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)

Title

Enhancing the Experiences of Children with Social Emotional and Mental Health Difficulties
in a Primary Class.

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

Date
4/09/22

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Bliain / Year group: Master of Education 2021-2022

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Ábhar / Subject: Master of Education Research in Practice Thesis

Léachtóir / Teagascóir: Lecturer / Tutor: Deirdre Forde

Sprioclá / Due date: 9th September 2022

Teideal an tionscadail / Assignment title: Enhancing the Experiences of Children with Social Emotional Difficulties in a Primary Class.

Líon na bhfocal / Word Count: 19,721

Líon leathanach / Number of pages: 105

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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.

Student

Éilis Keenan

Date

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Abstract

The Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) Operational Guide (2019) declared that in December 2018 in Ireland 19,073 adolescents and children were in receipt of their services. There are thousands of children placed on waiting lists desperately seeking appointments due to the lack of staffing and resources. These statistics establish the urgent demand for sufficient support and guidance at primary school level.

The research for this study took place in a school that acquired the DEIS Band One School Support Programme of Delivering Equality of Opportunity to Schools (DEIS), the action plan of the Department of Education and Skills for educational inclusion. The school comprises an urban setting and there are over three hundred and fifty pupils enrolled. The focus children were in second class.

There was a specific focus placed upon working with children with social emotional and mental health difficulties. I utilised a self-study approach within an action research framework. I reflected on my practice with the objective of enhancing my personal and professional knowledge and understanding and developing the care that I offer to the children. This research comprises two cycles that utilise Circle Time and the Trauma Informed Practice Approach. Circle Time involves the children and the teacher sitting within a circle completing an activity, task or discussion together. Trauma Informed Practice supports the educators understanding regarding how trauma can impact children's actions and behaviour in school. In collaboration with pupils, colleagues and parents, and the initiative in place, the values: communication and the significance of forming strong relationships were established, enlightened and inspired throughout.

Circle Time, with the assistance of a speaking object, encouraged a positive communication thread amongst the educator and the children. It motivated them to develop the confidence to engage in the group dialogue. This in turn, along with valuable reflection in their Happy Scrappies, led to the transformation of peer and teacher-child relationships within the class. Thematic Analysis reinforced the demand to further analyse and explore the themes of promoting positive ways of being, communication and relationships and motivation. These themes compounded my understanding of social emotional experiences of the children in my class. These discoveries resulted in a radical change in my understanding of teaching children with social emotional and mental health difficulties (SEMH). They enhanced the level of care and understanding within my practice and further denoted the values of establishing communication and forming of positive relationships within the school community.

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisor Deirdre Forde whose encouragement and knowledge guided me through this process. I would never have been able to complete this research project without Deirdre's guidance.

I would like to thank my second-class pupils who were fantastic throughout. They worked so hard and I learned so much from them.

I would like to thank my fabulous critical friend Orla and my wonderful validation group who played a vital role in the development of this research project.

I would like to thank my best friends Sarah and Clare for encouraging me when I really needed it.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge my principal and the Board of Management of the school who were exceptionally supportive throughout.

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List of Abbreviations

SEMH- Social Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties

SEBD- Social Emotional Beavioural Disorder

EBD: Emotional Behavioural Disability

DEIS-Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools

SEN-Special Educational Needs

INTO-Irish National Teachers Organisation

NEPS-National Educational Psychological Service

ACE-Adverse Childhood Experiences

TIP-Trauma Informed Practice

WHO- World Health Organisation

WMHS-World Mental Health Survey

NCSE-National Council for Special Education

HSE-Health Service Executive

DES-Department of Education and Skills

SPHE-Social Personal and Health Education

Múinteoir- Teacher (in Irish)

SEAL-Social Emotional Aspects of Learning

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Focus and Aims of the Study

Mental health caters for the holistic development of a person. It includes the emotional, psychological, and social well-being of individuals. It affects how a person thinks, feels and acts every second of every day. Children with social emotional difficulties often suffer with mental health difficulties too. I noticed that these children often respond inappropriately to situations and circumstances which arise. This can result in these children being excluded and isolated from school experiences. Children who feel confined or secluded often segregate themselves from their peers, friends and teachers. This self-study action research project aims to create new knowledge and ideas around how I can best enhance the experience of children with SEMH in my class.

Circle Time involves the whole class sitting, working, conversing, reflecting and quite often laughing together. It provides children with the relevant tools to engage with each other and their teachers. Trauma Informed Practice is an approach to teaching that involves the assumption that children are likely to have experienced trauma in their lives. It acknowledges the presence of symptoms and endorses the effect that trauma can have on a child's everyday life.

Communicating appropriately and promoting and modelling the formation of effective relationships were two areas of concern highlighted within my practice. Consequently, the focus was on utilising Circle Time and the Trauma Informed Practice approach to promote relationships and inspire the use of dialogue to effectively enhance the experiences of children with SEMH in a primary classroom.

1.2 Research Title

The title of this project is *'Enhancing the experiences of children with social emotional and mental health difficulties in a primary classroom'*.

1.3 Research Background and Context

From working in three different DEIS schools, I have a huge interest in working with children with social emotional difficulties. Through experience, I discovered that children with social emotional difficulties often present with symptoms of poor mental health too. This can be for various reasons. My interest in working with these children stems from my own personal and professional experiences along with the value of care that provide to the children in my class.

As a school we recently began persuing the Pieta Amber Flag initiative. This flag enables organisations to raise awareness and promote positivity around issues within their environment and demonstrates the effects these stigmas can evoke on the emotional and mental wellbeing of individuals. Therefore, I decided to further explore ways, strategies, and behaviours I could adopt to heighten my awareness, understanding and practice around this. It was evident from September that there was a considerable number of children with mental health issues in conjunction with social emotional difficulties in the class. These children were present and often acted compliant, however, they were exhibiting their negative experiences through their emotions, actions, and words. Their lack of interest was evident throughout every aspect of the school day. Encouraging the children to participate within Circle Time, with the objective of teaching them the skills necessary and promoting communication and relationships formation, was a priority for the conduction of this research.

1.4 Potential Contribution of this Self-Study Project

Through the analysis of this self-study research project, I intend to endeavour knowledge, understanding and awareness around how I can work alongside children with SEMH and enhance their school experiences. With this research I hope to inspire my colleagues to use these practices within their classrooms and demonstrate how they can be adopted and implemented as tools to promote positive relationship formation and communication links in our school. In enlightening and enriching my knowledge and understanding around this topic, I sincerely hope to provide the children with various

opportunities to form strong relationships and communicate with others effectively, to ultimately enhance their experiences in school.

1.5 Format of the Study

This self-study project took place in my second-class classroom over a period of three months. Two six-week cycles were required for the in-class intervention. The first cycle required the introduction of the Circle Time intervention. This was followed by the launch of the Happy Scrappy reflection book. Simultaneously, research around Trauma Informed Practice had been conducted and this approach was introduced alongside the Circle Time intervention for the second cycle. This aimed to determine the effect and validity of these two vigorous methods in promoting relationships and communication to enhance the experiences of children with SEMH in a primary classroom.

1.6 Chapter Summary and Thesis Layout

This research is anticipated to acertain the significance behind the promotion of dialogue and relationship formation in the process of enhancing the experiences of children with SEMH. There are five chapters within this Master of Education thesis. The format of this self-study action research project is as follow: Chapter two illustrates and critiques relevant and significant literature that was appropriate to the research topic. Chapter three focuses on the methodologies in addition to the research instruments used to carry out research and data collection. Chapter four depicts a precise outline for the findings for this study. Chapter five concludes this research project with a comprehensive account of my learning from participating in this self-study action research project. The limitations of the study along with implications for potential prospective research around this matter are also analysed.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Throughout Chapter 1, the prevalence of mental health difficulties among children with social emotional difficulties was examined. Similarly, the significant role that one's social emotional development has on their mental health in the world that we live in today was determined. This chapter begins with an exploration of social emotional and mental health difficulties in schools and the educator's role in assisting these children. Educational Disadvantage, DEIS schools (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) and incidences of SEN (Special Educational Needs) in DEIS schools are examined. Secondly, the potential impacts of relationships, a sense of belonging, providing skills to cope with stressful events and fostering self-efficacy (DES, 2019) will be considered. Additionally, the effects of adverse childhood experiences (ACE) will be explored. Following this, the need to review our approach to teaching children with SEMH will be scrutinised. Lastly, the value of adopting a trauma informed practice approach when focusing on enhancing the experiences of children with social emotional development in a DEIS school will be investigated within this chapter. Ultimately, the significant roles that both teachers and schools have on enhancing and promoting positive mental health amongst their students are established.

2.2 Educational Disadvantage

The Education Act (1998) defines Educational Disadvantage as:

'…the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools.' (p.32).

'Since the term 'educational disadvantage' entered the policy discourse in Ireland in the early 1990s, there has been a proliferation of research, at a broad macro level, highlighting the inequities in the existing system, arguing for a more progressive vision as well as greater ambition regarding the educational imaginary of pupils attending schools in disadvantaged

areas' (Fleming and Harford, 2021, p1). Concerns and issues regarding equality in relation to the accessibility, participation and outcomes of education arose. It was clear that social class exhibited a major role in education. Smyth (2018) denoted that intergenerational is common and it is quintessential for one to invest in a child's education from the early years. Research on educational disadvantage has highlighted three main domains of concern: students' motivation, expectation and school engagement (Konidari, 2021).

A Scheme of Assistance was formulated by the Department of Education (2005) which aimed to combat educational disadvantage in Ireland. There are unlimited factors to be considered such as income poverty, the percentage of children in the school whose families avail of local authority housing or non-permanent accommodation, the number of children whose families are registered with the public healthcare system/hold medical cards and the number of children whose parent/legal guardians are unemployed and in receipt of the unemployment benefit directed by the Department of Social Welfare (Kellaghan, 2001).

2.2.1 What is DEIS?

The Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme was launched in 2005 by then Minister for Education, Mary Hanafin. Supporting and guiding the educational needs of young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds is the focus of this initiative. The policy response of the Irish government has been to adopt a policy of positive discrimination, where additional resources are distributed to schools that cater for students, or really for high numbers of students, from low SES (socioeconomic status) backgrounds (Weir, 2016). The main ambition of the 2017 DEIS plan is:

*'To become the best in Europe at harnessing education to break down barriers and stem the cycle of inter-generational disadvantage by equipping learners to participate, succeed and contribute effectively to society in a changing world (*Department of Education, 2017*).*

Extra funding was to be made available to DEIS schools in relation to the School Book Scheme, resources for whole school literacy and numeracy programmes, Home School Community

Liaison Scheme and School Completion programme (Fleming and Harford, 2021). Teachers felt quite positive about the DEIS Support programme. They also felt that they were lacking resources and supports in certain areas to deal with the various issues that can arise. According to a report by the Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO) educational psychological services, clinical psychological services and therapy services, such as speech and language and occupational therapy, would be of benefit to children with social emotional difficulties (INTO Report, 2015).

2.2.2 DEIS Review

A Review of the DEIS policy in 2015 indicated that the missing supports and resources required to support the mental health and social emotional well-being of pupils will be provided.

'An explicit focus on pupils' mental health, well-being and their social and emotional development has been missing from the DEIS support programme and from evaluations. For some children, behavioural challenges arising from unmet social and emotional needs are the greatest barrier to their learning' (INTO and The Educational Disadvantage Centre, p10, 2015).

2.2.3 Higher Incidence of SEN in DEIS Schools

Research has shown that there are significantly higher incidences of children with SEN in DEIS schools in Ireland. Cahill (2021) established the extreme connections between SEBD (social emotional behavioural disorder) and socio-economically disadvantaged young people and communities. The implications and influences of the social world on the experiences and actions of children in school settings are major. Similarly, Banks et al., (2012) further remarked that children from disadvantaged backgrounds and children in disadvantaged school contexts are far more likely than their peers to be identified as having non-normative special educational needs such as learning difficulties and EBD (emotional behavoural disorder) (Banks et al., 2012, p1). Additionally, Cahill (2021) declared that social class has a remarkable influence on how children with SEN are received, admitted to and taught in Irish school

contexts. In a similar vein, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) (2012) produced a policy titled '*The Education of Students with Challenging Behaviour arising from Severe Emotional Disturbance/Behavioural Disorders'* which declared that the number of children with behavioural difficulties is known to be higher than average in DEIS schools. The Limerick Children Services Committee (2012) established that the prevalence of emotional conduct and behavioural problems is considerably higher in the most disadvantaged areas of the city in comparison with other 'average' areas. In conjunction with the above, according to the article *'Inclusive Education and the Law in Ireland' (2022) the* goal of an inclusive education system is enabling persons with disabilities to participate effectively in society (Ferri et al., 2022). However, one could question the extent to how inclusive the Education System is in Ireland if children attending DEIS schools are far more likely to be identified as having learning difficulties such as SEBD, than their peers. Moreover, Ireland has evidently not paid enough attention to the prevalence of SEN among certain groups of children. This is inarguably an issue that must be addressed.

2.3 Social and Emotional Difficulties in a Primary School Classroom: Role of the School

The Department of Education and Skills (2015) in Ireland declared that schools play a major role in promoting the mental health of young people in Ireland today. Schools provide a warm and safe environment for children while also cultivating appropriate life skills to guide them through any mental health difficulties they may encounter. This idea surrounding schools having a major impact on a child's mental health is reinforced by Dolton et al., (2020) as they issue how schools are an agency that play a role in the prevention of mental health difficulties and provide support for children who encounter them. Throughout this section, the link between a child's social emotional development, and mental health will be explored.

The EPSEN Act (2004) provides the following definition of Special Educational Needs:

'A restriction in the capacity of the person to participate in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability or any other

condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition' (Cooper and Jacobs, 2011).

Children with social emotional difficulties have Special Educational Needs (SEN), and these needs should be attended to by schools, parents, guardians and any other relevant communities. Children with SEMH cover a range of passive behaviours such as low mood, lethargy and isolation, and active behaviours such as mood swings, impulsivity, and aggression (Dolton et al., 2020).

The Review of the INTO guidelines issued that all responsibilities regarding a child's mental health being placed on the school is both outdated and wrong. There are several relevant bodies required to co-operate to attend to the mental health of a child (INTO, 2015). Parson and Howlett (1996) conducted a study which analysed the significant number of children with social emotional difficulties who were being failed by society due to poor techniques being employed by schools. Throughout this work, the teachers and Principals involved reported how very little had changed over the past twenty-five years, and children who misbehave are still simply removed from their learning environment. There is a significant amount of pressure and responsibility being placed solely upon schools to support children with social emotional difficulties' mental health. The headteacher of the school where this study was conducted declared that schools have various pressures in terms of attainment and progress heaped on them, and it is hard to juggle them all. Some children do 'slip through the net' due to the huge responsibilities regarding a child with social emotional difficulties' mental health (Caslin, 2021). While schools play a major role in supporting, guiding and providing children with SEMH with skills and techniques to deal with any well-being that they may encounter, they certainly require assistance from other stakeholders to complete this appropriately.

