synopsis of the chapters within this thesis is given to conclude this chapter.

## **1.2. Focus, Aims and Values**

There are two elements within my SSARP, both of which are inter-related. The first element is the concept of professional agency, whilst the second element is my applied use of this to implement a self-directed enhancement in my teaching of Gaeilge. SSAR is the chosen research methodology for my study because I believe it is, as Sullivan et al (2016: 25) state, “a living authentic form of continuing professional development (CPD) that has the potential to change both practice and practitioner irrevocably”.

I am passionate about the need for active promotion of professional agency because I believe that a lack of empowerment and possibility is detrimental towards the teaching profession. I value creativity, positivity and empowerment. I place importance upon the need for a voice to be given to teachers as professionals in the pedagogical approaches taken towards teaching and learning in their classrooms.

The aim of the intervention cycles within my SSARP was to enhance my teaching of Gaeilge. I identified a feeling of increased apathy towards Gaeilge from pupils on a general level. Therefore, I aimed to positively influence my student’s attitudes towards the language. I acknowledged and reflected upon my positive experience of learning Gaeilge in school and at third level. Such was the positive impact of my secondary school Irish teacher that I chose Marino for my Bachelor of Education degree due to the emphasis on Gaeilge. Similarly, positive experiences at third level influenced me to pursue a scholarship for my final teaching practice during which I taught in a Gaeltacht area. I noted the positive repercussions of the initial positive

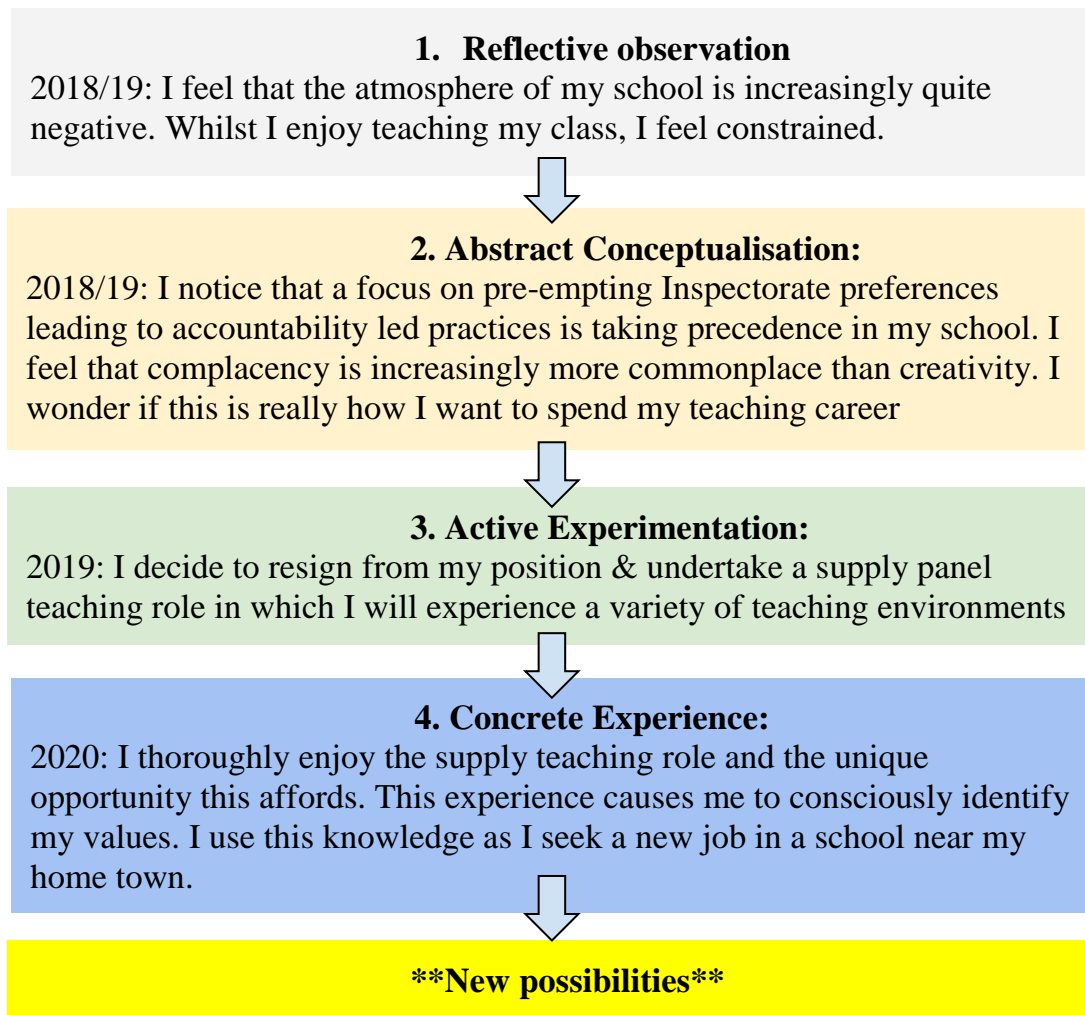
disposition which was cultivated in school and college for me, leading to further motivation and indeed a positive feedback loop. Therefore an aim of my study evolved to attempt to empower my pupils with regards to their learning of Gaeilge.

### **1.3. Research Background**

My engagement in this research project has ignited my interest in teacher identity theory and exploration of impacting factors on my professional development (Hargreaves, 2000; Mockler, 2011; Buchanan, 2015; Simmie et al., 2016). As a result, I will use Mockler's (2011) three domains of teacher identity to outline key influences on the development of my SSARP in the form it evolved into. These domains include professional context, personal experience, and external political environment (Mockler, 2011).

#### **1.3.1. Professional Context: Why Professional Agency?**

Mockler's (2011: 4) first domain of teacher identity is 'professional context', namely the influence of career history and professional learning. Professional context has influenced my enrollment on this specific Masters in Education (MEd) programme, whilst it has equally impacted upon my values. Figure 1.2 (shown below) outlines the significant professional experience of resigning from a permanent teaching position after twelve years, in 2019. I use Kolb's (1984) reflective learning cycle of reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, active experimentation and concrete experience to describe this experience.



*Figure 1.1: Overview of my experience of resigning a permanent job in 2019, with reference to Kolb (1984)*

As detailed above in Figure 1.1, my initial reflective observation of feeling constrained within my teaching environment in 2018/2019 led me to the active experimentation of accepting a temporary supply teaching panel position in 2019, and, following this, the concrete experience of consciously seeking a new school environment in 2020. This experience has greatly impacted

upon my interest in professional agency and the possibilities which exist for this within the SSAR form of research.

### **1.3.2. Personal Experience: A Renewed Focus on Gaeilge**

Mockler's (2011) second domain of teacher identity is 'personal experience', namely teachers' interests and own experiences of school as students. Personal experience influenced my choice of Gaeilge as a focus area in my study. My experience of learning Gaeilge in school was positive and influential. When I moved to my new school in 2020 and taught fifth class, I noticed that some of the children had a somewhat negative attitude towards Gaeilge. I wondered what I could do to challenge this. Subsequently I taught junior infants, followed by senior infants and I noted their enthusiasm and love for Gaeilge. I wondered how I could attempt to maintain this level of interest as the children progressed through the school.

I noted that during my time teaching in a DEIS band 1 school for twelve years, I enjoyed teaching Gaeilge. I felt I did a sufficiently good job of promoting the language in my class, based on my initial teacher education. However, given the increasing feeling of a presence of apathy towards the language, I felt I needed to 'do more' and to uphold my value for the language. I identified an absence of participation in targeted continuing professional development (CPD) with regards to my teaching of Gaeilge. I was beginning to unconsciously adopt a mindset that English and Maths were somewhat more important. This is evidenced in Figure 1.2 (below) which is an excerpt from my recent standard application form for my new temporary teaching position.

Figure 1.2 illustrates how I had neglected to focus on Gaeilge in my CPD training in the past number of years, in favour of Maths, English literacy, SEN strategies and digital technology.

I began to wonder why I, as a teacher who values Gaeilge and the importance of cultivating a positive attitude towards the language, had not opted to deliberately address this. I noted my lack of engagement with new methodologies detailed in the PLC (NCCA, 2019), before now. A renewed focus on Gaeilge emerged.

OTHER RELEVANT, NON-ACCREDITED COURSES – MOST RECENT FIRST
<p><u>2020</u> Engaged in a variety of CPD webinars during COVID 19 closures including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Supporting successful transitions for Early Years and Primary school children</li> <li>● Getting ready for returning to the infant classroom in Sept 2020, West Cork Education Centre</li> <li>● Building Psychological Resources for these Challenging Times, Jacinta Kitt</li> <li>● An international perspective- what's happening in other countries, PDST and TC</li> <li>● Google for Education- Distance learning with g suite for education, Chrome extension and google keep, Google slides intermediate</li> <li>● 'Introduction to google forms' and 'docs &amp; drive', hosted by Camara</li> <li>● Gaeilge sa bhaile, Aislinn Nic Pháidín</li> <li>● <u>2019 (Sept-Dec): Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Practitioner, Achology LTD Academy of Modern Applied Psychology, Udemy</u></li> <li>● <u>2019- G Suite for Education, full day training at Google headquarters, Dublin</u></li> <li>● <u>Sept-Nov 19: Evening PDST courses in 'SEN- continuum of support' and 'Weaving Wellbeing' (Dublin West Education Centre)</u></li> <li>● <u>2019: No more meltdowns- Managing challenging behaviour, Actualise Academy</u></li> <li>● <u>2019: Making Connections: Inclusion in Literacy Through Team Teaching, PDST</u></li> <li>● <u>2018: Incredible Years Programme, NEPS</u></li> <li>● <u>2018: Anxiety in Children- Why it occurs and how to deal with it, Actualise Academy</u></li> <li>● <u>2018: Using ICT to support teaching of Literacy and Maths for SEN, PDST</u></li> <li>● <u>2017: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Problem Solving, PDST</u></li> <li>● <u>2017: Embedding ICT in the Primary Classroom, PDST</u></li> <li>● <u>2016- Fun Friends/ Friends for life (SPHE), NEPS</u></li> <li>● Maths Recovery Training &amp; Ready Set Go Maths</li> <li>● First Steps Writing, Reading &amp; Oral Language</li> <li>● Regulation Stations, Zoom Boom Kids</li> </ul>

Figure 1.2: Example of CPD undertaken as shown in my Standard Application Form, 2020

### 1.3.3. The Influence of External Political Environment

The third domain of teacher identity outlined by Mockler (2011) is the external political environment. This relates to the impact of governmental policy on my work as a teacher. As

previously noted in Figure 1.2 (above), my former professional context was influenced by accountability led policies and practices. This experience impacted upon my focus of professional agency within my study. It highlights the external political environment as an influencing factor upon my work. With regards to my experience of teaching in a new professional context, I began to notice a renewed sense of enthusiasm and possibility in my new school (as referred to in Figure 1.1 above). Whilst the external political environment technically remained the same, I began to note differences in respect of this. My SSARP explores this, namely investigating the possibilities for professional agency and potential benefits of this.

#### **1.4. Research Context and Intervention**

It is in my new professional context that my SSARP takes place. This is a Senior Infant class in a large, urban, vertical, mixed, middle class school in Leinster. My action cycle interventions incorporate three cycles informed by critical reflection, the focus of which is to enhance my practice with regards to my teaching of Gaeilge. Emphasis is placed on the use of the CLIL methodology (NCCA, 2019). Alongside this, my research explores the concept of professional agency as I critically reflect on my use of professional agency to enhance practice. The intervention period of this SSARP within the classroom lasted fifteen weeks.

##### **1.4.1. Current Context: Covid-19 Pandemic**

It is important to highlight that my research took place in the third academic year of the Covid-19 pandemic. This was a time of great change in education in which virtual classrooms became the norm in year one, alongside a return to in-person teaching in years two and three. Mask wearing and social distancing in the forms of ‘pods’ and ‘bubbles’ (DES, 2021a) alongside necessary technology integration of Google Classroom, Zoom and Seesaw defined the



2021/2022 school year. The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the ability of the teaching profession to respond to fast paced change, whilst also bringing to the fore the reserves of emotional energy needed to teach well (Day & Gu, 2007; Day, 2008), areas for consideration within my SSARP.

## 1.5. Thesis Structure

This thesis consists of five chapters. **Chapter One** outlines the focus and aims of my study. The context and rationale are detailed. My values are explored with a description of past experience which influenced my focus areas of professional agency and my teaching of Gaeilge. The setting of my research is explained.

**Chapter Two** is a literature review. The concept of professional development is investigated, from a theoretical and policy focused viewpoint. Best practice with regards to the teaching of Gaeilge is explored, with emphasis placed on the PLC (DES, 2019). Theory to inform the CLIL methodology is outlined. Finally, theoretical literature relating to empowerment is detailed.

**Chapter Three** outlines my chosen research methodology, a SSAR approach with my rationale for this methodology explained. Following this, data collection tools, and ethical considerations are detailed. Next, a detailed description of my three intervention action cycles is given. Finally, the process of data analysis and efforts to ensure validity and reliability of my research are explored.

**Chapter Four** shares the messiness of the data collection and analysis process. The two themes which I identified through the use of Braun and Clarke's (2019) thematic analysis

process are outlined. Challenges encountered throughout my intervention are shared alongside an analysis and presentation of findings relative to each theme and related subtheme.

**Chapter Five** concludes my research. The significance of my study is explored with reference to my living theory and new claim to knowledge (Sullivan et al., 2016; Huxtable & Whitehead, 2021). Limitations of my study are outlined. Finally, I share recommendations for future studies relating to professional development and language learning.

### **1.6. Conclusion to Chapter One**

This chapter introduced my study by contextualising the focus and aims of my study. Research setting and background were outlined. An introductory overview of key areas, including professional agency and the teaching of Gaelige, was provided. The next chapter will explore literature relating to these two key areas.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

### **2.1. Introduction**

This Chapter consists of two sections. Section One relates to professional agency, whilst Section Two relates to Gaeilge. Section One begins with an overview of the most influential policy on professional development in Irish primary schools, namely the Cosán Framework (Teaching Council, 2016). Following this, the evolving needs of CPD are considered, leading to an exploration of factors which may impact upon professional agency. The concept of what it means to be an agentic professional is analysed (DES, 2016; DES et al., 2021), following which Action Research (AR) and shared reflective practice are investigated (McNiff & Whitehead, 2005; McNiff, 2013; Sullivan et al., 2016; TC, 2016; Cigala, 2019).

Section Two begins with an analysis of the current context of the Irish language in Irish society, alongside an overview of Governmental strategies relating to the teaching of the language. The PLC (NCCA, 2019) is outlined with emphasis placed on the CLIL methodology. Finally, in line with my values alongside my aim to promote positivity towards the Irish language, I explore theory on empowerment in order to inform my action cycles (Whetten & Cameron, 2016).

### **2.2. Section One: Professional Development**

#### **2.2.1. Cosán: A Framework for Professional Development**

In order to use professional agency, it is imperative to first explore conceptualisations of professional development and relative policies which impact upon this. The Teaching Council of Ireland's Cosán Framework is influential in this regard as it contextualises professional

development in the Irish primary landscape (TC, 2016). The overall aim of this framework is to foster a culture of professional learning amongst the teaching profession with a desire for teachers to be actively engaged in learning (TC, 2016: 3).

Reflective practice is indicated as a central element of CPD in the framework, as illustrated in Figure 2.1 (below). In addition to this, the role of teachers as important directors in their learning journey is highlighted (TC, 2016). During the development stages of the framework, the possibility of enforced CPD, which “linked with registration in a way that is appropriate and sustainable” (TC, 2016: 3), was considered. However, a decision was later made to abandon this approach. I feel that this was a wise decision as learning is therefore promoted rather than forced, whilst the values which underpin lifelong learning are upheld. Positive repercussions of the Cosán framework’s publication to date include the incentivisation of teachers’ involvement in summer based CPD programmes.

The Cosán Framework outlines a vision of teachers as “professionals who are intrinsically motivated to take ownership of their professional development and steer the course of their own learning journeys” (TC, 2016: 10). This indicates a value for teachers as professionals alongside a foundation of trust, thereby setting the scene for professional agency. In addition to this, the framework conveys a sense of applied theoretical understanding of CPD as a beneficial tool for teachers. My understanding of CPD from the Cosán framework is that professional development is fundamental, multi-modal and responsive, as well as possibly taking a formal, informal, collaborative or individual format (TC, 2016). The concept of evolving needs with regards to CPD becomes apparent in addition to the integral nature of reflective practice (TC, 2016).

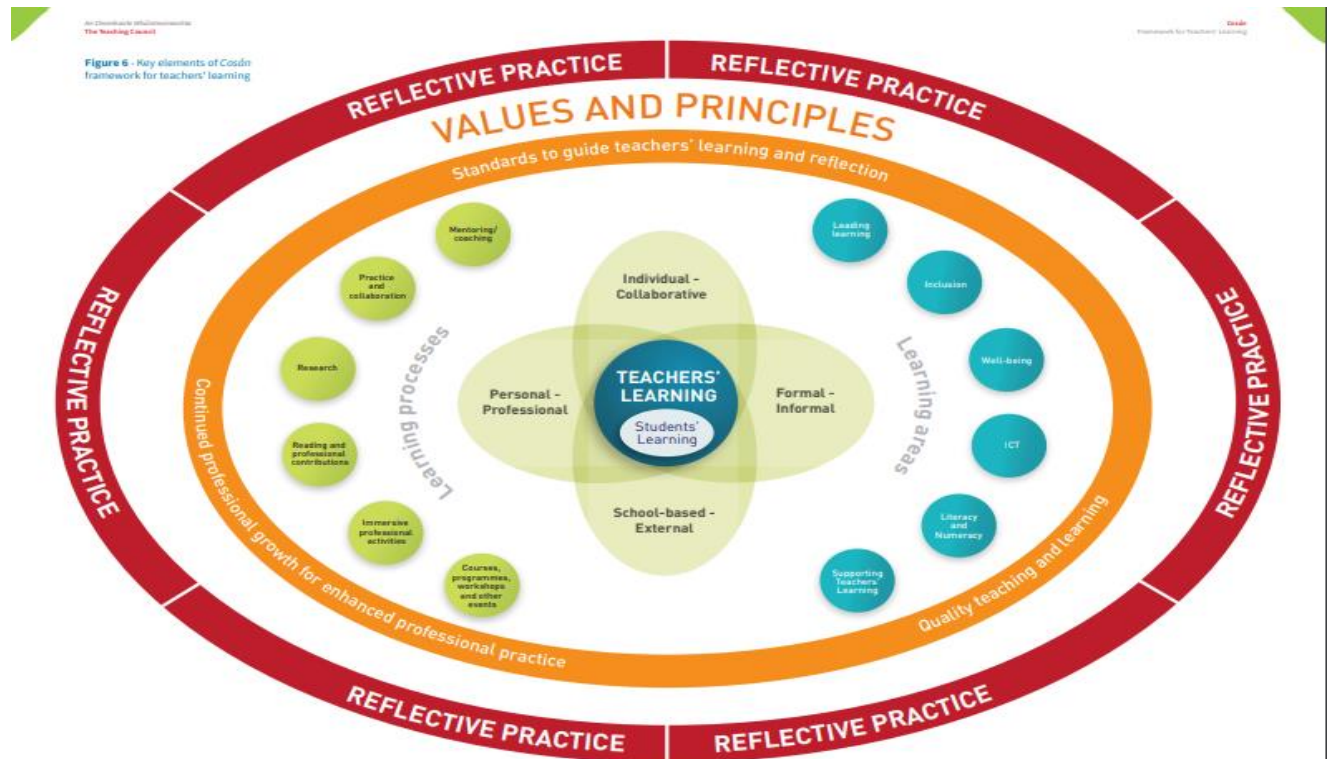


Figure 2.1: Key elements of Cosán Framework for teachers' learning (TC, 2016b: 28)

### 2.2.2. Evolving needs of CPD

The purpose of CPD is a key feature of recent definitions, specifically the need for CPD to keep up with and respond to the changing needs of students (Boeskens et al., 2020). I argue that an over-focus on responding to the changing needs of students is misplaced because focus is also needed with regards to the changing needs of teachers. McGillicuddy's research (2021) is noteworthy in this regard, as the pivotal role which teachers played in responding to fast paced change amidst the Covid-19 pandemic is detailed. In this instance, teachers upskilled and engaged in CPD in response to an immediate need, thereby accentuating the value of creativity and innovation (McGillicuddy, 2021: 14). This highlights the need for CPD to respond to both the needs of students and teachers, as well as the positive results of this.

A link emerges between the need and value for using teachers' experiences to build expertise. Winkler (2001) suggests that this happens when teachers develop their own theories from their experience. Therefore, flexibility with regards to conceptualisations of CPD is noted, which is set alongside a conflict in which the desire for evidence of teachers' learning is sought (Cordingley, 2014). This is interesting due to an identified era of accountability in Ireland in the past decade (Kirwan & Hall, 2016; Simmie et al., 2016), which is something I can attest to, as outlined in Chapter One.

### **2.2.3. Accountability: A Barrier Towards Professional Agency**

Research suggests that care must be taken in relation to accountability within the teaching profession due to negative repercussions of such. For example, Hargreaves (2000: 18) suggests that accountability "de-professionalizes the knowledge base of teaching and dulls the profession's critical edge". Furthermore, Buchanan (2015: 702) notes that an overemphasis on accountability and standards does not value teacher autonomy or collegiality. As outlined in Chapter One, I have experience of working in an environment in which significant emphasis was placed on accountability towards expected Inspectorate preferences. I can anecdotally attest to the negative impact upon teacher autonomy, authentic collegiality and incidences of practices tailored to be perceived as successful to outsiders from this experience. This leads me to question, to whom are teachers accountable?

Simmie et al. (2016) refer to the fact that the definition for 'good teaching' was habitually sought and answered by the DES Inspectorate to prioritise accountability and performativity in the past decade (Simmie et al., 2016: 14). Simmie and Edling (2016: 11) detail that policy reform in education in Ireland since 2008 resulted in a "technocratic view of teaching as a clinical

professional practice”, whilst Kirwan and Hall (2016) describe a market led, performative focused approach to education in Ireland. This highlights Governmental policy focus as a factor which impacts upon accountability. Therefore, it would seem that teachers are accountable to the DES. This is somewhat unsurprising, whilst equally noteworthy because deliberate analysis of this highlights the influence of ‘external political environment’ upon my work as a teacher.

To refer back to Mockler’s (2011) three domains of teacher identity, which includes external political environment, professional context and personal experience, a link emerges whereby I can identify professional context as an equally influencing factor with regards to my experience of accountability. By this, I note that the practices in my previous professional context supported a visible sense of accountability. Interestingly, Buchanan (2015) suggests that teachers must ‘push back’ through critical self-reflection in a shared manner. In order to ‘push back’, a need for collegiality and a school culture which enables this approach becomes apparent.

#### **2.2.4. School Culture**

Timperley (2015) claims that it is only in the presence of a positive school culture that the possibility for information and artefacts to be transformed into actionable knowledge occurs. Banks and Smyth (2011: v) note that CPD take-up in teaching is higher in “schools where there is a positive school climate and where teachers work with children who enjoy school”. This highlights the positive repercussions of positive school culture upon learning possibilities. The mention of ‘school culture’ occurs seven times in the Cosán Framework (TC, 2106) and ten times within the LAOS framework (DES, 2016). There is no explicit section regarding school culture in either framework, however an implicit acknowledgement for such exists.

Cosán adopts a reflection based response to acknowledging school culture, stating a desire for “reflective processes” to “facilitate teachers in considering the complex ways in which their learning can benefit...their school culture, and the wider school community” (TC, 2016: 10). The suggestion that teachers’ learning may benefit school culture is interesting (TC, 2016: 10). I question how this may be achieved in the case of a negative school culture. For example, Banks and Smyth (2011) and Kitt (2017) outline the detrimental effects of negative culture owing to a lack of possibility and empowerment. Timperley (2015) further notes that we narrow our horizons and opportunities to learn when stressed or threatened. The Cosán Framework envisions teachers to become intrinsically motivated to steer their learning journeys (TC, 2016: 10). In order to achieve this ideal, I argue that positivity, possibility and collegial relationships are needed. In this regard, Immordino-Yang and Damasio (2007) acknowledge that supporting relationships within a positive school culture is linked with the interrelated nature of cognition, emotion and motivation.

Buchanan (2015) makes an interesting finding with regards to the interrelated factor of school culture and possibilities for professional agency. He states that when there is a close fit between a teacher’s identity and his/her school culture, the teacher feels as though he/she belongs, which assists in the teacher asserting agency (Buchanan, 2015). Conversely, he found that if there is a lack of values between the teacher and their school culture, he/she may feel constrained and unable to assert the kind of professional agency that matched his/ her identity (Buchanan, 2015). This highlights teacher identity as a valuable area for consideration with regards to possibilities for professional agency.



### **2.2.5. Teacher Identity Theory**

As previously outlined in Chapter One, my interest in teacher identity theory has been ignited through this SSARP due to the fact that this has informed my sense of self understanding as a teacher. Mockler's (2011) three domains of teacher identity were referred to in Chapter One to detail the rationale and background to my study. As noted above, the external political environment has been linked to accountability, in theory (Kirwan & Hall, 2016; Simmie et al., 2016) and in my experience. This highlights Mockler's (2011) remaining domains of 'personal experience' and 'professional context'.

With regards to the domain of 'professional context' (Mockler, 2011), Buchanan (2015: 700) notes that teachers confront policies and professional discourses they encounter not as *tabulae rasae* but rather that they adapt and learn throughout their careers. He further highlights how teachers evolve and learn from past experiences, thus reforming their identities and allowing for professional agency to be carved out (Buchanan, 2015). This informs my understanding of professional agency as the influence of my professional experience to date becomes apparent. The link between informed identity and opportunities to 'carve out' professional agency is noteworthy, whilst the question of what it means to be an agentic professional emerges.

### **2.2.6. Teachers as Agentic Professionals**

A core component of professional agency is the perception of having a capacity for both proactive and autonomous actions (Cigala et al., 2019). Both Fraser and Kalra (2019) and McGillicuddy (2021) outline the need for teacher autonomy with regards to directing their professional development. Teachers with agentic capacity feel enabled to participate in organisational decision-making as well as having an active role within their community/work

group (Wilson & Deaney, 2010; Priestly et al., 2013; Sanglim & Sungeun, 2016; Hadar & Benish-Weisman, 2019). Proactivity and autonomy are therefore key.

