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ABSTRACT

In this self-study action research, the focus is on enhancing the social-emotional skills of pupils in a primary school classroom. This study arose from my own teaching experience and the core values that are central to my professional practice. The research for this study takes place in a DEIS Band Two Primary School with twenty-three first class pupils. The school is part of the Delivering Equality of Opportunity to Schools (DEIS) programme set up by the Department of Education and Skills. My experience teaching in this DEIS school has deepened my understanding of the importance of nurturing the holistic development of a child. The aim of this study is to foster the social-emotional skills of the children in my classroom, to ensure that both their social and academic needs are being supported. This is relevant as the focus of the new Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools (Department of Education, 2023) is to provide a holistic approach to a child's education. Throughout this research I cultivate a classroom environment that embodies my core values of care, respect and building positive relationships.

The implementation of daily morning meetings is the intervention used in this study. Morning meetings are structured around four components, which are a greeting, sharing, activity and message. These morning meetings are held in my classroom every morning before the children start their academic work. The research is conducted over two cycles, lasting twelve weeks. Two reflective frameworks are used to critically examine my practice from different perspectives. In the first cycle, Schöns reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action model (1983) is adopted and in the second cycle Brookfield's Four Lenses of Critical Reflection (2017) is adopted as a reflective approach. The study uses multiple research methods, including student questionnaires, student journals, observations and a teacher reflective journal. These qualitative research tools provide an insight into the participants learning and develop my own learning as a researcher in this study.

Using thematic data analysis, I explore three central themes in this study which include the importance of meaningful content, building relationships and using the voice of the children. Firstly, the content must be meaningful for the children to connect with and apply the social-emotional skills taught to them. Secondly, children develop positive relationships with their peers as they use the social-emotional skills being taught to them. The third theme explores the use of the children's voice in the study as they became more confident in using their voice.

This research transformed me as a teacher, guiding me towards the holistic development of a child. With the recently published Primary Curriculum Programme for Primary and Special Schools (Department of Education, 2023), a shift in educational priorities is anticipated. The increased allocation of time given to Wellbeing in the new curriculum highlights the importance of focusing on the overall development of a child. I hope that this study will inspire teachers and educators to promote Wellbeing in the classroom through an intervention that can be used daily.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CAPP	Child Abuse Prevention Programme
CASEL	The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
ECM	Every Child Matters
NEFC	The Northeast Foundation for Children
PE	Physical Education
RC	Responsive Classroom
SEAL	Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning
SET	Special Education Teacher
SPHE	Social, Physical, Health and Education
YCDI	You Can Do It

APPENDICES

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This thesis explores the self-study action research that I embarked on to enhance my practice. This research emerged from a desire to support both the academic and social development of the children in my classroom, which I have experienced as being important in my practice. The recently published Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools (Department of Education, 2023) emphasises the importance of supporting the holistic development of a child. The aim of this study is to enhance the social-emotional skills of pupils in my classroom. A self-study action research approach was particularly compelling to me, as I could critically examine and enhance my own teaching practice whilst supporting the needs of the children in my classroom. By engaging in self-study action research, I was guided by my core values of care, respect and relationships which will be explored in this chapter. The rationale for this self-study will be discussed, highlighting how my personal and professional background significantly influenced this study. My motivation to carry out this research study was supported by relevant literature in this area of study which will be emphasised. Finally, a summary of the five chapters within this self-study action research will be presented at the end of this chapter.

1.2 AIMS OF THIS RESEARCH

The concern of this research is motivated by my teaching experience. I am currently working in a school that falls under the Delivering Equality of Education in Schools (DEIS) framework due to its socio-economic needs. Delivering Equality of Education in Schools are determined by 'employment status, education levels, single parenthood, overcrowding and dependency rates' (Fleming & Harford, 2023: 385). This experience has allowed me to work with children from different socio-economic and social backgrounds. I have taught

children that have experienced homelessness, poverty and parental imprisonment. It has illuminated the critical importance of supporting the academic and social needs of the children in my classroom. I began asking the question posed by McNiff and Whitehead (2010: 9) 'how do I improve my practice?', to meet the needs of all the children in my class. I strive to create a classroom environment that provides a safe space for these children. As I reflected on my practice, I realised that the classroom environment that I wanted to create aligned with my values. My values of care, respect and relationships are important in my practice. Research consistently indicates that promoting the social and emotional skills of children can positively impact children in school (Barry, Clarke & Dowling, 2017; Durlak *et al.*, 2011; Weare & Nind, 2011). These skills are important for children's success in school and beyond the classroom. This informed the aims of this research which is to enhance the social-emotional skills of the children in my class. The aim of this study is to improve the social-emotional skills of the children in my classroom so that they are equipped with these skills. I also want to identify strategies that effectively support children in developing their social-emotional skills.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTION

Self-study action research is a combination of self-study and action research to critically examine one's practice. McDonagh *et al.* (2019: 15) describe it as 'studying my practice, with a view to improving it – and my understanding of it and then making that process visible for others'. Self-study action research appealed to me as I could improve my own practice, with the possibility that the research could help others. This research study was motivated by a desire to support both the academic and social development of the children in my class. As I reflected on my practice I realised that I needed to place a greater emphasis on supporting the holistic needs of the children in my class. With critical analysis of my practice

and reviewing relevant literature I decided upon my research area. This led me to explore the following research question in my self-study action research:

How can I enhance the social-emotional skills of pupils in a primary school classroom?

1.4 PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

Teacher identity is the internal and external influences that shape an educator's identity. Palmer (1997: 17) describes identity as the 'moving intersection of the inner and outer forces that make me who I am'. My identity as a teacher has stemmed from both my personal and professional background. I graduated from Maynooth University in 2021 with a Bachelor of Education Degree. The experience of undertaking my final placement in a DEIS school was significant in shaping my teacher identity. It fostered an understanding within my practice of the significance of supporting the holistic development of a child. The teaching experience that I have gained has been situated in a DEIS primary school in urban Kildare. The children that I have taught are from diverse sociocultural and economic backgrounds including experiences of poverty, homelessness and parental imprisonment. This motivates my desire to focus on the holistic development of a child rather than focusing solely on their academic needs. The Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (Department of Education, 2018) aligns with this perspective as it recognises that social and emotional development is intertwined with cognitive growth. My core values of care, respect and relationships are central to my teacher identity and are intertwined with the holistic development of the child. As I critically examined my practice I realised that I was experiencing myself as a 'living contradiction', a term coined by Whitehead (1989). My professional practice did not reflect my values of care, respect and relationships. By encouraging the children to participate in morning meetings that focused on developing their social-emotional skills, I could better align my practice with my values and identity as a teacher.

1.5 VALUES

The values that I hold are deeply rooted in my identity as a teacher. Ferguson (2015: 64) argues that 'we need to probe and develop our own identities to ensure that we're working in ways compatible with our stated values'. Ferguson (2015) insight resonates with me, as it was only through understanding my identity as a teacher that I could articulate my values. As I started my research journey I was encouraged to identify my core values as an educator. This proved a challenging task as I found it difficult to identify values that are important to me. It was not until I critically examined my practice in my reflective journal, and as I reflected on my teaching experience that I realised what values are important in my practice. Care, respect and relationships are the values that deeply resonate with me and shape my practice as a teacher.

1.5.1 CARE

Care is the first value that I identify in my practice. The holistic development of a child at the core of my practice is deeply rooted in this value of care. Care is having an interest or emotional draw towards something or someone (Noddings, 2003). This is an important value in my personal practice, but is also deeply embedded in the ethos of my school. Care is valued in my practice as I endeavour to create a safe classroom environment where every child feels genuinely cared for. The classroom is a diverse environment where children come from different family and social backgrounds. Caring for every child creates a common ground as all children can be treated equally in the classroom. The impact of care goes beyond the interactions between a teacher and child. Children must feel cared for so that they can learn to care for others (Noddings, 2013). When children feel valued in the classroom, they begin to look out for others in the same way.

1.5.2 RESPECT

Respect is another value that is important to me. It is my belief that every child should be treated with respect in a classroom. This respect should be shown by both the teacher and other children in the class. The Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools (Department of Education, 2023) identifies the diversity that exists in Irish classrooms today. The framework acknowledges the diversity of the competence, age, language and family backgrounds of children. Diversity exists in the school that I teach in as the school is considered socially disadvantaged. A safe and inclusive learning environment emerges when all children are treated with respect regardless of their individual differences (Department of Education, 2023). Valuing respect in the classroom also influences the interactions that children make outside the school environment.

1.5.3 RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships are the connections that children and teachers build in a classroom. In my reflective journal I wrote this entry on the first day of school 'I want to spend the first day getting to know the children' (Mather, 2024). My priorities on the first day were to begin making connections with the children in my class. Creekmore, M. & Creekmore, N. (2024) focus on the importance of taking this time to get to know others. A relationship develops from shared moments and meaningful connections that are made in the initial stages. I ensure to take time during the day to engage in meaningful conversations with the children to develop these connections. School environments that foster relationships and connectedness are described as places that are both physically and emotionally safe (Wilkins *et al.*, 2023). This is a value that I live by in the classroom.

1.6 CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND: SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

A growing body of research indicates that fostering the social-emotional skills of children can significantly enhance their social, emotional, academic and behavioural development (Barry, Clarke & Dowling, 2017; Durlak *et al.*, 2011; Weare & Nind, 2011). In this research

study the definition of social-emotional learning was based on the CASEL (2020) framework which describes social-emotional learning as the process by which individuals develop healthy identities to manage their emotions, to develop empathy, to set goals, to develop relationships and make responsible decisions. Despite strong evidence demonstrating the positive impact of developing social-emotional skills, the implementation of social-emotional learning programmes in schools remains limited. In many countries, including Ireland, the implementation of evidence-based programmes is inconsistent or often the uptake is low (Barry, Clarke & Dowling, 2017). The Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools (Department of Education, 2023) is a positive advancement in Ireland as it prioritises social-emotional learning as an integral part of a child's education. One of the key competencies of the framework is 'Being Well', which highlights the importance of being healthy including social and emotional wellbeing (Department of Education, 2023). Cline *et al.* (2023) argue that schools lack a curriculum devoted to social-emotional education. This places pupils at a disadvantage, resulting in negative behaviour which includes poor academic performance and discipline issues. The new curriculum will encourage teachers to dedicate more instructional time to teaching Wellbeing in classrooms. Teachers will seek guidance and require training to implement effective approaches in their classroom. This research study set out to implement one particular intervention that could be used in the classroom on a daily basis.