According to the Well-being in Primary School's Guidelines, positive mental health and well-being enables young people to lead positive and fulfilling lives (National Educational Psychological Service, 2015). However, these Guidelines also state that by the age of thirteen,

almost one in three people will have experienced some sort of mental disorder. These Guidelines reinforce the ideas surrounding the home and family being the primary source of nurturing and support for children, and do not solely place the responsibility on schools. Attending to the well-being needs of a child provides a holistic approach involving the school community, parents and guardians and all other relevant stakeholders. According to Hutton (2021) Childline witnessed a 100 percent increase in the number of children contacting them regarding mental health difficulties between March and June 2020. This indicates the mammoth issue that exists in Ireland today. However, Rickard et al., (2016) believe that utilising schools to establish mental health difficulties interventions, can be effective in reducing the impact of these issues. Rickard et al., (2016) also suggests that schools do and should play a major role in promoting the mental health of young children. My thoughts do not entirely align. Although I am aware of the role that teachers play in the promotion of positive mental health for young children, I firmly believe that this is a major obligation that should involve communication and cooperation between several relevant bodies. Schools simply do not have the resources or training to tend to these needs without additional support from external agencies.

Lastly, The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) have adapted a tiered approach to providing support for children with social emotional difficulties in primary schools. It involves a commitment to the major role of the teacher, in addition to the special education personnel that each school has, these are then supported by any relevant external agencies (Cooper and Jacobs, 2011). While this approach places an emphasis on the major role that the school and teacher play on a child with SEMH, it provides examples of additional bodies and communities who can aid and guide children in the right direction in collaboration with the school.

2.4 Social Emotional Difficulties in a Primary School Classroom: Role of the teacher

Undoubtedly, the teacher plays a central role in providing support and guidance for children with SEMH in a primary school classroom. According to Caslin (2021), many teachers do not feel as though they have adequate training to work with a diverse range of learners. This idea is reinforced by Dolton et al., (2020) as they declared that teachers felt as though they lacked training, skills and resources to meet the various needs of children with SEMH.

The concept of listening to children with social emotional difficulties who are also struggling with their mental health is analysed by Dolton et al., (2020). If the child's voice is not heard, then all other attempts to provide support to the child with social emotional and mental health difficulties will be hindered. This not only involves communicating with a child about their mental health difficulties, but also listening and allowing them to put forward their ideas, thoughts and worries. Similarly, according to a study carried out by Cooper et al., (2011), they established how showing the values regarding respect and care towards children with social emotional and mental health difficulties indicated a positive change towards disaffection and highlighted the lower levels of exclusion in the school. A common thread can be drawn here as teachers must honour their duty of care towards children with social emotional difficulties struggling with their mental health, by listening to their issues and worries, and caring enough to follow through and guide them in the right direction. Caslin (2021) had a similar idea as she stated that a teacher's response to a child struggling with their mental health can have a major impact on the teacher-child relationship. Therefore, being respectful and listening to the child in question are just some of the ways that a teacher can show they care and in turn form powerful relationships with children with SEMH.

The INTO (2015) suggested that teachers must constantly remind themselves of the heavy burden that children carry as they come to school. It was proposed that children should not come to school sick, hungry, tired, anxious and afraid but unfortunately, they do (INTO, 2015). This implies that the role of the teacher involves them being constantly aware of the

environment and surroundings that children are coming from, and to care for them retrospectively.

Palmer (1997) demonstrated that a quintessential part of being a teacher is to invite a child to honour their true self, not their ego, expectations, or image. This relates to Cooper and Jacobs (2011) as this once again denotes the significance of portraying the values of respect and care towards children with SEMH by encouraging them to respect and care for their inner-being. In doing so, teachers create valuable and powerful relationships with children who have SEMH. The validity of forming strong relationships with these children will be analysed in the section to follow.

2.5 Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE)

'Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) is a term used to refer to a collection of potentially traumatic exposures that individuals may experience during childhood ages 0 to 18 years' (Asmundson et al., 2020, p18). Similarly Asmundson et al., (2020) establish that childhood experiences have a major effect on an individual's lifelong health and opportunities. These experiences form the building blocks for future learning, behaviour and health to provide the brain with a strong foundation for future improvement. According to Hyland et al., (2021), the World Health Organization's (WHO) 'World Mental Health Survey' (WMHS) found that 70.4% of people had experienced at least one traumatic event in their life. Exposure to ACE can limit future life opportunities such as educational attainment and employment (Asmundson et al., 2020). Unfortunately, there are numerous events that a child could face, that could be declared an ACE. A study completed by Hyland et al., (2021) illustrate various potentially traumatic experiences such as bullying, exposure to physical or sexual abuse, a family death, neglect and stalking. These are just some of the diverse experiences that children can be exposed to. It could be argued that not all people who have experienced ACE are affected in their later life, however, it is certain that some people's future will have implications due to their ACE (Hyland et al., 2021). As everyone is different, these traumatic

life events can present in various ways for numerous people. Lastly, an upstream prevention method that was established after this study was to ensure that children who had experienced ACE were provided with opportunities to form safe, stable and nurturing relationships (Hyland et al., 2020). This provides a conspicuous link to the theme of relationships that is evident throughout this research. Making a significant effort to provide children with opportunities to open-up and speak about any ACE they have overcome, is inevitably a turning point for any teacher-child relationship.

2.6 Teacher Qualities in Building Relationships

Detrick (1999) declares that it is the right of the child to be provided with information and guidance in relation to their social, moral wellbeing and mental health. Undoubtedly, all children with SEMH should be given clear guidance about how to tackle their issues. In conjunction with the above, these children should be exposed to relationships that are bound by trust, inclusion and security.

The idea revolving around the educator exhibiting these qualities was denoted by Cooper and Jacobs (2011), 'what matters for the youth is the resilience that prospers through relationships and from which youth can experience renewed trust, inclusion and security' (Cooper and Jacobs, 2011, p12). While Godoy and Carter (2008) discuss the significance of relationships for children, they conclude that the communication styles, affective tone and expressiveness, sensitivity, warmth and responsiveness, mutuality, reciprocity, and adaptability are exceptionally important for adults to demonstrate, for children to willingly commit to such powerful relationships.

However, Bolby (2017) mentioned that relationships between an adult and a child depend on both characteristics that they prevail. This suggests that a teacher's specific relationship style can have a major impact on the relationships with children in a class (Hayes et al., 2017). This concept reinforces how teachers should be conscious of the influence that their actions and behaviour can have on their relationships with children in their class.

2.6.1 The Impacts of a Teacher-Child Relationship

Green and Mezirow empower educators to comprehend the extensive influence that the relationships they have formed with the children within their class, can ultimately have on a child's identity (Mega, 2020).

'Our identity is formed in webs of affiliation within a shared life world. […] It is within the context of these relationships, governed by existing and changing cultural paradigms, that we become the persons we are' (kokko's, 2020, p6).

This theory advocates how relationships can have a positive impact on a child's wellbeing and identity if they are established properly. However, this theory also proposes that negative teacher-child relationships can have substantially pessimistic consequences on a child's mental health and identity. This in turn acts as a reminder for teachers to ensure that they continuously model, promote and support positive relationships formation in their classrooms.

According to the Health Service Executive (HSE) (2013), the promotion of positive relationships for young children can increase cooperation and reduce verbal and physical aggression. This indicates the major impact that an effective teacher-child relationship can have on a child with SEMH. It is clear from this, that a teacher must also model positive relationships with others to reinstate the potential benefits that they can have on a child's wellbeing. Correspondingly, Lang et al., (2020) advocates that early teacher-child relationships play a critical role in social-emotional development. Therefore, it is of benefit to all involved to promote positive teacher-child relationships in the classroom.

On the contrary, Kokko's (2020) examines the cure-by-love conspiracy where in that when a person gives and receives love, they could become powerful enough to conquer any complication that they encounter. This idea simply cultivates anxiety and fear over tendencies of self-dependence. This can have severely negative impacts on a child with social emotional difficulties wellbeing and attitudes towards relationships with teachers in general. They could become too dependent on a teacher and have unrealistic expectations for this

relationship. However, I believe if teachers are aware of this conspiracy, this should not be an issue within a classroom environment. Educators should promote and model realistic expectations and outcomes of positive teacher-child relationships to all children within their care.

Moreover, it is clear from the above that children with SEMH certainly benefit from forming and upholding strong relationships with their educators. Children's progress in developing social and emotional skills is important for building healthy relationships, as well as being an important part of their overall well-being (Economics and Social Research Institute, 2018). According to a study called 'Growing up in Ireland in 2017', these relationships, if they aren't too reliant on the teacher, can have a considerable influence on a child's mental health and wellbeing (Economics and Social Research Institute, 2018).

2.6.2 The Effects of Peer Relationships on Children with SEMH

It has been said that there is a significant crossover between parent-child and peer relationships. A close parent-child relationship lays the foundations for future bonds, such as peer relationships (Lerner, 2013). Therefore, it could be argued that in taking the time to formulate a strong bond with their child, they are leading the way for their child's forthcoming relationships with peers.

The COVID-19 Pandemic brought to life that we as a society desire relationships in order to persevere through the journey of life. Children with SEMH are certainly no different. They require close relationships with peers. According to Pepler and Bierman (2018) peer relationships provide children with unique opportunities to acquire a range of social-emotional skills such as empathy, co-operation and problem-solving strategies. An educational study completed by Liu et al., (2020) denotes how interpersonal character and academic achievements are closely related to children's peer outcomes. Children learn from each other. They seek the urge to 'fit in' and in doing so they often imitate the actions of their peers. This establishes how encouraging positive relationships with peers within a classroom

can lead to children developing critical life social-emotional skills, in addition to enhancing children's academic achievements in school. Lastly, Cooper and Jacobs (2011) support the work of Liu et al., (2020) and Pepler and Bierman (2018), as they conclude that positive peer relationships were closely linked to achievement within school. This would suggest that encouraging and supporting such relationships within a class would be of sincere benefit to children, teachers, parents and the wider school community.

2.6.3 Peer Acceptance within Peer Relationships

Schwarz et al., (2012) indicate that alienation from friends can have a major impact on a child's development. This denotes how children seek acceptance and approval from their peers as they wish to be included rather than excluded from the peer group. Therefore, peer acceptance is a fundamental element for the foundation and formation of peer relationships. However, a study completed by Caslin (2021) stated that some schools have formed isolation and seclusion rooms. This is where children with social emotional difficulties are sent when a teacher does not agree with the actions of the student. I agree with the thinking of Barker et al., (2010), as they insist that the highly punitive nature of these rooms violate children's rights. In accordance with this discovery, I have found myself wondering whether children could ever feel accepted or comfortable within their social circle, if they are purposely isolated from their peers. Not only would this hinder their educational opportunities but isolating a child from their peers would surely inhibit their chances of acceptance and further impede their chances of forming relationships with their peers. A common thread can be drawn from the work of Liu et al., (2020) as it was concluded that peer acceptance was closely linked to a child's interpersonal character and academic achievement. The formation of a child's interpersonal character is central to relationships.

Moreover, peer acceptance plays a central role in the formation of friendship relationships for children with SEMH. To encourage these relationships, teachers should promote and model acceptance within their classroom environment. Friendships foster a sense of

belonging, security and reduce the impacts of stress which in turn could provide opportunities to enhance the experiences of children with SEMH in school.

2.6.4 The Significance of a Teacher-Parent Partnership in Social Emotional Development

Family is central to a child's life. Froebel emphasised the important role of the family in a child's education in addition to the link between family and community (Bruce et al., 2019). Froebel (1902) believed family life was more important than school and church (Bruce et al., 2019). This is both evident and relevant over one thousand years later. The Department of Education and Skills in Ireland (DES) (2010) reinforce this as they illustrate how 'research clearly indicates that positive relationships between teachers, pupils and their families are key factors in effective teaching and classroom management' (DES, 2010, p19). A common thread can be drawn here as Lang et al., (2020) depicts the idea that teachers and parents mutually benefit from positive relations and interactions. Furthermore, Lang et al., (2020) denote how positive relationships between educators and guardians allow the caregivers to gain a further insight and understanding into the child's current development and life contexts. According to Mental Health and Family Caring: Supporting the Supporters (2020), promoting collaborative relationships allows the child to gain an understanding of others around them. Therefore, modelling and exhibiting positive relationships with the relevant caregivers can encourage the children to form and withhold positive relationships with other relevant people and stakeholders in their lives. Moreover, Bruce (2019), DES (2010), Lang et al., (2020) and Mental Health and Family Caring: Supporting the Supporters (2020), emphasise the power of strong teacher-parent relationships. As a result of this and guided by the values of communication and establishing powerful relationships, reinforcing strong relationships with parents will play a part within this research.

As evident from the above, both the family and the school community play a central role in a child's life. These are certainly worth considering when exploring how to enhance the experiences of children with SEMH in a school setting.

2.7 The Need to Review how Children with SEMH are Taught

The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) was set up in 1999 to enable children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) to attend mainstream schools. This tiered approach indicates the central role that the class teacher plays, alongside excess personnel that a school may acquire, in addition to the support provided by other appropriate external agencies (Cooper and Jacobs, 2011). However, it seems as though there has not been any additional training or resources provided for teachers to tend to the needs of these children appropriately. From research so far, it has become apparent that children with SEMH are quite often forgotten about. Cole et al., (2013) reinforced this issue stating that the needs of children with social emotional difficulties are quite often neglected. There seems to be both a lack of training, and a severe requirement for resources, to attend to the needs of these vulnerable children within our care (Cooper and Jacobs, 2011). In actual fact, there needs to be a more realistic, achievable, and relevant approach for schools to take in addition to the administration of relevant resources in order to adhere to the needs of children with SEMH in schools today.

Caslin (2021) reiterated how evidence would suggest that children with social emotional difficulties are more inclined to be excluded from school than children who don't have such difficulties. A common thread can be drawn here as Graham et al., (2019) denoted that children with SEMH are at high risk of being excluded from school (Dolton et al., 2020). It is hard to believe that this is the case in the twenty-first century. Caslin (2021) alluded to the idea that young people with social emotional difficulties are disabled by the socially constructed education system that they must respond to. This indicates the anguish that these children experience, simply by attending school and attempting to further their education. This is augmented when referring to the study completed by Parsons and Howlett (1996), as it is apparent that the children with social emotional difficulties were labelled as the problem, rather than a person who has problems. Therefore, not only is the system not appropriately tending to the severe needs of these children, but it is suppressing their

differences and isolating the children too. As evident from above, it is imperative that the relationship between a teacher and the child's parents is nurtured. An obligation must be placed upon schools to build bridges with parents. It is vital that schools examine their approach to teacher-parent relationships, in light of children with SEMH.