On this note, a recent policy focus which acknowledges teachers as “agentic professionals” has emerged (DES et al., 2021: 7). The DES publication ‘Guidelines for Preparation for Teaching and Learning’ details the underpinning foundation for the key pillars of teaching and learning as “teachers as committed, skilful and agentic professionals” (DES et al., 2021: 7). This is illustrated in Figure 2.2 (below). The move towards a policy representation of professional agency becomes apparent due to the explicit acknowledgement of teachers’ autonomy. For example, the reference to visible and invisible preparation within these guidelines begins to address the accountability trail with regards to paperwork overload in recent years (DES et al., 2021: 5). It is therefore evident that an effort in respect of the “external political environment” (Mockler, 2011) has emerged to support the concept of professional agency.

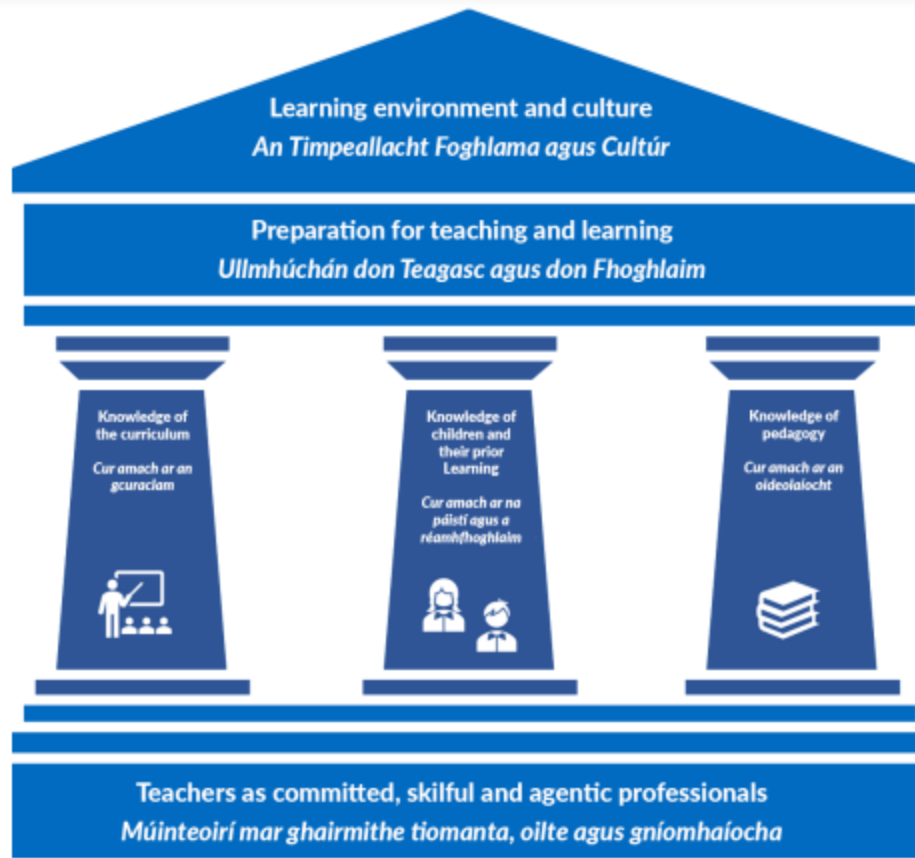


Figure 2.2. Key Pillars of Teaching and Learning (DES et al., 2021: 7)

### 2.2.7. Promoting Professional Agency

Lowrie (2014) and Wiliam (2014) emphasise the importance of personalised professional learning for teachers, whilst Winkler’s (2001) research explicitly recommends the need for teacher voice on professional development matters, noting that this allows for best practice to become embedded in schools and allows for a culture of learning to be upheld. The LAOS Framework (DES, 2016: 8) promotes the concept of teachers’ participation in “communities of practice” in order to extend their expertise. In order to do this, it is suggested that a combination of collaborative and individual reflection should be encouraged and recognised (DES, 2016).

The role of reflective practice as a key tool in driving professional growth is extensively documented within policy (DES, 2016; TC, 2016; DES et al., 2021). Bubb and Earley (2007: 4) note the importance of teachers taking an active role in their development in order to enhance pupil learning and wellbeing, therefore creating opportunities for adult learning (Bubb & Earley, 2007: 4). Action Research (AR) is mentioned in the statement of highly effective practice within both the LAOS Framework (DES, 2016: 23) and the Cosán Framework (TC, 2016). The LAOS Framework notes that:

The principal and other leaders in the school ensure that professional development is firmly based on action research and is adapted to the identified needs of the school. They maximise opportunities to develop teachers' capacity and competence to improve teaching and learning (DES, 2016: 23).

This would suggest that engaging in a form of AR encompasses the very nature of reflective practice on an action based level. McNiff and Whitehead (2005: 26) note that AR is a research approach that allows for teachers to develop personally, professionally and to develop their own theories of practice. The use of AR compliments the conceptualisations of CPD as previously outlined (Winkler, 2001; Lowrie, 2014; Wiliam, 2014; TC, 2016). Professional responsibility is given to the teacher, which allows for new theories to be developed within their classroom (Sullivan et al., 2016). Cognisance is afforded to the teacher's integral role within their unique classroom setting (Sullivan et al., 2016), allowing for a personalised response to identified CPD areas of interest in this approach. Interestingly, this was what influenced me to enrol on this particular Masters course.

### **2.2.8. Conclusion to Section One**

This section considered professional agency from a theoretical and policy focused point of view (Lowrie, 2014; Wiliam, 2014, Buchanan, 2015, TC, 2016, DES et al., 2021). The

defining features of professional agency were outlined as a perceived presence of proactivity and autonomy (Cigala et al., 2019). Barriers towards the possibility to act in a proactive, autonomous manner were described with regards to accountability and school culture. Teacher identity theory (Mockler, 2011; Buchanan, 2015) informed my personal understanding with regards to acknowledging such obstacles.

A recent policy focus on teachers as agentic professionals is noteworthy (DES et al., 2021), supporting my sense of possibility in asserting professional agency. This is a welcome focus particularly following the description of accountability led practices over the past decade (Kirwan & Hall, 2016; Simmie et al., 2016; Simmie & Edling, 2016). My understanding of what it means to use professional agency has been informed, whilst I acknowledge that engaging in an AR based MEd aligns with this.

## **2.3. Section Two: Gaeilge**

### **2.3.1. Context of the Irish Language: Recent Policy**

Concerns relating to the Irish language exist on a Governmental policy level. The recent Inspectorate Report for primary schools indicates that pupils' learning outcomes in Irish in English-medium schools remains "very concerning" (DES, 2022: 114). It is also noted that pupils' motivation and engagement with Irish needs to be improved (DES, 2022: 103). On a national level, a deterioration of the population's proficiency in speaking the Irish language is identified in the census data from 2016 showing a drop in the number of people who can claim to speak Irish since 2011, at an overall rate of 39.8% of the population (CSO, 2016).

Some suggestions to address the above concerns are given, for example the Government of Ireland's Twenty Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030 (DTCAGSM, 2020: 12) details a need to "give life to the Irish language outside the classroom". Additionally, a desire to promote partial immersion education at primary level is outlined, as well as a stated commitment towards CPD for teachers (DTCAGSM, 2020). A consultation in relation to the Government of Ireland's Twenty Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2020 was recently undertaken by the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht and Media (DTCAGM, 2021). The need to foster greater 'buy in' and awareness in support of the strategy and intrinsic value of the Irish language as an integral, valuable and unique part of Irish culture was identified.

Similar to the Twenty Year Strategy for the Irish Language noted above (DTCAGM, 2021), the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht's five year plan for the Irish language outlines a goal to develop the area of teacher education and models of CPD (DCHG, 2018: 9). It is noted that such CPD will focus on a communicative approach to address concerns relating to language competency and pedagogy (DCHG, 2018). This policy also highlights partial immersion education for trial usage (DCHG, 2018).

Overall, policy portrays a bleak picture of a lack of genuine engagement and opportunity for the Irish language to flourish (CSO, 2016; DCHG, 2018; DTCAGM, 2021; DES, 2022). This aligns with my observations in the classroom over the past number of years. I feel there is a focused need to address the concerns with regards to the Irish language in a cohesive manner to avoid widespread apathy towards the language. Areas of note within the above policies include the mention of partial immersion education and CPD. I will explore partial immersion education in the context of the revised curriculum for Irish at primary level, the PLC (NCCA, 2019). This

informs my research question ‘how can I critically evaluate and reflect on policy development to enhance my teaching?’

### **2.3.2. Promoting the Irish language: The Primary Language Curriculum (2019)**

The rollout of the PLC (NCCA, 2019) began in 2016/2017 with junior infants to second class, before all class levels were made available during the 2019/2020 school year (DES, 2022). One of the underlying features of the PLC is the emphasis placed on the relatedness of transference of skills in language learning (NCCA, 2019). It is noted that The PLC builds upon the principles of Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009), in that the importance of playful and meaningful experiences for children’s learning and development is acknowledged. Emphasis is placed upon nurturing the development of the children as competent and confident communicators with acknowledgement given to the importance of developing dispositions alongside concepts and skills (NCCA, 2019: 46).

The CLIL approach is suggested within the PLC (NCCA, 2019). Some of the benefits of the CLIL approach are identified as higher motivation to learn Irish amongst students (DES, 2019b). Upon receiving the in-service CPD on the PLC over the past number of years, I was immediately attracted to the CLIL approach because this was a new methodology which I was not aware of prior to this. I was inspired by the view of Gaeilge as a language because this is something I also value, having been afforded the positive experience of learning Irish through an inspiring, motivational teacher at second level and through an extremely positive experience at third level in Coláiste Mhuire Marino. On a personal level, the PLC (NCCA, 2019), whilst overly complicated in its layout, delivered a positive aspect for me in the form of a renewed perspective and focus on Gaeilge.

### 2.3.3. Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)

Harris and Ó Duibhir (2011: 41) define CLIL as “a dual-focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language”. Coyle et al. (2010: 1) describe this dual focused approach as an interwoven focus on content and language, “even if the emphasis is greater on one or the other at a given time”. Therefore the applied nature for the use of the CLIL methodology in the teaching of Gaeilge becomes apparent: the Irish language is the suggested language through which content of other subject areas within the curriculum may be taught (NCCA, 2019). Fahey (2021: 340) claims that “CLIL is the innovation the Irish language has been waiting for”, as he further notes the possibilities for the CLIL methodology to positively enhance teacher language awareness.

The CLIL approach is described as “an effective way to increase exposure to Irish by creating authentic contexts for children to use the language” within the PLC (NCCA, 2019: 41). This is supported by the Inspectorate who state that opportunities for language learning and development should be extended more consistently through the use of active and collaborative learning opportunities across all curricular areas, akin to the CLIL methodology (DES, 2022: 126). The benefits of a CLIL approach are well documented within international research including studies by Dalton-Puffer (2007, 2008); Harris and Ó Duibhir (2011); Morton (2015) and De Diezmas (2016). The bilingual nature of the CLIL methodology in which pupils are “introduced to new ideas, content, and concepts in traditional curriculum subjects using the target language as the medium of communication” outlines my understanding (Mac Éinrí, 2007: 17).



To give a brief background, the CLIL methodology originated in immersion and bilingual movements in the USA and Canada (Coyle, 2007: 544). The approach then began to arise in a European context due to an emphasis from the European Commission on second languages for citizens of Europe (Vollmer et al., 2006). A debate exists in the literature with regards to the definition of CLIL and immersion education. Coyle (2007) notes the need for CLIL to be defined separately, whilst Mehisto et al. (2008) highlight the overlap between immersion programs and CLIL. These comparisons are interesting as the PLC (DES, 2019) refers to the methodology as ‘partial-immersion’ (NCCA, 2019).

Recommendations for applied use of the CLIL approach exist within the PLC (NCCA, 2019). It is suggested that teachers choose a subject they are comfortable communicating through Irish for, which offers opportunities for discussion and active engagement by children in groups (NCCA, 2019: 41). It is also noted that new language should be taught in advance of CLIL lessons (NCCA, 2019: 41). With regards to my applied use of this methodology within my SSARP, my focus and aim is to use CLIL to increase exposure towards the Irish language. Therefore, definitions of CLIL as immersion or partial immersion do not immediately impact upon my use of the methodology as the focus is on increased use of Irish outside of formal Irish lessons.

#### **2.3.4. Positivity: Creating Positive Dispositions in Children**

Positivity is one of my values, as previously outlined. Therefore, this value is integrated into my SSARP. In this regard, Seligman (2004) is a seminal author in the area of positive psychology. His PERMA theory of well-being is based on five core elements of psychological well-being: positive emotions (feeling good), engagement (finding flow), relationships (finding

connections), meaning (purposeful existence) and finally achievement (a sense of accomplishment) (Seligman, 2004). The recent focus on well-being within the education sector points towards the importance of promoting positive emotions within the classroom as a means to support learning. Whilst not created with the intention of teaching languages, Seligman's (2004) PERMA theory reminds me to reflect on and plan actions to enhance my teaching of Irish, whilst equally aiming to live to my values. In this regard, Bandura (1977) found that the absence of positive emotional arousal makes it difficult if not impossible for individuals to feel empowered. This is particularly important given the context of negativity from a policy level previously outlined.

### **2.3.5. Empowerment**

I will outline theory relating to empowerment in this section, alongside a description of my applied use of this within my SSARP. Empowerment is an essential element of my action research project because it is one of my values. Whetten and Cameron (2016: 396) note that "empowerment matters to almost everyone in almost every circumstance", further outlining that people tend to experience empowerment in environments that can help them flourish (Whetten & Cameron, 2016: 397).

It is noted that empowerment cannot be forced upon others. By fostering an environment which includes the dimensions of empowerment, however, it becomes "highly likely that people will accept empowerment for themselves" (Whetten and Cameron, 2016: 392). Therefore it is essential that I consider both what I teach with regards to my SSARP, as well as how I teach it. In this regard, the five dimensions of empowerment include producing a sense of self efficacy,

self-determination, personal consequence, meaning and trust (Whetten & Cameron, 2016). Next, I will outline how this looked within my SSARP, due to deliberate integration of this.

Self-efficacy refers to one's perception of their ability to complete a task (Bandura, 1989). The dimension of 'self-efficacy' was addressed in my SSARP by focussing on activities which were in line with the children's ability levels and stage of development. In addition to this, I took note of Whetten & Cameron's (2016: 396) suggestion to have a clear goal and to foster personal mastery experiences.

Self-determination refers to a sense of "having choices" (Deci & Ryan, 2012). This dimension was addressed through the inclusion of the children's voice in the discussions around their learning during the SSAR process. This helped to increase 'buy in' and allowed for children to direct the learning journey, thereby having a choice in the process. Having goals motivates individuals to achieve higher performance than if they have no goals (Rawsthorne & Elliot, 1999; Ryan & Deci, 2000). I shared my goals of the SSARP with my pupils. Each of these actions enabled a heightened sense of self efficacy with regards to learning Gaeilge amongst my pupils.

The dimension of 'personal consequence' refers to one's perception that they can produce a result and that obstacles may be overcome (Whetten & Cameron, 2016). This was addressed in my SSARP by the very aim of the intervention which was to promote positive dispositions. By sharing this aim with my pupils, this allowed them to steer and take ownership of their learning journey, heightening their perception of their ability to overcome obstacles in relation to the learning of Gaeilge.

The dimension of ‘meaning’ was addressed through the use of the CLIL methodology due to the fact that meaningful language use contexts were focused on. Finally, the dimension of ‘trust’ was not specifically addressed, however it permeated my way of teaching in that the creation of a classroom climate in which trust existed was a core element of my belief as a teacher. Bandura (1986) suggests that the single most important thing you can do to empower others is to help them experience personal mastery over some challenge or problem. In this regard, I planned my SSARP on a phased basis in terms of expectation, particularly in relation to inclusion of Irish during Aistear stations, in order to allow for this sense of mastery amongst my students. Overall, the integration of empowerment into my SSARP requires a combination of reflective practice, a collaborative approach and an adoption of the AR approach.

### **2.3.6. Conclusion to Section Two**

This section explored the context of Irish language teaching and learning from a Governmental policy standpoint. The PLC (NCCA, 2019) was analysed, with a focus on the CLIL methodology arising from this. An overall aim to promote the language in an innovative manner, given the context of stagnation was outlined. This was in line with the PLC’s (NCCA, 2019: 15) aim to “promote a positive disposition towards communication and language by fostering within children a lifelong interest in and a love of language learning”. To support this, research pertaining to positivity and empowerment was consulted. The practicalities of attempting to enhance practice in a manner which proactively addressed the concepts of positivity and empowerment were outlined.

## **2.4. Conclusion**

Overall, a combination of sections one and two informs my SSARP and enables me to inform my response to research question one: ‘how can I critically evaluate and reflect on policy development to enhance my teaching’. Through my description of policy and literature in this section which relates to professional development, professional agency, current curriculum focus with regards to the PLC (NCCA, 2019), governmental policy implications in addition to theory on empowerment, a reflective analysis of such has been demonstrated which permeates my research. The next chapter will outline my chosen research methodology: SSARP.

## **Chapter Three: Research Methodology**

### **3.1. Introduction to Chapter Three**

Chapter Three outlines my chosen research methodology, SSAR; a research approach which views teachers as researchers of their own practice (Lassonde et al., 2009). Significantly, my enrolment on this particular MEd was based on my inherent interest and value for a form of research which highlights the role of teachers as integral. It is noted that the Research in Practice MEd “upholds the concept of teaching as innovative professional practice, combining academic study with research in practice” (NUIM, 2022). This aligns with my epistemological beliefs, which will be outlined in greater detail in this chapter, alongside a detailed rationale for my choice of the SSAR methodology.

My understanding of SSAR will be explained from a theoretical standpoint. I will describe the research methods used for data collection within my study, with advantages and limitations of my chosen data collection tools listed. I will then detail the research design and process of my study. This will include a descriptive outline of my SSAR intervention cycles. Ethical considerations will be clarified, following which I will describe measures taken to ensure validity and reliability within my SSARP.

### **3.2. Self Study Action Research**

#### **3.2.1. Rationale**

##### ***Epistemological Beliefs***

Epistemological beliefs refer to the understanding of knowledge, namely how knowledge is created and acquired. My study was underpinned by a focus on building knowledge as a teacher. Sullivan et al. (2016: 26) state that when we study our own work, we are seeking

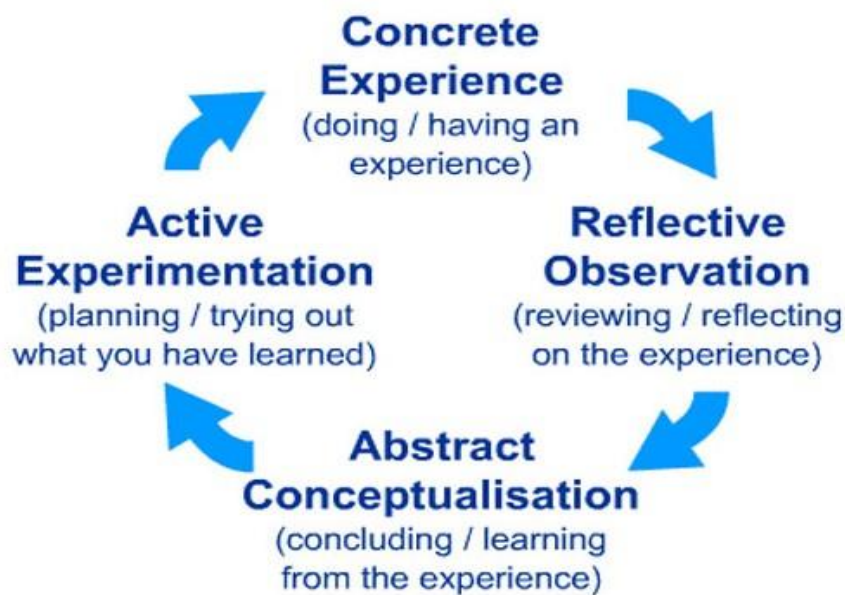
knowledge about our practice and our professional lives. By adopting a SSAR approach, the possibility to create knowledge about my practice and my professional life was evident as I explored how I can further *my* knowledge of *my* practice. This aligned with my value of empowerment.

McNiff (2002) and Cohen et al. (2007) uphold the possibility for empowerment with the SSAR methodology as they detail that SSAR creates the possibility for emancipation. They further note that the SSAR process has the possibility to be a transformative experience due to the fact that assumptions and norms can be challenged (McNiff, 2002; Cohen et al., 2007). I could see potential for empowerment in the experiential nature of the SSAR methodology, as teachers are acknowledged as constructors of knowledge within the profession (Sullivan et al, 2016: 25).

My epistemological belief is that knowledge is not passively received, rather, as Glasersfeld (1995: 35) states, it is “built up by the cognising subject”. It was imperative that my lived experience as a practising teacher played a central element in the exploration of my practice within my research. I was interested in the *process of my practice*, or the possibility for knowledge creation through experiential learning. I sought to understand why I do what I do, meaning that self-understanding and knowledge creation with regards to my practice were key. The aim of my study was to enhance my practice, and thereby the learning of my pupils. The focus on learning was integral.

My understanding of how to learn, and thereby create knowledge, as an educational practitioner was influenced by theory on the learning process, specifically Kolb’s (1984) learning cycle (as illustrated in Figure 3.1). I understood the process of learning to include a combination

of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984). I felt that the SSAR methodology aligned with my understanding of what it meant to learn as an educational practitioner, which impacted upon my choice of the SSAR methodology. I liken the SSAR process to a deliberate and focused repetition of the learning cycle.



*Figure 3.1. Illustration of Kolb's 1984 learning cycle (Kolb, 1984: 97)*

To elaborate further on my epistemological beliefs, whilst I believe that knowledge is created, I also accept that experience alone does not build knowledge, similar to Dewey's (1938) beliefs on such. In relation to my understanding of the learning cycle as noted above (Kolb, 1984: 97), an emergence of the need for critical reflection is highlighted because this composes one of the four elements of this cycle (as seen in Figure 3.1 above). Accordingly, Sullivan et al (2016:24) state that "reflection plays a central role in all forms of AR". Therefore the SSAR



methodology aligns with my epistemological belief that knowledge is not passively received, rather, as Glasersfeld's (1995: 35) states, it is "built up by the cognising subject".

### *Professional Experience*

As detailed in Chapter One, I have recently relocated to a new school environment in the past two years. This was after I spent twelve years teaching in the one school prior to this. Sullivan et al (2016: 16) acknowledge that when we "take a step back from the daily busy-ness of our classrooms, there are aspects of our practice that have a recurrent pattern or a rhythm...we notice that perhaps there are underpinning values to what we do". I correlate my aforementioned professional experience with "taking a step back" as it caused me to consciously reflect upon my values and influences on this to date.

The process of identifying one's values is a core component of the SSAR methodology (Sullivan et al., 2016: 28). My aforementioned recent professional experience required me to publicly articulate my values, for example I rewrote my curriculum vitae for the first time in twelve years. Through this experience, I began to question assumptions relating to the concept of learning as a teacher and what this meant for me. As noted in Chapter One, a defining feature of the context in which my SSAR took place was amidst a perceived presence of 'new possibilities' (as previously referred to in Figure 1.1). I felt a sense of possibility with the new perspectives I was gaining which inspired me to seek further learning, and ultimately choose a SSAR approach for my research.

My identity as a teacher was highlighted: I viewed myself as an informed practitioner whose experience is worthy of deliberate reflection and investigation to understand, analyse and ultimately enhance my practice. Interestingly, this, yet again highlights my value for

empowerment. Sullivan et al. (2016: 44) state “when reflecting as an action researcher, it implies taking action. When reflecting as an action researcher for academic purposes, it implies taking action and generating theory”. This very possibility to take action and potentially generate theory appealed to me, alongside the fact that SSAR is a flexible, creative approach in which situational differences according to context are acknowledged (Sullivan et al., 2016: 25).

In summary, the SSAR methodology aligned with my values and epistemological beliefs. Equally, it supported the very focus of my research topic, in which I sought to investigate the possibility for knowledge creation through my focus area of using professional agency to enhance my practice of teaching Gaelge. This was akin to Vanassche and Kelchtermans’s (2015: 509) recognition of such:

apart from contributing to the improvement of teacher educators’ own practices, self-study researchers also seek to make explicit and validate their professional expertise with the explicit intent of advancing the public knowledge base of teacher education.

### **3.2.2. Action Research Paradigm**

Herr and Anderson (2005: 6) point out that there are a number of different ways in which Action Research (AR) is defined. They state that each researcher should make their own understanding of AR clear and explicitly state their definition of choice, as found in the literature. They outline that this will impact upon the epistemological, ethical and political decisions made throughout the study (Herr & Anderson, 2005: 6). Consequently, my understanding of AR aligned with Whitehead’s (2019: 5) description which uses the term ‘participatory action research’ (PAR).

PAR emphasises participation and action (Whitehead, 2019). Understanding is sought through collaborative change. An emphasis is placed on collective inquiry and experimentation

which is grounded in experience and social history (Whitehead, 2019). My study aligned with this approach as I prioritised and considered student voice in my aim to enhance my practice, in addition to peer feedback with my use of a critical friend and informal professional conversations. As detailed in Chapter One, I value collegiality and I felt that the concept of ‘pushing back’ through critical self-reflection in a shared manner (Buchanan, 2015) was a beneficial approach. Therefore, experimentation grounded in experience and collective inquiry were fundamental aspects of my study (Whitehead, 2019).

Bassey (1992) suggests that three realms of research exist in education; empirical research, reflective research and creative research. Due to SSAR’s focus on formulating new thinking and problem solving. Bassey (1992: 5) notes that this methodology aligns with reflective and creative research. An inherent focus is placed on bringing about change and new ideas, as opposed to traditional forms of research which may analyse and reflect on a way of doing things. In this regard, the concept of bringing about change was important to my research as I sought to enhance my practice, whilst equally interrogating my experience of doing so.

The desire to bring about change highlights the importance of action cycles. Herr and Anderson (2005: 5) detail that AR involves an intervention into one’s own practice in the form of a ‘spiral of action cycles’ with each cycle “further informing the researchers’ knowledge of the original question, puzzle, or problem”. This process of experiential learning and adaptation from cycle to cycle is illustrated below in Figure 3.2 (Kemmis et al., 2004: 595), in which action and reflection are shown to impact upon the possibility to revise an action plan. The solution focused nature of the AR approach is evident, thereby highlighting my value of empowerment. Consequently, my understanding of SSAR can be summarised as to positively empower oneself

as a teacher through participating in focused action and self reflection which are cyclically and systematically linked.