1.7 THE INTERVENTION: MORNING MEETINGS

Morning meetings were a particular intervention that appealed to me to carry out this study. Morning meetings are one of the classroom practices developed by the Responsive Classroom (Cline *et al.*, 2023). The Responsive Classroom is an approach that integrates social-emotional learning and content delivery to create a supportive learning environment (Baroody *et al.*, 2014). The appeal of morning meetings was that I could implement social-

emotional learning in my classroom on a daily basis. Cline *et al.* (2023) highlight the importance of daily social-emotional lessons as they encourage positive social interactions between peers and adults on a daily basis. The participants of this study were of a younger age group which was a consideration taken in this study. The intervention would give the children consistent prompts every morning and encourage them to use the skills they had learnt. For the study, I devised a plan for the daily morning meetings that focused on specific social-emotional themes. The children took part in ten daily morning meetings for each theme. The morning meetings continued over two cycles of action research.

1.8 THESIS STRUCTURE

There are five chapters within this thesis, which are outlined below.

1.8.1 CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION

Chapter one outlines an introduction to my thesis. The chapter explores my research question and the rationale for this research study. I emphasise my values of care, respect and relationships that guide the study. The conceptual background and intervention that were chosen for the study are also explored in this chapter.

1.8.2 CHAPTER TWO – LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter Two details my critical engagement with the relevant literature in this research study. The chapter analyses the research on social-emotional learning and examines the rationale for implementing social-emotional learning in educational settings. There is an emphasis on current practices to social-emotional learning both in Ireland and Internationally. The literature review then examines the interventions that can be adopted in a classroom setting, exploring the intervention of Morning Meetings. I will discuss the current 'gap' that exists in this research in the context of an Irish primary school classroom.

1.8.3 CHAPTER THREE – METHODOLOGY

Chapter three provides a detailed exploration of my chosen research paradigm, Self-Study Action Research. I will describe the intervention that was chosen for this study, giving a detailed account of the action research cycles and data collection methods that were chosen. There were various ethical considerations for this research study, which are explored in the chapter. I outline Braun and Clarke's (2022) six step system for thematic analysis that was used to analyse the data that was collected during this study.

1.8.4 CHAPTER FOUR – FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION OF DATA

Chapter four outlines my main findings in this research study. The chapter is an exploration of the data analysis that was undertaken on the qualitative data that was gathered during the research. There were three main findings in this research study. I became aware that the content of social-emotional learning must be meaningful for the children to connect with it. I discovered that as the children developed their social-emotional skills they began to build positive relationships with others. I also found out the importance of using the voice of the children when teaching them social-emotional skills. These findings are evaluated in this chapter, with a particular emphasis on the relevant literature that has emerged about this in previous research.

1.8.5 CHAPTER FIVE – SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Chapter five provides a summary of the research study that was undertaken. It details the limitations that were discovered when carrying out the self-study action research. There is an emphasis in this chapter on the personal and professional significance that this research will have on my future practice. I provide recommendations for future practice in this research area, specifically at a school and policy level. Finally, I discuss how this research can be shared in my school community and at a further level.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents a wide range of literature related to social-emotional learning and the development of social-emotional skills. The purpose of this self-study action research is to answer the question, “*How can I enhance the social-emotional skills of pupils in a primary school classroom?*”. This chapter presents key themes to provide a structured overview of the literature related to this area of research.

This literature review begins with an exploration of social-emotional learning. The literature on the curriculum (1999) and framework (2023) that are currently used in Ireland are then reviewed. A comparison is then drawn between the policies and programmes that are in place in the United Kingdom and the United States. Ireland's policies and programmes have been significantly influenced by the United Kingdom and the United States. The literature review then discusses the importance of social-emotional learning. It explores the improved academic achievements and lifelong wellbeing that are consistently associated with social-emotional learning. Following this, the literature review will focus on morning meetings and explore how they can facilitate the development of social-emotional competencies. There is a particular focus in the literature review on effective strategies that are currently working to implement social-emotional learning in schools.

2.2 WHAT IS SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING?

There has been a rise in research and thinking related to social-emotional learning, particularly in education (Cline *et al.*, 2023; Greenberg *et al.*, 2017; Taylor *et al.*, 2017; Durlak *et al.*, 2011; Weare, 2007). More people are intrigued to understand how children recognise and manage their emotions effectively (Kelly *et al.*, 2004). Social-emotional learning is widely referred to in literature, with differing definitions offered. Wigelsworth *et*

al. (2022) describes social-emotional learning as an umbrella term which represents approaches that foster the development of an individual's cognitive, social and emotional skills. Zins and Elias (2007) use the term social-emotional learning in their literature and define it as the ability to identify and manage emotions, resolve issues effectively and build strong connections with others. They say that social-emotional learning aims to integrate three areas which are behaviour, cognition and emotions. The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) maintain a similar idea as they describe social-emotional learning as the capacity to recognise and manage emotions, develop empathy for others, establish positive connections with others and exercise careful judgement in situations and in making decisions (CASEL, 2020). All of the above emphasise the interconnected development of cognitive, social and emotional skills.

Emotional literacy is another term widely used in literature. Claude Steiner (1979) defined emotional literacy as the ability to recognise and manage emotions, express empathy and express emotions to others in an appropriate way. Another term often used interchangeably with emotional literacy is emotional intelligence. This term is coined by David Goleman (1995) who identified five key components of emotional intelligence. These are self-awareness, emotional regulation, self-motivation, empathy and social skills. Colverd & Hodgkin (2011) distinguish emotional intelligence into three different areas of the mind. The affective side allows us to learn about emotions and how they are expressed in others and ourselves. The cognitive side is concerned with reasoning and how emotions are processed in our mind. The conative side allows us to respond to emotion based on the knowledge acquired. One main contrast in the literature is that emotional literacy provides a framework for understanding how to foster social and emotional skills. Social intelligence offers the skills needed to enhance social and emotional learning (Coskun & Oksuz, 2019).

Most of the Irish literature uses the terms ‘Wellbeing’ (Department of Education, 2018) and ‘Being Well’ (Department of Education, 2023). The Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (Department of Education, 2018) highlights that ‘Wellbeing’ is supported through social and emotional competencies. These competencies are based on a framework (CASEL, 2020) which include five competencies; the development of attention and planning, self-awareness, self-management, relationship and responsible decision-making skills. The Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special School (Department of Education, 2023: 11) uses the term ‘Being Well’ to encompass a child that has ‘self-awareness’ ‘healthy relationships’ and the ability to cope in different situations. A comparison can be drawn between the earlier definitions of emotional literacy (1989) and emotional intelligence (1995) as the skills are cognitive, social and emotional. The various terms used in the literature, though diverse, have an underlying common theme. Social-emotional learning is concerned with people being able to understand their own emotions and the emotions of others. It includes the ability to form strong relationships with others and respond competently to the emotions of others (Weare, 2004). The definition of social-emotional learning applied in my thesis is grounded in the CASEL (2020) framework, which is referenced in the introduction of this study. They have identified five competencies which are self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, relationship skills and social awareness. These skills are interconnected between the behavioural, social and emotional which can be seen in the diagram below (CASEL, 2020).



Figure 2.1 The Five Core Competencies of SEL adapted from CASEL (2020)

2.3 WHAT IS CURRENTLY HAPPENING IN IRELAND?

Social-emotional learning is actively integrated in schools in Ireland. There are a range of policies and frameworks in place to support the teaching and learning of social-emotional skills. Various programmes have also been developed to enhance social-emotional learning in classrooms. Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) is a mandatory subject taught in schools. The Stay Safe, Walk Tall and Relationships and Sexuality programmes were designed to support the implementation of the SPHE curriculum. These programmes support social-emotional learning as they teach children personal and interpersonal skills. The programmes Incredible Years, Zippy’s Friends and Friends for Life were introduced to support well-being in schools.

The curricular subject SPHE (Department of Education and Skills, 1999b) was published as part of the Primary School Curriculum (Department of Education and Skills, 1999a). The curriculum has three main strands: Myself, Myself and Others and Myself and the wider world. The strand ‘Myself’ is concerned with the personal development of the child and allows them to take responsibility for their own actions and behaviour. The strand ‘Myself

and Others' focuses on enhancing the children's communication skills with others including the ability to resolve conflict, to co-operate and develop the skills to work with others. The aim of the third strand 'Myself and the Wider World' is to allow children to develop a sense of belonging and share a sense of purpose. There are key topics taught in each strand, and I focused on the 1st and 2nd class topics in particular as the focus of my research was with this class group. These topics include self-identity, taking care of my body, growing and changing, safety and protection, myself and my family, my friends and other people, relating to others, developing citizenship and media education.

The programmes Walk Tall, Stay Safe and Relationships and Sexuality programmes were created to facilitate the implementation of the SPHE curriculum. The programmes are relevant and teach children personal and interpersonal skills that can be used outside the classroom environment. There are strong links between the objectives of the SPHE curriculum and the Walk Tall programme (PDST, 2016). The programme supports the teaching and delivery of the SPHE curriculum through detailed lesson plans and classroom planning. Stay Safe is a Child Abuse Prevention Programme used in primary schools from Junior Infants to Sixth Class. The programme is designed to enhance children's personal safety skills by participating in lessons on safe and unsafe situations, bullying, inappropriate touch, secrets, telling and stranger danger (MacIntyre & Lawlor, 2015). The Relationships and Sexuality programme is another support used in teaching the SPHE curriculum. This programme seeks to teach children how to develop and maintain personal healthy relationships. There are two strands in the curriculum of this programme. The strand 'Myself' includes self-esteem, growing and changing, new life, feelings and emotions, keeping safe and making decisions. The strand 'Myself and Others' focuses on relationships with family, friends and other people.

There are huge benefits to the SPHE curriculum and the programmes that were developed alongside it. Having reviewed the literature, the children are taught about relevant and important issues to enhance the lives of the children. A significant concern with this is that there are only thirty minutes per week allocated for teaching SPHE at all class levels. This allocated time is insufficient to cover the curriculum objectives outlined in each programme. This puts a time constraint on the teacher as they may not be able to focus on particular topics which are important for their class. Given the abundance of resources available to support the curriculum objectives, greater allocation of instructional time is needed to teach SPHE.

The Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools (Department of Education, 2023) aligns with other curriculum areas such as SPHE and the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (Department of Education, 2018). This framework 'reflects educational priorities which society, at a point in time, deems important for its young citizens' (Department of Education and Skills, 1999b: 3). Social-emotional learning is an important factor in one of the key competencies of the framework 'Being well' (Meegan, 2023). This competency is concerned with the children being able to understand and appreciate wellbeing and being healthy, in particular socially and emotionally. It supports the need for healthy connections between themselves, others and the wider world. It also emphasises that children should be able to manage their emotions in various situations and environments. The increased time allocation in this framework is one significant improvement. Wellbeing is comprised of SPHE and Physical Education (PE). The allocated time for Junior Infants and Senior Infants is 2 hours 30 minutes, increasing to 3 hours for every other class level. The time will be divided between the subjects within Wellbeing, although an increase in instructional time is given to SPHE. This development is a positive move as it emphasises the importance of Wellbeing in the curriculum.

The Department of Education also published the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (Department of Education, 2018). This policy was published to support the wellbeing of children and young people in Ireland. It affirms the importance of schools in developing the wellbeing of young people given the substantial amount of time they spend there. The policy is relevant as it recognises that both cognitive skills and social and emotional skills are interconnected. There is a focus in the policy on the most effective measures that schools should implement to enhance wellbeing in their school community. Research undertaken by Durlak *et al.* (2011) aligns with the policies support of teaching social-emotional skills through programmes. The study revealed the benefits of social and emotional programmes noting the improvements in social and emotional skills and attitudes. The policy recognises that social and emotional programmes can be taught through the SPHE Curriculum.

There are huge positives to be found in the recent policy and framework that are currently available to schools in Ireland. There are also consistent similarities between social-emotional learning and wellbeing that is referred to in them. These offer useful guidelines to improve wellbeing but there is no pedagogy to support them. This aspect makes it difficult for teachers to implement the guidelines as they make no reference as to how they can be taught.

2.4 SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL FRAMEWORKS OUTSIDE OF IRELAND

Many countries outside of Ireland have implemented initiatives to improve social-emotional learning in schools. The recognition to provide all children with the best start is high on the political agenda in both the United Kingdom and the United States (Qualter, Gardner & Whiteley, 2007).

In the United Kingdom, Qualter, Gardner & Whiteley (2007) trace the development of the Every Child Matters (ECM) framework. This framework was set up to create opportunities

and services for children and young people to reach their potential. The need to develop the social-emotional skills of young people is inherent in the targets. Social-emotional learning in the United Kingdom is delivered through the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programme (Humphrey, Lendrum & Wigelsworth, 2013). The programme promotes five social and emotional aspects of learning which are influenced by Goleman's (1995) model of intelligence. The curriculum of the programme is delivered to the whole school, however there are different resources and materials for each year group (Hallam, 2009). Banerjee, Weare & Farr (2014) highlight that the programme is also delivered to small groups who may need to engage in targeted social and emotional learning. There are many benefits to this programme as the whole school is targeted to meet their needs. The structure of the programme ensures that five main social and emotional aspects of learning are focused on through the curriculum content. Conversely, research undertaken by Humphrey, Lendrum & Wigelsworth (2013) reported that the delivery of the programme varied significantly between schools. The structure of the programme is flexible, allowing for various approaches to implementation rather than following a fixed model. The flexibility of this model can shape the children's engagement with the programme.

In the United States, social-emotional learning initiatives are predominantly centred within schools and education. Qualter, Gardner & Whiteley (2007) highlight the commitment they show to ensure that all children are given a good quality education. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002) resulted in extra funding being provided to schools to improve teacher quality, resources and extra help with learning. There are currently thousands of social-emotional programmes that are based on the CASEL framework (2020) being used in American classrooms. The skills in the framework are explicitly modelled and taught to children in the programmes (Lau & Shea, 2024). Some programmes focus on creating an inclusive classroom environment. One such programme is the Caring School Community

Programme which was developed on the basis that children have basic psychological needs for belonging, autonomy and competence. A child's level of engagement in school is determined by their engagement in a classroom community as their basic needs are being met. The programme integrates academic subjects with social-emotional learning to create a safe classroom environment (Battistich et al., 1997). In the United States, programmes are also implemented by promoting specific social-emotional skills. Second Step Early Learning curriculum is delivered through daily activities and brain builder games to promote a specific skill (Upshur *et al.*, 2019). These programmes are hugely beneficial however (Barry, Clarke & Dowling, 2017) highlight the discrepancy between the research that has been undertaken to determine the impact of these interventions and their optimal implementation in a school. The programmes and initiatives that are currently in schools in the United Kingdom and the United States appear to have been implemented successfully. These programmes are highly effective in schools however there is limited guidance on how the programmes should be implemented. The initiatives are designed to be flexible to accommodate adaptability, but this can have an impact on how an educator implements the programmes. This adaptable nature also means that there is limited research on intervention outcomes as they are different in every school context.

2.5 THE NEED FOR SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Research consistently indicates the positive effects that social-emotional learning can have on children. Many studies have shown that schools who foster pupils social-emotional learning are more likely to enhance children's social, emotional and academic development (Greenberg *et al.*, 2017; Taylor *et al.*, 2017; Durlak *et al.*, 2011; Weare & Nind, 2011).

Durlak *et al.* (2011) conducted a meta-analysis study on the impact of universal school-based interventions in 213 schools, mainly in the United States. The study found that there were significant improvements in schools when universal school-based interventions were

implemented. Children demonstrated an improved attitude towards self, school and others. There was an increase in emotional and social intelligence amongst the children. This review also found a significant improvement in children's academic performance with an 11-percentile gain in achievement.

Internationally, Weare & Nind (2011) conducted a review on 52 systematic reviews of social and emotional skills-based interventions implemented in schools. The interventions had beneficial effects on children, their families and communities. The study identified interventions targeting social and emotional competencies were reported to have moderate to strong effects. Zins *et al.* (2007) maintain a similar idea as they emphasise the critical role of social-emotional learning programmes in schools. The absence of social-emotional learning problems in schools is often associated with higher rates of problematic behaviour. Schools are more likely to experience poor academic performance, lack of commitment, attendance and discipline issues. These studies demonstrate the positive outcomes that are associated with implementing social-emotional learning programmes in schools.

Social-emotional learning has a central role in improving lifelong wellbeing and outcomes. Taylor *et al.* (2017) carried out a meta-analysis review on the durability of the impact of social-emotional learning programmes. The study had consistent positive outcomes for all demographic groups including children from diverse family backgrounds and ethnic groups. Significant positive outcomes were demonstrated in social and emotional skills, attitudes and measures of well-being.

One area of interest in the literature for this research study is the impact of social-emotional learning on children across different socio-economic backgrounds. The action research was carried out in a school which is part of the DEIS programme, which aims to reduce educational disadvantages in schools (Department of Education and Skills, 2017). Many of the studies that have been carried out have indicated that fostering social-emotional learning

among socially disadvantaged students does not reduce educational inequality or attainment gaps (Damian *et al*, 2015; Gruijters, Raabe & Hübner, 2024). Gruijters, Raabe & Hübner (2024) conducted a study to investigate the extent to which differences in social-emotional skills can contribute to the achievement gap between children from socioeconomically advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds. Socioeconomically advantaged children were seen to have a higher level of socio-emotional skills. Socioeconomically disadvantaged children had lower levels of socio-emotional skills. In saying this, the influence of social-emotional skills on academic achievement was consistent for children from both socio-economic backgrounds. The authors argue that initiatives to promote social-emotional learning are unlikely to substantially reduce educational inequality. In contrast, the study conducted by Damian *et al.* (2015) supported the idea that social-emotional skills can contribute to educational equality. Children that have emotional intelligence are likely to close the gap on others with an educational advantage. Teaching social-emotional skills can improve their emotional intelligence to reduce educational inequality.

Several literature studies indicate that social-emotional learning should begin from a young age (Denham & Brown, 2010; Ashtown & Bernard, 2012; Livaccari, 2013). Denham & Brown (2010) argue that children begin to develop self-awareness in early childhood. They are aware as to whether they are proficient with their letters and numbers in an early years setting. This early development of self-awareness positively influences a child's lifelong learning as it gives them the confidence to take risks in the classroom when participating or attempting a task. Another study conducted by Ashtown & Bernard (2010) investigated the effect of a social and emotional learning curriculum *You Can Do It! Early Childhood Education Program (YCDI)* on young participants. The study reported that the children who had lower reading levels in the class before the programme displayed greater gains in their reading levels after the programme. In the study conducted by Denham & Brown (2010)

they argued that children who can regulate their emotions can focus on their learning. Whereas the primary focus for children who have trouble regulating their emotions is on learning how to handle their feelings effectively. Livaccari (2013) emphasise the importance of integrating social-emotional programmes in the early years. This will empower children from a young age and have a lasting impact on their entire educational experience. These studies emphasise the importance of teaching social-emotional skills to children from an early age and the impact of this on their academic success.

The significant benefits of teaching social-emotional skills to children is apparent from reviewing the literature. Children begin to develop social-emotional skills from a young age which can have an impact on their lifelong wellbeing and academic success. The studies highlight the positive outcomes for all children across diverse backgrounds.

2.6 BRIDGING THEORY AND PRACTICE IN THE CLASSROOM

There are many key characteristics of effective social-emotional interventions that have been identified in the literature. The scope and implementation of social-emotional learning vary widely from one school to another. Social-emotional learning programmes range from using a whole school approach to programmes that target specific children needing more support (Carroll *et al.*, 2020). These programmes are commonly referred to as social-emotional learning programmes (CASEL, 2020), or life skills programmes (Botvin & Griffin, 2014) in the literature. Skald *et al.* (2012) outline the variations in the programmes that are delivered. Some programmes focus on teaching specific skills to prevent problematic behaviour. Other programmes enhance specific social-emotional skills to encourage children to make positive choices in their actions. Wellbeing can even be taught through social-emotional learning programmes. Many of the skills are in line with the current SPHE curriculum (Meegan, 2023).