2.8 The Value of Listening to Children with SEMH

A study was completed by Dolton et al., (2020) to capture children with SEMH difficulties voices and thoughts about their rights in education. The purpose of this work was to signify their individual school experiences and their personal understanding of school inclusive of the support they receive. Throughout this study, one of the children was asked why they felt cross. The child reciprocated by announcing that 'nobody ever listens to me! Not school, not my mummy and daddy.' This reinforces the sincere value of listening to a child. This has been referred to previously throughout this chapter. Correspondingly, Parsons and Howlett (1996) conducted similar research which relayed how one educator spoke of a child who continuously challenged structures and routines that were in place. The child's behaviour had been deemed 'unacceptable'. However, this educator did not imply that they had given the time, the most valuable resource, to listen to the child. It appears the child was simply acting out in order to communicate with this teacher. Both surveys offer related accounts of children with SEMH who simply seem to require a person to listen to their thoughts and worries. Perhaps this could be something that more time is made for in the school day. It can undoubtedly be a struggle to find the time to do so, however, there seems to be considerable benefits of doing so for all involved, patricularly the child who simply needs to be heard.

The Social Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) process intends to add to the school-wide curriculum, whilst fixating on other areas of concern. It focuses on self-awareness, empathy, managing feelings, motivation and social skills (Cooper and Jacobs, 2011). Whilst this process mentions the significance of listening to the child with SEMH, it doesn't play a

major part in the implementation of this approach. This is contradictory to the ideas that stemmed from the above research projects. However, listening to a child 'acknowledges their right to be listened to and for their views and experiences to be taken seriously about matters that affect them' (Clark, 2018, p1). Therefore, while the SEAL method seems to have compelling potential, the role of 'listening' is not reinforced as much as it is within other practices put in place to help children with SEMH. Clark (2018) promotes the value of listening to children as she believes that it is a 'vital part of establishing respectful relationships with the children we work with and is central to the learning process' (p.1). Similarly, Dolton et al., (2020) stated 'this work demonstrates the importance of taking a child-centred approach, allowing children to feel heard, understood and valued' (p.1). Therefore, considering that forming positive relationships and communicating with children are the two values that are manifested throughout my professional teaching life, I would be inclined to comply with the thoughts of Clark (2018), Dolton et al., (2020), Parson and Howlett (1996) and Caslin (2021) regarding ensuring children have the time and space to express themselves appropriately and to ensure that their thoughts, ideas and worries are listened to and heard.

2.9 Adapting a Trauma Informed Practice in Schools

Trauma informed practice perceives the hindrance of traumatic experiences on a child and shows the impact that it can have on their social, emotional, wellbeing and therefore holistic development. This method has been promoted in schools to support staff in understanding the nature of trauma as well as how it can affect a child's life (biological, psychological and social) (Anderson et al., 2015; O'Toole, in press; SAMHSA, 2014). Enforcing a trauma informed practice within a classroom involves the adoption of a specific approach. The educator must understand the widespread impact that trauma can have on a child, recognise trauma fuelled behaviour, integrate knowledge of trauma into all classroom policies and procedures, and lastly, they must ensure to avoid re-traumatisation for the child.

Dickinson (2019) denoted some of the benefits surrounding adopting a trauma informed practice approach in schools. Included were children showing empathy and building trusting relationships between learners, their families and teachers. The copious advantages of generating and obtaining strong and powerful relationships with significant adults for children with SEMH has been explored throughout this chapter. Similarly, the value regarding forming and maintaining steady relationships with children with SEMH is one that is paramount within my professional practice. Therefore, embracing a trauma informed practice arrangement within a classroom setting is something that could produce distinct and plentiful benefits for myself as an educator and all children with SEMH within my care.

According to Van Der Kolk (2014) it can often be hard to define traumatic events (Piotrowski, 2019). Therefore, trauma in care procedures should be used in settings not only with children who have experienced adverse childhood experiences, but also with any child who has experienced trauma (Piotrowski, 2019). This implies how using trauma informed practice approaches within an educational setting generally produces positive outcomes for all children involved. These approaches have now been applied to policy in social work and health care and have had conclusive outcomes (Piotrowski, 2019). Correspondingly, according to a journal article by 'Mental Health Australia', 'Studies have shown that programs that utilise a trauma-informed practice model report a decrease in symptoms, an improvement in consumers' daily functioning, and decreases in the use of hospitalisation and crisis intervention' (Kezelman, 2014). Therefore, utilising these approaches in schools in Ireland could have similar positive outcomes for children with SEMH.

2.9.1 Things to consider when adopting a Trauma Informed Practice Approach in a Primary School Classroom

Dickinson (2019) explained how time, effort, organisation and training must be coordinated in order for this approach to be formulated accordingly. This idea is reinforced by Kezelman (2014) as she demonstrates how one must recognise the signs of traumatic stress, a child experiencing trauma, and the role of trauma informed coping mechanisms

involved in this process. It seems that like anything, time, effort and patience is needed to put this system into place. However, once teachers are given appropriate training and are provided with easily accessible resources, the introduction of this approach into practice can save lives, prevent suffering, and increase the cost effectiveness of health and prevention programming (Piotrowski, 2019). It is conspicuous that teachers must be provided with relevant training in order to aptly exploit this method and to enhance the experiences of children with SEMH in schools.

On the other hand, Devenney and O'Toole (2015) disputed that in order to best utilise this approach with children who have experienced trauma, one must devise environments that foster the sense of safety, understand the severity of the effects of trauma on a person, in addition to how troubling behaviours may reflect brave attempts to handle and endure trauma. The creation of such environments would require training and resources, mirroring what was mentioned by Dickinson (2019) and Kezelman (2014). Devenney and O'Toole (2015) further delve into how such training and resources can be practiced through the creation of safe learning environments. However, it could be argued that creating suitable environments for children with SEMH is simply not enough to tend to their needs. Undoubtedly, here lies an issue within the Irish Education System. Educators are already overburdened with curriculum, assessments, results along with several other obligations. It is imperative that the Irish Education System accept this prevailing issue and hasten their response to this major problem for children with SEMH.

2.10 Circle Time

Circle Time requires the teacher and children co-operating in order to achieve a shared goal in an enjoyable and comfortable environment (Bliss and Tetley, 2006;2012). According to Leicester (2006), Circle Time involves the collaborative formation of a circle. This can be done spontaneously, if or when a teacher feels it is necessary or it can be an arranged part of the weekly timetable. Jenny Mosley, an extreme enthusiast for Circle Time, discussed how

this process stemmed from rituals of cultures many years ago. The North American Indians used to sit in a circle with a talking object, a person's train of thought was not allowed to be interrupted by others whilst they held this object. This approach was intended to solve problems and achieve goals (Leicester, 2006, p2). Ideally, this method could be adapted with the intention to identify any areas of concern before the 'snowball effect' transpires. The snoball effect involves something starting from an initial state of little significance and building upon itself. Children could be subjected to at least one hour of Circle Time every week. The objective of such time would be for the child with SEMH to be in a supportive environment where they can voice their issues and concerns and can therefore compose solutions to queries spoken.

2.10.1 Utilising Circle time in a Classroom Setting

White (2018) examines how a child's self-esteem must be promoted for them to achieve. She explores the connection between children developing self-esteem through the utilisation of Circle Time. Additionally, Unal (2014) established that self-awareness is knowing your strengths, weaknesses and yourself. Unal (2014) further noted how being self-aware can boost and improve self-esteem. This denotes how grown-ups must take responsibility for children's self-esteem. However, this poses the disputable concern relating to how White (2018) believes that if an adult does not have sufficient self-esteem themselves, then they are not capable of boosting a child's self-awareness or self-esteem. From my experience of teaching in a school with DEIS 1 status, my opinion would not align with that of White (2018). While I understand where this idea stems from, nonetheless I have witnessed and empathised with parents who have been exposed to horrific circumstances and have overcome hurdle after hurdle and yet they could still tend to the self-esteem of their child before their own. They work on encouraging their child's self-awareness, which in turn boost their child's self-esteem. However, I cannot deny that a teacher adopting this approach within her classroom would inevitably have to take this into consideration and conclude to be extra vigilant towards children whose parents or guardians do not appear to have high self-esteem.

Both Bliss and Tetley (2006) and Leicester (2005) release the impact that Circle Time can have on relationships for children. The relevance of relationships for children with SEMH has played a major role in this chapter so far. Bliss and Tetley (2006) identify the game 'Pass the Smile' in order to encourage the development of cooperation and to build bonds. Children are instructed to go around the circle and communicate with the person beside them by means of smiling. This task not only provides children with the opportunity to form strong relationships with their teacher, but also with their peers. Other activities such as pass the squeeze, blind squeeze, let laugh and pass the wave, all require similar actions and denote complementary objectives. Cooper and Jacobs (2011) also portray the significance of children with SEMH forming and upholding strong relationships with peers as they conclude that children are less likely to disengage and more likely to participate and enjoy school life if they obtain strong peer relationships. Leicester (2006) believes that 'Quality Circle Time provides for a special time in the school week where children can think about their relationships and behaviour, and during which they can be honest about their problems and feelings' (Leicester, 2006, p3).

Leicester (2006) extends this idea by establishing how circles have no top, bottom or end. Children are contained within the circle, rather than excluded. They are provided with a space to share and discuss interpersonal issues within a supportive ethos, and this in turn opens the way for effective emotional development of children. Seemingly, this method could potentially enhance the experiences of children with SEMH in a primary school classroom. This connects with the ideas of Lavery and Umbreitt (2016). An underlying message behind Lavery and Umbreitt (2016)'s article '*The Power of Circles'* is both thought provoking and compelling. They denote how we currently have a 'quick-fix' culture in terms of simply demanding solutions to issues without embracing a willingness to compose realistic and long-term solutions. Correspondingly to adapting the TIC approach within a classroom, utilising Circle Time requires patience and tolerance. In committing time to this valuable and democratic approach, children will be given the vital opportunity to have their voices, needs,

desires and dreams heard without criticism (Lavery and Umbreitt, 2016, p19). Therefore, it seems that in combating time and effort into this approach, children can recognise the significance of being supported and the value of being listened to. These are two essential elements of any powerful relationship.

Moreover, having a healthy balance of self-esteem is crucial to a child's holistic development. White (2018), Leicester (2005) and Bliss and Tetley (2006) reveal how the implementation of Circle Time into a classroom routine can encourage powerful relationships, promote self-esteem and self-awareness and enhance social emotional development of children.

2.11 Conclusion

It is evident from the research above that social emotional difficulties can have lifelong implications for an individual's holistic development, including their mental health. Thankfully, educators and schools, along with other relevant bodies, can aid and guide children in the right direction to support them and provide them with the skills they require. The study of literature has indicated further areas for consideration, such as the power of listening to a child and the significance of positive interpersonal relationships for a child. It highlights the tiered approach which NEPS have reinforced in order to encourage all relevant stakeholders to work collaboratively to enhance children's experiences of school. It indicates the major role that mental health plays in a child's social emotional development, in addition to the power of teacher understanding and sensitivity regarding this. This in turn can provide educators with the knowledge and skills to compile ideas as to how they can help children to conquer these mental health difficulties that could be restraining them from accessing the curriculum while also maintaining interpersonal relationships and therefore hindering their entire school experience. This research denotes the teacher qualities of care and respect desired to form and maintain relationships with children. Similarly, the role of positive relationships with parents is established, along with indications as to how to best maintain

durable home links with those involved. An inherent part of the literature analysed issued how teachers must glance inward at their own values and ideas in order to create trusting relationships with children and parents. Furthermore, the urgent concern for teachers to receive training in correspondence with working with children with SEMH was declared. There are a huge variety of such courses available. This could be an area for consideration for schools as teachers could learn new skills to enhance their current skill set and therefore better tend to the needs of the children. Ultimately, the urgency to introduce relevant approaches to primary schools to encourage children with SEMH to participate was proposed. Valuable methods such as adopting a Trauma Informed Approach and Circle Time, indicate various advantages in accordance with promoting communication and the formation of powerful relationships is recommended. These small group strategies focus on addressing issues around social and emotional and communication skills. Lastly, the literature denotes the impediments that teachers and schools are faced with that can obstruct this process and sabotage the formation of relationships.

Chapter Three: Methodologies

3.1 Introduction

The methodologies used within this research project are explored throughout this chapter. Both the research rationale and the research paradigm will be analysed. The participants of this research, along with the research setting are explored, in addition to a comprehensive analysis of the interventions and methodology underpinning this research.

3.2 Research Rationale

Upon meeting this class group in September 2021, it was obvious that there was a considerable amount of mental health issues stemming from children with social emotional difficulties. As a result of this, these children were finding it hard to communicate with teachers and peers. This had a major effect on their relationships with others. Introducing interventions to support these children to encourage them to communicate with others and work on their relationships skills was the main objective of this research. Circle time and adopting a trauma informed practice are the initiatives that assisted me in tackling this issue.

3.3 Research Paradigm

According to Kivunja and Kuyini (2017), 'Paradigms provide beliefs and dictates, which, for scholars in a particular discipline, influence what should be studied, how it should be studied, and how the results of the study should be interpreted' (Mc Donagh et al., 2020). This research involved the paradigm of action research. This was greatly influenced by the values of communicating and relationships.

3.3.1 The Nature of Self-study

Freire (1972) believed that critical reflection produces change. He insisted on a humanising pedagogy where problematising, enquiry and collaborative relationships were encouraged (Sullivan et al., 2016). *'Self-study enables understanding of one's own identity in*

relation to practice in new ways, because it connects the self in relation to others in historical and social contexts that facilitate the educative experience' (Sharkey et al., 2018, p 34). Therefore, self-study involves one reflecting on their practice with the hope of learning new techniques and ideas to essentially improve their practice. Self-study action research involves collaboration and dialogue. One shares experience with critical friends who provide support as well as constructive challenge and critique (Sullivan et al., 2016).

3.3.2 The Nature of Action Research

Mc Niffe (2013) revealed how action research is a name given to a particular way of looking at your practice, reflecting on it and determining whether it meets your standards or not. It involves a search for more (Mc Niffe, 2013). Sullivan et al., (2016) believe that action research signifies that the researcher uses their own values to inform their practice. It includes various ways, contexts, and settings. This approach issues a procedure for how to study your own work to ensure understanding with the aim of making systematic changes to your future practice.