*Figure 3.2. Interpretation of Action Research Spiral (Kemmis et al, 2004: 595)*

### **3.2.3. Living theory approach**

McNiff and Whitehead (2010) explain that practitioners engaging in a SSAR project have the potential to generate their own theory of practice. Whitehead (1989) refers to this as a 'living theory'. This involves the researcher developing a framework in order to explain why they do what they do in a purposeful manner in order to impact meaning. This approach aligned with my interest in and desire to use professional agency. My engagement with the process of critical reflection throughout my research enabled me to adopt a living theory approach. I therefore, self-assessed the cohesion between my values and practice whilst interrogating my practice.

Whitehead (2019) uses the term ‘living contradiction’ to explain the uncovering of a lack of cohesion with a practitioner's values in their practice. Other researchers such as Brydon-Miller et al. (2003: 13) also note the importance of evolving theories of practice and the need for action researchers to be “willing to be wrong”, as well as being open to embrace the process in which action and reflection co-exist. In this regard, the nature of my three action cycles, whereby my teaching evolved in response to the experience, illustrates this process in action. I was willing to be wrong and eager to uncover any instances of myself as a ‘living contradiction’ (Whitehead, 2019). Experiential learning was a central element in my understanding of using professional agency, as previously detailed in Chapter Two.

Huxtable and Whitehead (2021: 6) suggest that it is important for researchers to indicate the ‘hallmarks’ of a living theory approach in their research methodology. Therefore, hallmarks of the living theory approach in my research are evident in my use of reflective practice journaling within my teacher reflective journal (TRJ), dialogue with critical friends, professional conversations with my colleagues and focus group interviews with my pupils. I believe in the social construction of knowledge to develop my living theory, as illustrated in Figure 3.3 (below).

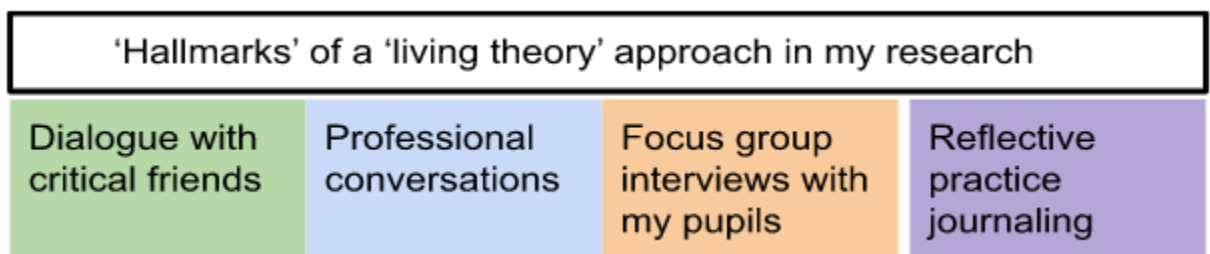


Figure 3.3. Hallmarks of a living theory approach in my research (Huxtable & Whitehead, 2021)

### 3.3. Research Questions

My study included two research questions:

- How can I critically evaluate and reflect on policy developments to enhance my teaching of Gaeilge?
- How can my engagement with implementing suggested best practice inform and impact upon my sense of professional agency?

Sullivan et al. (2016: 9) note that in order to identify one's research question, reflection is necessary. They further note that this usually involves "retrospection by examining an event/ idea/ approach/ artefact from as many different perspectives as possible, in order to explain the situation for oneself" (Sullivan et al., 2016: 10). In this regard, my aforementioned experience, and reflection in relation to this, significantly influenced my research questions. For example, my first research question refers to 'policy developments'. This is because I identified a conflict in practice in my past experience, whereby accountability negatively impacted upon the possibility for my epistemological belief to be achieved in reality. As a result, I sought to question assumptions from my former reality, highlighting my values of empowerment, creativity and positivity.

A central process of the SSAR approach is to identify values which underpin the chosen research question and work (Jones, 2016; Sullivan et al., 2016). In order to define and create the research questions for my study, my TRJ was used as a tool to explore my values and to consciously outline them. I initially identified my values as "congruence between school policy vision statements and action in practice as well as a positive, empowering, safe work

environment” in my TRJ on September 5th 2021. Further reflection upon this led to a slight evolution in my values statement to acknowledge my value for a positive working environment. In this regard, the focus of my study changed from barrier focused to one of possibility.

On September 12th 2021, I wrote in my TRJ that I valued “positivity and feeling empowered with regards to having a sense of ownership over my actions in my teaching because I value love of learning, open mindedness and curiosity”. I was reflecting on and renegotiating my values. Kalmbach Phillips and Carr (2010: 41) describe this process of meta-reflection as 'auto ethnography', detailing that “critical reflection must be deliberate and result in transformed practice”. It was through this process of meta-reflection that the focus of my study evolved to explore two issues alongside one and other, namely the possibility for professional agency in addition to the possibilities which exist when this is achieved.

### **3.4. Data Collection**

#### **3.4.1. Qualitative Data**

Qualitative data refers to observable data which provides insights and interpretations of others (Sullivan et al., 2016). Qualitative methods were chosen as this form of data aligns with my desire to understand, inform and enhance my practice. It is noted that qualitative data prioritises the views of the subject rather than that of the researcher (Check & Schutt, 2012). However, this is not true in the context of the use of qualitative data within my chosen methodology of SSAR. Therefore, qualitative data, as used within the SSAR approach in my study, allowed for insight into the effectiveness of methodologies used in my teaching of Gaeilge. As previously outlined, my research questions begin with the following: ‘how can my engagement with’ and ‘how can I critically evaluate’, which highlights the focus of my study as

one which aims to understand, observe, provide insight and interpret. Each of these aforementioned aims is a feature of qualitative data as outlined by Sullivan et al. (2016).

### **3.4.2. Research Site and Participants**

The research site was a senior infant class of twenty eight pupils within a large, urban, middle class, vertical school in Leinster. Research took place in the third year of the Covid-19 pandemic. This meant that social distancing and possible school closures dependent on infection levels were a contextual feature throughout the study. Significantly, the research took place in a school environment which I recently moved to in the last two years, after twelve years spent teaching in a different school environment. This is noted due to the impacting factor of this upon my perception of professional agency as well as the presence of the possibility for comparison of influences within different settings during the study.

### **3.5. Data Collection Tools**

Two main data collection tools were used during this study. The methods included: the use of a TRJ which included unstructured observations and intuitive assessments, as well as focus group interviews with my pupils. A critical friend was also used, which acted as a validation method to gain perspective on the research within my classroom. I will now outline my data collection tools in greater detail.

#### **3.5.1. Teacher Reflective Journal**

McDonagh et al. (2012) note the paramount nature of critical reflection in AR, owing to the fact that one of the main reasons researchers engage in AR is to seek self-improvement. Sullivan et al. (2016: 79) note that a TRJ can “provide data about changes to the way you think, about your work and how you go about it”. They further note that these changes are important



because they create a trail of one's learning, something "which is at the heart of generating theory from practice" (Sullivan et al., 2016: 79). Consequently, a TRJ was an integral data collection tool used throughout my self-study.

In this regard, I recorded written reflections on my teaching from August 2021 until June 2022. Google Docs and Google Drive were used to record and save these typed observations. A notebook was used to record reflection-in-action observations during active teaching time. I also noted intuitive assessments on my pupil's learning within my TRJ during my three AR intervention cycles from January 2022 until May 2022. The purpose of this was to uncover whether my everyday practice was as it should be (McNiff, 2002), in addition to informing my action cycles and interventions with regards to progress of pupils.

The link between professional development and reflective practice was previously outlined in Chapter Two with regards to policy (DES, 2016; TC, 2016; DES et al., 2021). The TC (2021) makes suggestions relating to teachers' use of models of reflection (Schon, 1983; Gibbs, 1988; Johns, 2000; Rolfe et al., 2001). I used Rolfe et al.'s (2001) framework for critical reflection within my TRJ where I felt its use was appropriate and beneficial. This framework follows a three-step process including the questions 'what, so what and now what?' (Rolfe et al., 2001). This aided retrospection, self-evaluation and re-orientation (TC, 2021) within my data collection. In addition to this, I regularly reviewed the content of my TRJ and, where necessary, I noted meta-reflections in response to prior entries or reflections. An example of this process of meta-reflection can be seen in Appendix A.

### **3.5.2. Focus Group Interviews with Pupils**

My aim to enhance my practice of teaching Gaeilge was closely linked with the pupils' experience of this. As noted by Sullivan et al. (2016: 81), "when you are examining your teaching, your pupils are part of the process". Therefore, it was essential that I considered how best to ethically and considerately gather data from my pupils' perspective. I chose to use focus group interviews with my pupils. Focus group interviews are described as "carefully planned discussion[s] designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment" (Krueger & Casey, 2009: 2).

The group discussions took place within the classroom as the children completed a written or active task. This allowed for a comfortable, familiar setting, during which the children had the option to answer the questions asked of them and engage in discussion as they wished. The natural setting of the classroom ensured a safe peer environment (Adler et al., 2019). The focus group interviews took place prior to starting my intervention cycles, as well as after each action cycle. The reason for this was to review progress. Four interviews took place in total. Audio recording was used because the use of multimedia to gather data can bring life to the study (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010; Sullivan et al., 2016).

I chose to use convenience sampling for the discussion groups (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). This was because the discussions took place during class time and it was important to gain the perspective of any child who chose to answer. I circulated around the classroom asking the children questions and engaging in discussion at their seats. The questions were pre-planned and phrased in simple language (Lund et al., 2016; Sandberg et al., 2017). These questions are outlined in Appendix B. I ensured to keep the purpose of my study in mind as I planned these

questions. With regards to timing of discussions, I deliberately timetabled the group discussions for the morning section of the school day as the children were most focused at this time.

### **3.6. Research Design and Process**

#### **3.6.1. Research Design**

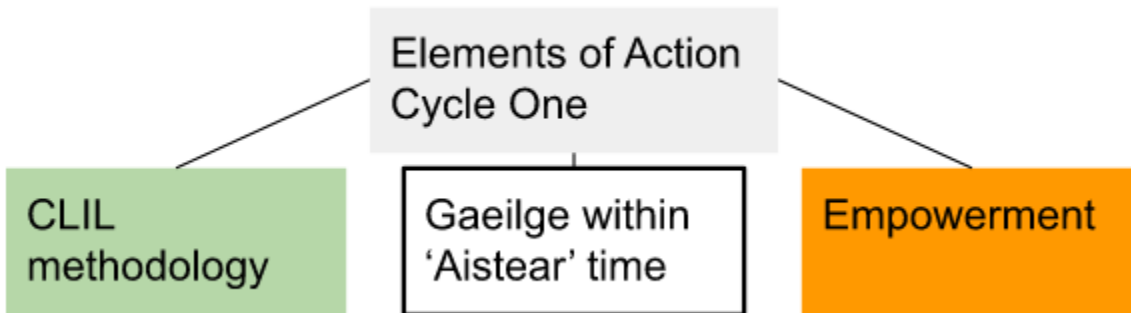
AR is a cyclical activity that involves “a continuous process of acting, reflecting on the action, and then acting again in new ways in light of what you have found” (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010: 95). Sullivan et al. (2016: 1) acknowledge that the path to developing as a critically reflective practitioner cannot be prescribed or pre-planned. This reinforces the fact that the AR process may guide and change the intervention approach. This was a defining feature of my action cycle interventions in which I explored my understanding of implementing best practice in my teaching of Gaelge. This section will outline the presence of a process focused approach within my study because of its significance to my research design and process. My data collection tools of TRJ and focus group pupil interviews were integral to this. Due to the fact that I aimed to use professional agency to enhance my practice, the need for teacher and pupil voice throughout was highlighted and will be outlined below.

#### **3.6.2. Evolution of Action Cycles**

The explicit occurrence of experiential learning in my SSARP is illustrated in Appendix C. This outlines a comparative overview of my pre-planned action cycles alongside the end result of my final action cycles. Therefore, the evolution of change within my planned practice versus responsive action is clear. Within Appendix C, changes can be seen from Action Cycle Two (AC2) onwards. Critical reflection in-action and on-action during the SSAR process

informed my action cycles, following the spiral process previously referred to and illustrated in Figure 3.2 above (Kemmis et al., 2004: 595).

### 3.6.3. Action Cycle One



*Figure 3.4. Three Components of Action Cycle One*

Action Cycle One (AC1) took place for five weeks from January until February 2022. AC1 included three elements, as outlined in Figure 3.4 above. This included a focus on using the CLIL methodology (NCCA, 2019), the integration of Gaeilge within my play based learning timetable, and finally, a focus on empowerment. These actions evolved in response to my data collection tools which included my TRJ and focus group interviews with pupils. Information regarding each of these three components will now be outlined.

#### ***CLIL Methodology***

My teaching intervention cycle within AC1 was defined by my use of the CLIL methodology. As previously outlined in Chapter One, I had been exposed to this methodology in my training for the PLC (NCCA, 2019) but I had not opted to use it in my teaching of Gaeilge prior to this.

I decided to use the CLIL methodology in my teaching of P.E because the children enjoy P.E, as noted during focus group interviews with pupils. The gymnastics strand of the PE curriculum (NCCA, 1999) was chosen as this was pre-decided as per my yearly P.E plan. Examples of the nature of these P.E lessons and the vocabulary used can be seen in Appendices D and E. The use of Gaeilge within P.E lessons was teacher focused with an aim to increase exposure to the language, in line with the outlined benefits for the CLIL approach in the PLC (NCCA, 2019: 10).

### *Gaeilge Within Aistear Time*

Prior to beginning AC1, focus group discussions took place with my pupils in order to ascertain their experience of learning Gaeilge. My pupils noted their enjoyment of active and play-based learning. As a result, I decided to integrate Gaeilge into play-based learning time, referred to as ‘Aistear’ time in reference to the Aistear Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009). This was also due to the fact that I identified my value of creativity in-action during play based learning in my classroom. I stated in my research proposal in September 2021 that:

I see my values being lived in my classroom when I see my pupils engaged in their learning in a curious, open minded manner, similar to the state of ‘flow’ identified by positive psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi (1990). This is when the pupils are fully immersed in an activity and exhibiting an enjoyment of learning. I see this during Aistear time in my classroom (September, 2021).

Gaeilge was incorporated into two stations in my Aistear timetable. An example of the content of these lessons and related vocabulary is indicated in my fortnight plan (seen in Appendix F). As outlined in Chapter Two, it is recommended that vocabulary is pre taught in advance of the expectation that the children will use the language as per the CLIL methodology

(Marsh, 2002; NCCA, 2019). Therefore, the vocabulary for this integrated use of Gaeilge was pre taught in December and January within Gaeilge lessons.

### ***Empowerment***

A core component of AC1 was to empower the pupils in their exposure towards Gaeilge. As noted in Chapter Two, having a clear goal is a core component in developing empowerment (Whetten & Cameron, 2016: 396). On this note, I shared my research aims with my pupils in relation to my aim of promoting positive dispositions towards Gaeilge. The pupil's responded positively to this and eagerly engaged. I initially envisioned the use of SMART targets (Locke & Latham, 2006) in order to outline clear goals with respect to the focus on Gaeilge with my pupils during the intervention cycles. However, given the context of COVID and other time constraints, I simply did not manage to prioritise this in the manner in which I originally envisioned. By this, I mean that whilst clear goals were given, they were discussed rather than formally written as SMART goals.

### 3.6.4. Action Cycle Two

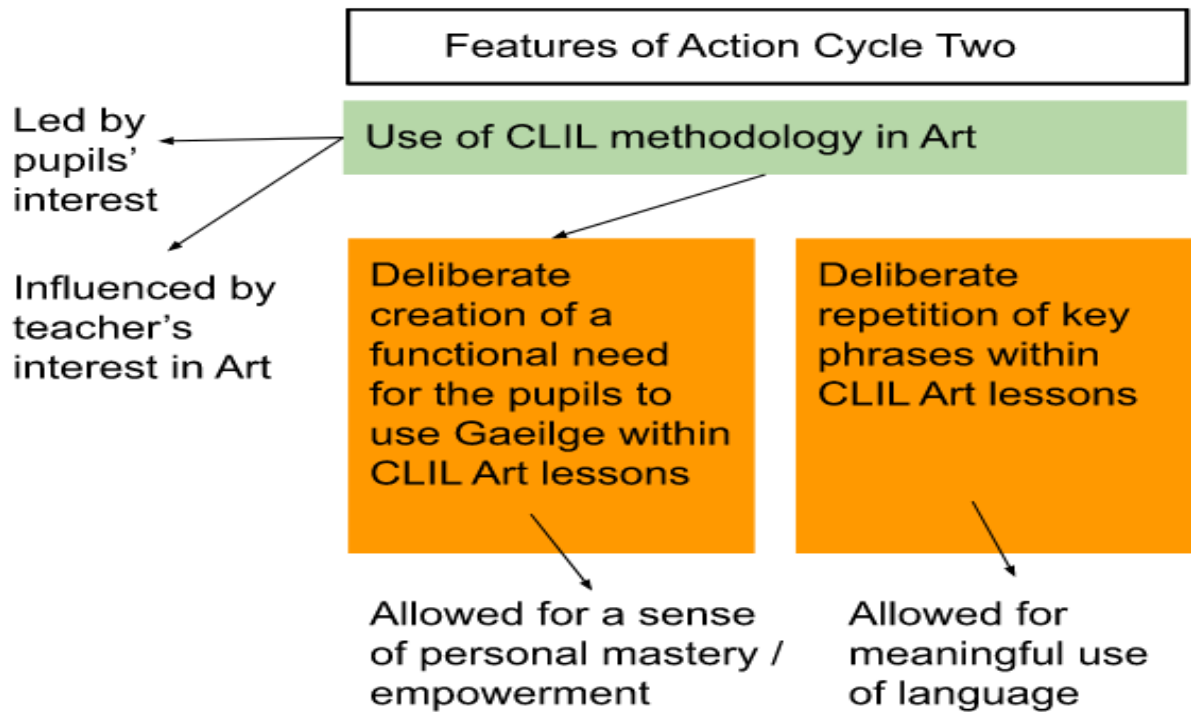


Figure 3.5. Features of Action Cycle Two

Action Cycle Two (AC2) took place for four weeks in February and March 2022. Eight lessons were created, which incorporated craft making through Irish. Two lessons were taught each week. Examples of these lessons can be seen in Appendix G. The use of the CLIL methodology during Art lessons was informed by a combination of pupil and teacher interest (as noted in Figure 3.5 above). My decision to explore the CLIL methodology during Art lessons was informed by the emerging data in my TRJ.

#### ***CLIL Methodology***

I felt that there was merit in the CLIL methodology which I had not managed to unlock within AC1. In this regard, my use of the CLIL methodology in AC2 was more deliberate and

informed. My pupils identified a feeling of frustration towards learning Gaeilge during focus group interviews following AC1. This is shown in my pupils' response to the following question:

'what is your least favourite thing about learning Irish?' Pupils stated:

"I don't like Irish, I like Maths... I don't really want to do the words... like Irish words."

"It is not easy like Maths."

(Focus group interviews with pupils, January, 2022)

In response to this data from my pupils, I decided to emphasise repetition of phrases and vocabulary during lessons. A list of this repeated vocabulary is outlined in Appendix H.

### 3.6.5. Action Cycle Three

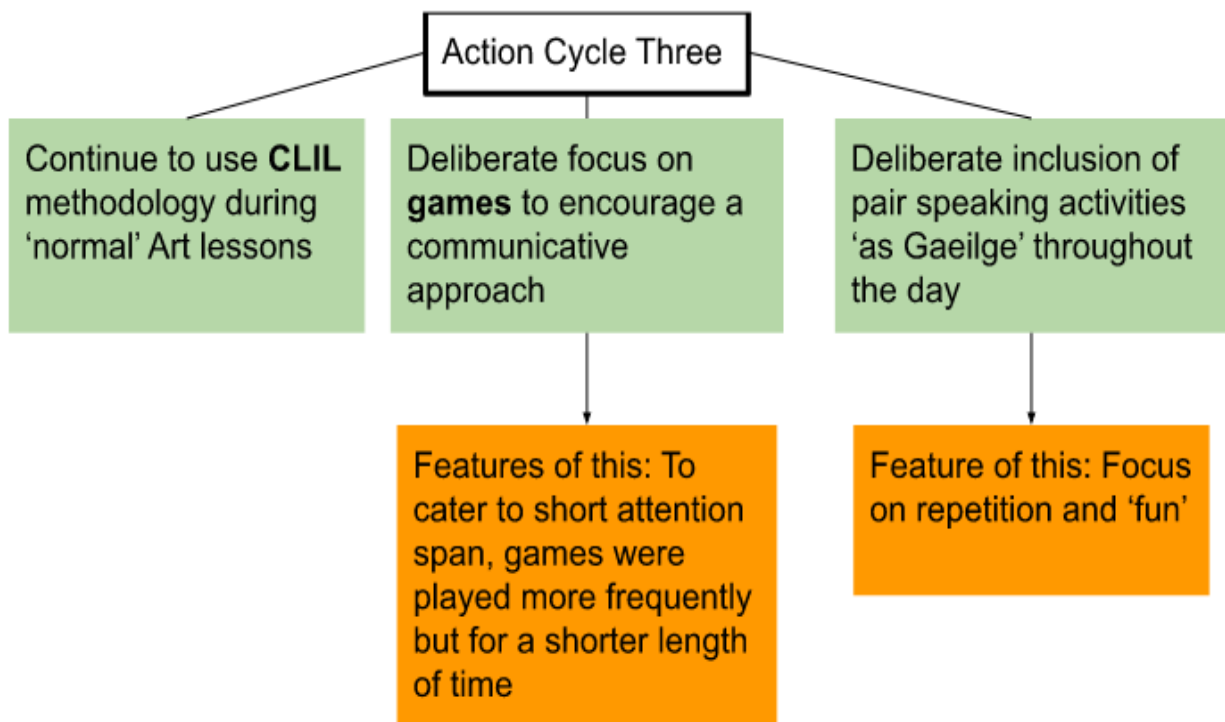


Figure 3.6. Features of Action Cycle Three



Action Cycle Three (AC3) lasted six weeks, from April to May 2022. It included the continued use of the CLIL methodology during Art lessons, as well as an increased focus on the use of games and pair speaking activities (Figure 3.6, above). I used critical reflection to review my progress of enhancing my teaching of Gaeilge. Therefore, the focus of AC3 was on responsive action, relative to my unique classroom environment. This supported my enhanced understanding of professional agency and how I could direct my professional development in this manner. Whilst AC1 relied on ideas from Governmental policy to direct my actions, AC3 was largely influenced by my critical evaluation of my engagement with such to date.

### *Continued use of the CLIL methodology*

My choice to continue with the CLIL methodology was influenced by a perceived sense of positivity towards Gaeilge amongst my pupils following AC1 and AC2. Using intuitive assessment, as advocated for within the Assessment Guidelines for Schools (NCCA, 2008: 25) and Draft Primary Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2020: 23), I identified that my engagement with the CLIL methodology to date encouraged me to acknowledge the need to create meaningful contexts for language use. As a result, I continued to incorporate the use of CLIL in AC3.

### *Games*

Short games which promoted communication throughout the day were incorporated in AC3. Examples of these games were ‘Céard a thóg mé?’, ‘An bhfuil tú ag’ and ‘Bí ag’, a description of which is included in Appendix I. My decision to prioritise short games was a direct response to the fact that maintaining the children’s engagement was limited by their developmental age and,

consequently attention span. Therefore, short games allowed for maximum opportunities for active engagement.

### *Pair Speaking Activities*

My underlying aim to increase opportunities for a communicative approach meant a focus on pair speaking activities. This involved the children asking and answering questions. Two questions were focused on: ‘cén dath é seo?’ and ‘céard e seo’? My TRJ indicated a need for fun activities so an element of fun was included whereby the children had the freedom to walk around the classroom, and later the school, during this activity. This was also influenced by my participation in some lectures during the MEd which adopted this engaging approach, capturing my interest.

## **3.7. Ethical Considerations**

### **3.7.1. Ethics Approval Process**

Prior to engaging in this study I received ethical approval from Maynooth University. I received permission from my Board of Management to conduct the research (see Appendix J). Due to the fact that my research was conducted with children, there were many ethical considerations to be considered. This included informed consent, child assent, data storage, confidentiality, anonymity and ethical considerations in using voice recordings and interviews with children. These ethical components of my research will now be outlined.

### **3.7.2. Informed Consent**

Brooks et al. (2014) note that research participants should be provided with adequate and accessible knowledge. They further note that participants should understand that their

participation is voluntary and they should have the right to withdraw from the research at any stage (Brooks et al., 2014). Additionally, a decision to participate should only be made by those who choose of their own will (Brooks et al., 2014). In this regard, consent was sought from the children's parents (see Appendix K). Information letters were provided to each child's responsible adult (See Appendix L). These letters were written in accordance with Maynooth University Research Integrity Policy (NUIM, 2021) and were approved by the ethical committee.

### **3.7.3. Child Assent**

Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) suggest that consulting with the children about the research creates a more empowering role. This was important with regards to my values. Kellet (2005) acknowledges that gaining child assent is critical practice to uphold ethics procedures regardless of the country's law. Written permission was sought by means of a letter which was sent home for parental discussion (see Appendix M). Oral permission was sought from my pupils by simply explaining to them that I would be researching my teaching of Gaeilge to try to impact their enjoyment of the language. The right to withdraw was explained as simply as possible so that the children could decide freely if they wished to withdraw from the research process at any stage.

### **3.7.4. Data Storage**

Maynooth University guidelines on data storage were followed, as presented in the Maynooth University Research Integrity Policy (NUIM, 2021). In this regard, it is noted that the research project and its findings will be used for examination module purposes, will be made available for the external examiner and may be published and disseminated at conferences.

Digital data, including voice recordings have been password protected. They have been stored on Google Drive which is a secure location, as per Maynooth University guidelines best practice.

### **3.7.5. Confidentiality and Anonymity**

Check and Schutt (2012) emphasise the necessity for teacher researchers to be vigilant around confidentiality and to be particularly cautious not to abuse power relationships. Children's names were not used in my thesis and all voice recordings have been transcribed with pseudonyms. My school will not be identified through the study.

### **3.7.6. Ethical considerations for voice recording with children**

Robust ethical consideration is needed when voice recording children. Aubrey et al. (2000) caution against the risk in doing so within private situations. This was mitigated by using a focus group discussion approach, as previously outlined. The children were asked prior to and during each recording if they were happy to have their voice recorded.

### **3.7.7. Ethical consideration for interviews with children**

As previously outlined, focus group interviews with my pupils took place during an everyday routine in which the children were engaged in. This approach is recommended by Cohen et al. (2018). Cognisance was given to power dynamics and creation of a "permissive, non-threatening environment" (Krueger & Casey, 2009: 2) through consideration of my approach, as previously detailed.