An interesting report was compiled by Jones and Bouffard (2012) emphasising that social-emotional learning is most effective when it is embedded into the daily interactions between the children and teachers in a school community. The teaching and reinforcement of social-emotional skills should be integrated using strategies that are meaningful and sustained. Billy & Garriguez (2021) advocate for a similar approach as daily check-ins have become more common in classrooms. They argue for a curriculum that embeds daily social-emotional instruction, recognising that teachers are monitoring both the academic and social-emotional progress of pupils in a classroom. Current social-emotional programmes often require large blocks of time to implement and frequently do not align with the specific needs and circumstances of schools. This will be explored further at a later stage in this chapter. I kept my core values of care, respect and relationships in mind to decide on an intervention that would be most suitable to enhance the social-emotional skills of the children in my classroom. This idea of implementing an intervention that could be used on a daily basis was an area that I wanted to explore further.

One intervention was particularly appealing due to its potential for daily integration within my classroom context. Morning meetings are a practice that is part of the Responsive Classroom (RC) approach. The Northeast Foundation for Children (NEFC) developed the Responsive Classroom approach to enhance social-emotional learning in classrooms. The aim of the approach is to improve the overall wellbeing of pupils and benefit them academically (Cline *et al.*, 2023). The Responsive Classroom is an instructional approach which integrates academic and social skills into the everyday classroom (Northeast Foundation for Children, 2014). It focuses on the holistic development of the child as the social curriculum is seen just as important as the academic curriculum (Winterman & Sapona, 2002). Bruce *et al.* (2006) found that participation in morning meetings enhanced children's social, communication and academic skills. The methodology of morning

meetings was appealing to me as there is an emphasis on the importance of including social-emotional learning in the classroom every day.

Morning meetings are structured into four main components. Whilst reviewing the literature I was drawn to the authors Bondy & Ketts (2001) as they provide a foundational source which emphasises each component of a morning meeting. The first component is the *Greeting*. This component allows children to build relationships with others as they gain a sense of belonging and practice their verbal and non-verbal communications skills. *Sharing* is the second component of Morning Meetings. Children are developing crucial skills such as listening, taking turns and asking questions that are relevant. The *Group Activity* is the third component of the meeting. The aim of this activity is to promote identity within the group and co-operation among peers. Games may be academic or can focus on a certain skill. The fourth component *News and Announcements* is the final part of the meeting. The teacher may share a message for the day or reinforce a skill that the children have been focusing on. The final component is described by the authors as a transition back to the classroom environment.

There are many benefits to morning meetings and their impact on social-emotional learning. Research undertaken by Abry, Rimm-Kaufman & Curby (2017) found that classrooms who used morning meetings demonstrated a higher quality of emotional interactions. Children can share enjoyment and make conversation with one another when they are taking part in activities that are the same. The sharing component can also contribute to a respectful relationship between peers as they are listening and learning about their peers during this time. Morning meetings are advantageous as they can be used in multiple settings. The benefits of morning meetings are discussed by Bruce *et al.* (2006), as they can be implemented in various settings with diverse needs and learners. Children can express themselves using diverse communication methods, for example using sign language and

output devices. Pupils can greet each other in different languages to accommodate the linguistic diversity within the classroom. Morning meetings can also be inclusive for pupils with different learning styles. Music, drama and visual arts can be incorporated to meet the diverse learning needs of pupils.

There are necessary components for successful implementation of social-emotional learning interventions. These components were strongly considered when implementing morning meetings. The literature emphasises the importance of teachers being competent in delivering social-emotional instruction and to have a clear understanding of their own social-emotional capabilities (Collie, Shapka & Perry, 2012). Kaspar & Massey (2023) argue that teaching social-emotional skills can become demanding when teachers are not aware of their own comfort level. This literature also draws attention to the importance of planning and preparation for morning meetings (Cline *et al.*, 2023). The meetings will require rigour and confidence to implement the initiative. Another area considered in the literature is that teachers must take the time to create an ideal learning environment for social-emotional learning to take place in the classroom (Kaspar & Massey, 2023). Children must feel supported in the classroom to foster this learning environment (Elias, 2014). This author also emphasises that the learning environment must reflect the values being taught in the intervention. Children learning about respecting one another, must see these values being actively practiced in their school community. These factors were considered when implementing the intervention in my classroom.

While there is a growing amount of literature on morning meetings there appears to be a lack of research on implementing the practice in a classroom. There are multiple sources that outline the intervention and the benefits to the intervention which are supported with studies. However, the lack of research in implementing the intervention is one main concern

in this area. This can be difficult to determine the challenges and the ideal implementation of the intervention.

2.7 DAILY IMPLEMENTATION OF SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN THE CLASSROOM

There is a growing amount of literature demonstrating the benefits of social-emotional programmes and interventions. There appears to be a gap in the research on interventions that can be embedded into the classroom on a daily basis. Studies reveal that social-emotional interventions are delivered on a weekly basis or as an isolated programme. This study will help to further develop research on the sustained daily use of an intervention in the classroom.

There are currently many social-emotional programmes and interventions that are implemented in schools in Ireland. The programmes Incredible Years, Zippy's Friends and Friends for Life were developed to support well-being in schools. These programmes are a great benefit to children however, one main concern with the programmes is that they are a heavy burden to implement in the classroom (Bailey et al., 2019). They often have heavy curricula that are challenging to implement on a daily basis. The Zippys Friends Programme is one such approach often used in Irish Classrooms to promote wellbeing. This programme is taught over twenty four weeks, using weekly lessons that are based on tasks and discussions about Zippy and his cartoon friends and family (Holen *et al.*, 2012). The FRIENDS for Life programme is another programme commonly used as a behavioural intervention for children and young people. This programme runs over ten weeks with two booster sessions provided after the initial programme ends (Liddle & MacMillan, 2010). These programmes are delivered over several weeks which can impose a significant burden on teachers. The allocated time for the curricula subject SPHE is thirty minutes per week which has been highlighted previously. This places additional pressure on the teacher to implement a programme and focus on the curriculum objectives.

Research has highlighted the growing need to develop social-emotional interventions that can be incorporated into a classroom everyday (Bailey *et al.*, 2019; Jones & Bouffard, 2012). The burden of a programme with a heavy curriculum can appear daunting for teachers. Interventions that can be used on a daily basis will be easier to implement (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Bailey *et al.* (2019) maintain a similar idea as they see more benefits to teachers implementing social-emotional strategies into their daily routines. Children are given more opportunities to practice their social-emotional skills on a daily basis which can create consistency in a classroom context. A flexible daily approach that can be implemented in any context allows teachers to use opportunities or address challenges as they arise. The focus moves from the curricula and lessons that usually need to be implemented in social-emotional programmes. Jones & Bouffard (2012) outline guiding principles in their report for this integrated approach to social-emotional interventions. Social and emotional skills should be seen just as important as academic skills, create consistency with the intervention, classrooms and schools should work together and relationships are important to develop social and emotional skills. There is a strong correlation between these guiding principles and the Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools (Department of Education, 2023). However, there are no recommended interventions suggested in the framework to apply this.

The intervention that I implemented in my classroom is rarely explored in literature. The various studies have focused on programmes that are implemented over a number of weeks. The gap in the research is related to interventions that can be adopted on a daily basis in the classroom. The research aims to enhance the literature on the effectiveness of these interventions to enhance social-emotional learning.

2.8 CONCLUSION

Social-emotional Learning is just as important as any other curricula area. The growing studies and frameworks in Ireland are hugely beneficial to support this idea in an Irish classroom. There are currently many initiatives and programmes being implemented in schools across the world. The literature studies have shown the positive effects of these programmes on children who have participated in them. Significant improvements in behaviour and social-emotional skills have been observed amongst teachers and researchers. There are currently social-emotional learning initiatives and programmes taking place in primary schools across Ireland. The Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools (2023) will encourage teachers to place a greater emphasis on Wellbeing in their classrooms. This research study enhances social-emotional learning focusing on an initiative to ensure children can access social-emotional learning every day in the classroom.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines the research methodology that was chosen to carry out this self-study. This study employs a self-study action research approach with the dual focus of enhancing the social-emotional skills of pupils and improving my practice as a teacher. By engaging in action research, educators can critically examine their practice to deepen their understanding of their approaches and enhance their teaching practice (Glenn *et al.*, 2023). Morning meetings were the specific intervention implemented in this self-study, which appealed to me as I could use it in my classroom on a daily basis. There were two action research cycles in this study distinguished by their reflective approach namely Schöns reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action model (1983) and Brookfield's Four Lenses of Critical Reflection (2017). Critical reflection allows for the 'sustained and intentional process of identifying and checking the accuracy and validity of our teaching assumptions' (Brookfield, 2017:21). Reflective practice allowed me to gain valuable insights into the action research cycles and identify strategies that were working well. A range of data collection tools were employed for this study which included student questionnaires (baseline and endline), teacher reflective journal, student reflective journals, teacher observations and critical friend feedback. Ethical considerations are discussed in the chapter specifically relating to the area of vulnerability and sensitivity, informed consent and assent, data storage and power dynamics. My values are considered throughout the chapter as I reflect on my ontological and epistemological values which form the basis of my research.

3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

The key question guiding this research is *'How can I improve the social-emotional skills of pupils in a primary school classroom?'*.

The objectives of the study include:

- To model strategies to children that improve their social-emotional skills.
- To enrich my understanding and teaching of social-emotional learning to enable me to support children in their development of social-emotional skills.
- To explore the effectiveness of morning meetings as an intervention to improve social-emotional skills.

3.3 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The methodology underpinning a research study is guided by the researchers purposes, attitudes and reasons (McNiff, 2013). McDonagh *et al.* (2019) maintain a similar idea arguing that a research methodology is shaped by the underlying research paradigm. A research paradigm is a way of interpreting a 'world view' (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018:8), which can heavily influence a choice of methodology. Action research is the paradigm guiding this research and the research that I aim to achieve in this study. This particular methodology aligns with my values which will be explored further in detail in this chapter.