Kemmis (2009) suggests that action research has the potential to change people's practices, understanding and the conditions regarding how they practice (Sullivan et al., 2016). While Koshy (2010) is of the opinion that action research is derived from one learning through action, to improve personally or professionally (Sullivan et al., 2016). One must practice to develop their personal or professional ideas. Brookfield (2017) brings to light how one must view their actions through four complementary lenses. These lenses comprise students' eyes, colleagues, literature and the lens of personal experience. Action research is a form of social learning with aspirations for development. Educational action researchers aim to progress their practice, such as their classroom or the whole school environment, by accepting the requirement for improvement and change. These action research practitioners engage in various cycles of inquiry and practice within their educational setting (Mertler, 2019).

Schön (2016) portrayed implications around this research. He explores how it impacts professional relationships, organisational settings, and it has implications for the future interaction of research and practice of others in the larger society too. Therefore, action research has the ability to influence and transform the views, ideas, and actions of a wide variety of people. Schön issues two different types of reflective practice. Reflection in action and reflection on action. Reflecting in action involves reflecting on the behaviour as it is occurring. Reflection on action occurs after the action took place and is known as the review of the action (Sullivan et al., 2016).

3.3.3 The Reflective Cycle

Gibbs' (1998) Reflective Cycle encourages researchers to analyse events, situations and experiences systematically. This cycle best suited the nature of this research. It catered for the structure that guided my reflections. The six questions that motivated this are as follows.

Description - What happened?

Feelings - What are your feelings towards it?

Evaluation - What went well/did not go well during the activity?

Analysis - What have I learned/interpreted from the situation?

Conclusion - What are the positives/negatives from the situation?

Figure 1: Gibbs Reflective Cycle (Mulder, 2018)

3.3.4 The Nature of Qualitative Research

Campbell (2014) established qualitative research as a method that allows for the collection of open-ended, emerging data that is then used to develop themes. It relies on direct experiences to provide meaning making within their everyday lives. Campbell (2014) listed ethnographies, grounded theory, case studies, phenomenological research, and narrative research as the five strategies that have been established as qualitative research methods. Tracy (2010) indicated that good qualitative research is relevant, timely, significant, interesting or evocative. Nowell et al., (2017) argued that qualitative research generates knowledge from human experience.

 'Many students (and senior scholars, for that matter) engage in qualitative projects without knowing which theories will eventually situate their research' (Tracy, 2010, p3). This was certainly the case for my research. I began this study with absolutely no idea as to where it would fixate.

The qualitative forms of data that were used for the purpose of this action research involved a reflective journal, interviews of children involved, happy scrappies, observations and

conversations with my critical friend and validation group. These will be discussed in detail later in this chapter.

3.3.5 My Values System

'Epistemological values are to do with how we view knowledge; ontological values are to do with being and how we see ourselves with others' (Sullivan et al., 2016, p31). Mc Donagh et al., (2019) establish how our values inform who and how we are as educational-researchers, and how we attempt to work with others. Attending to the children's social and emotional needs is undeniably vital. The classroom environment must portray an inviting and caring atmosphere, where all children feel safe and valued. This in turn will optimise the teaching and learning that ensues. This is first and foremost a priority within any classroom. Catering for the child's care needs is fundamental prior to assisting their academic needs.

In conjunction with the above, children with SEMH require a little extra attention in order to ensure that their care needs are adequately catered for. Therefore, guiding and assisting children with SEMH is an obligation placed upon schools, teachers and other relevant bodies. The values of communicating and fabricating developing strong, powerful relationships with both parents and children are evident in various ways throughout this study.

Communicating

Lewis (2003) wrote about '*The power of conversation and communication and the benefits of discussing and learning whilst sitting in a circular shape*' (Bruce et al., 2020, p78).

This not only involves communicating with the children in question, but also providing a safe space for them to articulate any queries, issues or thoughts that require discussion, or simply words that require to be spoken aloud. Facilitating circle time provided children with this opportunity, in addition to the skills and techniques needed to communicate with others in

the school environment. This corresponds retrospectively to the value of relationships, as communication is a fundamental principle for maintaining authentic relationships.

Relationships

Bruce et al., (2020) recognise relationships as being an essential component of a child's life. Determining the significance of such relationships to children and modelling what is required can promote positive peer relationships within an educational setting. Similarly, forming strong bonds with children within your care is quitessential as an educator. Lastly, the relevance of forming strong parent-teacher relationships plays a critical role within my values system. As we know, forming strong bonds with parents can positively influence teacher-child relationships in the classroom.

3.4 Research setting

The research setting consisted of participants who took part in the study and the site where the study was conducted. These are both discussed in greater detail in this chapter.

3.4.1 Research Participants

The research participant consisted of twenty-one second class students, a critical friend, and a validation group. My sister who teaches in a local primary school was my critical friend. The group comprised two teachers from the SET team in this school, one being the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) in the school. In a similar vein to Brookfield, I found that my critical conversations with my validation group helped me *'to notice aspects of our practice that are usually hidden to us'* (Mc Donagh et al., 2019, p103). It was tough to ask a colleague to analyse aspects of my teaching, however, it was ultimately extremely worthwhile. A critical friend is one who should both validate and simultaneously critique actions and understanding of practice (Mc Donagh et al., 2020). They are people who we discuss our ideas with and they provide us with critical, robust and honest feedback (Glenn et al., 2017). Utilising a family member from a teaching profession as a critical friend was

particularly useful. There were no boundaries or limits in consideration of discussion, and all guidance and criticism were authentic and conscientious.

3.4.2 Research Setting and Participants

The school comprises an urban setting. This school is included in Band One of the School Support Programme of Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS), the action plan of the Department of Education and Skills for educational inclusion. The participants are girls in second class. There are over three hundred and fifty pupils enrolled. This school enrols boys and girls from junior infants to first class, and just girls from second to sixth class. In recent years, this school has placed a major emphasis on the promotion of positive mental health development. We are working towards achieving an amber flag which recognises and promotes individual efforts in supporting the well-being of students.

3.5 Research Design

	Research Design of this Study	
Week	Date	Actions
1	6/12/21-10/12/21	Research project shared with class Collect consent and assent Meetings with Critical Friend Organisation of letters
2 & 3	13/12/21- 22/12/21	Individual child interviews
	Christmas Break	
	CYCLE ONE	
4, 5 & 6	10/1/22-28/1/21	Introduction of Circle time Reflection time and Happy Scrappies introduced
7,8 & 9	1/2/22- 18/02/22 **Midterm Break: 24th & 25th February 2022**	Circle time intervention Informal Observations Meta reflections in reflective journal Discussions with Critical Friend about Cycle One Meeting and discussion with Supervisor about Cycle One Review of Literature on Trauma Informed Practice
	CYCLE TWO	
10,11, 12, 13, 14 & 15	➢ 1/3/22-8/4/22	Circle Time alongside the Trauma Informed Practice Approach introduced Meeting with validation group about Cycle Two Discussions with critical friend about Cycle Two Reflections in Reflective Journal
16	➢ 25/04/22	Follow up interview with children Follow up questionnaire for parents Analyse Reflective Journal
17	➢ 2/5/22	Final meeting with validation group Final meeting with critical friend Discussion with Supervisor

		Data analysis of post intervention observations from both Cycles

3.5.1 Structure of the Intervention

According to the SPHE Primary School Curriculum (1999) **'***The ways in which children live and behave in the early years of life will have a significant influence on their health and well-being in future years'* (NCCA, 1999, p9). This indicates the motive behind this research. These methodologies will hopefully have a positive, lasting effect on the children. The interventions that I introduced into my daily routine to best inform my practice, and to ultimately enhance the schooling experience of children with SEMH were Circle Time and adopting a Trauma Informed Practice. Circle Time was introduced as a weekly act at once. Eventually this became a significant part of the daily routine within the classroom. Additionally, utilising a Trauma Informed Practice required me to teach and model empathy to the children in addition to engaging in active listening. These approaches complement each other justly. They worked simultaneously to support me in guiding and catering for the children's wellbeing.

Circle Time

Circle Time required all children sitting together in a circle with the teacher. Brookfield (2017) portrayed the sincere value of Circle time describing it as being student centred and empowering. Discussions were led by the teacher. The teacher began each Circle Time with the introduction of the speaking object. This object signified who was allowed to speak at each given moment. Each child was required to wait their turn until the speaking object reached them. However, ultimately Circle Time was coordinated after the final lesson of each day. The children were required to focus on five skills throughout each Circle Time; thinking, listening, looking, speaking and concentrating. Naturally, this got easier as they became accustomed to it. They focused on issues that were affecting them, both individually and as a

whole class, and worries that they had. We worked collaboratively as a class to solve these issues. They also played games. Each Circle Time ended with reflection. The children were given an opportunity to reflect on the task in whatever way was most meaningful to them which will be explained later in this chapter.

Observational notes were written about the children after Circle Time. Their Happy Scrappies were analysed regularly. I found this insightful as it allowed me to examine their individual growth in addition to the development of peer relationships, and the progression that some children had made in relation to opening-up to me. Therefore, trusting and accepting the teacher-child relationship was very beneficial.

Trauma Informed Practice

This specific approach involved the teacher accumulating a particular mindset to approach children. It involved me, acknowledging the impacts of past events, and simultaneously granting them hope for the future. This prompted me to change the question from 'what is wrong with that child?' to 'what happened to that child?' A safe environment was created for students to share their stories, whilst professional boundaries were adhered to accordingly. Some children found it sincerely difficult to communicate their anguish orally, so a Múinteoir Mailbox was constructed. This meant that children could write down any past or current stress that they had and I would be made aware, without them having to physically speak about it and relive that trauma. This in turn, made me aware of the prolonged stresses that some children had endured, and acted as a constant reminder to be aware of such discomfort and understand how this could have a significant effect on a child's actions and behaviour. Children were also provided with opportunities not to speak. They put their thumbs down which signalled that they did not wish to share anything at that particular moment.

3.5.2 Data Collection

This report denotes a qualitative research approach. A reflective journal, interviews with children, observations, Happy Scrappies and meetings with a critical friend and validation group is the data used throughout this research.

Reflective Journal

This journal was used as a record of thoughts, events, words, interviews, and any other ideas or thoughts that I considered relevant. I recorded daily routines and events that went accordingly and why, in addition to transcribing situations which did not go as planned. Freire's (1972) ideas about critical reflection being action, is relevant for this form of data (Sullivan et al., 2016). This journal compelled me to question my past thoughts, actions, and practices within my classroom and guided my future ideas and behaviour. Throughout my reflective journal, it ranges from reflections on actions along with reflections in action as examined by Schon (1983) (Glenn et al., 2017). Dewey portrayed the threat of passivity and 'complete unity' (Sullivan et al., 2016). This form of reflection eliminated all possibilites of passivity. Moreover, reflecting on my practice assisted me in not being passive and simply complying to my regular standards of teaching. Reflecting can ultimately indicate that you are not living to your values and becoming what Whitehead (1989) establishes as a 'living contradiction' (Sullivan et al., 2016). Therefore, the focus was placed upon constantly wanting to improve and develop as a teacher, and this journal assisted tremendously with this progression.

Child Interviews

Meetings and discussions with the children occurred prior to individual interviews. This ensured that the children were familiar with this intervention, and catered for rapport, which in turn supported the value of relationships formation. Glenn et al., (2017) highlight how one can become *deeper* through their participation in dialogue, and they can be nurtured, inspired and heeled throughout this process. The children were invited for two

interviews. The questions were the exact same for both. The interview collected qualitative data. This data enabled the researcher to establish children's opinions on their current mental wellbeing.

Observation Notes

Observation notes were accumulated after the initial interviews occurred. The Happy Scrappies were anaylsed, the researcher observed the children and notes were formulated. Additionally, several accidental observations occurred when the researcher or a member of the validation group overheard a child talking. Initial observation notes indicated certain behaviours and social interactions. This demonstrated enlightenment into children's social emotional and wellbeing difficulties. The notes on certain children's behaviour, thoughts, relationships, insights, dialogue and interviews were analysed alongside my critical friend and validation group and formed the basis of future lesson plans and routines. They also assisted in the development of my reflection process. This provided much more in depth into the children's self-esteem. An example of this is how I constructed and taught a range of lessons based on self-awareness using this information. Brookfield (2017) denoted that *'through the collection of data from children, one can understand the various ways they interpret the things we do and say'* (Brookfield, 2017, p8).

Happy Scrappies

These scrapbooks were introduced after the initial Circle time. They were designed to encourage the children to think about and reflect about the discussions, ideas and solutions which were formulated. The children could write, draw, or type up a reflection after Circle Time. The objective of this data was to *'become aware of the complex and sometimes contradictory perceptions students have of the same event'* (Brookfield, 2017, p97).

My critical friend was my sister, who teaches in a non-DEIS co-educational school. She has also been an inspirational teacher to me. I believe in her teaching, her experience, and her passion for this topic. Additionally, she was someone that I knew I could ask questions to, and I knew she would provide sincere, honest and robust feedback. Similaly, a colleague within my school acted as another critical friend. As previously stated, a member of my validation group was the SENCO in the school. The other teacher was the SET teacher for the class and had taught these children previously, so she was familiar with them and my teaching. They provided me with critical feedback during each meeting.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

All relevant ethical considerations that were taken for the protection of the participants are examined below.

3.6.1 Principle of Informed Consent

Firstly, ethical approval was achieved from the University. The next step required approval from the Principal and the Board of Management of the school. An informational letter was formulated and given to both parties. Informational letters were also sent to the parents of the children. These letters clearly detailed the nature of the research and their consent was sought to allow their child to participate.

3.6.2 Child Assent

The British Education Research Association (BERA 2014) guidelines establish that

'*The best interests and rights of the child should be the primary consideration when designing and conducting research with young people*' (Sullivan et at., 2016).

I began by informing the children orally about the research project in school. I used child-friendly language and pictures to aid their understanding. Next, I asked the children to discuss it within their groups and come up with questions. A discussion was facilitated based on all

concerns and ideas that had evolved. This alluded to the children explaining the process back to me, in order to check for understanding. The co-participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and they could withdraw their consent at any stage of the process. They were constantly reminded of this. Finally, the children were informed that those who did not give assent for this research would still participate in the interventions, however, data would not be collected on them.

3.6.3 Data Storage

All observations were handwritten at first. They were eventually typed into the child's individual portfolio. The handwritten records were stored in a locked filing cabinet in the classroom. The soft copies were kept on a laptop that required a password to access it. In accordance with the above, the data will then be disposed of in a safe manner that ensures the protection of the identities of all co-participants involved in the study. Finally, the research may be published to my peers, participants of the research, parents of the participants, the school, the University and to other educators for learning purposes. Johanson (2018) issued the requirement of storing data effectively and the instructions around the safe destruction of such data.

3.6.4 Confidentiality and Anonymity

According to Sullivan et al., (2016), *The Belmont Report* exhibits the idea of 'beneficence' which intends to minimise any possible harm and maximise possible good. This is the approach that was taken for this action research study. The name or location of the school was not mentioned throughout this study. Pseudonyms were used in place of names to protect the identity of all participants. All co-participants were treated equally and with respect throughout this research.