### 3.8. Data Analysis

My choice of a data analysis method was influenced by the type of data collected (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018), namely qualitative data. Cohen et al (2011: 537) suggest the necessity to observe a “fitness for purpose approach”. Therefore, a thematic analysis approach was selected which will now be outlined.

#### 3.8.1. Thematic Analysis

I used a reflexive thematic analysis approach to analyse my qualitative data set (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Familiarisation of the content of my data was key in the initial stages of my data analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006: 87) note the importance of “repeated reading” of the data. This formed step one of my data analysis process, followed by five subsequent steps as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019) (illustrated below in Figure 3.7).



*Figure 3.7. Overview of Braun and Clarke's (2019) Six Step Process of Thematic Analysis*

I considered my paradigmatic orientation and assumptions to ensure trustworthiness of my findings and interpretations, as outlined by Kiger and Varpio (2020: 2). My epistemological and ontological beliefs aligned with a constructivist paradigm due to the fact that my interest lies in understanding meaning within my practice and the experiences of my pupils. This process of data analysis will be further outlined in Chapter Four with regards to my findings.

### **3.8.2. Validity**

I referred to Brookfield's (2017) four lenses of critical reflection in order to ensure an inclusion of a variety of perspectives within my SSARP. These perspectives included myself, my peers/colleagues, my pupils and theoretical literature, as illustrated in Figure 3.8 (below). This addressed the limitation of subjectivity in my study through data triangulation, thereby, enhancing reliability and validity within my study (Sullivan et al., 2016).



*Figure 3.8. Brookfield's Four Lenses of Critical Reflection (2017)*

McDonagh et al. (2020: 107) define triangulation as “getting other perspectives on qualitative data so as to show its credibility by cross checking”. In order to integrate a variety of perspectives into the fabric of my SSARP, two deliberate approaches were taken: the formation of a learning community (Glenn et al., 2017) and the formal use of a critical friend in my research. These approaches to validate my research will now be outlined.

### **3.8.3. The Formation of a Learning Community**

Glenn et al. (2017) suggest that the formation of a learning community facilitates dialogue and partnership whilst gaining multiple perspectives, further noting that this promotes methodological rigour. In order to do this, I discussed my research with my colleagues by means of professional conversations. This was informal and ongoing throughout my SSARP. An example of this is seen in Appendix N which outlines a message I sent to my staff seeking their discussion and input on my research in May 2022. By discussing my research with my colleagues, I was enabled to share ideas, gain new ideas and validate my findings. This aligned with Habermas’ theory on social validation (1976, cited in Sullivan et al., 2016) which states that validation may be achieved by means of dialogue with others.

My engagement with the ‘Implications for Educational Improvement’ module during the Research in Practice MEd further enhanced my ability to form a learning community and to achieve validity through dialogue. I presented my research and findings to my MEd peers and lecturers in June 2022. Examples of the slides used for this presentation are included in Appendix O. By publicly disseminating my SSARP, I engaged in dialogue relating to my research, received feedback based on this and answered relevant questions. This endeavour

supported me in validating my claims to knowledge, a possibility acknowledged by Sullivan et al. (2016).

#### **3.8.4. Critical Friend**

With regards to a second deliberate approach to integrate a variety of perspectives into my SSARP, I sought permission from a ‘critical friend’ to participate in the discussion of my research on a formal basis (see Appendix P). I scheduled two twenty minute discussions with my critical friend, one at the beginning and one at the end of the intervention stage of my research. My critical friend was a practising teacher in a different school than my own. McNiff (2013) highlights the importance of inviting peers to comment on and discuss one's claims in order to avoid bias and show intellectual and methodological rigour. This allowed me to question assumptions and uncover hidden bias.

#### **3.9. Conclusion**

This chapter explored the AR paradigm and my understanding of SSAR. My understanding of self-study action researchers as active agents in their own professional development was outlined. Detailed rationale was provided for my choice of this methodology in line with my values. My choice of a ‘living theory’ approach was explained, which linked to my epistemological beliefs, particularly with regards to knowledge creation within the teaching profession.

A description and overview of the research methods used in my study were outlined, including focus group interviews with pupils and my use of a TRJ. Consideration was given to the design of the AR intervention process with detailed description of actions cycles one to three.



Ethical considerations of my study were outlined before the process of data analysis was described. Finally, efforts to ensure validity, authenticity and reliability of my study were outlined with reference to the prioritisation of a variety of perspectives as per Brookfield's four lenses of critical reflection (Brookfield, 2017). The use of a critical friend and the formation of a learning community were explained. The next chapter will focus on data analysis and findings.

## Chapter Four: Data Analysis and Findings

### 4.1. Introduction to Chapter Four

This chapter provides an overview of the data analysis process and resulting findings, with reference to my research questions:

- How can I critically evaluate and reflect on policy developments to enhance my teaching of Gaeilge?
- How can my engagement with implementing suggested best practice inform and impact upon my sense of professional agency?

I outline my use of a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2019), with regards to my qualitative data set. This process resulted in the identification of two themes, which include:

Theme 1 : Teacher as learner

Theme 2 : Gaeilge as a living language

Within these two themes, four associated subthemes were identified: experiential learning, learning environments, meaning with regards to language learning and personal mastery experiences, as seen in Figure 4.1 below.

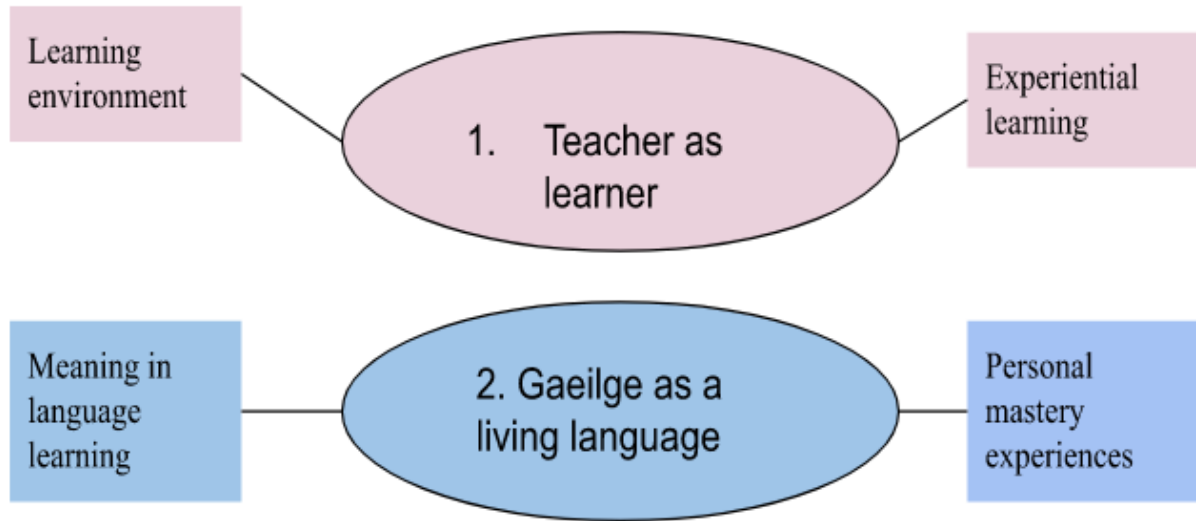


Figure 4.1. Overview of themes and subthemes within my data

Interestingly, a strong overlap was found between my two overarching themes and my values of positivity, creativity and empowerment. This link between the themes in my data and my identified values is illustrated in Figure 4.2 (below). This overlap of values is noteworthy in light of research question two ‘how can my engagement with implementing suggested best practice inform and impact upon my sense of professional agency’? This will be addressed in my data analysis within my findings.

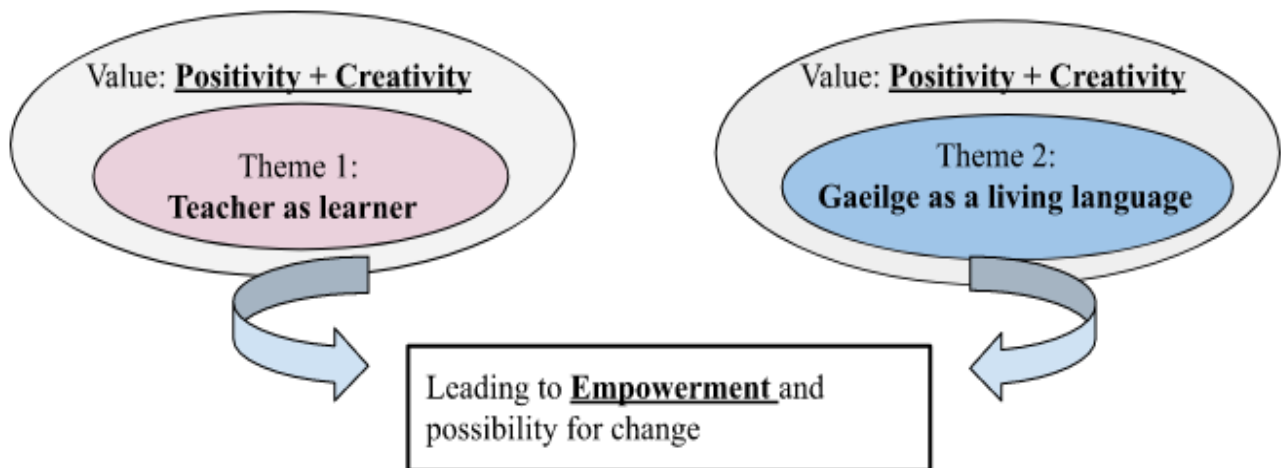


Figure 4.2. The link between the themes in my data and my identified values

#### 4.2. Data Analysis Learning Journey

The data analysis component of my research began after the completion of the fifteen week action cycle interventions. This took place between May and August 2022. This section outlines my experience of identifying my two themes through the data analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2021), which links with and leads into my analysis of Theme One ‘Teacher as Learner’, and subsequently the subtheme ‘Experiential Learning’. I found that an authentic, informed approach to this process helped to situate my learning as a practitioner based researcher and is indicative of the experience of learning in a SSARP. This linked with my focus of *using* professional agency; which is to act proactively and autonomously (Cigala et al., 2019).

I used Braun and Clarke’s (2021) updated six phase framework as a tool to decipher and interpret my qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2021: 591). This included my TRJ, interviews with my pupils, conversations with my critical friend and observations within the intervention cycle timeframe of fifteen weeks. Reliability and depth of my findings was ensured through triangulation of the data.

It is important to note that Braun and Clarke’s (2021) thematic analysis framework is designed in a manner which promotes critical reflection. This was not a linear process, rather a recursive process whereby subsequent steps prompted me to return to earlier steps as I considered and renegotiated the analysis of my data (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). My experience of this process is illustrated in Figure 4.3, which depicts the messy reality of engaging in this process:

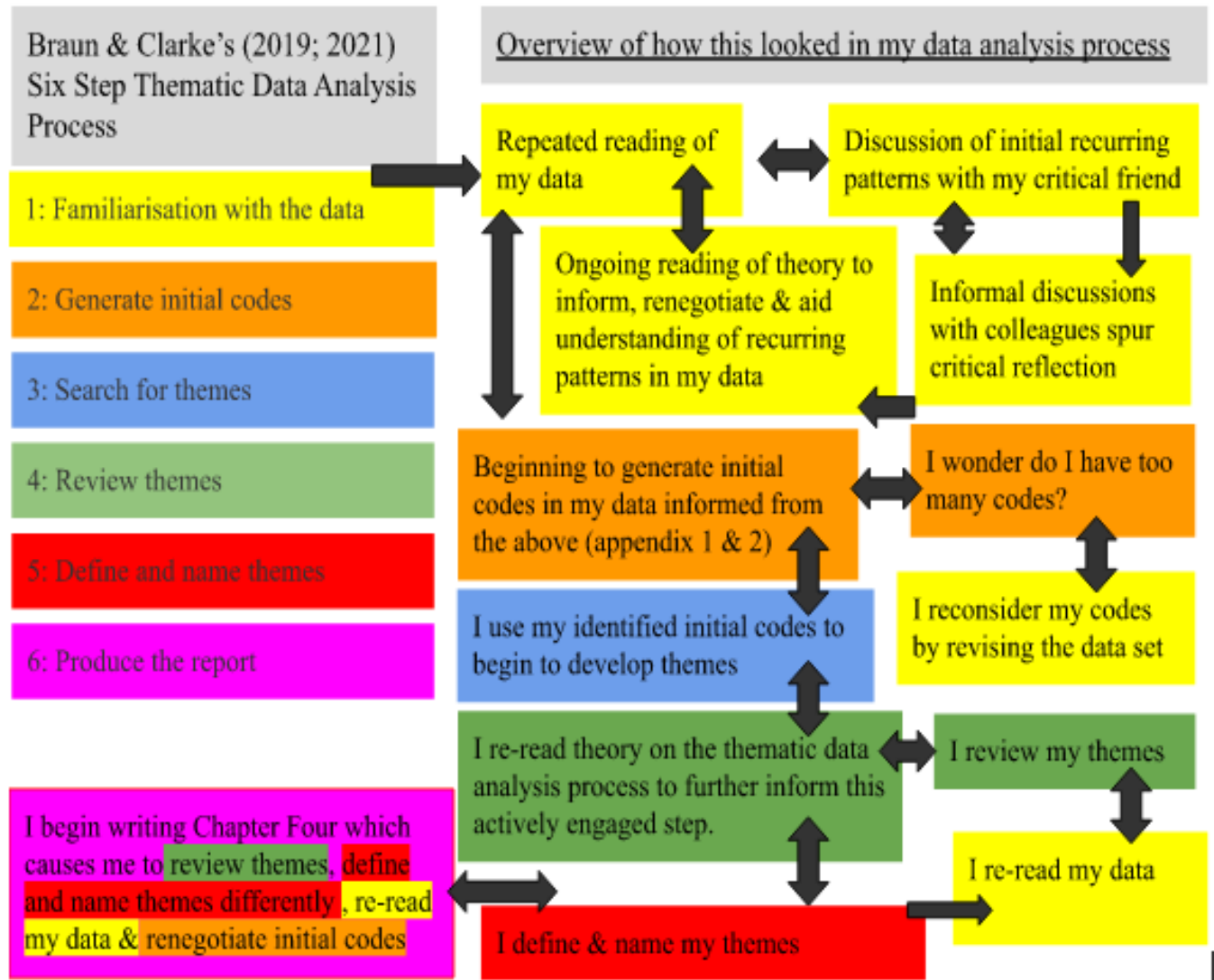


Figure 4.3. An overview of my use of Braun & Clarke's (2019; 2021) Six Step Thematic Data Analysis Process

As seen in Figure 4.3 (above), the steps which I took to thematically analyse my data were interrelated and repetitive, as shown by the recurring nature of former steps as well as arrows which point forwards and backwards, left and right. Critical reflection and renegotiation of my qualitative data led to alterations in my initial codes and themes. I began to identify latent themes which reflected deeper underlying meanings, assumptions and ideologies (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

**4.2.1. Coding Process**

Step two of Braun and Clarke’s (2019; 2021) six step thematic data analysis process is to ‘generate initial codes’. An example of my experience of generating initial codes can be seen in Appendices P and Q. Appendix Q displays an excerpt from my TRJ with initial codes indicated throughout. Appendix R depicts an excerpt of the transcript of pre-intervention interviews with my pupils in January 2022 with initial codes evidenced throughout. Initial codes occurring in Appendix R include meaning, language, frustration, difficulty, usefulness, communication, disinterest, active learning, learning, empowerment, possibility, identity and interest. The immediate correlation of these initial codes with the eventual construction of my final two themes can be seen in Figure 4.4 and will be detailed below. Colour coding was used within my interview transcripts and TRJ as it helped to separate and label codes throughout the data.

Theme	Corresponding Initial codes
1. Teacher as learner	self understanding, critical reflection, policy, accountability, professional conversations, collegiality, positivity, values, humour, leadership, culture, best practice, motivation, empowerment, learning
2. Gaelge as a living language	communication, usefulness, engagement, interest, meaning, language difficulty, identity, creativity, active learning, motivation, empowerment, learning

\* 25 initial codes

*Figure 4.4. Correlation of Initial Codes with each of my Two Themes*

**4.2.2. Identification of Themes**

As noted above, twenty-five codes were identified in my data set. I then adopted an inductive approach to theme identification (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). This meant that my themes were reflective of the entire data set (Braun & Clarke, 2019). In order to do this, I first filtered

and grouped the initial twenty-five codes into linked categories, followed by critical reflective questioning. An example of this process is outlined in Figure 4.5 (below), in relation to Theme One 'Teacher as Learner'.

Figure 4.5 (below) displays the initial codes, which were then grouped into a category entitled 'the learning process'. It became evident that the focus was on my role as a learner in addition to my desire to understand and enhance this. Therefore, a combination of the aforementioned categories led to 'Teacher as Learner' presenting as Theme One. The related subthemes, 'learning environment' and 'experiential learning', arose in response to the factors which may promote or inhibit learning as the data reflected a strong focus on this.

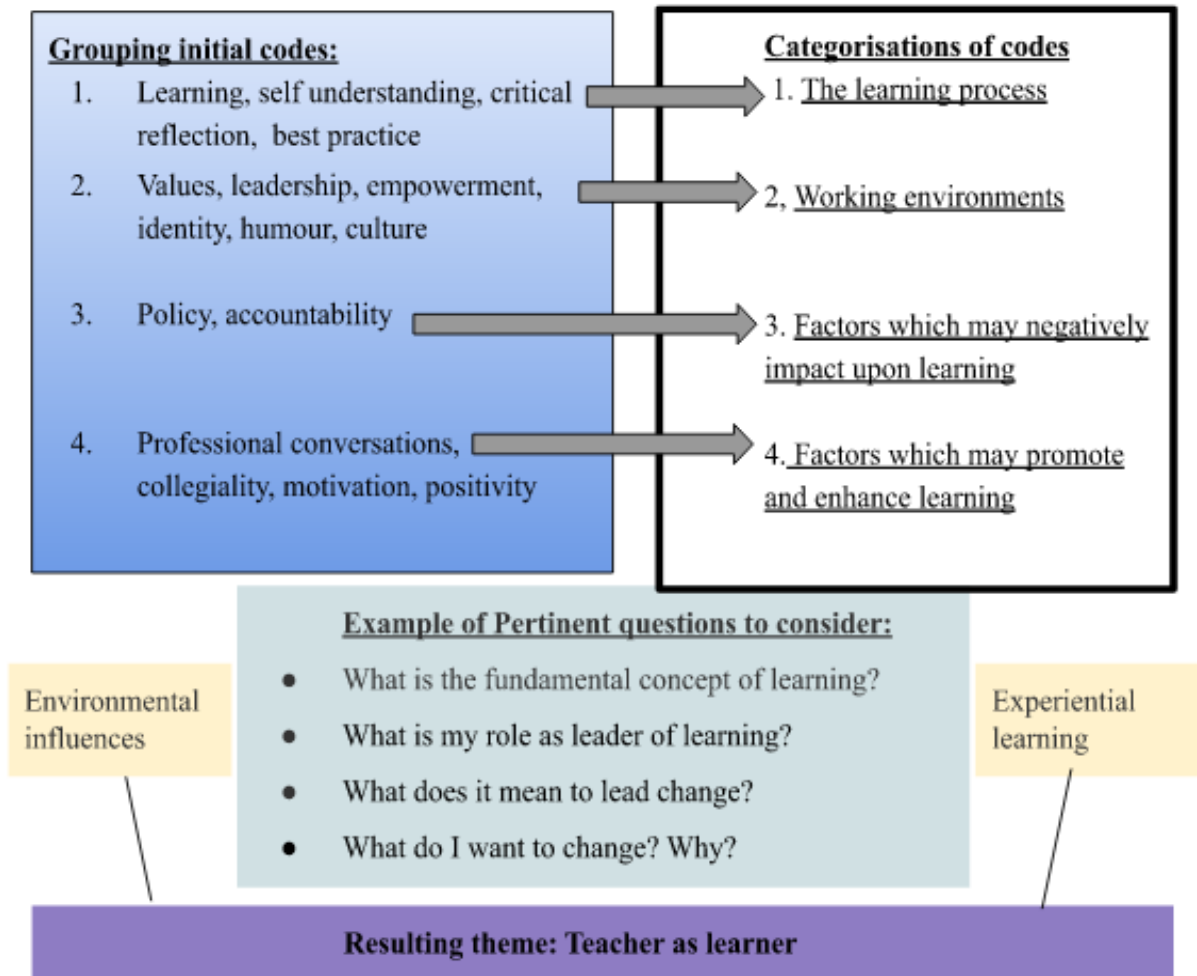


Figure 4.5. Categorisation of initial codes with examples of critical reflective questioning

The next step of the coding process involved my use of thematic mapping (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Figure 4.6 (below) outlines a macro level thematic map related to the initial code of ‘learning and best practice’, whilst Figure 4.7 outlines a micro level thematic map for the same. These thematic maps give an indication of the critical reflection required in order to arrive at the end point of identifying my two themes. This example specifically illustrates my journey in identifying Theme One: Teacher as Learner.



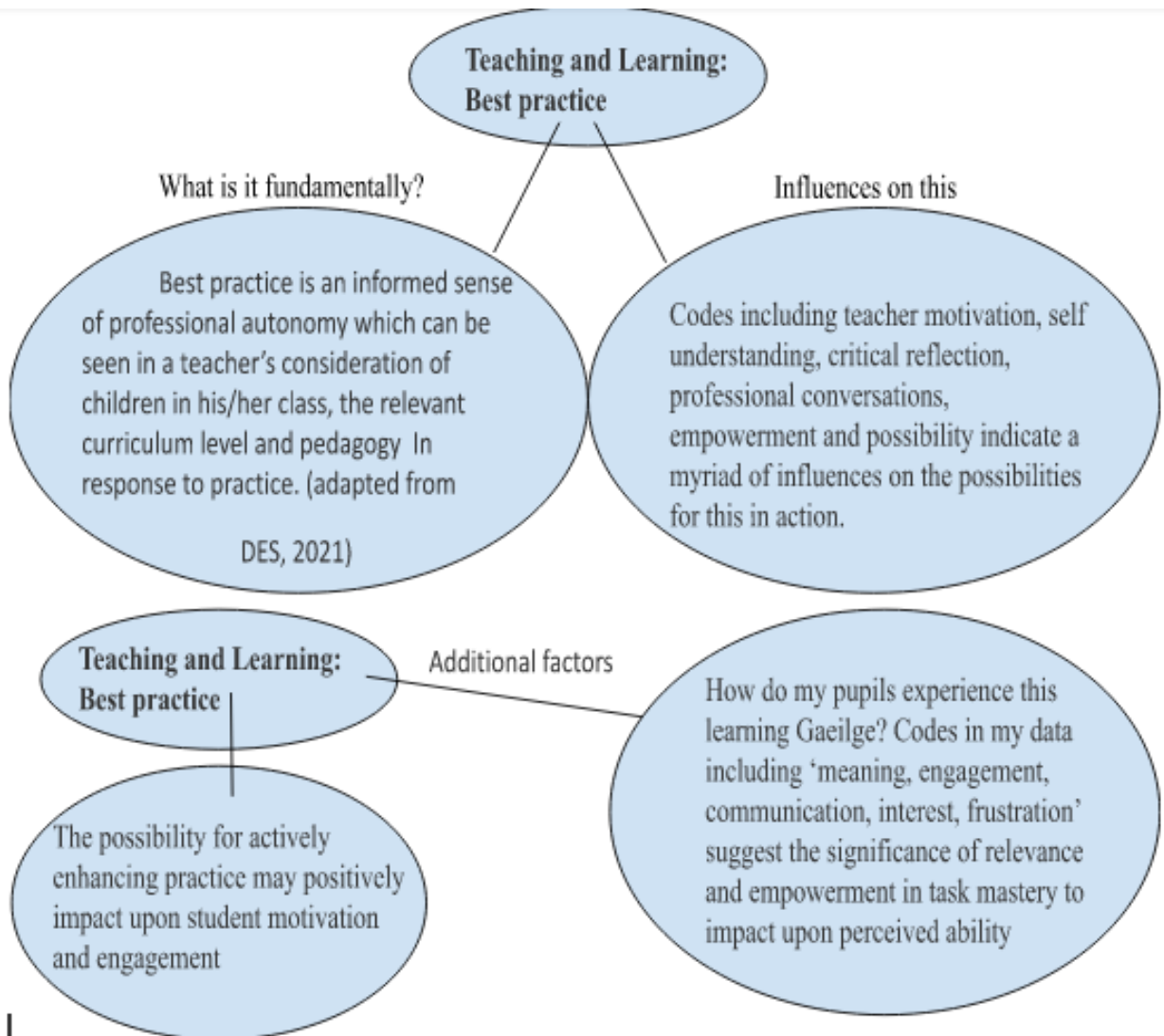


Figure 4.6. Macro level thematic map on the learning process and improving practice Source: Developed by author, informed by Kiger & Varpio (2020)

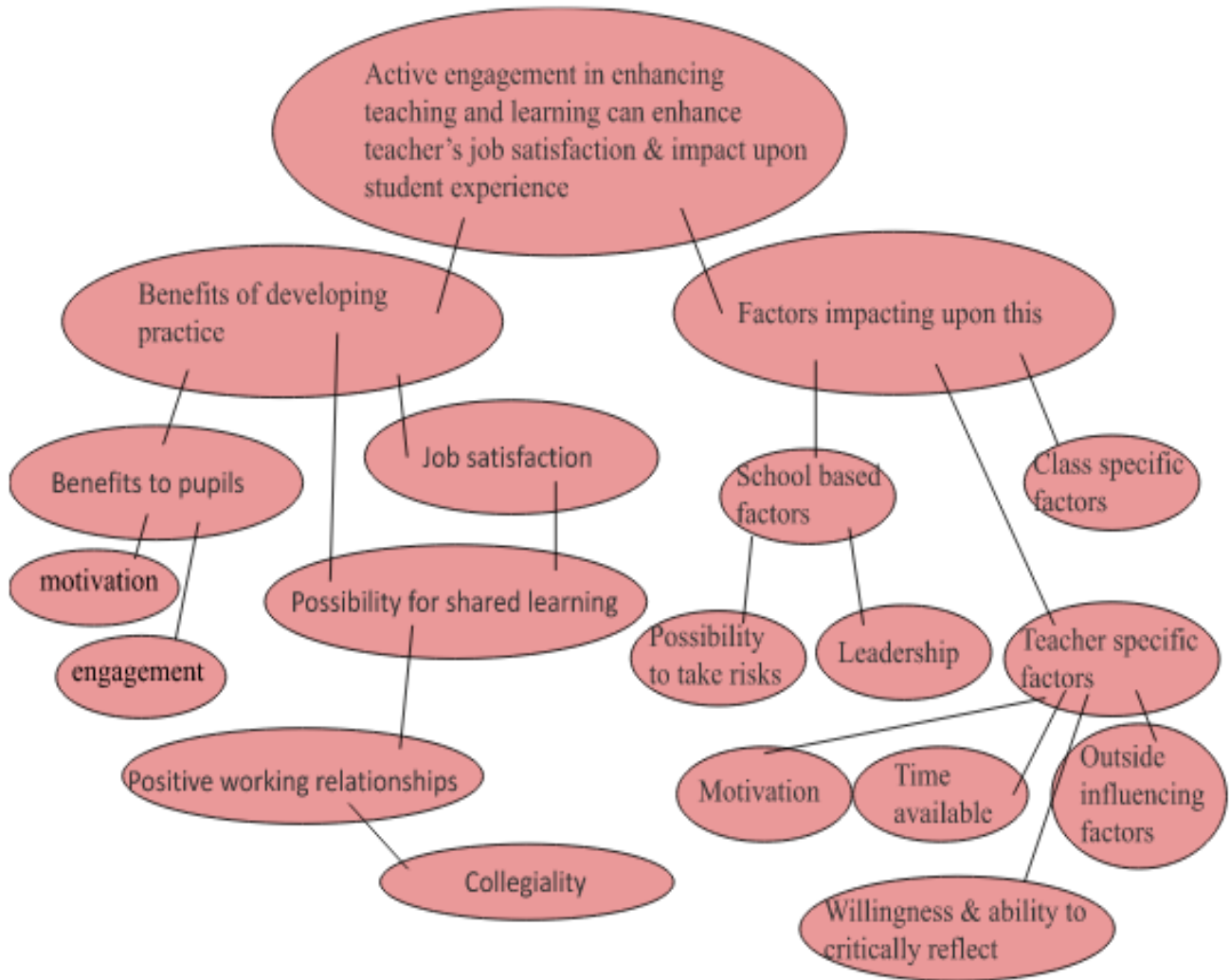
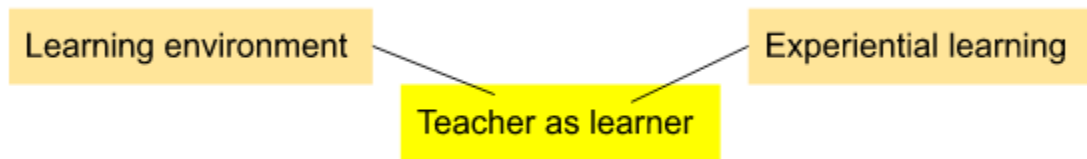


Figure 4.7. Micro level thematic map on the learning process and improving practice

Source: Developed by author, informed by Kiger & Varpio (2020)

This section has displayed the process of identifying my themes; an important step in the understanding and analysis of my data. The audit trail outlined above within Figures 4.3, 4.4, 4.5, 4.6 and 4.7 allows me to support the trustworthiness of my interpretations and data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). I will now detail my data analysis and findings in relation to my two constructed themes.