3.3.1 WHAT IS ACTION RESEARCH?

Action research is typically carried out in a classroom, school or community as educators want to improve their pedagogy and practice (Clark *et al.*, 2024). Action research is the chosen methodology in this research study as it provides me, as a researcher, with the opportunity to study my own work. This type of research enables teachers to better understand and make improvements to their practice (Sullivan *et al.*, 2016). Action research can lead to changes in how people approach their work, deepen their understanding of their practice and improve the conditions in which they work (Kemmis, 2009). I chose action research as the methodology is best suited to answer the research questions in this study. Action research also allows me to examine my own practice with the intention of enhancing it for others. When a researcher acts with purposeful educational intent in the present, they

can influence the future experiences of others (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). McNiff and Whitehead (2010) claim that action researchers can use their learning to improve behaviours which can influence others to change their behaviour in society. Action research has one core aspect which is that it is about ‘enhancing one’s practice, learning from that process and generating theory from it’, which can influence the practice of others in a similar setting (Glenn *et al.*, 2023: 16).

3.3.2 CRITIQUE OF ACTION RESEARCH

Action research is often considered an abstract process or a series of procedures that must be implemented in one’s practice. McNiff (2013: 24) denies this construct of action research as ‘it rejects the values of autonomy, independent thinking and accountability’ that are associated with this model of research. Sullivan *et al.* (2016) argue that action research is when a researcher examines their own practice through action and reflection, which complements this idea. Action research is not a methodology ‘that leads to harmonious thought and action but to a problematic practice of coming to know through struggle’ (McNiff, 2002:3). There are many different models or cycles of Action Research. However, the core components of Action Research remain the same. Action research is usually represented in a spiral or cyclical illustration. Kurt Lewin, a widely recognised founder of action research believed there were four stages. These four key stages are planning, acting, observing and reflecting (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). The Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) action research cycle best represents the research undertaken in this study. The key stages of the model are outlined in the diagram overleaf:

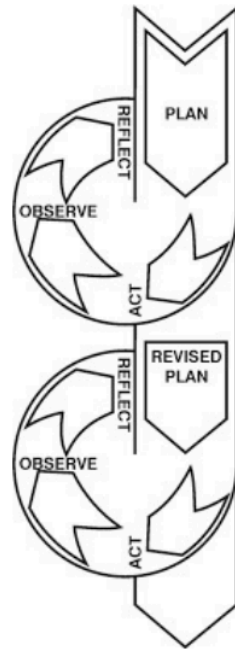


Figure 3.1: Kemmis and McTaggart Spiral Model of Action Research (1988)

3.4 CRITICAL REFLECTION IN ACTION RESEARCH

Critical reflection is central in action research. Action research allows a researcher to learn through action and reflection (McNiff, 2013). The researcher can critically reflect on their practice and any assumptions that they have made about their work (Glenn *et al.*, 2017). I used two reflective approaches, Schön's reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action model (1983) and Brookfield's Four Lenses of Critical Reflection (2017), to critically examine my own practice and the intervention carried out in this study. Critical thinking as part of an action research study allows a researcher to critique and problematise their everyday practice. Action research encourages a researcher to critically explore their practice to enhance and gain new insights into it (Sullivan *et al.*, 2016). Zeichner & Liston (2014) cite Dewey (1933) who says that teachers that are unreflective about their practice rely on familiar approaches that have already been established for them. This may dissuade teachers

to seek out new approaches in their practice. When educators take part in action research it empowers them to critically examine their practice. Critically reflecting on our practice can reveal that we are not in fact living closely to our values. We may experience that we are a 'living contradiction', which is a term coined by Whitehead (1989). This implies that the reality of our practice may not align with the values that we wish to show in our classroom (Glenn *et al.*, 2023). Sullivan *et al.* (2016: 46) recommend using a reflective journal as it 'heightens your awareness of what is actually happening for you in your workplace'. I will explore the reflective approaches that were used in my teacher reflective journal in the next part of this chapter.

3.4.1 SCHÖN'S REFLECTION-IN-ACTION AND REFLECTION-ON-ACTION

Schön's reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (1983) reflective approach guided the analysis of my intervention during the first cycle of this study. This model of reflection was chosen to reflect on my practice through a personal lens. Zeichner & Liston (2014) make reference to Schöns reflective approach stating that reflection can be viewed through two reflective frames. The first frame is reflection-on-action which occurs before or after an action. I regularly reflected before and after morning meetings in my teacher reflective journal (Figure 3.2). Sullivan *et al.* (2016: 54) suggests to briefly record incidents throughout the day that 'cause you concern to wonder about something that is happening in your workplace'. These ideas can be used to reflect in a journal at a quieter time at the end of a school day. The second frame is reflection-in-action which happens during a lesson, or in this case during a morning meeting. This frame is used to solve problems as they happen in time (Zeichner & Liston, 2014). I recorded reflection-in-action responses in my journal (Figure 3.3) which depicted the actions that were taken at the time. Reflection-on-action is a reflection model which aims to use past experiences to improve current practice. Whereas reflection-in-action is when a professional examines their practice as it happens in the

moment (Finlay, 2008). This reflective approach allowed me to examine my own practice, however, I felt that it didn't encourage me to question beyond my own assumptions. In the second cycle of this self-study I adopted another reflective approach when reflecting in my journal.

01.10.24
Today, the children were more settled. Yesterday they found the day hard. They were not listening as well and they were finding it hard to get back into the routine. Looking back, I felt that the children were doing many writing activities during the day. They find writing tasks a challenge as a class. The lessons were differentiated by outcome and support. Going back in today I wanted to be mindful of this. I planned an active lesson in Gaelic to start

Figure 3.2: An example of Schöns reflection-on-action in my reflective journal

11th February 2025
Are we being kind?
This morning started on a very positive note today. A teacher came into my classroom to let me know that our class had received a star. The teacher had noticed that the whole class were making an effort to say "Good Morning" to the teacher as she welcomed them in the door. She had noticed this about my class on a previous week so she awarded them a star today. We spoke with the teacher as a class and how they got a star. One child said that "I was being kind". Another child said "It is important to greet someone nicely". After the teacher came in we started our morning meeting. We spoke about getting the star and how we have been practising greeting each other in morning meetings. As part of the activity we spoke about kind and unkind scenarios. I made the scenarios that occur in the classroom often as part of the activity for example "giving someone a 'look'" "stealing someone's 'Friday treat'". There was a lot of conversation surrounding the ideas. I.C. "That happened when someone took my ring" as we spoke about taking someone's things. ED connected with making fun of someone as "Everyone laughed at me yesterday when I asked to spell a word". This connection with the activity made it more meaningful for the children. After the meeting one child gave another child a 'look' at the

Figure 3.3: An example Schöns reflection-in-action in my reflective journal

3.4.2 BROOKFIELD'S FOUR LENSES OF CRITICAL REFLECTION

Brookfield's Four of Critical Reflection (2017) were used in the second cycle of this study. This lens of reflection was adopted to encourage me to think beyond my own assumptions. It enabled me to consider the perspectives of others, through reading literature, listening to students and collaborating with colleagues. Brookfield (2017: 7) identifies four lenses in his critical reflective model to encourage critical reflection and unravel assumptions. These lenses are: 'Students' eyes', 'Colleagues perceptions' 'Personal experiences' and 'theory and research'. Using these lenses, I deepened my understanding of my own practice and the intervention used in this study. Brookfield's Four Lenses of Critical Reflection (2017) are used to examine our teaching assumptions which are implicit understandings that we have about the world. These assumptions influence the actions and decisions that we make (Brookfield, 2017). The four lenses show different parts of our teaching, 'providing multiple perspectives on what we think and do' (Brookfield, 2017: 67). The perspectives that are illuminated in each lens are outlined by Sullivan *et al.* (2016). The focus of the autobiographical lens is on examining the researcher's own thinking and learning in their practice. The student lens can illuminate the understanding and ideas of students. Collaborations with colleagues enables a researcher to questions assumptions and gain another perspective on their practice. This combined with the theory and practice lens allows a researcher ground their assumptions in literature. These four lenses give the researcher multiple perspectives on their practice, which deepened my understanding in this study.

3.5 SELF-STUDY ACTION RESEARCH

This study is considered self-study action research as it is 'an enquiry by the self into the self, with others acting as co-researchers and critical learning partners' (McNiff, 2013: 23). McDonagh *et al.* (2019) highlight the importance of self as it is an enquiry into a researchers

practice which is driven by an inclination to explore certain aspects of their practice. Each teacher creates their own learning opportunities based on their unique experiences and circumstances (Glenn, 2017). Sullivan *et al.* (2016) emphasise the significance of the researchers values in self-study action research, as it is a critical reflection of their practice. Self-study action research involves critically reflecting on ones practice, whilst also working alongside other participants in the research. This is an important area to consider as the children were co-participants in the research, and I worked alongside critical friends in the study.

3.5.1 WHY DID I CHOOSE SELF-STUDY ACTION RESEARCH?

This self-study enabled me to critically examine my own practice. At the beginning of the study, it was important that I could identify my values as a researcher (Sullivan *et al.*, 2016). I took the time to consider the values that are important to me in my educational practice. This study was guided by my commitment to my values of care, respect and relationships. The next stage was to identify an area of focus for this self-study action research. This focus must be ‘driven by a sense of curiosity or even of dissatisfaction with some aspect of your practice’ (McDonagh *et al.*, 2019:11). Through critical reflection I realised that a change was needed in my practice as I was experiencing myself as a living contradiction (Whitehead, 2009). I identified a problem in my practice through teacher observation and critical reflection in my teacher reflective journal. My values were not aligning with the classroom environment that I wanted to create and it went unnoticed in the busy rhythm of daily teaching. I wanted to foster a classroom environment where children were given the time to develop their social-emotional skills. A self-study approach allowed me to create an intervention that would target the concern of enhancing the social-emotional skills of the children and create a ‘living theory’ (Whitehead, 2009) that aligns with my values. There were two action research cycles in this self-study. These cycles involved planning, acting,

observing the action, gathering data and analysing the data. Eventually all of the data that was collected from this research was analysed and a claim to knowledge was made (McNiff, 2016). Self-study action research was meaningful to me as the research could be carried out in my classroom, it aligned with my values and it could enhance my practice as an educator.

3.6 THE ROLE OF VALUES IN ACTION RESEARCH

Self-study action research was chosen because it aligns with both my educational commitments and my educational values as a teacher. In action research, the values held by the researcher play a crucial role in the research process as beliefs and values inform their actions. Researchers take action in the direction of their values and transform their values into living practices (Glenn *et al.*, 2023). The quality of action research is determined by the degree to which a researcher can demonstrate that their actions align with their personal values (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). Before starting my research, it was important that I could identify my epistemological and ontological values. Critical reflection was crucial for the initial stages of the self-study. It allowed me to examine my actions and question assumptions about my practice (Brookfield, 2017) This allowed me to unravel my core values in my educational practice. Epistemological and ontological values will be explored further in the next part of this chapter.