3.6.5 Principled Sensitivity

With Circle Time, Happy Scrappies and interviews being introduced for the first time, I was aware that some children could feel upset, stressed or anxious. Therefore, as always, my own personal value regarding communication was relevant here as I provided a safe space for children to talk, in addition to constantly working towards formulating relationships and a safe classroom environment for children to speak their worries. In conjunction with the above, the entire process of this research was grounded by the Teaching Council values Respect, Care, Integrity and Trust (The Teaching Council of Ireland, 2012).

3.7 Data Analysis

As stated previously, a qualitative data approach is evident throughout this study and in the analysis of the data. Gibbs' (1998) Reflective Cycle assisted with this process.

3.7.1 Thematic Analysis

Braun and Clarke (2006) argued that thematic analysis should be a foundational method for qualitative analysis as it provides the skills required (Nowell et al., 2017). They also establish that data management is imperative for this process. The six phases of thematic analysis in order to establish trustworthiness for each stage of the analysis involve:

Phase 1: Familiarising yourself with the data.

Phase 2: Generating initial codes.

Phase 3: Searching for themes.

Phase 4: Reviewing themes.

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes.

Phase 6: Producing the report.

(Nowell et al., 2017, p4).

3.7.2 Validity, Credibility and Reliability

Winter (2002) suggests that a research report has authenticity when it pays attention to the genuine voice that belongs to those whose worlds are being explored (Sullivan et al.,2016). Lincoln and Guba (1985) introduced their view of trustworthiness by exhibiting the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to assure validity and reliability (Nowell et al., 2017, p3).

3.8 Limitations

The findings from this study represent a small number of children from one class in the school. They do not imitate other classes of the same stream from the school of various educational settings where these interventions are utilised. Additionally, these initiatives were only in place for a number of weeks which can determine limitations.

Time was a limitation. It is already a challenge to find the time to complete the aims and objectives of the Primary School Curriculum, with the addition of Circle Time every day. Events, accidents and other unforeseen circumstances occurred that meant initiatives couldn't proceed. This was a limitation of this particular study. When working alongside a class simultaneously, it was often difficult to ensure that each child got a chance to voice their opinion and be heard. Lastly, attendance proved to be a limitation for this study as children found it extremely difficult to settle back into the tasks and routines surrounding Circle Time after they had been absent for a period of time.

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter exhibited a comprehensive account of the research methodology examined throughout this study. The nature of self-study, in addition to a detailed description of the data collection methods utilised were presented. All relevant ethical considerations were demonstrated.

Chapter Four: Findings

4.1 Introduction

A fundamental part of this research project was to foster and promote pupil enjoyment for children with SEMH. The focus of this study was to motivate children to engage within the Circle Time process. As a result of this participation children would feel more valued and accepted as their issues, thoughts and ideas were listened to adequately, and they felt a sense of belonging within the class community. Promoting positive mental health is deeply rooted within my values. The findings of this research have been compiled into three correlated headings: Promoting more positive ways of being, Communication and Relationships and Motivation.

After an extremely difficult year, I felt compelled to enhance the experiences of children with SEMH in a primary classroom. The objective of this study revolved around utilising Circle Time along with the Trauma Informed Practice approach to effectively encourage communication links between myself and the children. Ultimately, this aimed to establish powerful teacher-child and peer relationships within the class. The goal of this research project was for me to uncover how I could enhance the experiences of children with SEMH in a primary class.

4.2 Data Analysis

This self-study action research project involved second class students with SEMH participating in Circle Time. In addition to this, the teacher utilised the Trauma Informed Practice approach to focus on enhancing their school experiences. The data involved included: teacher observations, my reflective journal, children's feedback, parental discussions, conversations with my critical friend and discussions with a validation group. The values regarding communication and forming strong relationships played an extensive role throughout. My values along with the research question: *How I can Enhance the Experiences of Children with Social Emotional and Mental Health Difficulties in a Primary Class*, provided

the focus for this study. Methods such as thematic analysis involve finding patterns in topics and themes. (Ditchfield, 2018). Thematic analysis established themes and patterns from the data that was produced for the purpose of this study.

4.3 Finding 1: Promoting Positive Ways of being

4.3.1 Circle Time

The facilitation of the Circle Time initiative provided a completely different structure than what the children were used to. We all sat as equals within the circle. Brookfield (2017) denoted that the circle draws the student's attention and gives everyone a chance to be seen and heard. It was evident that the children thoroughly enjoyed participating within Circle Time. They cheered when the tables were pushed back and regularly asked when it was time for Circle Time. There was never a sound to be heard during the reflection time. The children took their Happy Scrappies very seriously. Their comfort, happiness and general well-being was evident from their participation and engagement, conversations observed throughout the school day, Happy Scrappies, discussions with my critical friend and from my own Reflective Journal entries.

'I feel really really really happy when the teacher tells me that it's time for Circle Time. My body feels 'shakey' and I can't stop smiling' (Happy Scrappy, February 2022).

'Circle Time is slowly but surely becoming everyone's favourite part of the day. They know as soon as they hear the first bell that the time has come. It is the highlight of everyone's day' (Reflective Journal, March 2022).

A critical friend regularly came to observe our Circle Time. She noted how the children spoke to each other and willingly listened to one another as they communicated within the circle. My critical friend was often astonished at their ability to be compassionate and empathetic at times when a child mentioned something upsetting. Additionally, she noted

the significant improvement in the children's engagement and their willingness to participate within the initiative.

'The atmosphere is so soothing; you could hear a pin drop during reflection time. It is hard to believe what room I'm in. Their words are so considerate and gentle. The listening and responding aspect to this initiative is unbelievable' (Critical Friend, May 2022).

4.3.2 Providing Opportunities for Choice and Agency

The Circle Time setting required soft cushions for each of the children and a speaking object. The tables were pushed back, and it took place in our classroom. It was very evident that the simplicity of the setting worked excellently. The children thoroughly enjoyed being involved in the organisation of the initiative. Each group had a different role, for example: putting the cushions in a circle, stacking chairs, pushing back the tables, getting the speaking object etc. This in turn promoted a sense of agency from the beginning of this initiative. The children were already familiar with this classroom environment and therefore settled well into the routine surrounding this intervention.

Figure 2: Circle Time in the Classroom.

However, as the initiative progressed, we decided to change the regular setting of Circle Time that the children had become familiar with. The possibility of changing the location of Circle Time arose one evening during our reflection time. The children were invited to suggest ways that we could change our routine to enhance the experiences of children with social emotional and mental health difficulties in our classroom. It was intended to provide the children with the choice to become more agentic in relation to this initiative. This autonomy supportive behaviour has been suggested to be associated with positive outcomes. This is because it fosters intrinsic motivation and provides opportunity for the child's satisfaction for autonomous needs (Ryan and Deci, 2017).

The cushions were transported down to the school hall and were placed in a large circle, as the hall was a much bigger space. Simply providing the children with opportunities to be involved in the organisation and configuration of Circle Time promoted positive ways of being through this new idea of 'choice'. They chose the location. They were given the opportunity for choice. This cultivated an empowering environment and promoted agency within the initiative as the children had a say in their routine and were given a level of control over the initiative, which they had never been given before.

'I like that we got to decide what we could do to change Circle Time and make it more fun. I didn't believe my teacher when she said it. We never usually get to choose things in school, so we were all really happy about it.' (Happy Scrappy, April 2022).

'I felt really important when we were talking about how we could change Circle Time. My teacher was listening and writing down our ideas. It was exciting because we could pick what we thought would be fun. It made me feel special' (Happy Scrappy, May 2022).

It became extremely apparent that providing the children with opportunities for choice and promoting ideas surrounding agency was an extremely effective way to promote positive ways of being for children with social emotional and mental health difficulties in my class. Due to the positive response around choice and agency in completing Circle Time in the

hall, the children decided to try the intervention in our outdoor learning space. Naturally, this was weather permitting. The children showed excitement on the days when Circle Time was completed outside too as some of them skipped down the stairs. They enjoyed listening to the birds during their reflection time. The setup was naturally very different to the regular indoor classroom Circle Time that they had become accustomed to. I also noted in my Reflective Journal that it was a *'safe and comfortable space for the children'* and I could *'visibly see the children enjoying themselves'* (Reflection Journal, May 2022).

*'Circle Time outside is even better than the hall. There is so much more space and the birds make it really nice too. It was actually my idea to move it outside and I felt really special when everyone else thought it was a good idea too. It's nice when people listen to your ideas, especially teacher because then we can do what we like in school and everyone feels happ*ier' (Child G, May 2022).
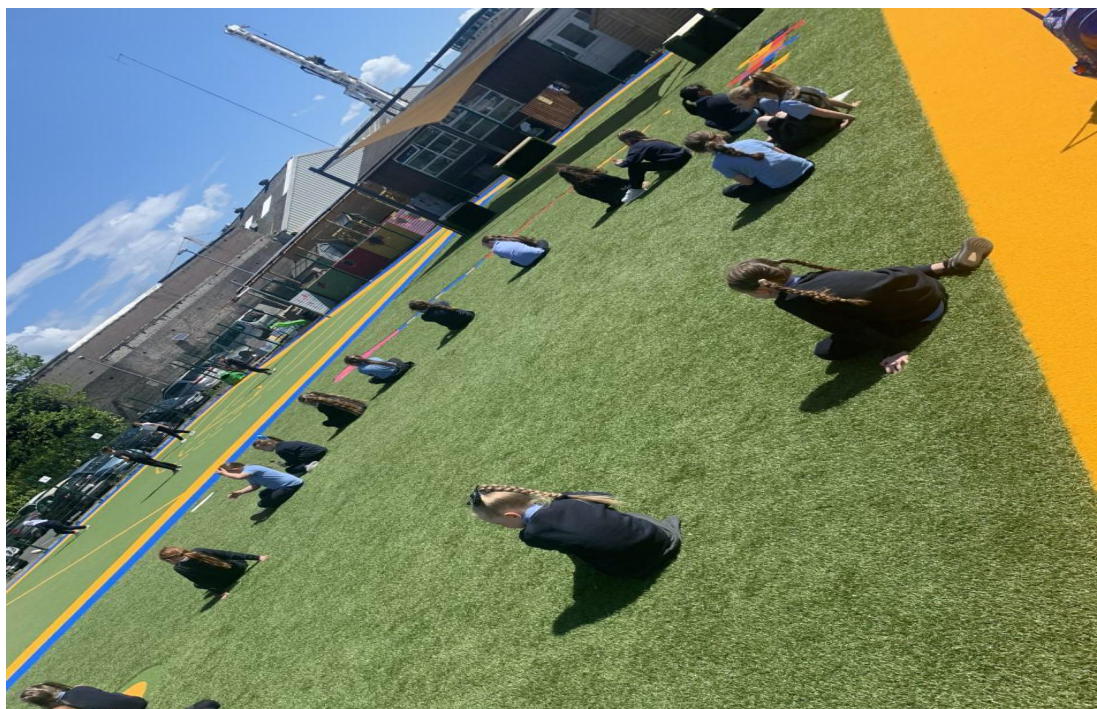

Figure 3: Circle Time in the Outdoor Learning Space

Following on from this, I completed a short survey with the children in relation to the environment surrounding Circle Time. From this, it was evident that the children favoured completing Circle Time in the outdoor learning space. It was evident that this was due to the fact that they were empowered to choose the outdoor location. Along with the above, they simply loved being outside of the classroom. This correlates with the Froebelian approach regarding the significance of creating a physical environment outdoors. He argued that the environment and atmosphere are as important as what they learn (Bruce, 2014).

'The change of environment came at a compelling time. The weather had just begun to change and the children were just settling into their Circle Time routine. This was a challenge to all involved. However, the children acquitted themselves wonderfully, with their teacher's guidance and gentle communication of such change' (Validation Group, May 2022).

Observations, reflections and feedback from a critical friend and validation groups established how it was extremely evident that the activities and space provided motivated the children, as opportunities for them to engage and participate within the intervention were exploited.

'Going outside is such a novelty for any child. Being provided with multiple opportunities to prosper and develop outside is fantastic. Children who had been doing little to no verbal communication have begun to communicate. Perhaps this is the bigger space or the fact that it's so aesthetically pleasing. Regardless it is insightful to observe and inspiring to be a part of' (Critical Friend, May 2022).

Figure 4: The Outdoor Circle Time Space

4.3.3 Developing a Sense of Self-Awareness

The introduction of the Happy Scrappies inevitably promoted positive ways of being for the children as they encouraged the children to develop a sense of self-awareness. As we know from the exploration of literature, there is a major link between self-awareness and self-esteem. An increase in self-awareness can ultimately allude to positive self-esteem which can encourage self-acceptance for children. This newly formed sense of self-awareness was exceptionally evident for the children from this research project. Children reflected in their Happy Scrappies. Happy Scrappies encouraged the children to learn from their experiences, ideas and thoughts during Circle Time. They encouraged children to question actions and responses. They had begun to assess their reactions to situations and determine how they would respond if such an experience were to occur again. It was apparent through their reflections that the children had begun to discover how to proactively manage their emotions and actions. The children were finally beginning to get to know and understand themselves better through the process of reflection, which was evidently developing their sense of self-awareness, boosting self-esteem and confidence.

'Today in yard I didn't shout at my friend when I lost the game. I used to do that but I think it just makes me sadder. I felt really proud of myself for not getting angry and I know my friend did too' (Happy Scrappy, May 2022).

'I learned that it's okay that my best friend has other friends. It doesn't matter that I feel sad and jealous about it sometimes as long as I don't get mad at her about it. She always lets me play and it is better to have more friends than cry about it' (Happy Scrappy, April 2022).

It became indisputable that children were beginning to learn about themselves through reflecting in their Happy Scrappies. Reflecting on these interactions and discussions with other children allowed them to process information and understand themselves more adequately. This in turn led to more positive ways of being as they were developing a sense of self-awareness amongst themselves. The Happy Scrappies encouraged the children to focus on themselves, their thoughts, actions, and responses. Zebracki (2021) argued that as researchers, teachers and parents we must encourage children to find their path for a meaningful and satisfying life and to embrace themselves which in turn will ultimately result in the promotion of their self-awareness. Moreover, the children utilised the Happy Scrappies to reflect upon their experiences, reactions and thoughts which in turn inspired them to expand their knowledge about themselves as a person in relation to their thoughts, ideas and responses to situations. This led to more positive ways of being as they better understood why they felt a particular way and empowered them to change things they did not like or necessarily agree with.