### 4.3. Theme One: Teacher as Learner



Theme One, 'Teacher as Learner', was strongly linked with my desire to *use* professional agency within my SSARP. An important question began to emerge: did I perceive myself as having the capacity to act autonomously and proactively to direct my teaching of Gaeilge within my SSARP? What impacted upon my perception of having the capacity to act?

#### 4.3.1. Subtheme One: Learning Environment

The subtheme 'Learning Environment' arose as an important factor which directly influenced my perception of having the capacity to act, or, in other words, to have professional agency. It was evident that I felt positively enabled to act autonomously and proactively within my new school and in my SSARP. I noted a presence of a myriad of factors within my TRJ and in discussions with my critical friend, which greatly impacted upon my perception to direct my teaching in an autonomous, proactive manner.

Interestingly, many of these factors were positive and school context specific, as opposed to directly influenced by the external political environment. As previously outlined, my value of positivity aligned with this theme. This was due to an overwhelming presence of positive influencing factors. These influencing factors are illustrated in Figure 4.8 (below), followed by the positive repercussion of this influence upon my perceived capacity to direct my teaching of Gaeilge.

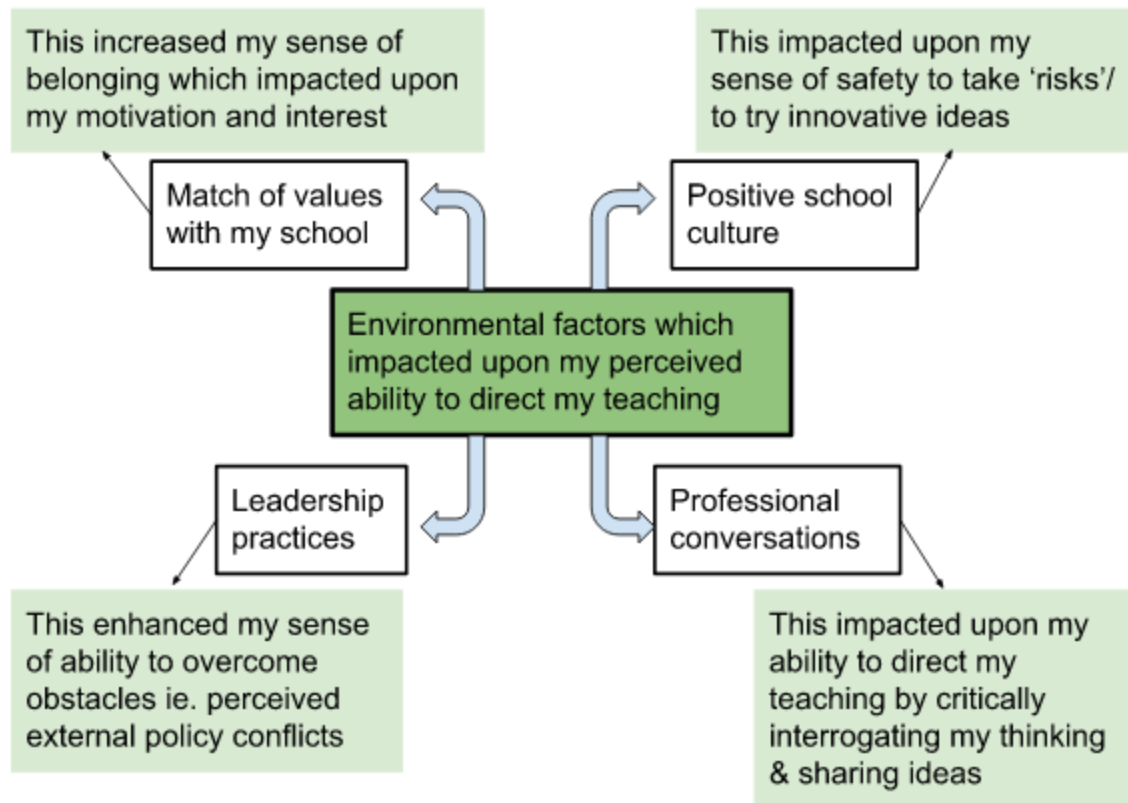


Figure 4.8. Environmental factors which impacted my use of agency

### ***Match of Values with my School***

I noted a match of values with my school on a number of occasions within my TRJ, for example in January 2022, I stated “I love working in my new school. I love working alongside my senior infant colleague. So inspiring and helpful”. Additionally, in October 2022, I noted that I felt “respected and empowered” in my school. The match of my value of empowerment can be seen in my reference to a staff meeting which took place in October 2021, in which I noted that:

The principal encouraged us as a staff to reflect on if we felt this was a good idea- sticking sheets into scrapbooks for assessment in SESE. He spoke about how we should be careful of doing things just because an inspector said so. He encouraged staff to reflect on if we really agreed with this and felt that it would be beneficial.

The importance of empowerment is evident in the above example as the principal explicitly encouraged us as teachers to assert our professionalism, thereby highlighting an existence of agency in action. This match of values increased my sense of belonging, which positively enhanced my motivation and interest (Figure 4.8 above).

I referred to this sense of belonging in August 2022 as I reflected on a professional conversation which I had with a colleague: “I really enjoyed having this conversation. A professional conversation. I felt energised”. The impact of my sense of belonging on my motivation is evident here in the word ‘energised’. The match of values between myself and my school positively influenced my capacity for professional agency, because to be energised suggests proactivity. This sense of energy was a recurrent theme throughout my TRJ and defined my engagement with my SSARP as I sought to enhance my teaching of Gaeilge. I was motivated and empowered.

Interestingly, a pupil in my class noted my motivation and interest in teaching and learning. I reflected on this in my TRJ in February 2022, stating “one of the children in my class said to me today: you really love being a teacher don’t you”. The match of values is again referred to in the follow on from this observation in which I stated “I heard so much laughter and joy in my school today and I consciously noticed it so I was happy for the child in my class to note this within our classroom too”. I felt a sense of possibility as a result of the above, which enhanced my motivation and interest. My experience links with Buchanan’s (2015) findings in

Chapter Two which outlined that when there is a close fit between a teacher's values and their school, this aids a sense of belonging which assists in asserting agency.

### *Positive Culture*

I noted in my TRJ in September 2021 that "I feel full of energy in my new school, I can even see this in the children, in the sense of energy they have". I refer to the fact that the positive school culture enabled me to experience a greater sense of autonomy as I was more likely to 'take risks' and, therefore, try new or innovative practices. I stated in my TRJ:

'I realised that I was afraid to take risks in my previous school, whereas I feel that anything (within reason!) is possible in my new school. This opens the doors to so many ideas, something which I am very grateful for' (September, 2021).

The above excerpt highlights the impact of school culture on possibility for professional agency as it is evident that there is a perceived likelihood for both autonomy and proactivity in directing my teaching. I was now "willing to be wrong", a term which Brydon-Miller et al. (2003: 13) uses to describe an essential ingredient of a researcher's approach with the AR methodology to encourage an evolving theory of practice. This suggests a presence of an increased possibility for learning in my context.

My critical friend provided me with clarity to recognise this presence of possibility and my willingness for trial and error in February 2022, stating "it's great that you have so many ideas and are willing to adapt and change and try them out". As previously noted in Chapter One, the CLIL methodology was a teaching method I was aware of within the PLC (NCCA, 2019) but I had not opted to try this approach before my involvement in this SSARP. The existence of a learning environment, defined by such features as positive culture, served to heighten my sense of professional agency in addition to encouraging me to challenge previously held assumptions. I

began to use professional agency to enhance my teaching of Gaeilge, whilst simultaneously enhancing my self-understanding.

### ***Professional Conversations***

I refer to professional conversations throughout my TRJ, referencing how these conversations encouraged shared learning and allowed me to interrogate my previously held assumptions. These conversations positively enabled shared critical reflection. An example of a professional conversation within my TRJ can be seen in March 2022, in which I stated:

I spoke to my colleagues informally about my use of the CLIL methodology. I asked if anyone had tried this methodology before. N said she hadn't but that she used mini whiteboards during Bua na Cainte lessons to enable whole class participation and to allow for the children to all answer, maximising labhairt na Gaeilge.

The social construction of building new knowledge is evident in the above example. I used this knowledge to inform my teaching, incorporating my use of mini-whiteboards to maximise engagement, thereby drawing upon this collective wisdom (Rushton, 2017: 131). The impact of professional conversations was a key factor which impacted upon my ability to direct my teaching, influencing the actions I took in autonomously directing my teaching. Professional conversations played a key role in gaining new perspectives, ideas and sharing experiences in the teaching of Gaeilge.

### ***Leadership***

Leadership is a recurrent theme within my TRJ and my discussions with my critical friend. My TRJ indicates that the leadership practices within my school enhanced my ability to overcome obstacles, particularly ones which were linked to the external political environment. This was because of my principal's explicit commitment to remove such obstacles in order to

preserve the values of the school and to promote professionalism. For example, I reflected upon my principal speaking during a staff meeting in my TRJ in October 2021. I noted:

He reassured staff that if the inspectorate took issue with us for this, he would wholeheartedly defend and explain this. He was very passionate about this. This made me feel so privileged to work with such a leader. He modelled 'agency' in action and was not afraid to make strong decisions which ultimately aid teaching and learning in the school.  
(October, 2021)

This existence of leadership practices which encouraged critical reflection on pedagogical approaches encouraged a sense of ability to be proactive and to make autonomous choices. I felt supported which increased my perception of my ability to direct my teaching. This correlates with Leithwood et al.'s (2004) findings which state that the work a school leader puts into creating and promoting a positive school environment inspires trust and safety among students and teachers. I experienced this sense of trust as I noticed that the values of the school were lived through the leadership. I felt positively enabled to focus on my job of teaching and learning. This in turn positively impacted upon my perceived ability to impact change.

#### **4.3.2 Finding One**

##### **Positive school culture can increase the possibility for professional agency to be used**

A finding emerged whereby a link was shown between the learning environment of my school and the possibility for professional agency to be enacted. The learning environment was impacted by factors such as positive school culture, leadership practices, professional conversations and a presence of shared values. My data suggested that my school culture impacted upon possibility for change, the process of change and the speed at which change was



possible. Action was enabled which was responsive. Critical reflections in respect of teaching were more likely to be acted upon innovatively due to a presence of trust and safety. This supported intrinsic motivation. This correlates with Day and Gu's findings (2007: 14) which state that a supportive school culture is a key factor in sustaining motivation and a sense of effectiveness in teachers at all stages of their career.

### ***A Change of Focus***

When I began this MEd in August 2021 my values focused on my quest for professional agency. I wrote in my draft values statement in August 2021, "right now I value congruence between school policy, vision statements and action in practice" (Champkin, 2021). My values were very much a response to a deficit experience I was in the process of overcoming at that moment in time. This changed by January 2022, as shown in my TRJ in which I wrote "I value positivity and feeling empowered with regards to having a sense of ownership over my actions in my teaching". My awareness of the benefits of professional agency began to form a lived reality rather than an aim.

### ***A Supportive Atmosphere***

The focus on professional agency is at the core of both examples detailed above; however the emphasis is on the concept of possibility in the latter. I had achieved a sense of professional agency at this time which allowed me to expand my thinking and begin to critically reflect upon my teaching of Gaeilge. This allowed me to resituate my pedagogical approaches in light of my new found sense of possibility. My focus was now on actively improving my practice with a sense of possibility in this, as opposed to amending and altering my practice due to constraints and demand. As outlined above, the influencing factors of leadership, positive school culture, professional conversations and shared values combined to promote my possibility for

professional agency to be achieved. Discussion with my critical friend in April 2022 supported this: “the fact your school is so supportive definitely helps”.

### ***Possibility and Interest***

My engagement with implementing suggested best practice impacted upon my sense of professional agency, as it heightened my understanding of becoming an autonomous professional. This promoted motivation and interest in further professional development. As previously outlined by Sullivan et al. (2016: 1), this helped to ensure that teaching did not become “murky, mundane and repetitive”. In contrast to this, my experience was defined by possibility, interest and motivation to enhance my teaching of Gaeilge. Professional agency was found to be both possible, and a positive enabler for further learning.

### **4.3.3. Subtheme Two: Experiential Learning**

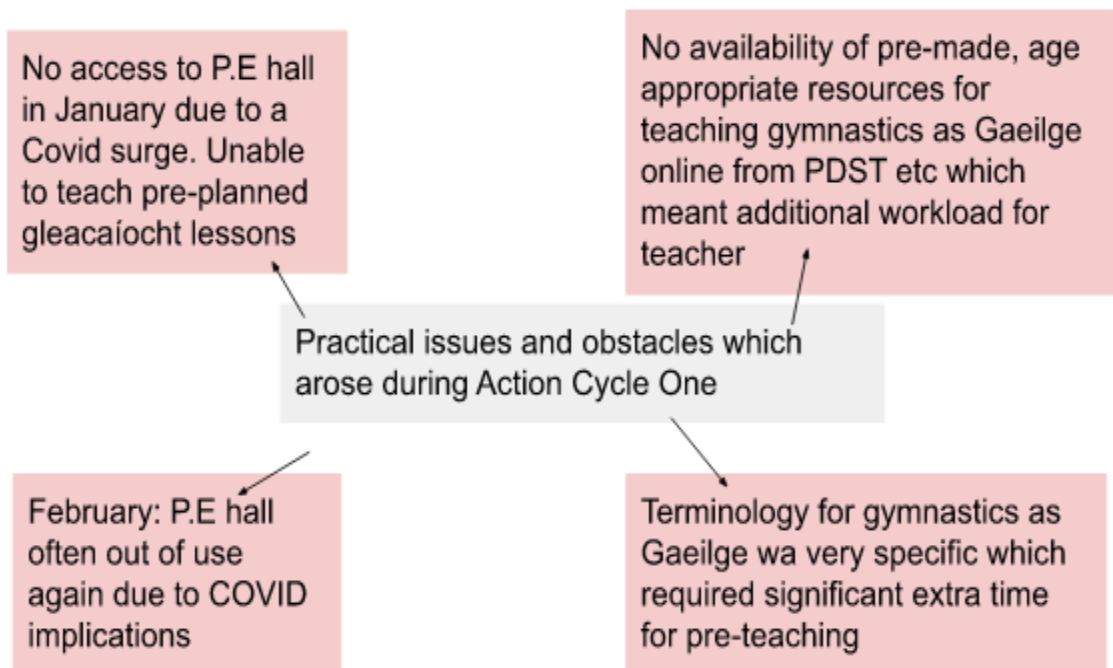
The concept of experiential learning is a core component of a SSAR approach. I began to realise that the very process of engaging in experiential learning within my unique context surpassed my expectations of what I could gain from such a project. I experienced a sense of achievement and enjoyment in embracing the ups and downs of the experiential learning process, which was motivating. As previously outlined, my unique situational context impacted upon my lived reality of the experiential learning process. Separate to these influences, the concept of the learning process was a recurrent theme throughout my data, thereby highlighting my second subtheme: experiential learning.

### ***The Inevitability of Disappointment***

My SSARP began on a very positive note, fuelled by enthusiasm by both myself and the children in my class who I had shared my aims with. I noted in my TRJ in January 2022:

The children were so enthusiastic when I spoke to them about promoting positivity towards Gaeilge and seeking their input on how we can do this collectively in our class. Even a parent noted it to me at hometime that Child D was excitedly telling everyone at home about it!”

The inevitability of disappointment soon arose, I noted in my TRJ in February 2022 that: “action cycle one has been disappointing.... the practicalities have hugely impacted my initial motivation”. As outlined in Chapter Three, AC1 focused on my use of the CLIL methodology within my teaching of gymnastics in P.E. I experienced a number of obstacles which prevented me from achieving my aims within this action cycle. These obstacles included logistical issues such as my inability to use the P.E hall due to a COVID surge in January, amongst others, as illustrated in Figure 4.9 (below).



*Figure 4.9 Obstacles which arose in my experiential learning journey*

Interestingly, the process of experiencing disappointment enhanced my learning because it was necessary for me to adapt, change and problem solve in a responsive manner. I was not achieving my desired outcomes immediately but I felt enabled to address this within my SSARP. The importance of responsive action became apparent. This led to a much more positive experience in AC2. I stated in March 2022 within my TRJ :

I am so pleased with my use of the CLIL methodology in action cycle two...the children engaged fully and used Gaeilge in the lessons, it was so motivating to hear them actively using Gaeilge and enjoying these lessons compared to action cycle one which was far too teacher focussed.

My sense of achievement is evident in the above example. I felt positively enabled to overcome barriers. This may have been linked to the fact that my learning environment supported my perception of having autonomy over my actions. It was clear that I was embracing the process of enhancing my teaching of Gaeilge.

### ***Creative Problem Solving***

The high level of sustained interest in enhancing my practice was defined by creative problem solving, an example of which is evident in this excerpt from my TRJ in February 2022:

I find the fact that infants lack the ability to listen well acts as a barrier to teaching the language. It is so full on for me as teacher to try to teach effectively on an ongoing basis... solution?...A plan which involves more singing or game playing? More opportunities to become active? How to teach vocab in an active way? ...I like when the children have an opportunity to use the language and not merely sit and listen to the lessons... Maybe I need to incorporate more speaking into my lessons by asking them to repeat and make a habit of it?

The above excerpt outlines the level of possibility which existed within my SSARP and depicts a process driven approach to enhancing my teaching of Gaeilge. I listed a number of potential ideas to address my perceived problem. Possibility is evident. This existence of problem solving is also shown in a discussion with my critical friend in March 2022: “your Gaeilge art lessons are easy to follow, keeping the structure the same and focussing on crafts was a good idea because the children are active, using the language... remember you said you find their attention span is very short”. Conversations such as this helped to further my learning and ignited my capability to positively overcome obstacles as they arose.

### ***Individual and Shared Reflective Practice***

Engaging in shared reflective practice supported my aim and maintained my level of interest in my SSARP. This aligns with research on the social nature of the teaching profession as well as the need to feel supported in developing professionally (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Sanglim & Sungeun, 2016). My ability to learn and adapt my teaching as necessary through both shared and individual critical reflection was built on further in AC3.

At this stage of the SSARP, I responded to my observation that the children’s attention spans at a senior infant level were quite short. Child F also referred to this difficulty during pre-intervention interviews stating “I don’t like that [learning Irish] takes ages”. My response to the above is shown in my decision to integrate Gaeilge throughout the day by using short, engaging games. I noticed that I was critically reflecting to enhance my teaching further. I was learning upon my former learning, adapting and refocusing as necessary.

Research question one ‘how can I critically evaluate and reflect on policy development to enhance my teaching’ became a lived reality. I began to realise that the answer for how to

enhance my practice did not necessarily exist within a policy suggestion of best practice. Whilst such ideas and documents were certainly supporting tools, I, as a professional, had the ability to adapt and use elements of my learning insights, as shown above in my description of the experiential learning process. I realised that I had the power to adapt my teaching as necessary. I embodied the previously defined understanding of what it means to be a professional teacher as discussed in Chapters One and Two: I was a “committed, skillful and agentic professional” (DES et al., 2021: 7).

### *Committed, Skillful, Agentic Professional*

My aim was no longer focused on how to achieve the seemingly unachievable scenario of *using* professional agency. Instead, the presence of the certain possibility to use this opened a world of possibility in terms of creativity to enhance my teaching. I was hopeful and full of ideas. My value for creativity became real and applied. I began to realise the possibilities which lie in achieving and using professional agency. I directed the action cycles within my SSARP to enhance my teaching of Gaelge in ways I had not explicitly placed such emphasis on previously. My critical friend supported this finding, stating in March 2022, “I feel like you have a good idea of where you’re going with this, you have made great progress and addressed concerns along the way. The amount of ideas you have shows that you feel you can steer the lessons as you see fit”.

#### **4.3.4. Finding Two**

##### **Teacher-led, experiential learning can positively impact upon a teacher's intrinsic motivation**

A finding emerged whereby I realised that my engagement in the experiential learning process not only impacted upon my sense of professional agency, it also enhanced my capacity

for future learning and possible action in light of this. This correlates with Kemmis' (2009: 463) findings that engaging in AR can be a "meta-practice: a practice that changes other practices". The process-focused approach promoted a sense of achievement and possibility. Interestingly, at the beginning of the SSARP, I envisioned looking outside myself to find the answers as to how to enhance my teaching, for example through policy. I now realised that having professional agency allows me to consult and consider such policies whilst being responsive to my own unique setting and values. It became clear that my experience and voice was not only valid, but essential and worthwhile.

### ***Living Theory***

As outlined in Chapter Two, theory on the SSAR approach notes that this form of research gives professional responsibility to the teacher, thereby allowing them to develop new theories within their classroom (Sullivan et al., 2016). The meaning of this statement came alive for me as I identified new learning in relation to my understanding of professional agency as well as identifying ways to teach Gaeilge in line with my values of empowerment. My aim was to promote positivity towards Gaeilge and to enhance the use of the language across the school day in a meaningful manner. The experiential learning process allowed me to interrogate ways to achieve this, relative to my unique setting, class and the children whom I taught.

The benefit of experiential learning was that it was self-directed. I chose to enhance my teaching of Gaeilge. My positive experience links with Lowrie (2014) and Wiliam's (2014) findings which outline the importance of personalised professional learning for teachers. The personalised nature of my professional enhancement created ownership, increased interest, increased autonomy and promoted further engagement in the process. Autonomy was key. The messiness of engaging in the process allowed for creativity to emerge, which aligns with McNiff

and Whitehead's (2016) description of the SSAR process. I composed creative solutions to new perceived problems and obstacles as they arose, in spite of the feeling of chaos of embarking on a mission with no defined answer as such.

### ***Leading Change***

I began to interrogate the concept of impacting upon change. I found benefit in having an awareness of the theory of change management as I attempted to direct my SSARP. Being an autonomous professional in an environment which promoted this level of professional agency allowed me to inform myself in relation to my desired outcomes as well as the process of achieving this.

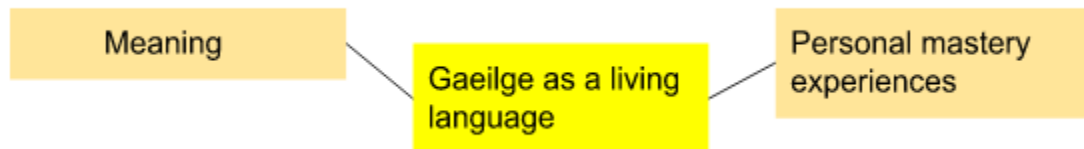
I reflected on my learning in relation to the positive impact of school culture and leadership practices on my capability to experience empowerment. I made a deliberate attempt to try to replicate this in my classroom, as suggested by my critical friend who encouraged me to apply what I had learned. I researched theory on change management, leadership and empowerment. This resulted in my use of Kotter's (1996) eight step change management model to steer my SSARP and to remain on track as such. Kotter's (1996) framework essentially acted as a tool to help me to refocus my aim at each stage of my SSARP as I felt necessary. For example, following my disappointment in AC1, I realised that the initial step of 'creating a climate of change' was important. This reframed my sense of disappointment as I realised the merit in AC1 because its very existence created a climate for change.

Overall, I noticed that genuine engagement with the experiential learning process led me to feel "intrinsically motivated to take ownership of [my] professional development and steer the



course of [my] own learning journey”, which is the vision for teacher professional development outlined by the TC (2016: 10).

#### 4.4. Theme Two: Gaeilge as a Living Language



Theme Two ‘Gaeilge as a Living Language’ describes the development of my ‘living theory’ (Whitehead, 2017) in relation to my informed teaching of Gaeilge. Significance was placed on my pupils’ experience of their learning of Gaeilge, which meant that their insights were integral to this theme. A combination of reflections within my TRJ, discussions with my critical friend, in addition to observations and conversations with my pupils led to the following two subthemes: ‘Meaning’ and ‘Personal Mastery Experiences’.