3.6.1 EPISTEMOLOGICAL VALUES

Epistemological values are concerned with what one considers important when it comes to knowledge and the creation of knowledge (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). Buber (1970) argues that knowledge is co-constructed and created through dialogue with others. Whereas Foucault and Gordon (1980) viewed the individual who imparts knowledge as holding privilege and power over others (Cited in McDonagh *et al.*, 2019). McNiff (2013) argues that in action research knowledge is generated from the researchers own living experiences. This research project provided me with the opportunity to challenge what I propose I value

and whether this is my living experience in the classroom. Action researchers view knowledge as ever-changing, continuously advancing as new experiences and ideas emerge (McNiff, 2013).

3.6.2 ONTOLOGICAL VALUES

Ontological values are concerned with how we perceive ourselves and how that influences how we see others (Sullivan *et al.*, 2016). Action researchers aim to actively contribute to shaping what they believe are better societies influenced by their ontological values. It involves a commitment to the idea that their learning will benefit society (McNiff, 2013). This study was underpinned by my commitment to my three core values of care, respect and relationships. This research encompassed my values and transformed my research into a living theory. McNiff (2013) argues that the researcher must play a central role in the action for living theory to emerge. They must be able to evaluate their own practice before critiquing others. This was significant for my research to ensure that my practice aligned with, rather than contradict with my values. The goal of this self-study action research was to prepare my pupils for the future. This study provided pupils with the opportunity to learn important social-emotional skills that they can use beyond the classroom.

3.7 RESEARCH DESIGN

The following section will provide a detailed overview of the research setting including a description of the participants of the study, a description of the research intervention and a summary of the action research cycles undertaken during the study.

3.7.1 RESEARCH SETTING

The aim of educational action research is to make ‘a situation such as a classroom or whole school system better by responding to the continuous need for development or change’ (Bradbury, Lewis & Columbia, 2019: 33). This research was conducted in an urban DEIS Band Two primary school. There are approximately 600 pupils enrolled in the school. The

Senior Management team includes a principal and non-teaching deputy principal. Other staff include 26 mainstream class teachers, 14 special education teachers and 12 special needs assistants. There are 26 mainstream classes and 3 Autism classes on site in the school. The school ethos of respect is deeply embedded in the school's culture.

3.7.2 RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

The participants involved in action research typically include teachers, students, parents, school board members and administrative staff. These research participants engage in repeated processes of inquiry within their school system (Bradbury, Lewis & Columbia, 2019). The research participants of this study included twenty-four first class pupils, ranging between six to eight years of age. The class consisted of eleven boys and thirteen girls. There were twenty-three first class pupils directly involved in my research. The Board of Management, principal and the children's parents/guardians were involved in the research as part of the consent process. Pseudonyms were assigned to the children to protect their anonymity. Data was collected from co-participants and critical friends in order to assess my own professional practice. Fellow staff members formed part of the critical friend group. The critical friend group was used for the purpose of rigour and validation of the research.

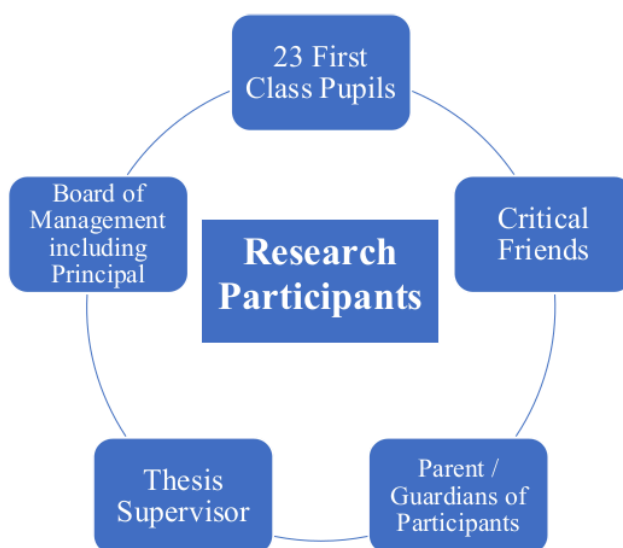


Figure 3.4: Overview of Research Participants

3.7.3 RESEARCH INTERVENTION

The following diagrams outline the timeline of the research (Figure 3.5) and the action research plan (Figure 3.6) that was undertaken during the research process.

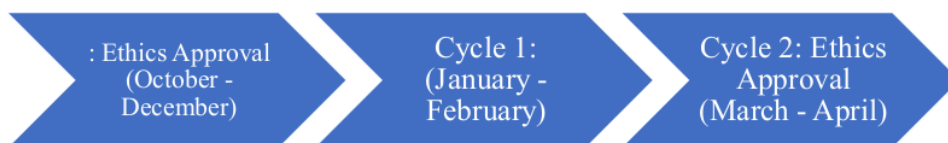


Figure 3.5: Research Timeline

Time Frame	Plan	Aim
September 2024 – December 2025	Identify values and research topic. Prepare and request ethics approval from Maynooth University. Distribute letters of consent and assent to the board of management, parents and children.	To prepare for the Self-Study Action Research
Early January 2025	Discuss concept of research with the class. Plan morning meetings. Distribute pre-questionnaire to children.	To share the research plan with others and gather baseline data
(Cycle 1) January 2025 – February 2025	Start morning meetings for the first action research cycle, for six weeks. Implement intervention using Schöns reflective approach. Record observations in a teacher reflective journal. Record in student reflective journals. Record feedback and observations from critical friends.	To begin to develop the social-emotional skills of the pupils in my class and align my values to my practice.
(Cycle 2) March 2025 – April 2025	Continue morning meetings for the second action research cycle, for six weeks. Implement intervention	To continue to develop the social-emotional skills of the pupils in my class and

	using Brookfield's four lenses. Distribute post-questionnaire to children.	align my values to my practice.
May 2025– June 2025	Analyse data findings.	To examine the findings of the research.

Figure 3.6: Research Design

3.7.4 ACTION RESEARCH ETHICS APPROVAL

This action research cycle began by gaining ethical approval from Maynooth University. The research was discussed with all of the relevant gate keepers of the research, including the Board of Management. The research was explained to the parents and guardians of the children emphasising that the aim of the research was to enhance my practice as a teacher. This was also explained to the children in an age-appropriate manner. Consent and assent forms were then given to these participants of the study. These forms were collected and stored in a locked file cabinet in the classroom. I met with my critical friends at this time to discuss the planned actions in the research. The children took a pre-questionnaire before the research cycles began in the next stage of the study.

3.7.5 ACTION RESEARCH CYCLE ONE

The first cycle of the action research started at the end of January. This cycle took place over six weeks. The children were aware that the morning meetings were going to commence in the class. They were reminded that they had a right to withdraw at any stage of the research. The morning meetings which were approximately twenty minutes in length were held daily in the classroom. An individualised student reflective journal was given to each child. Pre-designed tasks were given to the children to focus the reflections in their journals (Appendix J). During the day, I wrote down notes of any observations that were made by myself or critical friends. These notes were used to reflect in my teacher reflective journal at the end of each day. One significance of this cycle is that Schöns reflection-in-action and reflection-

on-action model (1983) was the reflective approach used in my teacher reflective journal. A different reflective approach was implemented in the next stage of the cycle.

3.7.6 ACTION RESEARCH CYCLE TWO

The second cycle of the action research started in March, which took place over six weeks. I discussed my first action research cycle with my thesis supervisor. I also met with critical friends to discuss the first cycle of the study with them. Morning meetings continued to take place every morning in the classroom. The children used their student reflective journals and observations were recorded in my teacher reflective journal. The reflective approach utilised in the second cycle was Brookfield's Four Lenses of Critical Reflection (2017) which deepened my understanding of the research. When the second cycle of research was finished the children completed a post-cycle questionnaire. All the data from both cycles was collected in preparation for data analysis.

3.7.7 MORNING MEETINGS

Morning Meetings were the methodology chosen for this self-study action research. These morning meetings took place in the classroom daily, with the intention of improving the social-emotional skills of the children in my classroom (Cline *et al.*, 2023). They were carefully planned and focused on a specific social-emotional theme (See Appendix H). The themes that were targeted were respect, kindness, friendship, teamwork, emotional skills and self-regulation. These themes were chosen as I used initial observations at the start of the study to determine the areas the children needed to focus on in class. There are four components of a morning meeting which include a greeting, sharing, activity and morning message (Poplawski, 2023). In every morning meeting I planned for each of these components ensuring that they were relevant to the theme being addressed in the meeting (See Appendix I).

3.8 DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS

A qualitative data approach was used to collect data for this study. McDonagh *et al.* (2019) argue that a teacher can evaluate the appropriateness of their data collection methods on three levels. The first level is whether the collection method is applicable in your classroom. The second level is whether the method is relevant to the topic and conceptual framework. Finally a researcher's values must be central in deciding a suitable data collection method. The use of different data collection tools can be a valuable form of triangulation in a research study. The researcher can compare and contrast different perspectives from each data tool (McAteer, 2013). With this taken into perspective, the data methods used in this research self-study action research were: teacher observation, teacher and student reflective journals, questionnaires and critical friends.

3.8.1 OBSERVATION

Observations involve the researcher directly witnessing events or behaviours as they happen. The observations can range from the very structured and systematic approach to the semi-structured and naturalistic approach (Denscombe, 2010). In a structured observation, the observer knows what they are specifically looking to measure or observe. An unstructured observation involves observing events or behaviours as they happen naturally without predetermined criteria (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). Campbell, McNamara and Gilroy (2004:94) say that 'simply noticing events can also provide insight into situations'. A combination of structured and semi-structured observations methods were used in this research. Semi-structured observations were recorded during morning meetings with a focus on the children's interactions and discussions (Appendix K). I also used observation notes to record the development of the children's social-emotional skills. The children were observed on their behaviour and interactions in class and on yard. These observations were reflected upon in my teacher reflective journal. In the second cycle of this self-study action research I used Brookfield's Four Lenses of Critical Reflection (2017) which provided me

with multiple perspectives of my practice (Brookfield, 2017). I reflected on observations that were made by myself as the researcher and from my critical friends.