'When we first started, I never used to speak out in-front of my class. I liked listening to them but felt scared when it was my turn to speak. It was a bit annoying as I did want to say things but just wasn't sure how to. Now I do it all the time and it is fine. It's actually really easy, I am not sure why I was so scared. I wish I knew it at the start though' (Child D, June 2022).

'I wasn't quite sure what self-awareness meant until now. The difference in some of the children is phenomenal. Through this newly found self-awareness their confidence has soared. They are using others to learn about themselves in their reflections' (Critical friend, June 2022).

As highlighted in the Literature Review Dolton et al., (2020), Caslin (2021) and Palmer (1996) suggested that children must be encouraged to honour their true self to develop this empowering and comforting sense of self-awareness within themselves.

4.3.4 Positive Mental Health

Quite often, children with mental health difficulties seek to mask their troubles and falsify their current state of being. However, as we know it is simply vital that a child has a positive sense of mental health and well-being. As discussed previously in this research project, there are numerous bodies involved in the promotion of positive mental health and well-being for young people. Morrin (2021) claims that children can hide behind a smile in order to convince others that they are happy. However, I strongly believe that through emphasising the significance of building powerful relationships with the children, consistently modelling the benefits of communication, and referring back to the relevance surrounding communication, I argue now that this makes it more difficult for children to fake their happiness and simply 'put on a smile'.

'I noticed that she wasn't really engaging with the activities today. I knew this was her favourite task, so I asked her how she was doing. She informed me that she was just having a bad day and she needed a break. When the egg-timer stopped, she bravely came over to me and stated that she was ready to talk. This is a turning point within my research (Reflective Journal, April 2022).

This denotes a child adopting vital communication skills that are reinforced and modelled explicitly within Circle Time and utilising them within her own life. This resulted in this child feeling happier, safer and more comfortable within her school environment as she declared:

'Telling the teacher when I feel sad actually makes me feel happy' (Happy Scrappy, April 2022).

It is evident that this child, alongside many others, finally felt as though she could and should talk through her worries to feel better. In the world that we live in today, it cannot be denied that children are more prone to suffering with mental health difficulties and therefore guiding and encouraging positive well-being for children is simply critical.

4.4 Finding 2: Communication and Relationships

4.4.1 Children's Voice

The child's voice was central to my research. Dewey's (1938) concept of the centrality of the voice of the learner in the teaching process is established in Article Twelve of The United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). This article advocates that a child has the right to have their ideas and opinions heard, and the right to be respected when an adult makes a decision that affects them (Ring, 2016). Opinions can be expressed in a variety of ways which includes nonverbal ones (Landsdown, 2009). As we know from the Literature Review it is quintessential that children are given the chance to communicate their ideas and thoughts and be heard in school.

The children were given numerous opportunities to voice their thoughts, ideas and queries throughout this intervention. A major emphasis was placed upon the significance of communicating, as stated above. This was reinforced through share and solve sessions in Circle Time. The children posed thoughts and queries and they were discussed and analysed until an agreement was reached. An example of this is when the children requested to do Circle Time in the morning. Together, we determined that Circle Time could be completed twice a week in the morning time. This reflects the demands of the United Nations which calls for the creation of a child friendly environment, child-specific methods, child-orientated information, transparency, and the respectful treatment of children (Ring, 2016). Similarly, children were provided with questionnaires that were analysed and ideas were considered based on the data gathered. Children were also provided with a multitude of ways to express

their ideas and thoughts during the reflection time at the end of each session. The children sketched the thoughts that they did not want to share. 'Very early in life children demonstrate they have a voice, but above all that they know how to listen and want to be listened to' (Rinaldi, 2011, p67).

'Sometimes I use my Happy Scrappy to talk to my teacher when I need to tell her something hard' (Happy Scrappy, May 2022).

4.4.2 Speaking Object

Our speaking object was a fluffy, pink, unicorn teddy. A lot of time went into choosing an appropriate, appealing and comforting speaking object that would inspire and motivate the children to communicate. The speaking object was used not only as a form of behaviour management during Circle Time, but it also ensured that each child was provided with the opportunity to communicate effectively. Therefore, it was not just the teacher or the same children talking for the duration of the session. The children were consistently reminded that if they did not wish to speak during Circle Time, they could use the non-verbal signal, which was their thumb facing downwards, to communicate this wish. Brookfield's (2017) ideas surrounding reassuring children that one would not assume that the children who contributed more were smarter or more committed than those who do not was constantly reiterated throughout. This concept played a vital role in the formation of powerful relationships as the initiative continued.

As the initiative endured and the children began to feel more comfortable within this setting, less children used the non-verbal signal to communicate.

'I like talking during Circle Time now. I used to be scared but holding teddy and seeing my teacher and friends smiling at me makes me feel safe' (Child A, June 2022).

Even though it was compelling to guide the children with SEMH along the way and encourage verbal communication from them, I never assumed silence to signify inattention

or carelessness. Similarly, I always expressed the significance of any form of communication that the child felt comfortable doing. The speaking object encouraged appropriate communication which inevitably looked different to every child.

'It is excellent how each child chooses their form of expression, be it verbal or non-verbal and this is accepted and encouraged by all. Witnessing the children's confidence grow, and observing them becoming more comfortable communicating within the Circle is incredible' (Critical Friend, May, 2022).

As stated above, promoting, encouraging, and providing communication links within the classroom played a vital role in enhancing the experiences of children with SEMH. However, through the improvement of the use of communication within the classroom, powerful bonds were formed between the teacher and the children.
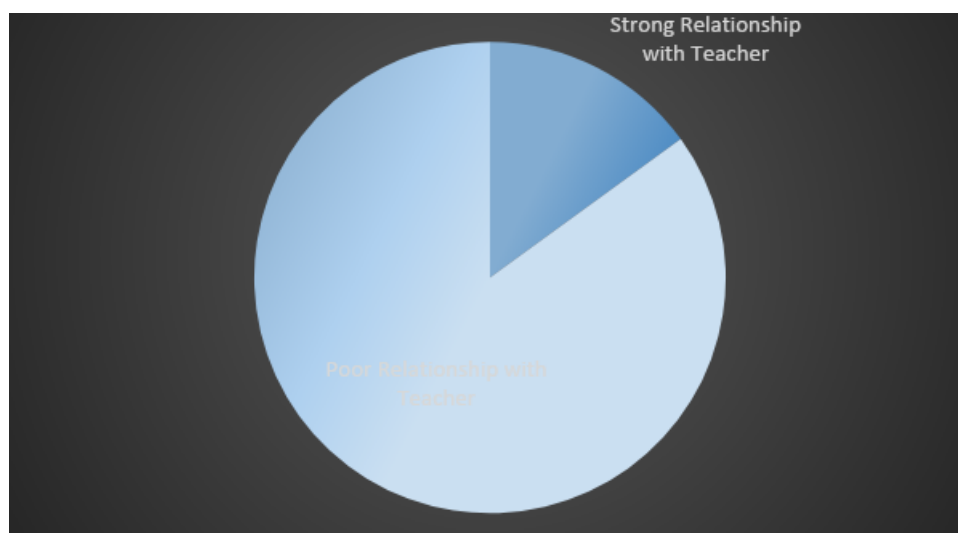
4.4.3 Teacher-Child Relationships

Figure 5: A chart indicating the increase of children who said they had formed a strong relationship with their teacher after the interventions.

This figure issues the responses of children when asked whether they had a positive relationship with their teacher prior to the introduction of the Circle Time alongside Trauma informed Practice intervention. It is evident from the above that a considerable number of

children believed that they had a poor bond with their teacher. The children felt as though they were not listened to and child D described themselves as feeling 'lost' within school.

Towards the end of the initiative, the children were asked whether they felt that they had formed a stronger bond with their teacher. It was then established that all of the children felt as though they had formed stronger relationships with their teacher after participating within Circle Time. This increase proves that powerful connections were formed through the utilisation of this robust intervention.

Child C's Happy Scrappy from September 2022 presented:

I don't like Circle Time and I don't know why. I don't like school because teachers are mean and don't listen to me' (Happy Scrappy, 2022).

The same child wrote *'I feel safe with Ms Keenan because I feel like she listens to me, I like telling my teacher stuff because I trust her. When I am having a bad day, I tell my teacher. My teacher is like a second mammy to me'* (Happy Scrappy, June 2022).
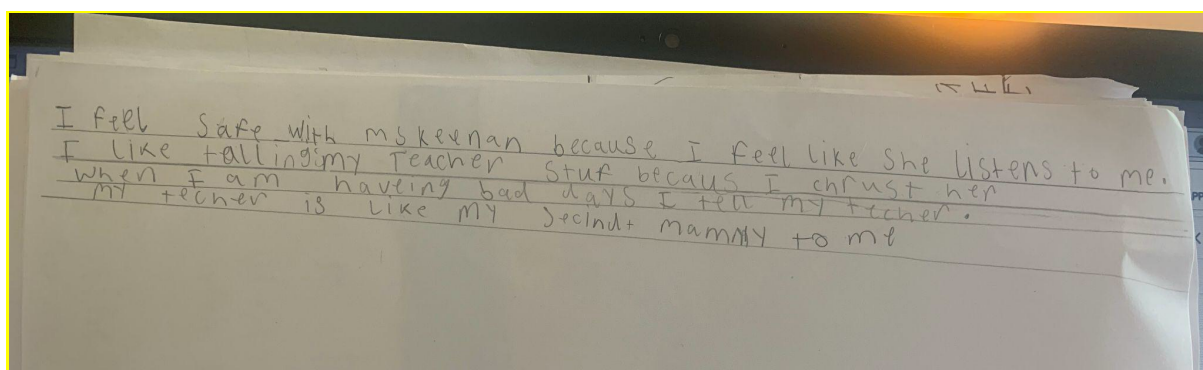

Figure 6: Image from a Happy Scrappy

Children began opening up and feeling comfortable in doing so. The relationships were more authentic as there was a space provided for the children to communicate their thoughts, problems or worries to a trusted adult.

'Child F came in looking particularly distressed today. When I asked her how she was she said that she was tired because her parents had been arguing all night and she had not slept' (Reflective Journal, March 2022).

This suggests the positive impact that this intervention had on this child. Some of the children were beginning to inform me of situations and circumstances that were occurring within their own lives. This enabled me to guide and assist them in whatever way I could. Through this communication and in accordance with the Trauma informed Practice Approach, I became more aware of the needs of these children and therefore could tend to them more adequately. This communication resulted in powerful teacher-child relationships amongst myself and some of the children. This can be read in relation to Delpit (1995) who decided that to engage children in the processes of learning, you must understand who they are and where they come from. As highlighted in the Literature Review positive relationship formation is imperative to a child's holistic growth and development. It was conspicuous that the children felt this sense of understanding as they began unfolding issues and trusting me to assist them with any worries they had. Similarly, Vygotsky's (1978) assertion that cognitive development is embedded within the context of social relationships is exceptionally relevant here (Goldstein, 1999).

4.4.4 Peer Relationships

Positive peer interactions provide children with rich opportunities to gain peer support and develop strong social skills (Yao et al.,2021). The lens of other teachers offered valuable insight as to whether the relationships formed within Circle Time extended to activity and yard time. Most children were encouraging and understanding of their peers. If a child decided not to orally communicate their reflections, this was quickly accepted and understood. Additionally, it was interesting to witness various unexpected friendships develop and blossom.

Child B was observed as cooperating and communicating well throughout the initiative yet finding situations where the child wasn't being as closely observed such as yard, physical education or assembly tough and acting out at others.

'Child B had another bad day in the yard today. He lashed out at his friends again and did not use any of his stop and think strategies that we have been working on' (SNA, May 2022).

This comment suggests that although this intervention has had positive impacts on this child's peer relationships during Circle Time, the teacher needed to reiterate the behaviour and actions required, in order for this child to withhold valuable friendships with others.

This behaviour reflects the non-linear aspects surrounding the Complexity Theory. The difference in initial conditions may produce more substantial ones in the final phenomenon. The theory advocates the complexity of the data and that one must unearth the information without just focusing on the surface (Fenwick 2012). Therefore, it could be argued that this child's behaviour had improved significantly during Circle Time, however, his actions outside of the initiative stayed the same. This was clearly something that I needed to continue to work on.

4.4.5 Parent-teacher Relationships

Parents provided the teacher with invaluable information when it came to analysing the data from this initiative. They established that they had seen a significant improvement in their child's feelings, words and conversations regarding school.

'I have seen a huge improvement in her. She has been getting along better with myself and her little sister. We are all now using the Circle Time strategies that you taught her. We will have to keep this up at home' (Parent, May 2022).
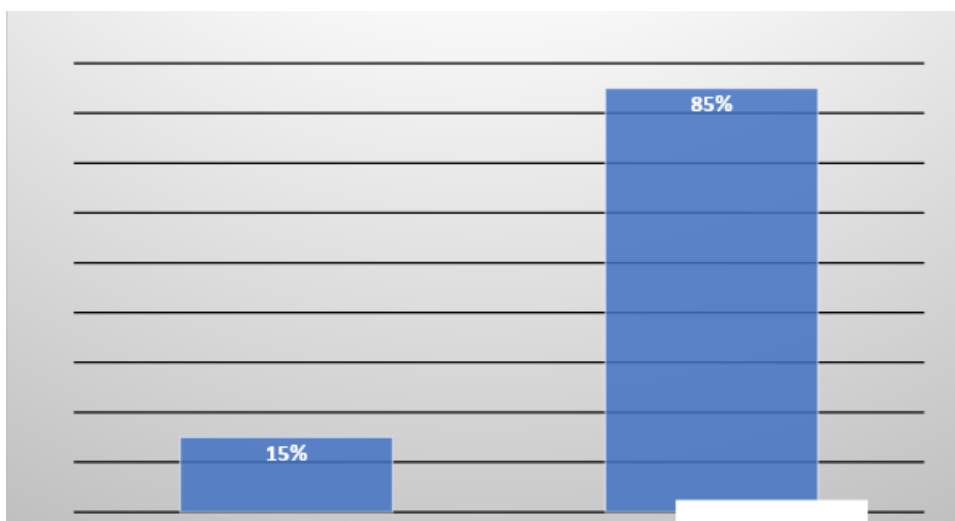
Figure 7: Graph indicating children's feeling about school post intervention

This graph indicates how the parents felt their children's conversations, thoughts and emotions around school have changed since this initiative was introduced. This establishes the immense impact that this programme had on these children as 85% of parents declared that they felt their children were happier to come to school. These findings are significant for determining the future of Circle Time in our school and the provision of additional support for children with SEMH.

The formation of strong connections amongst the parents and myself has been a compelling discovery. The mutual trust was an indefinite factor in the creation of such relationships. 'One aspect of the parent-teacher relationship that is important to consider is parent trust of teachers and schools' (Santiago et al., p1, 2016). At the beginning, some parents required some convincing, however, once the trust had been built it became a much easier process. The parents believed in this initiative and supported their child throughout. They were regularly informed of the activities, tasks and reflections that occurred within the intervention.