##### 4.4.1 Subtheme One: Meaning

###### *Student Voice*

I considered the data from my student interviews before and after my AR cycles. These interviews indicated a strong correlation between motivation to learn a language and the need for meaningful language use. The link between the need for meaning, and motivation to learn the language, is seen in the following excerpts from my group pupil interviews in January 2022. This was pre-intervention. I asked my pupils if they thought it was important to learn Irish:

**Child A:** Yeah I think it is , because just in case we go in Irish we know what to tell them.

**Child B:** Yeah because then we can speak different languages.

**Child C:** WE ARE IRISH !

**Child D:** Yes because if we go to a different country we will know Irish, if we go to the Irish country which I don't know what it's called. So if you want to move there you have to know the language.

**Child E:** Yeah I think it's important...so that we know languages from different countries like in Syria...bonjour!...it's important to learn Irish because I love it!

The children's responses above outline a strong correlation between the need for meaning and motivation to learn. This aligns with theory with regards to motivation in language learning. On this note, Gardner (2001) and Dörnyei (2003) link motivation to learn a language with the social, cultural experiences and possibilities for this. In other words, a meaningful context or purpose to learn the language positively impacts motivation to learn.

As seen above, the children's perception of the usefulness of learning the Irish language was closely tied to their perceived practical use for this. For example, statements such as "in case we go in Irish, we know what to tell them" illustrated that the children placed importance upon communicating for a purpose. My pupils were senior infants so their awareness of the prevalence of possibility for the use of Gaeilge outside of the education system was limited. My critical friend noted this when I spoke to her about my observations. She said "I think because your pupils are so young, they haven't been exposed to the narrative that Irish isn't useful. Their enthusiasm is very different to my class of ten year olds who often note that there's no point".

My critical friend reminded me to contextualise my students' responses according to their life experience and not to overgeneralise. With this in mind, I reflected on the fact that the lack

of possibility to authentically use the language was certainly a barrier that became more pronounced as the children progressed towards the senior classes.

### *A Communicative Approach*

As noted above, communication and the possibility for this was identified as an influencing factor on student motivation, even for my young pupils. As suggested by the DES in the most recent Inspectorate Report (DES, 2022: 115), “there is a need for teachers to create more opportunities for pupils to speak Irish individually and naturally in a sustained manner”. Although it may sound obvious to prioritise a communicative approach when teaching a language, it was not always this simple. I noted in my TRJ in December 2021:

'I noticed that sometimes I am actually a living contradiction, I value Gaeilge and empowering the pupils in this but my Gaeilge lessons this week were actually mostly passive, asking the children to recite from Bua na Cainte, focusing on vocabulary learning which was left at that'.

In this instance I was not prioritising a communicative approach even though I knew this would have been more beneficial. I indicated some reasons for this in my TRJ at the time, noting:

'I think this happened because I felt stretched, it's nearly Christmas, I'm tired, the ongoing threat and presence of Covid is taking its toll, it's a busy time and as much as I'd love to say my Gaeilge lessons were amazing, they weren't. They served their purpose' (TRJ, December 2021).

My above experience highlights the reality of influences on my practice, which aligns with Day and Gu (2007) and Day's (2008) findings in which they outline that significant reserves of emotional energy are needed to teach well.

Interestingly, my critical friend referred to the concept of usefulness and Gaeilge as a living language in March 2022, stating:

I think the lack of usefulness for using Gaeilge outside of school really causes the children to lose interest in the senior classes. Although that said, I haven't actually given the CLIL approach a fair go really. It's definitely worth a try, any informed intervention is surely better than none! It's good to hear a real life, positive experience from you.

As shown in my discussion with my critical friend, the lack of meaning for Gaeilge was a significant barrier towards teaching the language for my critical friend. We went on to discuss the fact that any attempt to include this lacking element within Gaeilge lessons would likely be worthwhile. We felt this way because this addressed a deficit which we were trying to overcome in the teaching of Gaeilge. Therefore, the significance of creating meaningful opportunities for my students to use Gaeilge as a living language became apparent. Whilst this was something I previously had an awareness of, it took on a new meaning as I now made a deliberate aim to plan my Gaeilge lessons to include opportunities for meaningful language use on a committed, consistent level.

### ***Commitment Towards a Meaningful use of Gaeilge***

This commitment towards viewing Gaeilge as a living language was reflected in action cycles two and three in which I deliberately created opportunities for my pupils to use Gaeilge in a new way. Interestingly, in my post intervention interviews with my class, the children indicated

that they enjoyed using Gaeilge in the art lessons as part of AC2. One child stated “I liked making things in Irish, I remember cnaipe [buttons: referring to the use of this vocabulary within the lesson]” (April, 2022). I also began to notice that my deliberate focus on enabling the children to use the language by including repetition of phrases in my lessons encouraged a sense of personal mastery.

#### 4.4.2 Subtheme Two: Personal Mastery Experiences

As previously outlined in Chapter Two, theory on the dimensions of empowerment (Whetten & Cameron, 2016) informed my aim to enhance my teaching of Gaeilge. In this regard, I sought to positively enable the children in relation to their perceived capability to speak Gaeilge. Post intervention focus group interviews with my pupils indicated a perception of increased confidence in my pupils’ ability to use Gaeilge. An example of this can be seen in my pupils’ response to the question ‘what has been your favourite way to learn Irish?’:

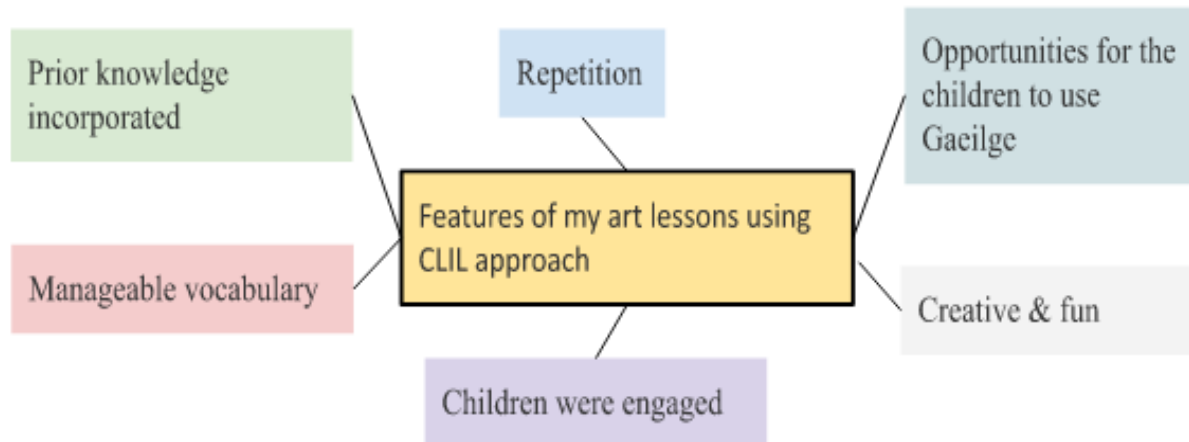
Child F: “I liked how we made the things in Irish.”

Child J: “I liked how the songs helped me remember words...*Fáilte isteach...Cuir ort do chóta!* [referring to songs learned in class with these phrases]

#### *Empowerment*

In order to facilitate empowerment, Whetten and Cameron (2016: 396) detail the need for clear goals, to foster personal mastery experiences, to model, provide support, encourage emotional arousal, provide information, connect to outcomes and create confidence. Therefore I understood my teaching role as two fold. Firstly I needed to effectively teach the desired vocabulary. This required repetition and fun. Secondly I needed to plan for the children to use the learned vocabulary and phrases. At first this took the form of teacher-directed lessons, as

previously referred to in Appendix G. The features of my art lessons using CLIL are illustrated in Figure 4.10 (below).



*Figure 4.10: Features of my art lessons using CLIL approach within action cycle two*

I deliberately included repetition of the phrase ‘ba mhaith liom’ within my art lessons during AC2. With this clear goal in mind, the engaging nature of these lessons allowed for the children to use Gaeilge as a functional, living language. This created the context for personal mastery experiences for the children as they experienced a sense of achievement and applied use for Gaeilge. I reflected on my perceived success in this endeavour in my TRJ in May 2022 stating:

I now notice the children actively integrating Gaeilge into their everyday conversations in the classroom which I am so delighted about. A child today combined his learning of 'ba mhaith liom', 'leithris' and 'le do thoil' to say 'ba mhaith liom leithris le do thoil'. I had not taught this phrase in this manner so I was very impressed at the desire to use Gaeilge as a language of communication in this way!

There are three children in particular who make a significant effort to combine phrases and vocabulary which they know in order to form communicative sentences with a purpose.

In addition to the reflections in my TRJ on this, my pupils noted how their increased confidence resulted in feeling more empowered in their ability to use Gaeilge. During focus group pupil interviews following AC3, pupils' responses to the question 'what do you think now: is it important to learn Irish?' included: "YES! I know ba mhaith liom and now I know ba mhaith liom for art and for asking you other things too" (Child A).

### ***Impact***

As shown above, I began to notice that my use of professional agency to enhance my teaching of Gaeilge was beginning to indicate a positive impact on my pupils' use of the language in my classroom. I noted that three children in particular made an on-going, significant effort to combine their learning during Gaeilge lessons to communicate informally. Empowerment came to life in this example, as noted by a pupil: "I'm good at using Irish words, I tell my sister at home". This was motivating as I felt a sense of achievement upon impacting change in my practice. This informed my findings in relation to enhancing my teaching of

Gaeilge as I noticed a natural transfer of learning from the children. This was not teacher-directed, but rather student-led.

Interestingly, the DES Inspectorate Report (DES, 2022: 115) outlines difficulties of pupils' ability to transfer new language to other communicative scenarios. They suggest that this is likely accredited to insufficient provisions of opportunities to practise the language in pairs and small groups on a regular basis (DES 2022: 115). In my experience from AC2 onwards, I could see that the children were acting autonomously to transfer elements of their learning. This was similar to Whetten and Cameron's (2016: 392) research which outlined that no one can force another to be empowered but fostering an environment which includes the dimensions of empowerment makes it highly likely that they will accept empowerment for themselves.

#### **4.4.3 Finding Three**

**Prioritising meaningful, engaging opportunities for the pupils to use language creates the opportunity for personal mastery experiences to happen. This impacts upon the possibility for transfer of learning to other contexts.**

A finding emerged whereby I identified that my prioritisation of meaningful, engaging opportunities for my pupils to use Gaeilge created the opportunity for personal mastery experiences to happen. This impacted upon the possibility for the children to transfer their learning to other contexts and thereby enhanced learning, as equally suggested by the DES Inspectorate (DES, 2022). This finding occurred as I reflected on my teaching and began to notice positive repercussions of my SSARP outside Gaeilge lessons and during teacher observation to assess learning in my class. Examples of this are indicated above. I also reflected



on a professional conversation with a colleague in my TRJ from March 2022. My colleague noted positivity towards the language in my pupils:

When using Gaeilge neamhfhoirmiul with my class, a colleague noted how it was so lovely to hear and see the good attitude of the kids towards the language. She told me that a child in her learning support group wanted to count in Irish as opposed to English today because he said it was something he felt he was actually good at.

### *Enhancing Practice*

As noted above, I had begun to achieve an aim of my SSARP, which was to enhance my practice. My research allowed me to answer my first research question. As previously outlined in Chapter Two, the Chief Inspectorate's Report (DES, 2022: 114) had cautioned that the teaching of Gaeilge was in need of significant improvement in English medium schools with pupils' learning outcomes outlined as being "very concerning". Given this policy related context, I decided to re-read the recommendations within this report as I wanted to compare the findings to my own small scale project. Interestingly, I noticed that the recommendations were strongly correlated with my findings in relation to how I felt I had improved my practice. The Inspectorate's report (2022: 115) suggested a need for:

- "Fun and engaging activities"
- "Communication skills"
- "Opportunities for pupils to speak Irish"
- "Creative and stimulating tasks and activities" (DES, 2022: 129)

Each of the above suggestions were in fact features of my lessons which I perceived to be successful. It was, however, more complicated than this. My perception of achievement in enhancing my teaching was process-focused. I did not set out with a prescriptive list of elements which bound me to define my improvement. The process of experiential learning led me to my conclusion. This was inherently more valuable and worthwhile than simply reading a list of desired elements of Gaeilge lessons in an Inspectorate observational report (DES, 2022). Whilst reading the above report helped to situate my learning, it was equally important not to over-emphasise this. My learning in this regard re-emphasises my epistemological belief that knowledge can be created through experiential learning in which deliberate reflection to reorient and gain new perspectives is present. This aligned with research on a living theory approach to knowledge construction as a teacher, as advocated for by Sullivan et al. (2016) and Huxtable and Whitehead (2021).

### ***Focus on Process***

I noticed a link with the elements of my pupils' learning and my own learning, as previously indicated within findings one and two. Firstly, the learning environment was a key feature which supported my learning. Following this, I found that my engagement in the process of experiential learning enabled further capacity for learning. This correlated strongly with my third finding as I noticed that it was the flexibility of the learning process which helped to enhance my teaching of Gaeilge and therefore positively impacted upon the learning of my pupils.

As cautioned above, this was not a product focused enhancement. Similar to the SSAR process itself, the potential for learning and enhancing my teaching was in the journey. This aligned with my value of creativity, as well as Sachs' (2003) acknowledgement that professional

development through the use of teacher research is a beneficial strategy for developing the knowledge basis of teaching. Acting as a teacher researcher allowed me to add to my knowledge base, and to develop both agency and influence, something which Glenn et al. (2008) equally attest to.

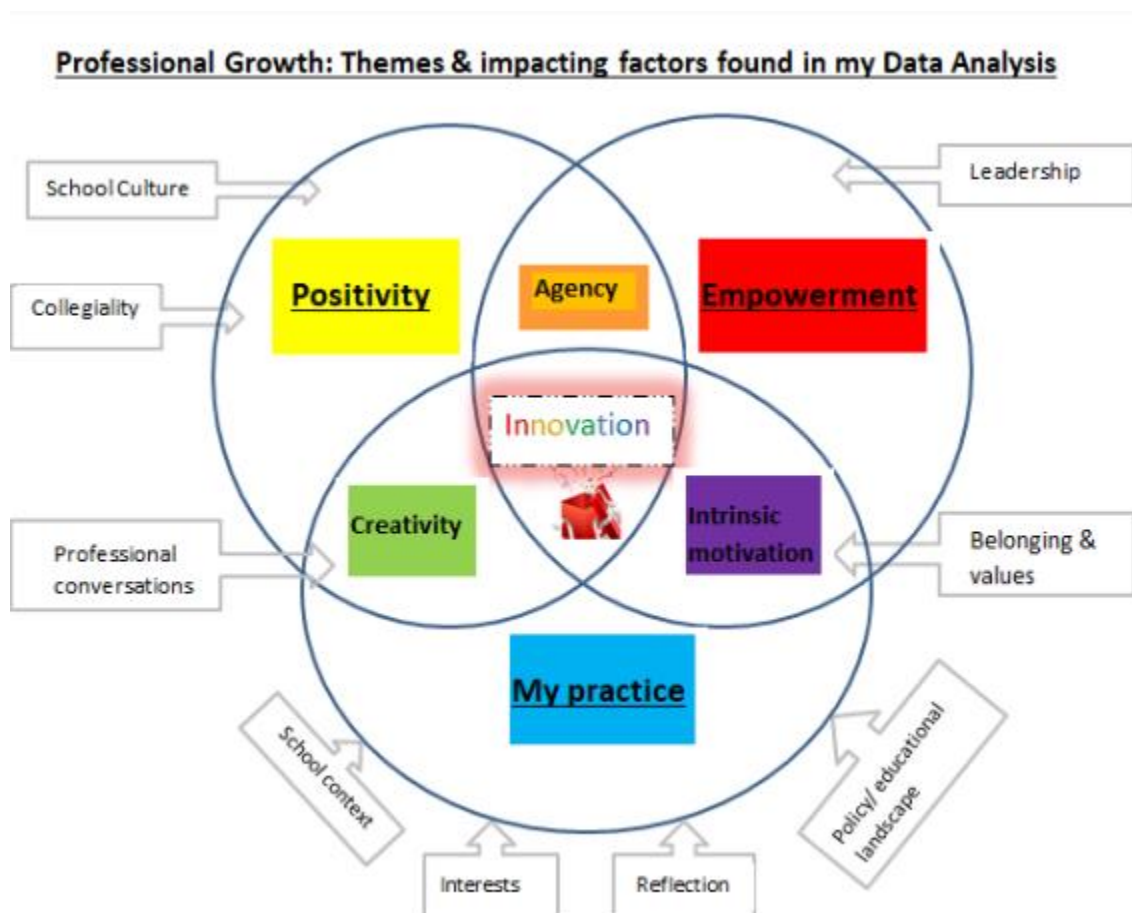
#### **4.5 Finding Four: Innovation and Transformational Change**

##### **Innovative practices in education may result when professional agency is actively promoted, enabled and sought**

A combination of learning from themes one and two, as analysed within my data above, resulted in the finding that innovative practices in education may result when professional agency is actively promoted, enabled and sought. This finding is illustrated below in Figure 4.11. In this illustration, innovation can be seen in the intersection of ‘positivity’, ‘empowerment’ and ‘my practice’. These elements defined my SSARP. Influencing factors upon each of these three areas are indicated, for example it can be seen that school culture and collegiality impacted upon ‘positivity’, whilst school context, interests, reflection and policy/ educational landscapes impacted upon ‘my practice’.

I found a strong correlation with McGillicuddy’s (2021a) research regarding the role of teacher agency, creativity and innovation. McGillicuddy (2021a: 14) notes that in order for teaching to adequately respond to “an increasingly dynamic, complex, and interdependent world”, the areas of teacher agency, creativity and innovation need to be actively promoted and enabled. This aligned with my findings within my SSARP in which the creation and existence of these elements led to a perceived sense of success and increased motivation.

Innovation is the result of a combination of all elements listed in Figure 4.11 (below). The fine balance of achieving this is indicated as it can be seen that whilst an overlap of ‘positivity’ and ‘my practice’ aided creativity for example, it is only when all areas combine that innovation really begins to emerge. Therefore, innovative practices in education may result when professional agency is actively promoted, enabled and sought.



*Figure 4.11: Influencing factors upon the possibility for innovation in education*

My research found that achieving a sense of professional agency is motivating and brings increased possibility for innovative pedagogies to be used in the classroom, similar to

McGillicuddy's research on such (2021a). I identified key components which encouraged the development of professional agency during my SSARP. These included:

- the importance of positive school culture
- the impact of leadership behaviours to model the way
- a match between teacher and school values
- the importance of collegiality
- the importance of critical reflection in order to avoid the perils of accountability
- the merits of risk taking and embracing imperfection through experiential learning.

#### **4.6. Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined my data analysis process and two resulting themes, which include Teacher as Learner and Gaeilge as a Living Language. My findings indicated that increased possibility for professional agency may be positively influenced by school culture and leadership practices. I developed a living theory in relation to my informed knowledge of best practice with regards to enhancing my teaching of Gaeilge. I noted a presence of empowerment with regards to my pupils' learning in Gaeilge following AC2 and AC3.

## **Chapter Five: Conclusion and Recommendations**

### **5.1. Introduction**

This chapter will provide an overview of my research findings. The implications of my SSARP will be considered with regards to my own personal and professional learning, as well as significance for the wider educational community. I will outline the limitations of my study, following which I will provide suggestions for future educational research. Finally, a summary of the significance of my research will conclude this thesis.

### **5.2. Summary of Findings**

The purpose of this study was to explore how I can critically evaluate and reflect on my teaching of Gaeilge in a pro-active, autonomous manner. I sought to reflect upon the concept of 'best practice' as I aimed to enhance my practice in a manner which addressed my concerns. In order to do this, I initially referred to the PLC (NCCA, 2019) for stimulus. The significance of intuitive assessment and reflective observation was highlighted within the data during my three action cycles. The link between professional development, professional agency and intrinsic motivation became apparent.

Significantly, I revised my understanding of what it means to be an agentic professional, in light of my new learning during my study. I previously believed that having professional agency meant the presence of choice in making decisions about how to teach. I now realise that it is more than this. Initially it is about being enabled to make such decisions but, more importantly, such decisions have the capacity to spark interest, ignite enthusiasm, enhance innovative practices and promote creative problem solving as a teacher (McGillicuddy, 2021a).

In relation to enhancing my teaching of Gaeilge, my research found that viewing and promoting Gaeilge as a living language is key, similar to DES Inspectorate recommendations on such (DES, 2022). I identified that following the children's interests whilst integrating Gaeilge into other curriculum areas was beneficial for language use. Furthermore, developing a sense of empowerment through clear goals and personal mastery experiences builds a culture in the classroom in which Gaeilge as a language is valued and promoted. This aligned with an applied use of Whetten and Cameron's (2016) research in relation to dimensions of empowerment. Positive repercussions of this lead to natural transfer of learning for the children. This highlights the contagion of positivity and possibility for further learning opportunities, as advocated for within research on positive psychology (Seligman, 2004).

In terms of actual practice of teaching Gaeilge, I found that prioritising commitment and consistency, using methodologies such as CLIL, prioritising a games-based approach to maximise interest and the use of songs helped me to enhance my teaching. I therefore used professional agency to enhance my teaching of Gaeilge, utilising a living theory approach to knowledge creation in my work as a practising teacher. This is advocated for by Glenn et al (2008), Sullivan et al. (2016) and Whitehead (2019), amongst others.

My research aligned with McGillicuddy's (2021b) acknowledgement of the need to ensure that teachers are indeed trusted to be agents of change. In this regard, I found the process-focused enhancement of my teaching to be a central element influencing my perceived success and increased motivation. I learned that methodologies, tools and suggested ideas were only as useful as their master. Adopting a process-focused, rather than product-focused, approach therefore highlighted the centrality of trust in my ability to act as an agent of change within my SSARP. This also highlights the reality of barriers to best practice, for example the possibility

for energy reserves of teachers to become depleted due to personal, professional, or policy related demands (Day & Gu, 2007; Day, 2008).

The description of my experience of the data analysis process in Chapter Four represents critical reflective thinking with regards to practice and understanding of practice in action. My learning and learning journey is evidenced. I noticed that genuine engagement with the experiential learning process from a practitioner focused perspective led me to feel intrinsically motivated and to take ownership of my professional development. This aligns with the vision for teacher professional development outlined by the TC (2016: 10). Sullivan et al. (2016: 46) point out that AR is “quite different to traditional, technicist approaches to research, where an external perspective is valued”. Therefore, my role as an active agent of change was central to my SSARP. I improved my practice on a practical level, on personal level due to an enhanced understanding of my practice, and also a theoretical level as I was enabled to develop a new theory of my practice, as advocated for by Sullivan et al. (2016).

### **5.3. Limitations**

The possibility of an existence of power dynamic in my role as both researcher and manager presented as a potential limitation to my SSARP. As Cohen et al. (2018) outline, this could result in a level of familiarity between myself and the participants which leads to the possibility for the participants to supply data they may consider to be in my favour. This was particularly pertinent in the focus group interviews with my pupils. To address this, I made it clear to my pupils that their opinions and answers were valid, welcome and unique to themselves. In terms of my data analysis, I addressed this by ensuring to triangulate my data from a variety of perspectives.



Another possible limitation emerged in the potential for my research to be impacted by subjectivity due to the practitioner focused nature of the SSAR methodology. Literature on the SSAR approach acknowledges this specific challenge, namely the challenge of articulating, representing, analysing and reporting personal experience as data (Lincoln & Guba, 1986; LaBoskey, 2004; Loughran, 2006; Hamilton et al., 2008). Lincoln and Guba (1986), therefore, highlight the need for trustworthiness to overcome this, whilst LaBoskey (2004), Loughran (2006) and Hamilton et al. (2008) outline the related notions of integrity, credibility and authenticity. Efforts to address this were outlined in Chapter Four with regards to validation and trustworthiness of my research.

#### **5.4. Recommendations for Future Educational Research**

My SSARP sought to interrogate my experience of a perceived deterioration of interest for Gaeilge amongst pupils in recent years. I also noted my lack of committed, consistent engagement in CPD on Gaeilge, despite a personal interest in the language. My study investigated this phenomenon from a practitioner focused perspective within my primary school classroom. I recommend that the concept of professional development for teachers with regards to Gaeilge is further explored. Further research is needed on the factors which negatively impact upon teacher uptake of CPD on Gaeilge, as well as an exploration of ways to positively promote innovative methodologies such as CLIL on a consistent and committed level. Whilst a pilot CLIL project is currently being undertaken by the DES, I suggest that this needs to be collated and publicised pro-actively to support innovation and positivity towards the language.

I suggest that there is a need for further research on the applied use of the CLIL methodology in the Irish primary classroom. This could take the form of further action research

projects on the use of this methodology. Public dissemination of this research would serve to promote discussion and emphasise innovative approaches towards teaching the language. With regards to teacher professional development and professional agency, further research relating to factors which promote professional development as a worthwhile lifelong process would further serve to highlight the importance of practitioner focused research. In this regard, the barriers which impact upon teacher motivation and uptake of CPD are categories for future research.

### **5.5. Conclusion**

My study sought to interrogate ways to enhance my teaching of Gaeilge through the use of professional agency, which is the perception of having a capacity for both proactive and autonomous actions (Cigala et al., 2019). My interest in this was influenced by a recent policy focus on teachers as agentic professionals (NCCA, 2019; DES et al 2021). Empowerment was at the core of my research. I feel that it is essential for the teaching profession to critically interrogate their practices, in a way which gives credible meaning and place to their unique perspective and experience within the classroom.

Zembylas (2018: 78) argues that high quality teaching requires “identity work”, further noting that this is underpinned by a process of self-reflection on “life experiences and classroom practices” in order to provide the “necessary awareness of personal and societal values, beliefs, emotions, and understandings”. Critical reflection transcended each step of my SSARP, as outlined by Sullivan et al. (2016). My core motivating factor for engaging on the Research in Practice MEd was to understand the extent to which I can impact upon positive change within my work as a teacher. Therefore, my SSARP facilitated engagement with self-reflection to promote professional learning.

Sullivan et al. (2016: 48) caution that complacency is “one of the most dangerous practices in which educators can engage”. The engaging process of the SSAR methodology highlighted the fact that it is possible to positively impact upon meaningful change. This, coupled with the fact that I felt supported and positively enabled within my school setting created an immense sense of job satisfaction and intrinsic motivation in my role as a teacher. My experience aligned with research which details the need for explicit acknowledgement and sufficient flexibility to allow teachers to direct their professional growth in an autonomous manner (Winkler, 2001; TC, 2016; Boeskens et al., 2020).