3.8.2 CRITICAL FRIEND GROUP

Collaboration is one of the key features of a self-study action research. Critical friends, as described by McNiff (2013:23) are 'critical learning partners'. This implies that they have an important role in the research particularly in relation to the data collection. Critical friends listen to your ideas and encourage you to question assumptions about your practice in a supportive way (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). I met with my critical friends (two colleagues) at different stages during the research process. My critical friends were crucial in this study as they asked questions about the study and suggested their ideas. These critical friends also gave valuable contributions on how the children were interacting on the yard or any observations that they made during the school day. I allowed my critical friends to share their opinions without any bias to ensure validity of the data. In cycle one of the research study I reflected on a more personal perspective using Schöns reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (1983) reflective approach. In the second cycle of the research, Brookfield's Four Lenses of Critical Reflection (2017) encouraged me to reflect on the ideas and observations that were shared to me by my critical friends.

3.8.3 QUESTIONNAIRES

Questionnaires are widely used in research to gather information specifically related to a particular area of research (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). Questionnaires were used in this study to assess the children's social-emotional skills. I used the likert scale (1932) because it best suited the questions I wanted to ask in the questionnaire. A likert scale 'provides a range of responses to a given question or statement' (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018: 480). The children were given the choices 'a lot like me', 'a little like me' and 'not like me at all (Figure 3.7). Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2018) argue that providing

participants fewer positions on the scale can give them little choice. However, given the age of the participants in this study I felt that a simpler scale would enable them to provide more reliable responses in the questionnaires. A pre-intervention questionnaire was distributed to the children at the beginning of action research cycle one. At the end of action research cycle two a post-intervention questionnaire was distributed to the participants. The baseline and endline data was compared to determine the changes in the responses of the questionnaires.

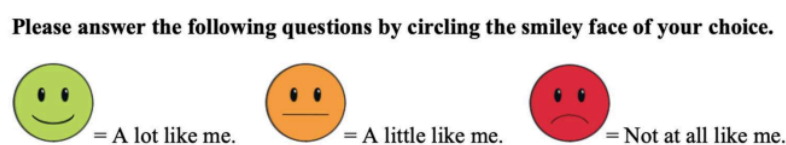


Figure 3.7: Responses for the Student Questionnaire

3.8.4 REFLECTIVE JOURNAL

Self-reflection is a powerful form of data in an action research study (McNiff, 2010). Self-reflection allows the researcher to critically reflect on their practice and demonstrate how their thinking has changed. A reflective journal is a suitable method for self-reflection which is supported by Sullivan *et al.* 's (2016: 41) belief that a reflective journal acts as a mirror allowing a researcher to take a step back from their practice and develop 'a new awareness of what is happening in your everyday work'. My reflective journal was a valuable data source and provided the foundation for my research. I reflected in my journal using two different reflective approaches. In cycle one, I used Schöns reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (1983) reflective approach. In cycle two, I applied Brookfield's Four Lenses of Critical Reflection (2017) drawing on my own personal experience, the perspectives of colleagues and students and relevant theoretical viewpoints. Lougran (2006:

85) says that a reflective journal is 'a window into your own pedagogical thoughts and actions'. My reflective journal became central to shaping the direction and findings of my study. The journal gave me an insight into the realities of my classroom practice.

3.9 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This research followed a highly rigorous ethical standard. There are important ethical guidelines to uphold when conducting action research (McNiff, 2016). Teachers conducting research are doing so within a learning community. Sullivan *et al.* (2016) say that a learning community are teachers, students, professional colleagues and others who must be treated ethically. This study was guided by the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education Ethics Policy and Maynooth University Ethics Policy. In the Master of Education: Research in Practice Student Handbook, 2024-2025 'It is imperative that the ethics and integrity of research are beyond question as the individual has a responsibility not only to him/herself but also to society' (McLoughlin, 2024). I abided by the professional guidelines of the Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (2017), Guidance for Developing Ethical Research Projects Involving Children (2012), Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA) (2024) and Data Protection Act (2018). The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the school's child protection policy was also considered throughout the research study. The various ethical concerns which were important in this research were: Informed Consent and Assent, Validity and Reliability, Principled Sensitivity and Data Storage. These ethical concerns will be outlined in more detail in the next part of this chapter.

3.9.1 ETHICS APPROVAL

This Self-Study Action Research was approved by the Froebel Department Research and Ethics Committee of Maynooth University. I sent an ethics proposal form to the committee which outlined my proposed action plan for this study.

3.9.2 INFORMED CONSENT AND ASSENT

Consent is a process where a participant is informed about the research and the possible risks that are at stake. It is more than signing a consent form to give permission for the research to take place (Abrar & Sidik, 2019). When ethical approval was granted from Maynooth University a letter was sent to the school principal and Board of Management seeking permission to carry out research in the school (See Appendix A). An information sheet and assent form were sent to parents and guardians outlining the details of the study (See Appendix C & D). I also provided the children with a child-friendly information sheet so that they could fully understand the research being undertaken (See Appendix F). The parents signed the consent form and the children signed the assent form to give their permission to partake in the study. When carrying out educational action research, the researcher is often the child's teacher. Participants must never feel pressured to consent to research, and they should be able to refuse participating at ease (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). There were children in my class who chose not to participate in the research, and this decision was respected without any negative response.

3.9.3 VULNERABILITY AND SENSITIVITY

My research topic deals with social-emotional learning, which may be seen as a 'sensitive research' area. Research that is sensitive 'potentially poses a substantial threat to those who are involved or have been involved in it' (Lee, 1993:4). With this study, the children were being taught social-emotional skills, I was aware that this could bring stress or worry to the children. They may never have been exposed to it before or may have experienced situations that could make them feel uncomfortable learning about it. Aligning with my value of care, I wanted to create a safe classroom environment where the children could feel comfortable to share their concerns with myself or another first class teacher.

The aim of the research conducted in my classroom was to teach the children important skills that they could use beyond the classroom. Emerald & Carpenter (2015) highlight the significance of this as the benefits of a research project must be greater than any foreseeable risks in order. This minimises vulnerability for the participants of the research study. I ensured that the children were not exposed to any more risk than what they would usually experience within their typical school day. The research was explained to the children in an age-appropriate manner so that they had a clear understanding at every stage of the study.

3.9.4 POWER DYNAMICS

The researcher in a study may have 'an asymmetric position of power with regards to the participants' (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2018:136). There may have been a power imbalance between myself as the researcher and the young children who were participants in the study. Participants were reminded that they were co-participants in the research process. I ensured that the children knew that the research was about my teaching and improving their learning. This study involved discussions as a class, and I wanted to create a safe classroom environment where contribution was valued and respected. There can be a concern that children have the innate desire to say 'yes' to any situation that the teacher proposes as they consider this is what the teacher wants to hear (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). To improve the validity of the research, I created a safe classroom environment aligning with my values so the children knew that they could share their honest opinions during morning meetings. As previously mentioned, the participants had the right to withdraw at any stage of the study.

3.9.5 DATA STORAGE

Confidentiality was a key concern in this self-study action research. All data was kept strictly confidential during the research process. Online soft copies were kept in a password protected folder on my laptop. Physical hard copies were stored in a cabinet in my

classroom. I only had access to these physical copies before being typed up and stored on a password encrypted USB stick. I ensured that this USB key was always stored in a locked cabinet.

During the study, pseudonyms were used on the students reflective journals to maintain anonymity. This anonymity ensured that the research site or any individuals involved in the study were not identifiable by others (Walford, 2005). Any data that was collected was only used for the purpose of the Master of Education in the Froebel Department and will be destroyed within the minimum period of six years consistent with the University Guidelines. Electronic and physical data will be destroyed using confidential shredding and secure deletion of digital documents.

3.10 DATA ANALYSIS

Qualitative data analysis is flexible as a range of methods can be used to interpret and analyse the data. There are 'often multiple interpretations to be made of qualitative data' (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018: 643). As mentioned above, the qualitative data methods chosen for this study were teacher observation, reflective journals, questionnaires and a critical friend group. When interpreting the data, I had to identify different analytical categories using defined criteria and standards of judgement (McNiff, 2013). Reflective thematic analysis was the method that I chose to analyse the data.

3.10.1 REFLECTIVE THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Reflective thematic analysis is a qualitative data analysis approach which involves identifying significant patterns that emerge in a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The researcher plays an active role in shaping the knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2019), as the codes or themes are created through their interpretation of the data. Researchers can derive different codes and themes from the same data depending on their individual interpretation of a dataset (Byrne, 2022). I used Braun and Clarke's (2022) updated six-phase thematic

analysis framework (Figure 4) to analyse the data. I began by reading and reflecting on the data that I had collected. I had some initial thoughts and interests in the data, which Braun & Clarke (2006) recognise can happen when a researcher has previous knowledge of the data. I interpreted the data and derived any significant codes from the data. The next stage of the analysis was to identify themes from the dataset and recognise their significance for the research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). With continued reflection and meta-reflection I began to refine any emerging themes from the data to generate knowledge. The final stage of the analysis is to produce a report which not only highlights the narrative the story conveys but can ‘make an argument in relation to your research question’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 93). The six phase thematic analysis is outlined in (Figure 3.8).