'I was unsure of this at the beginning as I thought it would be a bit much for her, but I am beyond thrilled that she has taken part in it now. She wants to do Circle Time with her siblings and has them all arranging cushions in the living room. We do our own version of share and

solve after messy situations, and it works excellently. I am not sure what we will do next year.' (Parent, June 2022).

'High parent involvement was associated with better quality teacher-parent relationships' (Santiago et al., p2,). There was a huge increase in parent involvement this year. Parents were emailing, calling and accompanying their children to school. They were taking a huge interest in their child's life at school. As we know from the Literature Review, it is simply vital to form strong links with parents in order to work collaboratively and enrich children's school experiences. Making parents aware of the initiative, along with all relevant information occupying this, was a leading factor to the increase in parental involvement alluding to the formation of strong parent-teacher relationships.

4.5 Finding 3: Motivation

4.5.1 Classroom Atmosphere

It was exceptionally evident that the children in the class were much happier to come to school and they appeared happier when they were present. Children were smiling more, eager to participate, laughing, and the classroom atmosphere had changed for the better. At times it felt like a different place with different children. There was a noticeable change in the mood of a lot of the children in the class both during the initiative and this continued throughout other lessons, activities and routines during the day. The positive change in the children's feelings and mood encouraged and motivated them to participate more throughout the day. This participation looked different to every child. Some children answered questions whilst others asked them, child D checked in on her classmate's numerous times throughout the day, some children came to school more whilst others were taking our speaking object to 'play' Circle Time with their friends from other classes. There was a newly found desire and motive for the children to participate and engage in school tasks and routines that was not present before this initiative began.

'It seems as though things are FINALLY falling into place. The classroom feels more positive, encouraging, safe and welcoming. Not only are the girls getting involved in Circle Time, but they are using the skills, practices and reflections taught to help and guide them throughout other parts and aspects of the school day' (Reflective Journal, May 2022).

4.5.2 Attendance

In conjunction with the above, with the assistance of the software programme 'Aladdin' it became conspicuous that the class attendance had improved by a significant amount since before the Christmas break. This was not something that I could have predicted and would have gone completely unnoticed had a colleague not informed me. I found this discovery compelling. We then completed a share and solve session during Circle Time and the children were encouraged to record their thoughts regarding this significant increase in attendance. Most children believed this increase in attendance was due to the Circle Time routine that they had become so familiar with and accustomed to.

'I think that more kids come to school because they know that they will get to do Circle Time every day and that makes them feel happy' (Happy Scrappy, 1st May 2022).

4.5.3 Active Club

The school organised and coordinated a new Active Club for the girls from my class. Initially it was presumed that half of the children in the class would participate. However, 94% of the children from my class participated in the Club. The children attended the club twice a week and it was extremely evident that they thoroughly enjoyed participating in the games, exercises and activities that were organised for them. The peer relationships within the class were excelling. Prior to the club's existence, we had aimed to encourage half of the class to attend. As highlighted in the Literature Review, the children were more inclined to attend due to the fact that they felt safe and comfortable around their peers. The children were inspired to attend and were motivated to participate as they felt happier, more comfortable and had

formed new friendships with other children. It was noted that they were simply happy to be there.

'I'm only doing Active Club this year because I like school and have new friends to do it with' (Child F, April 2022).
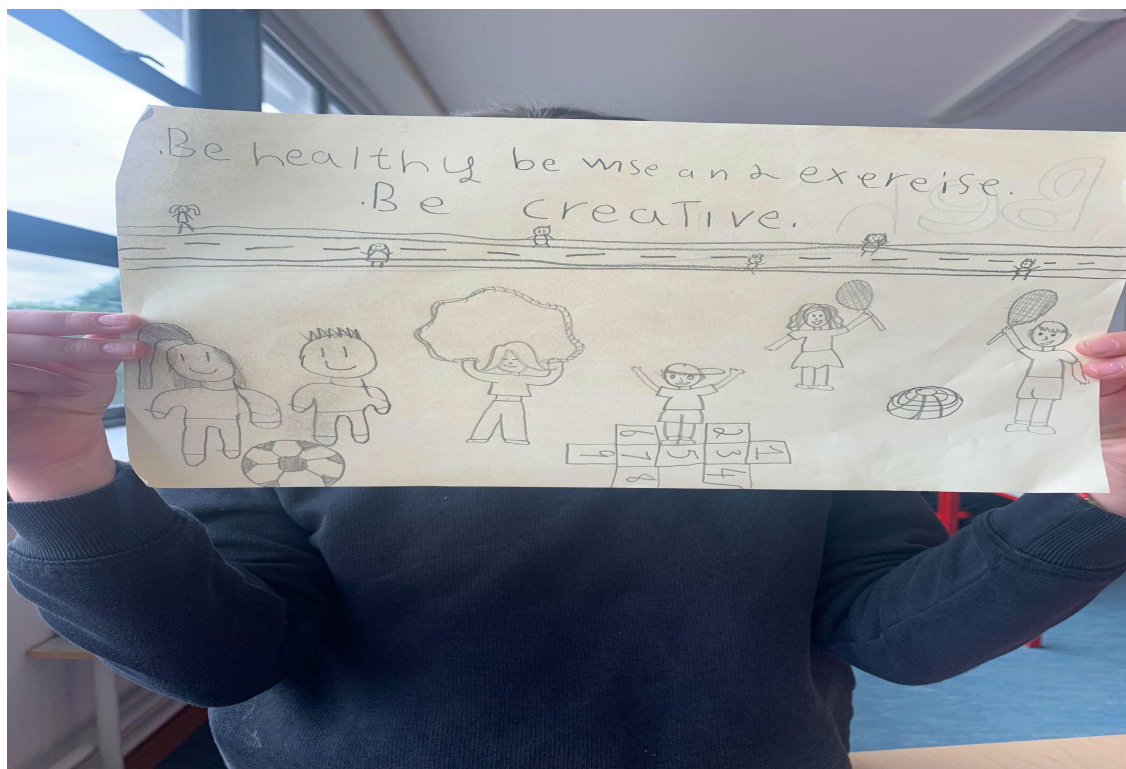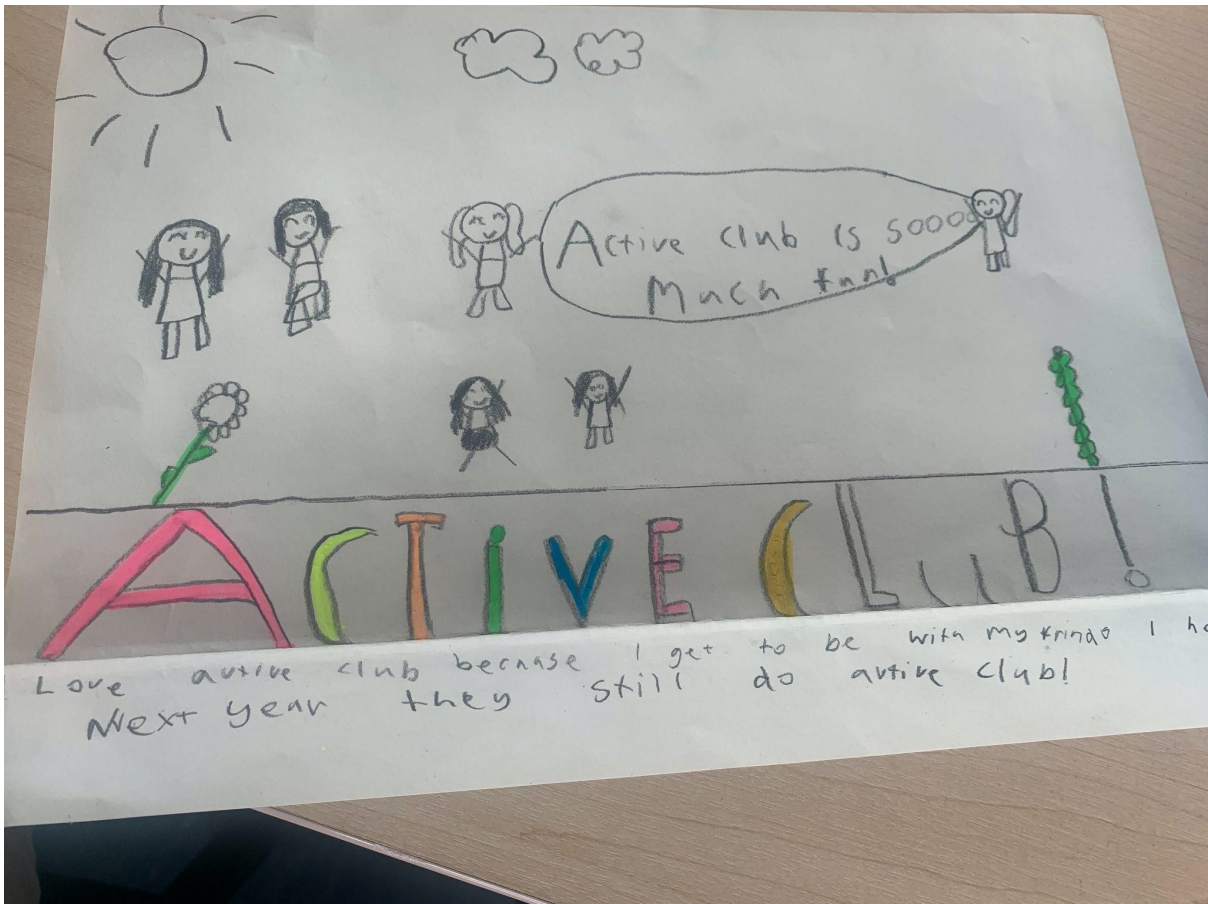
Figure 8: Taken from Happy Scrappy

Figure 9: Taken from Happy Scrappy

4.6 Conclusion

Froebel (1902) established the importance of connectedness and nurturing the family and community link in the learning process (Bruce et al., 2019). Most of the learning occurred in the final sessions as the research somewhat consolidated itself. The objective surrounding devising ways that I could enhance the experiences of children with SEMH within my class were attained considerably. Crucially, omissions and inaccuracies within my practice of such were highlighted from this research. I've discovered that promoting positive ways of being, establishing powerful relationships and creating an environment that fosters a sense of motivation has worked desirably for the purpose of this research. Lastly Froebel (1977) argued that to learn a thing in life through doing is much more developing, cultivating, and powerful than to learn it only through verbal communication of ideas. Through continuously 'doing' I will inevitably discover various other ways in which I can enhance the experiences of children with SEMH in my care.

Chapter Five: Conclusions

5.1 Summary of Research

This self-study action research project was aimed towards exploring ways in which I could enhance the experiences of children with SEMH in a primary classroom. Communication and promoting strong relationships with other relevant beings are areas of my practice that I value and therefore used to validate and calculate progress throughout each cycle. It was obvious from the beginning of this research that there was a considerable number of children with SEMH in this class. Their attitude, emotions and attendance further highlighted this. It was evident that school was not a pleasant experience for them. Dolton et al., (2020) denoted the significance of giving the child a voice. They argued that if a child's voice is not heard, then all other attempts to meet the needs of the child with SEMH will be hindered. I then decided to focus on trying to enhance the experiences of children with SEMH in a primary classroom through the promotion of communication and relationships whilst utilising Circle Time and the Trauma Informed Practice Approach.

The research was conducted within the self-study action research paradigm and involved following an action-reflection cycle. This project required two cycles to be carried out. Data was collected through my reflective journal, Happy Scrappies, critical friend and validation group observations and questionnaires.

Circle Time presented as an exceptionally appropriate approach to fulfil the requirements of this self-study action research project. This approach required all children, alongside the teacher, sitting together in a circle. Brookfield (2017) portrayed the sincere value of Circle time describing it as being student centred and empowering. We completed Circle Time for forty minutes four days a week. A speaking object was used to ensure each child was given a chance to communicate. This was intended to encourage communication as according to Whitehead (1989) I was experiencing myself as a living contradiction as I was not staying true to my values. Before this, I was doing all of the talking and none of the listening. Games such as Pass the Smile, Share and Solve and Show and Tell were played. The games were

aimed at promoting communication and positive relationship formation. We worked collaboratively as a class to solve issues. Each Circle Time ended with reflection. The children reflected in their Happy Scrappies.

The first cycle required the use of the Circle Time Approach. Although this was working well, it felt as though the needs of all children with SEMH were not being enhanced as I had hoped and expected. This led to the adoption of the Trauma Informed Practice Approach, alongside Circle Time.

This approach involved the teacher accumulating a particular mindset to approach children. It involved me, acknowledging the impacts of past events, and simultaneously granting them hope for the future. It prompted me to change the question from 'what is wrong with that child?' to 'what happened to that child?' A safe environment was created for students to share their stories, whilst professional boundaries were adhered to accordingly. Some children found it sincerely difficult to communicate their anguish orally, so a Múinteoir Mail' box was constructed. This meant that children could write down any past or current stress that they had or have, and I would be made aware, without them having to physically speak about it and relive that trauma. This in turn, made the educator aware of the prolonged stresses that some children had endured, and acted as a constant reminder to be aware of such discomfort and understand how this could have a significant effect on a child's actions and behaviour. This is in line with the Froebelian principles as he promotes relationship formation noting that relationships are central to a child's life (Froebelian Principles, 2018).

This self-study found that the utilisation of such approaches has promoted more positive ways of being for the children involved, in addition to encouraging relationships and communication links. Lastly, it was evident that the children's motivation for all school related tasks and activities had increased accordingly. Experiences of children with SEMH were enhanced, along with their attitudes and mindset around school in general. Although these findings may be useful as an example for those working in similar settings, it should be noted that due to the self-study nature, there are limitations for this study.

5.2 Limitations of the Study

The impact of Covid-19 on the school environment and absenteeism are challenges associated with this study. The small sample size used for this research is also a limitation as the findings do not represent the other classes of the same stream within the school or other educational settings where these initiatives were adopted.

5.2.1 The impact of Covid-19

Thankfully, there were no school closures throughout the duration of the interventions. However, in January and February 2022 there was a considerable number of confirmed positive cases in the class. This resulted in a prominent level of absence in the class. It was particularly disruptive as children were absent for ten days at a time. It was evident that on return, the children required additional time to settle back into the games, discussions, and reflections during Circle Time.

5.3 Impact of Sharing my Research

From the beginning of this research, I collaborated closely with my critical friend and my validation group. Communication about the research was constant and I was continuously reflecting on their feedback, ideas and observations. This in turn made it easier to share my final conclusions with them at the end of this process.