The SSAR process allowed for my engagement in professional development to transform my experience into enhanced expertise (Winkler, 2001). I can therefore conclude that a dedicated use of professional agency to enhance my practice resulted in positive repercussions for both teaching and learning in my classroom with regards to Gaeilge. I developed a living theory (Whitehead, 2017), as informed by data in my TRJ and focus group pupil interviews. This highlighted the benefits of applied professional agency, whilst equally gaining an understanding of the future application for such in my work as a teacher.

### Reference List

Adler, K., Salanterä, S. and Zumstein-Shaha, M. (2019) Focus Group Interviews in Child, Youth, and Parent Research: An Integrative Literature Review. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 18, 1-15.

Aubrey, C., David, T., Godfrey, R. and Thompson, L. (2000) *Early Childhood Educational Research*. London: Routledge.

Bandura, A. (1977) Self efficacy: toward a unifying theory of behavioural change. *Psychological Review*, 84, 191-215.

Bandura, A. (1986) *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Bandura, A. (1989) Human agency in social cognition theory. *American psychologist*. 44, 1175-1184.

Banks, J. and Smyth, E. (2011) *Continuous Professional Development among teachers in Ireland: A Report compiled by the ESRI on behalf of the Teaching Council*. Dublin: The Teaching Council and ESRI [online]. Available at: <https://www.esri.ie/publications/continuous-professional-development-among-primary-teachers-in-ireland> (accessed 14th November 2021).

Bassey, M. (1992) Creating Education through Research. *British Educational Research Journal*. 18 (1), 3-16.

Boeskens, L., Nusche, D. and Yurita, M. (2020) *Policies to support teachers' continuing professional learning: A conceptual framework and mapping of OECD data*. OECD Education Working Papers No. 235, Paris: OECD Publishing [online]. Available at: [https://www.oecd.org/officialdocuments/publicdisplaydocumentpdf/?cote=EDU/WKP\(2020\)23&docLanguage=En](https://www.oecd.org/officialdocuments/publicdisplaydocumentpdf/?cote=EDU/WKP(2020)23&docLanguage=En) (accessed 30th October 2021).

Boyatzis, R.E. (1998) *Transforming qualitative information: thematic analysis and code development*. Thousand Oaks California: Sage.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2019) Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* [online], 11(4), 589–97. Available at: <https://doi-org.jproxy.nuim.ie/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806> (accessed 9 June 2022).

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2021) One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in reflexive thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology* [online], 18(3), 328–352. Available at: <https://doi-org.jproxy.nuim.ie/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238> (accessed 10 June 2022).

Brookfield, S. (2017) *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher, 2nd ed.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Brooks, R., Riele, K. and Maguire, M. (2014) *Ethics and Education Research.* London: SAGE Publications.

Brydon-Miller M., Greenwood D. and Maguire P. (2003) Why Action Research? *Action Research*, 1, 9-23.

Buchanan, R. (2015) Teacher identity and agency in an era of accountability. *Teachers and Teaching*, 21 (6), 700-719.

Champkin, S. (2020) *Standard Application Form for Teaching Position.* Unpublished. Illus

Champkin, S. (2021/ 2022) TRJ- Teacher Reflective Journal (2022). Unpublished.

Champkin, S. (2021) *ED685 Draft Value Statement.* ED685 Principles of Action Research. Maynooth University, Froebel Department. Unpublished.

Check, J. and Schutt, R.K. (2012) *Research Methods in Education.* London: SAGE Publications

Cialdini, R. B. (2008) *Influence Science and Practice.* 5th ed. New York: Pearson.

Cigala, A., Venturelli, E., and Bassetti, M. (2019) Reflective Practice: A Method to Improve Teachers' Well-Being. A Longitudinal Training in Early Childhood Education and Care Centers. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10: 25-74.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990) *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience.* New York: Harper and Row.

Cohen, M., Manion, L. and Morrison, K. (2007) *Research Methods in Education.* 6th ed. London: Routledge.

Cohen, L., Manion, L. and Morrison, K. (2011) *Research Methods in Education.* 7th ed. New York, NY: Routledge.

Cohen, L., Mannion, L. and Morrison, K. (2018) *Research Methods in Education*. 8th ed. London: Routledge.

Cordingley, P. (2014) Teacher licensing and collaboration: a model for developing the confidence of the profession as a whole In: Hallgarten, J., Bamfield, L. & McCarthy, K., eds. *Licensed to Create: Ten essays on improving teacher quality*. London: RSA Action and Research Centre. 46.

Coyle, D. (2007) Content and language integrated learning: Towards a connected research agenda for CLIL pedagogies. *International journal of bilingual education and bilingualism*, 10 (5), 543-562.

Coyle, D., Hood, P. and Marsh, D. (2010) *CLIL: Content and Language Integrated Learning*, Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Central Statistics Office (2016) *Census of Population of Ireland 2016*. Dublin: Central Statistics Office.

Dalton-Puffer, C. (2007) *Discourse in content and language integrated learning (CLIL) classrooms*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins pub.

Dalton-Puffer, C. (2008) Outcomes and processes in content and language integrated learning (CLIL): Current research from Europe. In: Delanoy, W. and Volkman, L., eds. *Future perspectives for English language teaching*, Heidelberg: Carl Winter. 139 – 157.

Day C., Sammons P., Stobart G., Kington A., Gu Q. (2007) *Teachers Matter: Connecting Work, Lives and Effectiveness*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Day, C. and Gu, Q. (2007) Variations in the conditions for teachers' professional learning and development: sustaining commitment and effectiveness over a career, *Oxford Review of Education*, Vol. 33(4): 423-443.

Day, C. (2008) Committed for life? Variation in teachers' work, lives and effectiveness. *Journal of Educational Change*, 9, 43-260.

Deci, E.L. and Ryan, R. M. (2012) Overview of Self Determination Theory. *The Oxford Handbook of Human Motivation*, 85.

De Diezmas, E.N.M. (2016) The impact of CLIL on the acquisition of L2 competences and skills in primary education, *International Journal of English Studies*, 16(2), 81-101.

Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht DCHG (2018) *Action plan 2018- 2022, 20 Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030 Progress Report July 2018 - June 2019*. Dublin:

Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht [online]. Available at: [file:///C:/Users/Admin/Downloads/90399\\_03b64a9f-d7fb-465c-9e11-017917d3416b%20\(2\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/Admin/Downloads/90399_03b64a9f-d7fb-465c-9e11-017917d3416b%20(2).pdf) (accessed 24 July 2022).

Department of Education and Skills DES (2016) *Looking at our School 2016: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools*. Dublin: DES. [online]. Available at: <https://assets.gov.ie/25260/4a47d32bf7194c9987ed42cd898e612d.pdf> (accessed 26 July 2022).

Department of Education and Skills DES (2019b) *Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) Irish Pilot Project 2019/20*. Dublin: DES [online]. Available at: [file:///C:/Users/Admin/Downloads/46716\\_3f0c358a6d7c4ca6a97ece81774acfd%20\(3\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/Admin/Downloads/46716_3f0c358a6d7c4ca6a97ece81774acfd%20(3).pdf) (accessed 26 July 2022).

Department of Education and Skills, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, Professional Development Services for Teachers and the National Council for Special Education (2021) *Preparation for Teaching and Learning - Guidance for All Primary and Special Schools*. Dublin: DES [online]. Available at: <https://ncca.ie/media/5016/preparation-for-teaching-and-learning.pdf> (accessed 26 July 2022).

Department of Education and Skills, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, Professional Development Services for Teachers and the National Council for Special Education (2021) *Preparation for Teaching and Learning - Guidance for All Primary and Special Schools*. Dublin: DES, 7, illus.

Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht and Media DTCAGM (2021) *Action Plan 2018- 2022* [online]. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/1418a-action-plan-2018-2022/> (accessed 20th November 2021).

Department of Education and Skills (2021a) *COVID-19 Response Plan for the safe and sustainable operation of Primary and Special Schools*. Dublin: DES.

Department of Education and Skills (2016) *Looking at our School 2016: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools*. Dublin: DES.

Department of Education and Skills, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, Professional Development Services for Teachers and the National Council for Special Education (2021) *Preparation for Teaching and Learning - Guidance for All Primary and Special Schools*. Dublin: DES.

Department of Education and Skills (2022) Chief Inspector's Report 2016 - 2020. Dublin: DES.

Devine, D., Fahie, D. and McGillicuddy, D. (2013) What is 'good' teaching? Teacher practices and beliefs about their teaching. *Irish Educational Studies*, 32(2), 83-108.

Dewey, J. (1938) *Experience and education*. New York: Collier.

Dörnyei, Z. (2003) Attitudes, Orientations, and Motivations in Language Learning: Advances in Theory, Research, and Applications. *Language Learning*, 53(51), 3-32.

Edmondson, A (1999) Psychological Safety and Learning Behaviour in Work Teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44(2), 350-383.

Edmondson, A. and Lei, Z. (2014) Psychological safety: the history, renaissance, and future of an interpersonal construct. *Annual Review of Organisational Psychology and Organisational Behaviour*, 1, 23–43.

Fahey, P. (2021) *Using CLIL to support teacher language awareness in the Irish language in English medium primary schools: An analysis of the impact on second language teaching and learning competency*. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Mary Immaculate College University of Limerick.

Fraser, P. and Kalra, A. (2019) Teaching in Focus #27, *New Insights on Teaching and Learning: Contributions from Talis 2018*. Paris: OECD Publishing.

Gardner, R.C. (2001) Language learning motivation: the student, the teacher and the researcher. *Texas Papers in Foreign Language Education*, 6(1), 1–18.

Gibbs, G. (1988) *Learning by Doing: A Guide to Teaching and Learning Methods*. Oxford: Oxford Further Education Unit.

Glaserfeld, E. (1995) *Radical constructivism: A Way of knowing and learning*. London and Washington, DC: The Falmer Press.

Glenn, M., Roche, M., McDonagh, C. and Sullivan, B. (2017) *Learning Communities in Educational Partnerships: Action Research as Transformation*, London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

Hamilton, M.L., Smith, L. and Worthington, K. (2008) Fitting the Methodology with the Research: An Exploration of Narrative, Self-Study and Auto-Ethnography. *Studying Teacher Education*, 4(1), 17-28.



Hadar, L.L. and Benish-Weisman, M. (2019) Teachers' agency: do their values make a difference? *British Educational Research Journal*, 45, 137–160.

Harris, J. and Ó Duibhir, P. (2011) *Effective Language Teaching: A Synthesis of Research*. Dublin: NCCA.

Herr, K. and Anderson, G. (2005) Quality Criteria for Action Research: An Ongoing Conversation. In: *The Action Research Dissertation* [e-book]. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications. Available at: <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781452226644> (accessed 2 January 2022).

Huxtable, M. and Whitehead, J. (2021) Enhancing educational influences in learning with a Living Educational Theory approach to Pedagogical Action Research. *Higher Education. Educational Action Research*, 29(2), 310-327. Available at: <https://actionresearch.net/writings/writing.shtml> (accessed 10 January 2022).

Immordino-Yang, M.H. and Damasio, A. (2011) We feel, therefore we learn: The relevance of affective and social neuroscience to education. *Learning Landscapes*, 5(1), 115-132.

Johns, C. (2000) *Becoming a reflective practitioner*. Oxford: Blackwell Science.

Jones, C. (2016) *My living-theory of living inclusive and inclusional empowerment: a Living Theory research approach*. Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of Liverpool Hope University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. Liverpool Hope University. Available at: <https://www.actionresearch.net/living/chrisphd/chrisphd.pdf> (accessed 12 January 2022).

Kalmbach Phillips, D. and Carr, K. (2010) *Becoming teacher through action research: Process, context and self-study*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge.

Kemmis, S., McTaggart, R. and Retallick, J., eds. (2004) *The action research planner, 2nd ed. rev.* Karachi: Aga Khan University, Institute for Educational Development, illus, 595.

Kemmis, S. (2009) Action Research as a Practice Based Practice, *Educational Action Research*, 17(3), 463-474.

Kellet, M. (2005) Children as active researchers: A new research paradigm for the 21st century? *NCRM Methods Review Papers* NCRM/003. London: ESRC National Centre for Research Methods.

Kiger, M.E. and Varpio, L. (2020) Thematic analysis of qualitative data. *Medical Teacher*, 42(1), 846 - 854.

Kirwan L. and Hall, K. (2016) The mathematics problem: The construction of a market-led education discourse in the Republic of Ireland. *Critical Studies in Education* [online]. 57(3), 376-393. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2015.1102752> (accessed 3 July 2022).

Kitt, J (2017) *Positive behaviours, relationships & emotions: the heart of leadership in a school*. Dublin: NAPD.

Kolb, D. (1984) *Experiential learning: experience as the source of learning and development*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Kolb, D. (1984) *Experiential learning: experience as the source of learning and development*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 97, illus.

Koshy, V. (2005) *Action Research for Improving Practice: A practical guide*. London: SAGE publications.

Kotter, J.P. (1996) *Leading change*. Boston: Harvard Business Review Press.

Krueger, R.A. and Casey, M.A. (2009) *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research*, 4th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

LaBoskey, V.K. (2004) Afterword, Moving the methodology of self-study research and practice forward: Challenges and opportunities. In: Loughran, J.J., Hamilton, M.L., LaBoskey, V.K. and Russell, T., eds. *International handbook of self-study of teaching and teacher education practices*. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Lassonde, C.A., Galman, S., and Kosnik, C. (2009) *Self Study Research Methodologies for Teacher Educators*. Rotterdam NL: Sense Publishers.

Leithwood, K., Jantzi, D., Earl, L., and Fullan, M. (2004) Strategic leadership for large scale reform: The case of England's national numeracy and literacy strategies. *Journal of School Leadership and Management*. 24(1), 57-80.

Lincoln, Y. and Guba, E.G. (1985) *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park California: Sage.

Locke, E.A. and Latham, G.P. (2006) New Directions in goal-setting theory. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 15(5), 265-268.

Loughran, J. (2006) *Developing a pedagogy of teacher education: Understanding teaching and learning about teaching*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Lowrie, T. (2014) An educational practices framework: the potential for empowerment of the teaching profession. *Journal of Education for Teaching: International research and pedagogy*, 40(1), 34–46.

Lund, I., Helgeland, A. and Kovac, V.B. (2016) Empirically based analysis of methodological and ethical challenges in research with children as participants: The case of bullying in kindergarten. *Early Child Development and Care* [online], 186, 1531–1543. Available at: doi:10.1080/03004430.2015.1110817 (accessed 19 August 2022).

Marsh, D. (2002) Finland. In: Grenfell, M., ed. *Modern Languages across the curriculum*. Finland: Routledge. 88-97.

McDonagh, C., Roche M., Sullivan, B. and Glenn, M. (2012) *Enhancing Practice through Classroom Research: A teacher's guide to professional development*. Abingdon: Routledge.

McDonagh, C., Roche, M., Sullivan, B. and Glenn, M. (2020) *Enhancing Practice Through Classroom Research. A Teacher's Guide to Professional Development*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

McGillicuddy, D. (2021a) Reflecting upon primary schooling post COVID-19 pandemic- A call for increased agency to empower a dynamic and responsive contemporary education system. *Irish Teachers' Journal*, 9(1), 1-8.

McGillicuddy, D. (2021b) Is teacher creativity the key to transforming Irish education? *The Irish Times* [online] 7th December 2021. Available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/is-teacher-creativity-the-key-to-transforming-irish-education-1.4741006> (accessed 4 July 2022).

McNiff, J. (2002) *Action Research for Professional Development: Concise advice for new action researchers*, 3rd ed. Available at: <https://www.jeanmcniff.com/userfiles/filePublications/AR%20Booklet.doc> (accessed 2 January 2022).

McNiff, J. (2013) *Action Research Principles and Practice*. 3rd ed. London: Routledge.

McNiff, J. and Whitehead, J. (2005) *Action Research for Teachers: A Practical Guide*. Oxon: David Fulton Publishers.

McNiff, J and Whitehead, J. (2010) *All you need to know about action research*, 2nd ed. London: Sage.

Mehisto, P., Marsh, D. and Frigols, M.J. (2008) *Uncovering CLIL content and language integrated learning in bilingual and multilingual education*. Macmillan.

Mockler, N. (2011) Beyond ‘what works’: Understanding teacher identity as a practical and political tool. *Teachers and Teaching*, 17(1), 517–528.

Moon, J. (2004) *A Handbook of Reflective and Experiential Learning: Theory and Practice* [e-book]. Available at: ProQuest Ebook Central <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/nuim/detail.action?docID=181972#> (accessed 7 January 2022).

Morton, T. (2015) Vocabulary explanations in CLIL classrooms: a conversation analysis perspective, *The Language Learning Journal*, 43(2), 256-270.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (1999) *Primary School Curriculum Physical Education*. Dublin: NCCA.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2008) *Primary Assessment Guidelines for Schools*. Dublin: NCCA.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. (2009) *Aistear- The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. Dublin: NCCA [online] [https://ncca.ie/media/4151/aistear\\_theearlychildhoodcurriculumframework.pdf](https://ncca.ie/media/4151/aistear_theearlychildhoodcurriculumframework.pdf) (Accessed 23 July 2022).

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2019) *Primary Language Curriculum Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile*. Dublin: NCCA.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2020) *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework for consultation*. Dublin: NCCA.

National University of Maynooth (2021). *Maynooth University Research Integrity Policy*. Maynooth: NUIM. Available at: [https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/sites/default/files/assets/document/MU%20Research%20Integrity%20%20Policy%20V4.0%2026%2004%20%2021\\_approved%20by%20Research%20Committee\\_0.pdf](https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/sites/default/files/assets/document/MU%20Research%20Integrity%20%20Policy%20V4.0%2026%2004%20%2021_approved%20by%20Research%20Committee_0.pdf) (last accessed 18 July 2022).

National University of Ireland, Maynooth NUIM (2022) Master of Education (Research in Practice) (Part Time) [online]. Available at: <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/study-maynooth/postgraduate-studies/courses/master-education-research-practice-part-time> (accessed 17 July 2022).

Nowell, L.S., Norris, J.M., White, D.E. and Moules, N.J. (2017) Thematic analysis: striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1), 1-13.

Pollard, A., Collins J., Simco N., Swaffield S., Warin J. and Warwick P. (2003) *Reflective Teaching*, 2nd ed. London: Continuum International Publishing Group.

Rawsthorne, L.J. and Elliot, A.J. (1999) Achievement goals and intrinsic motivation: a meta analytic review. *Personality and Social Psychological Review*, 3(1), 326-344.

Rolfe, G., Freshwater, D. and Jasper, M. (2001) *Critical Reflection for Nursing and the Helping Professions: a User's Guide*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Rudduck, J. and McIntyre, D. (2007) *Improving learning through consulting pupils*. London: Routledge.

Rushton, K. (2017) Instructional Leadership: The Art of Asking Questions to Promote Teaching Effectiveness In: P. Preciado Babb, L. Yeworiew, & S Sabbaghan, eds. *Selected Proceedings of the IDEAS Conference: Leading Educational Change*, Calgary, Canada: Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary. 31-139.

Ryan, R.M. and Deci, E.L. (2000) Self determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, 55, 68-78.

Sandberg, A., Broström, S., Johansson, I., Frøkjær, T., Kieferle, C., Seifert, A. Laan, M. (2017). Children's perspective on learning: An international study in Denmark, Estonia, Germany and Sweden. *Early Childhood Education Journal* [online]. 45, 71–81. Available at: doi:10.1007/s10643-015-0759-5 (accessed 3 August 2022).

Sanglim K. and Sungeun Y. (2016) Childcare teachers' job satisfaction: effects of personality, conflict-handling, and organizational characteristics. *Social Behaviour and Personality*, 44, 177–184.

Schein, E. (2010) *Organizational change and leadership*. 4th ed. San Francisco: Wiley.

Schön, D. (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner: How professionals think in action*. London: Temple Smith.

Seligman, M.E.P. (2004) Can happiness be taught? *Daedalus*, 133(2), 80-87.

Simmie, G.M. and Edling, S. (2016) Ideological governing forms in education and teacher education: a comparative study between highly secular Sweden and highly non-secular Republic of Ireland, *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy*, 2016(1). Available at: 10.3402/nstep.v2.320 (accessed 3 July 2022).

Simmie, G.M., Moles, J. and O'Grady, E. (2016) Good teaching as a messy narrative of change within a policy ensemble of networks, superstructures and flows. *Critical Studies in Education*, 60(1), 55-72.

Stewart, D. W., Shamdasani, P. N. (2014) *Focus groups: Theory and practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Sullivan, B., Roche, M., McDonagh, C. and Glenn, M. (2016) *Introduction to critical reflection and action for teacher researchers*. New York: Routledge.

Teaching Council (2016) *Cosán, Framework for Teachers' Learning*. Maynooth: The Teaching Council.

Teaching Council (2016b) *Cosán, Framework for Teachers' Learning*. Maynooth: The Teaching Council, 28, illus.

Teaching Council (2021) Reflecting on Professional Learning [Online] Available at <https://www.teachingcouncil.ie/en/teacher-education/teachers-learning-cpd/-/cosan-support-materials/reflecting-on-professional-learning/> (accessed 20th November 2021).

Timperley, H. (2015) Professional Conversations and Improvement-Focused Feedback: A Review of the Research Literature and the Impact on Practice and Student Outcomes, prepared for the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership, AITSL, Melbourne.

Vanassche, E. and Kelchtermans, G. (2015) The state of the art in Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices: a systematic literature review, *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 47(4), 508-528.

Vollmer, H.J., Heine, L., Troschke, R., Coetzee, D. and Küttel, V. (2006). Subject-specific competence and language use of CLIL learners: The case of geography in grade 10 of secondary schools in Germany. In: ESSE8 Conference in London August (Vol 29).

Whetten, D. and Cameron, K. (2016) *Developing management skills*, 9th ed. Essex: Pearson Education Limited.

Whitehead, J. (1989) Creating a Living Educational Theory From Questions of the Kind, 'How do I Improve my Practice?', *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 19(1), 41-52.

Whitehead, J. (2019) Action research for self-study and living-educational theories. In: Zuber-Skerritt, Ortrun and Wood, Lesley, eds. *Action learning and action research: genres and approaches*. Emerald Publishing, Bingley, UK. 97- 110.

William, D. (2014) Teacher expertise: Why it matters, and how to get more of it In: Hallgarten, J., Bamfield, L. and McCarthy, K. (Eds.) *Licensed to Create: Ten essays on improving teacher quality*. London: RSA Action and Research Centre. 32-33.

Wilson E. and Deaney R. (2010) Changing career and changing identity: how do teacher career changers exercise agency in identity construction? *Social Psychology of Education*. 13, 169–183.

Winkler, G. (2001) Reflection and theory: conceptualising the gap between teaching experience and teacher expertise, *Educational Action Research*, 9(3),437–449.

Williams, J. (2003) *Promoting Independent Learning in the Primary Classroom*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Zembylas, M. (2018) Rethinking the demands for 'preferred ' teacher professional identities: Ethical and political implications. *Teaching and Teacher Education*. 76, 78-85.

## Appendix A

### **An example of meta-reflection within my Teacher Reflective Journal:**

#### **Thurs 2nd Sept**

##### ***Empathy in the classroom & peer learning moments***

It was the birthday of one of the children in my class today. He was excited to get home as he was looking forward to cake and other treats for his birthday. He was tired and a little bit irritable during the day. One of the other children in the class picked up on his mood and put his hand up to tell me “you should move ChildX’s name up” (on our reward chart). I responded by saying “that’s interesting, why would you say that?” to which he replied “I dont know, you just should”. I asked if it was because it was the child’s birthday and he wanted him to have a good day. The child said “yeah”. I found this so interesting and heartwarming to see this child empathise with his friend and wanting to improve his day somehow, yet he couldn’t put into words what exactly he wanted to say. This made me think about the value of SPHE lessons and recognising these moments in action and using these occurrences to make these important messages memorable and meaningful.

##### **Reflection on this the following day: (Fri 3rd Sept)**

Following on from this occurrence yesterday, I thought about what this child was trying to communicate and how he was showing empathy, which I strongly value and strive for in my classroom environment. I spoke to both children the next morning in school and I asked them how they both were this morning. I then told the child that I thought about what he said yesterday and that it was a really lovely gesture to look out for his friend and to show such kindness and empathy. I gave both children a sticker, asked the boy whose birthday it was if he had a nice evening yesterday and told him I hoped he had a brilliant day in school today. I told him he had a great friend who had showed kindness and empathy towards him and asked him how it made him feel. Both children were beaming!

##### **Reflection on this a few weeks later: (Wed 6th Oct)**

##### **Behavioural chart & intrinsic motivation (as well as agency)**

I have been thinking about this area further. During a staff meeting my principal spoke about a subject inspection in Science in the school in March 2019. During this subject inspection, the inspector laid out their recommendations as they do. The principal encouraged us as a staff to reflect on if we felt this was a good idea- sticking sheets into scrapbooks for ‘assessment’ in SESE. Teachers on staff expressed that we should do it as the inspector said so. The principal spoke about how we should be careful of doing things just because an inspector said so. He encouraged staff to reflect on if we really agreed with this and felt that it would be beneficial. The conclusion was that staff tried this last year and found it very cumbersome. It didn’t lend to better assessment in SESE, just acted as a tool to ‘prove’ that we were doing it. The principal then spoke about how we need to make these judgements and dont be afraid of speaking up and questioning, using our professional judgement and voice. He reassured staff that if the



inspectorate took issue with us for this, he would wholeheartedly defend and explain this. He was very passionate about this. This made me feel so privileged to work with such a leader. He modelled 'agency' in action and was not afraid to make strong decisions which ultimately aid teaching and learning in the school. During his time speaking about this, he referred to how the school has a very positive culture and that staff and children are happy here. I can fully relate to this, having had experience of a very different school environment. He then spoke about intrinsic motivation also when referring to his aim as a leader. This was really interesting. During the Higher Diploma in Leadership last year, I studied the principles of influence (Cialdini) and how to positively influence others. It made me look back on the reflection above in relation to the behavioural system in my class. I was reading a piece recently about how behavioural charts are creating interesting conversations in education at the moment. Arguments against behavioural systems are that they encourage extrinsic motivation with a focus on a reward. A study stated that they have been found to be beneficial in older children in improving achievement. This made me wonder if my use of a behavioural system is in fact a display of 'living contraction' in terms of my values. Does my use of this mean that I am not in fact valuing positivity and curiosity in learning? I thought about this extensively and came to the conclusion that ultimately any behavioural system is a tool and it really depends on how you use this tool. It can be used to positive effect whilst it can also be used negatively. I believe it is important to be aware of the drawbacks but I also don't think it is necessary to throw it out and discredit it altogether either. In relation to the initial reflection above, it is interesting to look back at my perception of the child showing empathy in looking out for his friends. Was he showing empathy or was he also alerting me to the fact that I need to be aware of how I use this tool in the manner in which I intended to?

Reference: Cialdini, R. B. (2008) *Influence science and practice, 5th ed.* New York: Pearson.

## **Appendix B**

### **Interview Questions used during focus group discussions with my pupils:**

#### **Pre Intervention Focus Group Discussion Questions**

- **Question 1:** What's your favourite thing to learn in school?
- **Question 2:** What do you like about learning Irish?
- **Question 3:** What's your least favourite thing about learning Irish?
- **Question 4:** Do you think it's important that we learn Irish?

#### **Post Action Cycle One Focus Group Discussion Questions**

- **Question 1:** What did you enjoy most about doing P.E in Irish?
- **Question 2:** What did you enjoy least about doing PE in Irish?
- **Question 3:** How did you use your Irish over the last few weeks?

#### **Post Action Cycle Two Focus Group Discussion Questions**

- **Question 1:** What did you enjoy most about the art lessons we did through Irish?
- **Question 2:** What did you enjoy least about the art lessons we did through Irish?
- **Question 3:** What words do you remember learning?
- **Question 4:** What did you tell your family about your Irish art work when you went home?

#### **Post Action Cycle Three Focus Group Discussion Questions**

- **Question 1:** Which Irish game has been your favourite in the last few weeks?
- **Question 2:** What has been your favourite way to learn Irish?
- **Question 3:** What do you think now: is it important to learn Irish?

## Appendix C

### Experiential Learning: A Comparative Overview of my Final Action Research Cycles with their Pre Planned Counterparts

	Original planned intervention	What my final plan looked like	
<b>Overall Aim</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Enhance positive disposition</li> <li>To impact Intrinsic motivation (empowerment)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Enhance positive disposition</li> <li>Empowerment through personal mastery experiences...repetition, commitment and consistency in planned activities aligned with creativity, innovation and fun</li> <li>Impact upon intrinsic motivation by creating a climate for change</li> </ul>	
<b>Action Cycle 1: 5 weeks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>CLIL in PE</b> (gymnastics)</li> <li><b>Integrate Gaeilge</b> into play based learning/ 'Aistear' time</li> </ul>	<b>Action cycle 1: 5 weeks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>CLIL in PE (gymnastics)</b></li> <li><b>Integrate Gaeilge</b> into play based learning/ 'Aistear' time</li> </ul>
<b>Action Cycle 2 6 weeks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use group <b>participatory games</b> approach with an emphasis on <b>repetition</b> of games such as Céard a thóg mé?/ 'An bhfuil tú ag'?</li> <li>Increase emphasis on <b>Gaeilge Neamhfhoirmiúil</b></li> </ul>	<b>Action cycle 2: 4 weeks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Use CLIL methodology in Art (interest &amp; strength led).</b> Build in opportunities for meaningful use of language in these specific art lessons which focus on simple crafts that the children enjoy.</li> </ul>
		<b>Action cycle 3: 6 weeks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continue <b>CLIL</b> in normal Art lessons</li> <li>Use <b>Gaeilge games</b> in which children revise past vocabulary in a small group to encourage <b>communicative approach</b></li> <li>Fun &amp; repetition in pair speaking activities</li> </ul>

**Appendix D**

**Example of Gaelge vocabulary targeted in Action Cycle One during PE, as shown in my Fortnightly Plan for January 2022:**

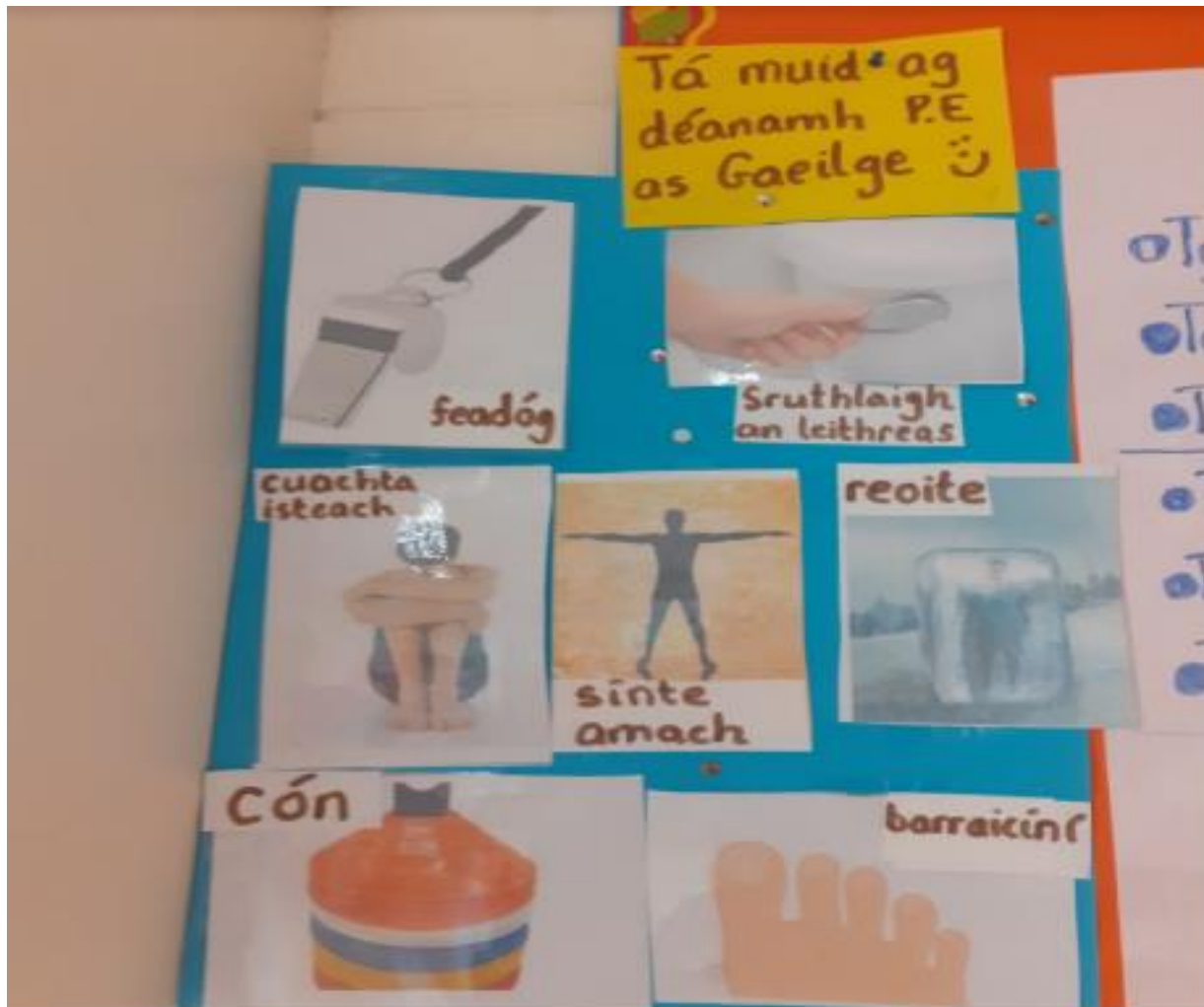
<b>PE</b>	
<b>Strand/ strand unit:</b>  Gymnastics. An Ghleacaíocht	<p><b>Torthaí Foghlama as Gaeilge</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Dea-theannas coirp agus dea-staidiúir a fhorbairt i rith suíomh agus luailí gleacaíocha.</li> <li>2. Fuinneamh a shú d'fhonn tuairt a sheachaint le linn tuirlingthe</li> <li>3. Bogadh agus rolladh a chleachtadh, agus de thoradh na ngníomhaíochtaí seo an rolladh ar aghaidh a dhéanamh</li> <li>4. Labhairt faoin luail agus ceisteanna mar gheall uirthi a chur agus a fhreagairt</li> </ol> <hr/> <p>Activities:     <b><u>Week 1:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Play suas/ sios game with cones (2 teams, one team suas, the other sios, must turn the cones around depending on which team, count after for winning team) (CLIL)</li> <li>• Balance on different body parts (one foot, two feet, hands on wall, crab, bridge, plank, one hand and one foot, stomachs...) Use printed cards for this- scatter in hall, children work in pairs to trial balances for 10 seconds. (CLIL)</li> <li>• Mats: Rolls x 2. Pin roll and tucked roll. (Refer to Lesson 4: <a href="http://pssi.pdst.ie/pdf/gym/gym_a_4.pdf">http://pssi.pdst.ie/pdf/gym/gym_a_4.pdf</a>) CLIL</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>Week 2:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Play 'tiomaint' game. Children 'drive' around the hall, stop on whistle, 'roll down window' and say 'dia duit __, conas ata tu?' (CLIL.Using Gaeilge)</li> <li>• Forward roll</li> <li>• Play 'sruthlaigh an leithreas'/ flush the toilet (CLIL. Using Gaeilge)</li> </ul>

**Foclóir (muinteoir):** Gleacaíocht, léim, siúl, go tapa, go mall, stop, go hard, íseal, ar chlé, ar dheis, ar aghaidh, ar cúl, lámha suas/ síos/amach/isteach, cóisiúl le, nathair nimhne, fearas (Equipment), an droim a choinneáil díreach, na glúine a fheacadh (bend the knees), taisteal ar dhá lámh/ lámh amháin, corp, ceann, cos, cosa, lámh, lámha, cúng (narrow), leathan (wide), cuachta (curled), sínte (stretched), an corp a bheith cuachta isteach (body in a curled position), an corp a bheith sínte amach (body in a stretched position), meáchan coirp a iompar ar chos amháin (support weight on one foot), taisteal go cliathánach (travelling sideways), an corp a choinneáil íseal (keeping the body low), an meáchan a aistriú go dtí dhá lámh agus cos amháin (support weight from 2 hands to one foot), an corp a bheith cuachta isteach (body in a curled position).

**Folcoir (paisti):** suas/síos, go mall, go tapa, siúl, ar do lámha, reoite, feadóg, féach, cuachta isteach, sínte amach, rolla peann luaidhe, mata, sruthlaigh (flush), glúin, bairricíní

Appendix E

Visual representation of vocabulary used in Action Cycle One as seen from a child's perspective displayed within my classroom



### Appendix F

**Excerpt from my Fortnightly Plan from January 2022: Plan for Aistear integrated teaching time, including integration of Gaeilge & related foclóir:**

*\*Sections coloured in yellow indicate that Gaeilge was integrated into these particular stations.*

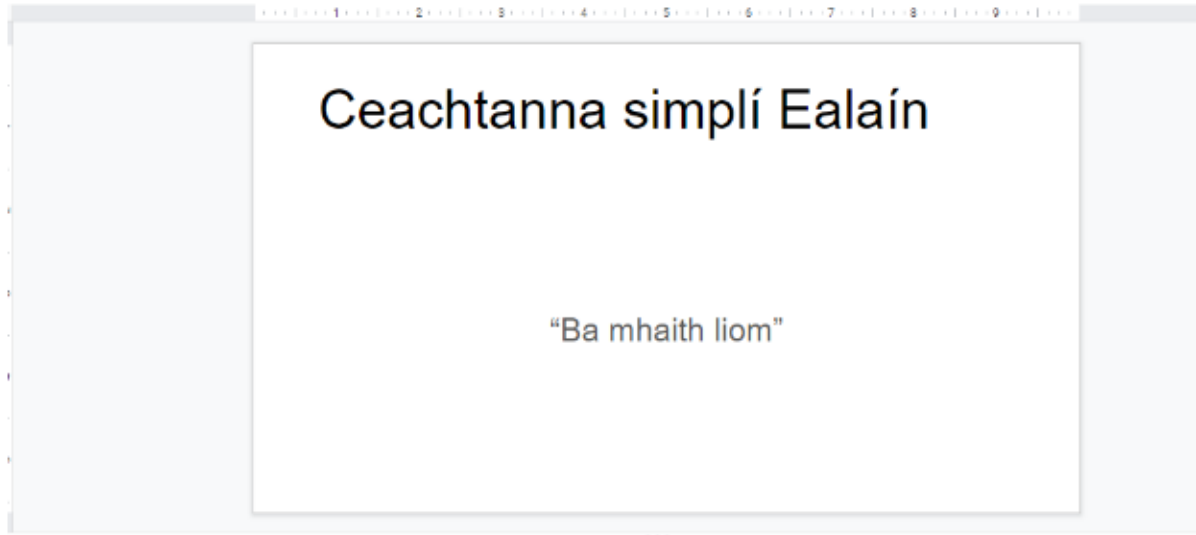
#### Aistear Integrated Learning Activities for January: Theme- Shopping/ Clothes

<b>Sociodramatic play</b>	The Clothes Shop role play
<b>Small world</b>	<p>Dressing little puppets/ people...</p> <p><b>**Integrate with Gaeilge:</b> Little people/ laminated clothes: Cuir hata/ broga srl air/uirthi</p> <p>Foclóir:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• cóta, hata, scairf, bríste, bróga, stocaí, geansaí, léine, gúna, sciorta, iallacha</li> <li>• bándearg, corcra, dearg, buí, glas, oráiste, dubh, bán</li> <li>• mo bhuataisí, mo bhróga, m'iallacha</li> <li>• mo léine, mo bhríste, mo chóta, mo hata, mo ghúna</li> <li>• do hata, do chóta, do bhróga, do stocaí, do scairf</li> <li>• Tá ___hata/sciorta srl air/ uirthi</li> <li>• Tá sé ___dearg/ glas/ buí srl.</li> </ul>
<b>Investigation</b>	Link with SESE Materials, create a coat for a penguin (need different materials)
<b>Sand / water area</b>	<p>Doing the washing: Washing dolls clothes/ squeeze water out and peg onto a washing line.</p> <p><b><u>Integrate Gaeilge: amhrán- Nigh na héadaí,</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• cóta, hata, scairf, bríste, bróga, stocaí, geansaí, léine, gúna, sciorta, iallacha</li> <li>• Salach, glan</li> <li>• Tá ___ an geansaí/sciorta srl _____ salach/ glan.</li> <li>• Nigh, troimigh.</li> <li>• Fluich, tirim</li> <li>• Tá sé fluich/ tirim</li> </ul>

## Appendix G

### Screenshot of Google Slides Art CLIL Lessons from Action Cycle Two:

*Overview page:*



A selection of Ceachtanna Ealaín as Gaeilge. (suitable for infants-2nd)

An aidhm ná go mbaineann na páistí taitneamh as an Gaeilge a éisteacht i gceacht Ealaín agus go labhraíonn siad Gaeilge sa cheacht. Mar sin de, caithfidh na páistí iarratas a dhéanamh chun áiseanna a fháil as an múinteoir i ngach ceacht (chun go bhfuil seans acu an Ghaeilge a úsáid).

Google Slides lesson for Ceacht 1:

"Ba mhaith liom" ...  
"Go raibh maith agat"

scamall  
bogha báistí





1. Tarraing scamall
2. Gearr amach an scamall leis an siosúr
3. Faigh na dathanna atá ag teastáil uait
4. Cuir na dathanna ar an scamall



Google Slides for Ceacht 2:


cnaipe cnaipí bláthanna mór beag  
 "Ba mhaith liom" "Go raibh maith agat"

1. Faigh dath glas agus tarraing na bláthanna
2. Roghnaigh cén dathanna atá tú ag iarraidh
3. Faigh na cnaipí atá ag teastáil uait
4. Gliúáil na cnaipí ar an leathnach


Google Slides for Ceacht 5:


ochtapas cosa   
 súile  béal   
 gearr amach   
 dronuilleog  ciorcal 

"Dia duit.. "Ba mhaith liom cheerios"..  
 "Go raibh maith agat" "slán"

1. Tarraing ciorcal & ocht dronuilleoga ar leathnach bán
2. Gearr amach iad
3. Gliúáil an ciorcal, na dronuilleoga agus na súile ar an leathnach gorm
4. Tarraing béal
5. Cuir ceist ar an múinteoir na cheerios a fháil 
6. Gliúáil na cheerios ar na cosa

## Appendix H

### Repeated vocabulary in AC2 Art lessons which used the CLIL methodology:

- Dia duit. Dia is muire duit.
- Céard ba mhaith leat? Ba mhaith liom \_\_\_\_\_.
- Seo duit. Go raibh maith agat
- Slán
- Dathanna- dearg, buí, gorm, glas, donn, dubh, bán, oráiste, corcra, bán dearg
- Mór, beag
- Píosa páipéir
- Cnaipe, cnaipí
- Gliú

### Appendix I

#### Description of Games used within Action Cycle Three:

Name of Game	Description of game
Céard a thóg mé?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Past vocabulary which the children had learned was focused on to avoid the need to pre teach vocabulary.</li> <li>• Children played this game at their groups which included maximum 6 children.</li> <li>• Children were given a set of 10 pictures. One child was 'on'. They asked 'Céard a thóg mé?' The children's group raised their hands to answer 'Ar thóg tú ____'. The child who got the correct answer was on next and the game continued in this manner.</li> </ul>
An bhfuil tú ag	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Past vocabulary relating to Caitheamh Aimsire/ Pastimes was the focus of this game. Again, there was no requirement to pre teach this as revision was the focus.</li> <li>• Children played this game at their groups which included maximum 6 children.</li> <li>• One child was 'on'. They stood up and performed an action. The other children raised their hand to ask 'An bhfuil tú ag?'. The children who answered correctly was then 'on' and the game continued in this manner.</li> </ul>
Bí ag	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Past vocabulary relating to Caitheamh Aimsire/ Pastimes was the focus of this game. Again, there was no requirement to pre teach this as revision was the focus</li> <li>• Children played this game at their groups which included maximum 6 children.</li> <li>• This game was action based. One child was 'on'. They directed the other children to 'bí ag ____'. The children performed the action. Teacher rang a bell to indicate that it was time to rotate around the group with regards to who was 'on' next.</li> </ul>

## Appendix J

### Sample of Letter to Board of Management to Seek Permission to Conduct Research Study:

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



Maynooth University Froebel Department  
of Primary and Early Childhood Education

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

10/01/2022

#### **RE: Permission to Conduct Research Study**

Dear Principal and Board of Management,

I am writing to request permission to conduct an action research study in my Senior Infant class. I am currently undertaking a Masters of Education Degree in Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education, Maynooth. My proposed research study is entitled 'How can I use professional agency to enhance my teaching of Gaeilge'. I aim to explore the extent to which my use of professional agency may impact upon my ability to enhance my teaching of Gaeilge.

In order to do this, I intend to carry out research in my classroom by adopting two targeted strategies in my teaching of Gaeilge: integrating Gaeilge into play based learning in addition to using the CLIL methodology by teaching P.E through Gaeilge for a selected timeframe. The research will be carried out during the normal school day. The data will be collected using teacher observations, a daily teacher journal, voice recordings & interviews with pupils.

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. 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:  
sandra.champkin@\_\_\_\_\_.com

If you agree, kindly sign and return the consent form attached.

Yours faithfully,  
Sandra Champkin

## Appendix K

### Sample of Letter to Parents to Seek Consent for Child's Participation in my Study:

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



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

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

#### **RE: Letter of consent for Parents/ Guardians**

Dear Parent(s)/Guardian(s),

I am currently pursuing a Masters in Education at Maynooth University. As part of the degree, I am conducting an action research project. The focus of my research is based on my teaching of Irish and how I might aim to positively impact upon disposition towards the language.

In order to do this, I intend to carry out research in the classroom by integrating Irish into our 'Aistear'/ play based learning stations as well as teaching some P.E lessons through Irish. This will take place during regular classroom time.

The information needed to complete this study will include observations, student work samples, a daily teacher journal, questionnaires with pupils and interviews with pupils. The children will be asked their opinions through discussing their learning experiences in Irish lessons.

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

I would like to invite you and your child to give permission for him/her to take part in this project. Please see the consent form which is attached with this letter.

If you have any queries on any part of this research project feel free to contact me by email at [sandra.champkin@\\_\\_\\_\\_\\_com](mailto:sandra.champkin@_____com)

Yours faithfully,

Sandra Champkin



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

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

**Parental/Guardian 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(s)/Guardian(s) Signature(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Child \_\_\_\_\_

Child's signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix L

### Information Sheet for Parents with Regards to my Study



Maynooth University Froebel Department  
of Primary and Early Childhood Education

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

#### Information Sheet: Parents and Guardians

##### Who is this information sheet for?

This information sheet is for parents and guardians.

##### What is this Action Research Project about?

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

##### What are the research questions?

- How can I critically evaluate and reflect on policy developments to enhance my teaching of Gaeilge?
- How can my engagement with implementing suggested best practice initiatives impact upon my sense of professional agency?

##### What sorts of methods will be used?

- Observation, Reflective Journal, Questionnaires, Interviews.

##### Who else will be involved?

The study will be carried out by myself 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 include your child in the process of undertaking 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:** Sandra Champkin

**Email:** [sandra.champkin@\\_\\_\\_\\_\\_](mailto:sandra.champkin@_____).com

**Appendix M**

**Sample of Letter Regarding Child Assent for my Study:**



**Child's name .....**

I am trying to find out how I can teach Irish in a way that might help you to enjoy the language and think positively about it. I would like to watch you and listen to you when you are in school, to write down some notes about you and speak to you about this.

Would you be ok with that? Circle one.      **YES**      **NO**

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.





**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:** \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix N

Sample of Slides as seen in my College Presentation from June 2022 with regards to validating my research:



Layout of presentation:

<b><u>Section 1</u></b>	<b>Introduction to my study</b> <i>Rationale, values</i>
<b><u>Section 2</u></b>	<b>Planning my intervention</b> <i>PLC (2019) &amp; CLIL, Inspectorate Report (2022)</i>
<b><u>Section 3</u></b>	<b>My intervention</b>
<b><u>Section 4</u></b>	<b>Themes &amp; Initial findings</b> Innovation
<b><u>Section 5</u></b>	<b>Summary</b>

## Section 2: My Intervention: Where to start?



## Section 5: Summary

- Change is a process
- Requires effort & sustained commitment
- Positive school culture impacts upon this... motivation and empowerment
- In terms of múineadh na Gaeilge: Gaeilge as a language is at the core...communicative approach
- CLIL is a useful methodology....but suit yourself!
- Professional conversations to motivate & inspire
- Practical barriers are inevitable.....

Positivity & Culture

Change & leading change: leadership

Collaboration

**Finding: School Culture impacts possibility for and process of change**

TRJ, Sept 2021

- So much **laughter and joy** in school today
- I feel **respected**
- I was more afraid to take risks in the past
- I feel like anything (within reason!) is possible in my new school.

**Kotter's 8-Step Change Model**

**Section 4: Themes began to emerge...**

Barriers

Meaning & purpose

**Finding: Leadership to model the way & empower**

TRJ, October 2021  
*(staff meeting, discussing subject inspection recommendations which took place pre Covid)*

- “My principal **encouraged us as a staff to reflect**”
- “He spoke about **how we need to use our professional judgement and voice**”
- He **reassured** staff that if the inspectorate took issue with us for this, he would wholeheartedly defend

Our autobiographies as learners

Our student's eyes

Peers

Our colleagues' experiences

Scholarship

Theoretical literature

Brookfield Reflective Model
Nursinganswers.net

## Appendix O

### Informal Message Which I Sent to my Colleagues in Relation to my Research (May 2022):

Hi everyone,

You can reply separately/privately to me on this if you wish:

I am studying for an MED at the moment with a focus on my teaching of Gaeilge as well as reflective practice regarding ways to encourage positive disposition/ ways to overcome any difficulties in my aim to do this. The particular research I am doing is practice focused so I don't have a specific survey, however, I would be interested if anyone has any thoughts they would be willing to share (if you can find the time to do so that would be great...anything at all, doesn't have to be an essay, a few words would be perfect!). **Basically, I am wondering do you have any particular insight with regards to the teaching of Gaeilge (curriculum or otherwise)? Any approach/ resource etc you have found very good or useful?**

My research is 'action research' so I had to design an intervention for use in my teaching. For part of it I used CLIL approach and taught some PE/ Art through Gaeilge (the Google Slides for the Art lessons are [here](#) in case anyone would like to use too, they're appropriate for junior inf to 2nd). I found that online resources from PDST/NCCA etc were minimal despite a suggestion of this in curriculum. I had never tried this approach before which I thought was interesting too as I knew about it but just didn't prioritise it before now (not that it is the answer to everything now either of course, as with anything!). *If anyone has used CLIL before I would definitely be interested in hearing your take on that too though!*

So to summarise, here are the 3 questions I am asking:

1. **What's your thoughts on teaching of Gaeilge?**
2. **Anything particularly good / useful you'd suggest?**
3. **(Extra question) Have you anything to say about using CLIL approach?**

Go raibh mile,

Sandra

## Appendix P

### Letter of Consent for Critical Friend:



#### RE: Letter of Consent for Critical Friends

You are invited to participate in a research study on the use of professional agency to enhance teaching of Gaelge. Participation in the study involves ongoing participation and support as a critical friend, including a pre and post intervention critical friend discussion.

The discussions will require about 40 minutes of your time in total. During this time, you will be invited to share your observations on my current teaching of Gaelge, on my observations and on the emerging findings from my research study. The group discussion will be conducted wherever you prefer (i.e. in the school), and the results will later be collated for the purposes of data triangulation. There are no risks or discomforts that are anticipated from your participation in the study. The anticipated benefit of participation is the opportunity to discuss feelings, perceptions, and concerns related to the use of professional agency in the classroom and observations on my experience of using the methodologies of CLIL and integrative teaching methods in teaching Gaelge.

Your name and any other identifying details will not be revealed in any publication of the results of this study. All data obtained will be kept confidential and secure for the duration of the study and thereafter. On completion of the thesis, the data will be kept for a further ten years, as per University regulations and then will be securely destroyed. The results will be presented in the thesis. They will be viewed by my supervisor, the Head of Department and an external examiner. The study may be published in a research journal or available to future students on the course.

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary and refusal to participate will involve no penalty. You may withdraw consent and discontinue participation from the study at any time for any reason without prejudice or penalty. If you do this, all information from you will be destroyed.

I would like to invite you to give permission to take part in this project. Please see the consent form which is attached with this letter.

If you have any queries on any part of this research project feel free to contact me by email at [sandra.champkin@s—.com](mailto:sandra.champkin@s—.com)

Yours faithfully, Sandra Champkin