Sharing my research with my colleagues was never something that I intended to do. However, after reflecting on the benefit that this could have on teachers practice and on student's future experiences in school, I decided to share my participation in this Masters programme with the whole staff. With the help of a Microsoft PowerPoint, a Happy Scrappy and a speaking object, I informed them of the journey that I had been on this year, in addition to the interventions, the cycles, data collection and the findings that produced at the end.

Presenting and communicating the objectives was an exceptionally rewarding, insightful and beneficial process. My colleagues were supportive and interested throughout. This process was in line with my values of communication and forming strong relationships. One colleague

expressed a substantial interest in the research and utilised a similar intervention in her classroom. We have since formed a pleasant bond through communication and the common interest of focusing on enhancing the experiences of children with SEMH in our school.

5.4 Claim to Knowledge

5.4.1 Personal Significance

Through my participation in this course, I believe that I have learned a lot about myself both personally and professionally. I have become more of a reflective practitioner, which has been beneficial to myself as a teacher and an individual. I have begun to question my actions and become more aware of my responses. Engaging in critical reflection is now a quintessential part of my daily practice and something that I have hugely benefitted from. This entire journey guided and inspired me to live as closely to my values as I could. I am a much better listener than I was prior to taking part in this research. I have become more confident in myself and have given two public presentations about my action research journey so far. These were pivotal moments for me as I always lacked confidence in my ability to speak in front of a crowd. Lastly, I have been encouraged to share my journey with colleagues as opposed to keeping this to myself. This alone inspired me to enhance my practice and to engage in meaningful and relevant conversations with colleagues.

5.4.2 Professional Significance

This self-study action research journey has changed my approach to children with SEMH entirely. If a child is having a tough moment, lesson or day in general I have now begun to ask myself: What happened to this child? Rather than: What is wrong with this child? It has opened my eyes to a new mindset I need to have as a primary school teacher in a DEIS school in Ireland in 2022. I have kept my reflective diary since September 2021, and I plan to keep as it has become a vital part of my routine. I have learned so much about my professional identity through the process of reflection. In conjunction with the above, I have also become more self-aware due to the powerful process of reflecion and I can certainly see myself more clearly.

Similarly, Circle Time alongside the Trauma Informed Practice has become common daily practice within my classroom and therefore the children are still guided and encouraged through the reflection process. In conjunction with the above the Múinteoir Mailbox is a highly effective form of communication and will be bound within my practice for the foreseeable future. Lastly, with this in mind this journey has reinforced the tremendous effect that encouraging communication and fostering strong relationships with students can have on their experiences in school.

5.5 Further Recommendations

Undeniably, there is a lot of room for further development of this study. Unfortunately, I could not undertake all of it this year, however, I do hope to explore the value of adopting a Restorative Practice Approach to enhance the experiences of children with SEMH in a primary classroom. I would be interested to discover how my values, alongside this intervention, could enhance my practice.

5.6 Final Reflection

Even though this research project has drawn to a close, the action research process will certainly not end. I intend to continue to research my own practice with the hope of enhancing my practice. My identity as a teacher is constantly changing. This study has enabled me to understand my values more adequately and I believe that I have finally begun to realise how I can live closer to my values within my practice.

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Appendices

1. Pre-Research Intervention Schedule

2. Cycle One and Cycle Two Intervention Schedule

3. Pre-Intervention Child Interviews

4. Circle Time Questionnaire 1

5. Circle Time Questionnaire 2

6. Circle Time Questionnaire 3

7. Circle Time Questionnaire 4

8. Circle Time Questionnaire 5

9. Post Intervention Child Interview

10. Validation Group Interview

11. Critical Friend Interview

12. Board of Management Letter

13. Parent Guardian Letter

14. Child Assent

15. Parent/Guardian Consent

16. Researcher Declaration

17. Outdoor Circle Time

18. Circle Time Rules

19. Múinteoir Mail Box and Speaking Object

1. **Pre-Research Intervention Schedule**

Month	Actions

August	- To be considered:
	   • Research Question
	   • Research Methodologies
	   •Principles of Action Research
	
	- Writing in Reflective Journal
	-Research Idea Shared with Principal
	-Critical Friend discussion
	-Validation Group formed

September	- Research Proposal Written and Submitted Recording ideas and thoughts in - Reflective Journal
October	-Meeting with Principal - Ethical Approval Form -Analysing Literature for Literature Review - Meeting with Supervisor to discuss Research Proposal -Research discussed with Critical Friend -Meeting with Validation Group
November	- Reflective Journal Entries - Ethical Permission Received - Gathering Literature for Literature Review

December	- Reflective Journal Entries
	- Board of Management Permission Sought
	- To be considered:
	   •Research Methodologies
	   •Tools for Data Collection

2. Research Design

	Design of Research Study	
Week	**Date**	**Actions**
1	6/12/21-10/12/21	Research project shared with class Collect consent and assent Meetings with Critical Friend Organisation of letters
2 & 3	13/12/21- 22/12/21	Individual child interviews
	Christmas Break	
	CYCLE ONE	
4, 5 & 6	10/1/22-28/1/21	Introduction of Circle time Reflection time and Happy Scrappies introduced
7,8 & 9	1/2/22- 18/02/22 **Midterm Break: 24th & 25th February 2022**	Circle time intervention Informal Observations Meta reflections in reflective journal Discussions with Critical Friend about Cycle One Meeting and discussion with Supervisor about Cycle One Review of Literature on Trauma Informed Practice
	CYCLE TWO	
10,11, 12, 13, 14 & 15	➢ 1/3/22-8/4/22	Circle Time alongside the Trauma Informed Practice Approach introduced Meeting with validation group about Cycle Two Discussions with critical friend about Cycle Two Reflections in Reflective Journal
16	➢ 25/04/22	Follow up interview with children Follow up questionnaire for parents Analyse Reflective Journal
17	➢ 2/5/22	Final meeting with validation group Final meeting with critical friend Discussion with Supervisor

		Data analysis of post intervention observations from both Cycles

Pre-Intervention Interview

1. How are you feeling today?

2. Can you tell me who you played with on yard today?

3. Do you think you get on well with your teacher?

4. Would you like to have a closer relationship with your teacher?

5. Do you like putting up your hand to speak in class?

6. Do you like coming to school?

7. What would make school a better place for you?

8. Do you feel happy in school?

9. What makes you feel happy in school?

10. Who makes you feel happy in school?

11. What is your favourite thing about school?

12. What is your least favourite thing about school?

13. How do you feel when someone doesn't listen to you?

14. Are you a good listener?

15. What makes a good listener?

16. What does the word 'communication' mean to you?

17. Have you ever heard of Circle Time before?

Circle Time: 1

1. Can you tell me about Circle Time today?

2. What was your favourite thing about it?

3. What will you do differently next time?

4. Did you learn anything new about anyone today?

5. Would you like to do this again? Why/Why not?

6. Can you tell me how the speaking object works?

7. Would you mind if I shared this information with others

   to help me to learn how to be a better teacher?

Circle Time: 2

1. Can you tell me about Circle Time today?

2. How was it different to our last one?

3. Did you learn anything new about teacher today?

4. How will the things you learned today help you and your friendships in the future?

5. Would you mind if I shared this worksheet with others to help me to learn?

Circle Time: 3

1. Can you tell me about Circle Time today?

2. Did you speak to anyone new today?

3. Why do you think we do Circle Time so often?

4. How will the things you learned today help you and your friendships in the future?

5. Would you mind if I shared this worksheet with others to help me to learn? Yes   No

Circle Time: 4

8. How do you feel after Circle time today?

9. Can you tell me two things that you've learned about yourself since starting Circle Time?

   •

   •

10.   Why do you think we should do Circle Time?

11.   Would you mind if I shared this worksheet with others to help me to learn?
    Yes   No

Circle Time 5

1. Did you enjoy Circle Time? Why/Why not?

2. Can you tell me how Circle Time has helped your friendships? It's okay if it hasn't! 😊

3. Do you think every teacher should do this with their class? Why/Why not?

4. Would you recommend Circle Time to other schools? Why/Why not?

5. Would you mind if I shared this worksheet with others to help me to learn? Yes   No

Post Intervention Child Interviews

1. What do you think about Circle Time?

2. Would you recommend Circle Time to other classes in our school? Why/Why not?

3. What has it taught you about your relationships with others?

4. Do you like communicating with your friends and your teachers?

5. Why do you think other teachers should/should not use Circle Time in their classrooms?

6. What was your favourite part about Circle Time?

7. How did you find the Reflection part?

8. Do you want to show me your Happy Scrappy?

9. Why do you think we used a Speaking Object?

Validation Group Questionnaire

1. What were your initial **thoughts** after observing Circle Time today?

2. How do you think the children **benefitted** from it?

3. Would you notice that we are working on our **relationships** during Circle Time?

   How/How not?
   1.
   2.

4. What is your opinion of the **speaking object** and how it works during this process?

11. Interview with Critical Friend

1. **How did you find the Circle Time intervention?**
   I have to say I thought it was brilliant. At the start I was unsure as to how positive it could be, particularly in relation to this class, however, I think it went really well. You could see in their faces how much they loved it. The atmosphere during reflection time was almost surreal. The children never stopped talking about it. They absolutely loved 'Pass the Smile'. I think it is something that we should introduce to the whole school.

2. **What did you think the benefits of this reading?**
   Well, there are many benefits to such an intervention being introduced and working so well with a class, however, I'd say the number one benefit to me was the children's engagement, participation, and enjoyment of the Circle Time intervention. They simply loved it. Their faces used to light up when they'd see my walk in the door, but I quickly learned that that had nothing to do with me unfortunately. Children who I genuinely never thought would have engaged within this would use the 'Múinteoir mailbox' regularly and one of the children even brought her Happy Scrappy out to the yard to finish her reflections. The speaking object became the most popular teddy in the world. I loved seeing the children so happy, particularly the ones who needed the boost.

3. **What affect did Circle Time have on the children's relationships?**
   I found that Circle Time did influence the relationships of some of the children. When it came to little arguments on the yard, I could see that the children were getting better at sorting it out themselves rather than letting it escalate. Some of the children were good at 'talking the talk' during Circle Time, but not 'walking the walk' outside of the intervention. I did feel as though ALL the children formed a close bond with you. I thought that was special to be involved in and to see. You could see it even in the way they looked at you. That is something that not every teacher has with their class. That was enough for me. Once I saw that I thought to myself 'it doesn't matter if nothing else good comes out of this initiative as that is amazing in itself'. I would also like to add that your efforts to include the parents within the whole process was great. I unfortunately didn't get to witness this as much as I didn't see your class at home time but, I could see the effort you put in for this to happen.

4. **Do you think the Circle Time intervention had a positive effect on both mine and the children's ability to communicate effectively?**
   I could see that you were focusing on listening to the children. I think they noticed this too. Listening is such an important skill, and it is one that you won't ever lose. It was fabulous that you used some of the stories that they spoke about during Circle Time and asked them more about it when you got a chance. I also think that the speaking object really helped the children to communicate during Circle Time. I lied that you used a fluffy pink unicorn as it was suitable for their age, and they liked it too. My favourite part of the communication was your 'Múinteoir Mailbox' they just loved this. Some of the other teachers even robbed this idea too which is great. I loved how there was a few children who never wanted to orally communicate at the beginning but they by the end they were simply dying to tell their stories and ideas. It was lovely to witness the growth in their confidence.

12.Board of Management Letter

Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

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

Sr. Mary Kernan,
Chairperson – Board of Management,
Stanhope Street Primary School,
Manor Street,
Dublin 7
2/12/2021
Dear Sr. Mary,

I am currently undertaking a part time Master of Education programme at Maynooth University. As part of my degree, I am doing a research project. The focus of my research is based on enhancing the experiences of children with SEMH (Social Emotional and Mental Health Difficulties).

I intend to carry out research in the classroom by completing Circle Time and observing the children. I also hope to reflect on these observations in a journal.

The data will be collected using observations and a daily teacher journal. An interview will be completed with the children at the beginning and end of the intervention. I hope to form strong relationships with the children involved and to encourage powerful communication links between myself and the children in my care. My focus is entirely on my own practice.

All information will remain 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 Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education.

In order to carry out the research, I need the Board of Management approval to proceed and I would be very grateful if you could agree to this request.

Yours sincerely,

_____

13. Parent/Guardian Letter

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

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

Dear Parent(s)/Guardian(s),

I am a student on the Master of Education programme at Maynooth University. As part of my degree, I am doing a research project. The focus of my research is based on enhancing the experiences of children with SEMH (Social Emotional and Mental Health Difficulties).

In order to do this, I intend to carry out research in the classroom by observing the children during Circle Time and taking note of the best practices involved in carrying out this initiative.

The data will be collected using observations, student reflections, a daily teacher journal and the children's Happy Scrappies. The children will be asked their opinions through discussing what they enjoyed most about Circle Time.

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

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

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

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

Yours faithfully,

14. Child Assent
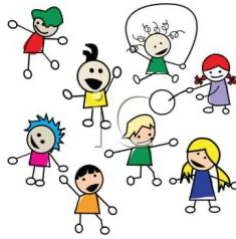
Child's name …………………….

I am trying to find out how I can make children feel happier in school. I would like to find out more about this. I would like to watch you and listen to you when you are in school and to write down some notes about you.

Would you be ok with that? Pick a box

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.

15. Parental Consent Form

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

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

PARENTAL CONSENT FORM

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

Parent / Guardian Signature_____

Parent / Guardian Signature_____

Date: _____

16. Researcher Declaration

Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

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

Declaration by Researcher

This declaration must be signed by the applicant(s)

I acknowledge(s) and agree that:

10. It is my sole responsibility and obligation to comply with all Irish and EU legislation relevant to this project.

11. I will comply with Irish and EU legislation relevant to this project.

12. That the research will be conducted in accordance with the Maynooth University Research Ethics Policy.

13. That the research will be conducted in accordance with the Maynooth University Research Integrity Policy.

14. That the research will not commence until ethical approval has been granted by the Research and Ethics committee in the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education.
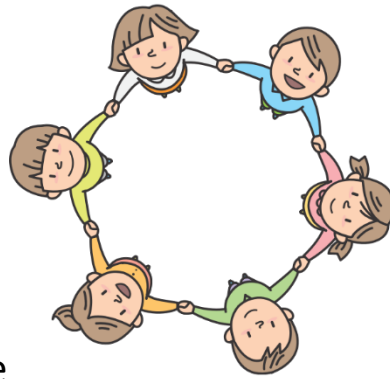
Signature of Student: _____

Date: _____

17.Outdoor Circle Time

Circle Time Rules:

1. Listen to everyone

2. Respect your friends

3. Use the Speaking Object if you have something to say

4. Be kind

5. Try your best to stay in the Circle

6. Don't laugh AT anyone

7. Reflect in your own Happy Scrappy **ONLY**

8. Just take one cushion

9. Have fun!! 😊

19. Múinteoir Mail box and Speaking Object