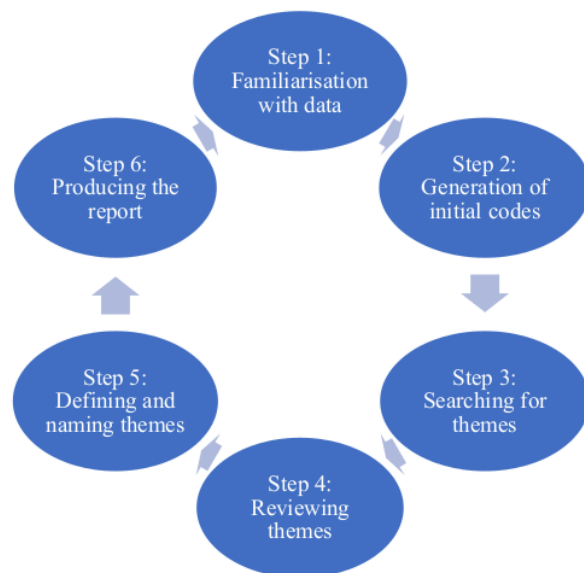


Figure 3.8: Braun & Clarke (2022) Six Phase Thematic Analysis Framework

3.11 CONCLUSION

This chapter outlined the research methodology and methods that were used to answer my research question, ‘*How can I enhance the social-emotional skills of pupils in a primary school classroom?*’. There were various ethical considerations examined and discussed in

this chapter. The research design and intervention were outlined to show the possible ethical issues that may have arisen in the study. The close of the chapter details the data analysis that took place when all data had been collected at the end of the study. The findings of this data analysis will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the key findings arising from this study's research question, '*How can I enhance the social-emotional skills of pupils in a primary school classroom?*'. This chapter analyses the data collected from action research cycle one and cycle two. Children were given a questionnaire at the beginning and end of the study. The children also recorded in their student reflective journal which served as a data source. The children were observed throughout the day and key observations were recorded from morning meetings, the behaviour in class and the behaviour on yard. I engaged in regular discussions with critical friends about these observations throughout the study. Finally, I reflected in my teacher reflective journal using two reflective frameworks. These frameworks were Schöns reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action model (1983) and Brookfield's Four Lenses of Critical Reflection (2017). Braun and Clarkes (2022) thematic analysis was used to code and theme the rich data. Several themes were found in the dataset which were eventually refined resulting in three main themes emerging from the data (Figure 4.1). The themes of this study are the importance of meaningful content, relationship building and using the voice of the children. Throughout this chapter, the key findings are discussed and analysed using data from all participants of the study. The findings draw on supporting literature from chapter two. An exploration of the changes that were implemented in cycle two and the impact that this made will also be included as part the findings. The next part of the chapter will explore in detail the data analysis method chosen for this study.

4.2 DATA ANALYSIS

A full data analysis was undertaken for this study using Braun and Clarkes (2022) six-step process model. Data was collected from two research cycles that took place over twelve weeks. The first cycle took place over six weeks, followed by a six-week cycle in the second

part of the research study. There were six themes considered in my intervention which included respect, kindness, friendship, teamwork, emotional skills and self-regulation. Initially I familiarised myself with the data by reading through the data after each theme was introduced to the class. I had regular discussions with my critical friend group about the data arising from the study. I also reflected in my reflective journal daily about observations that were made about the dataset. Braun and Clarke (2022) highlight that the researcher refines their understanding of initial data by moving back and forth between the entire dataset. I highlighted initial codes from the data which were topics reemerging from the dataset. These codes were divided into five emerging themes; relationship building, community, meaningful content, belonging, child's voice. I explored the themes and identified common words and phrases that were relevant to each theme (See Table 4.1 for an insight into this part of the coding process in my teacher reflective journal).

Date	Theme	Journal Entry
Reflective Journal Entry 11/02/25	Meaningful content	I made the scenarios that occur often in the classroom as part of the activity.
Reflective Journal Entry 14/02/25	Community	The children are learning about others in the class that maybe they wouldn't learn about from interactions in the class.
Reflective Journal Entry 06/02/25	Relationships between the children	I expected the children to invite their 'close' friend to sit beside them. However, many children asked children that they may not

		necessarily interact or play with on yard.
Reflective Journal Entry 07/02/25	Childs Voice	I found that the children were quite honest with all of their remarks and relating to the situation.

Figure 4.1: Demonstration of the Coding Process

The researcher has an active role when dealing with a dataset. Themes are not discovered unless the researcher engages with the data to uncover them (Kushnir, 2025). This engagement with the data allowed me to refine my findings into three themes (Figure 4.2); The importance of meaningful content, relationship building and voice of the children. These findings will be explored in greater detail in the following part of this chapter.

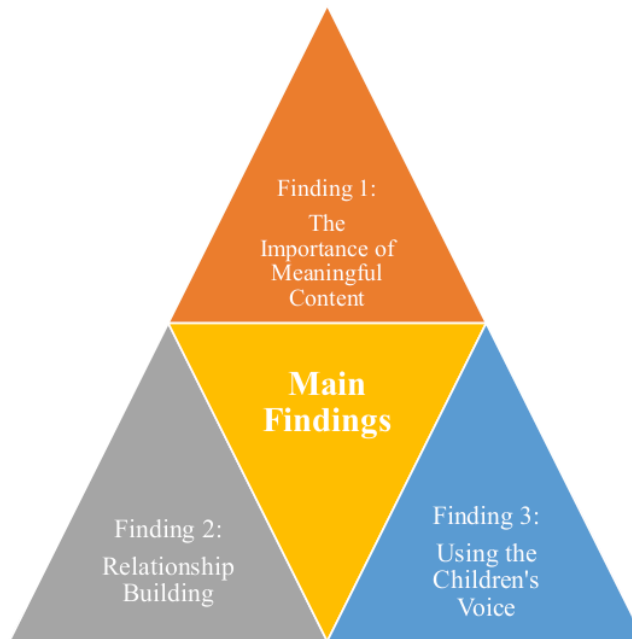
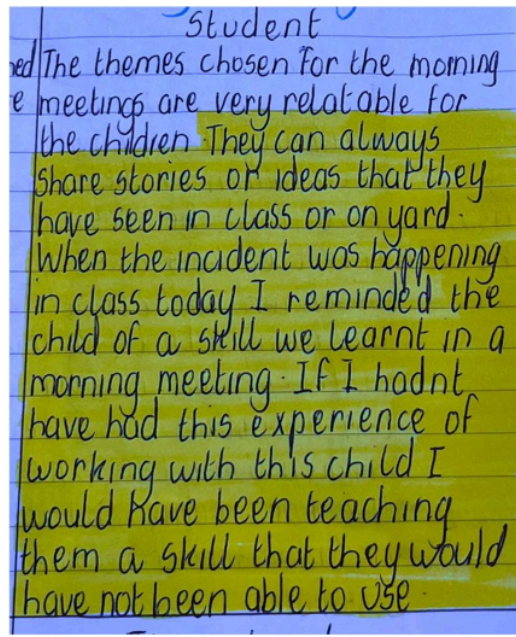


Figure 4.2: Three Key Findings of this Study

4.3 THEMATIC FINDING 1: THE IMPORTANCE OF MEANINGFUL CONTENT

4.3.1 PLANNING MEANINGFUL CONTENT

The triangulation of data highlighted the importance of ensuring that the content in the intervention was meaningful for the children. This had an impact on the children's ability to connect with and interpret the social-emotional skills being taught to them in morning meetings. The teacher has a particular role when implementing a social-emotional programme or intervention in a classroom. As outlined in chapter two, the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2018) emphasises the critical role that teachers have in supporting and nurturing a child's wellbeing in the classroom. Children spend a significant amount of time in school, which Schonert-Reichly (2017: 138) describes teachers as the 'engine that drives SEL programs and practices in schools and classrooms'. Many learning opportunities can arise when teachers are given the autonomy to promote social-emotional learning. In chapter two Binfet *et al.* (2023) examine how this flexibility influences teachers' professional development and helps foster social-emotional learning within their classroom. My flexible role in this study allowed me to plan an intervention to suit the needs of the children in my class. This research study was grounded in initial observations of my class to identify which social-emotional learning opportunities would most effectively support their development. At the beginning of the research I used this autonomy to choose specific themes that were meaningful to the children in my class. A recent journal entry depicts this insight as I reflected on why I chose specific themes for my class (Figure 4.3).



Student
The themes chosen for the morning meetings are very relatable for the children. They can always share stories or ideas that they have seen in class or on yard. When the incident was happening in class today I reminded the child of a skill we learnt in a morning meeting. If I hadn't have had this experience of working with this child I would have been teaching them a skill that they would have not been able to use.

Figure 4.3: Journal Entry 10/03/15 - Choosing Themes for the Study

4.3.2 FLEXIBILITY IN PLANNING

The importance of flexibility became evident during the early stages of the study. This flexibility informed the planning of lessons for morning meetings. In chapter two, there is a particular focus on the significance of careful planning and preparation for social-emotional interventions. Teachers must feel confident in implementing these interventions in the classroom (Cline *et al.*, 2023). A pre-study questionnaire provided an insight into the children's abilities within each thematic area. An example of the responses to the pre-questionnaire (Figure 4.4 & Figure 4.5) demonstrated the children's abilities in the skills that were going to be taught to them in the intervention.

QUESTION 4: I AM KIND TO OTHER PEOPLE?

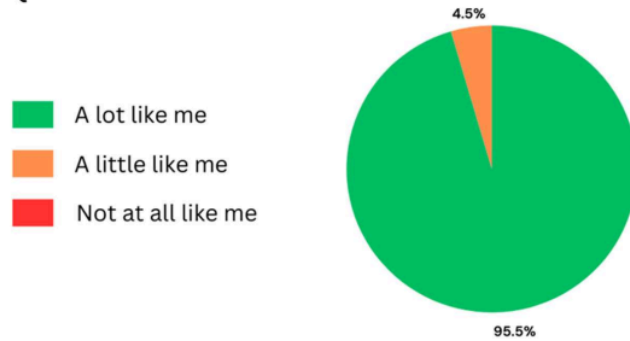


Figure 4.4: Response to the Pre-Cycle Questionnaire – Question 4

QUESTION 5: I HAVE SOMEONE TO PLAY WITH AT SCHOOL?

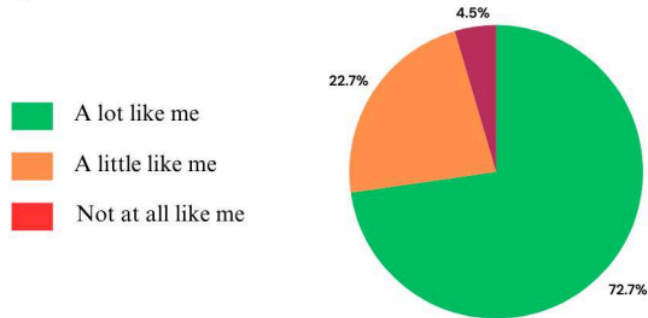


Figure 4.5: Response to the Pre-Cycle Questionnaire – Question 5

At the beginning of each theme the children were asked to share what they knew about each social-emotional learning theme. Students documented their understanding in their reflective journals through writing or drawing. A prompt was given to ensure that the work was focused (Figure 4.6).

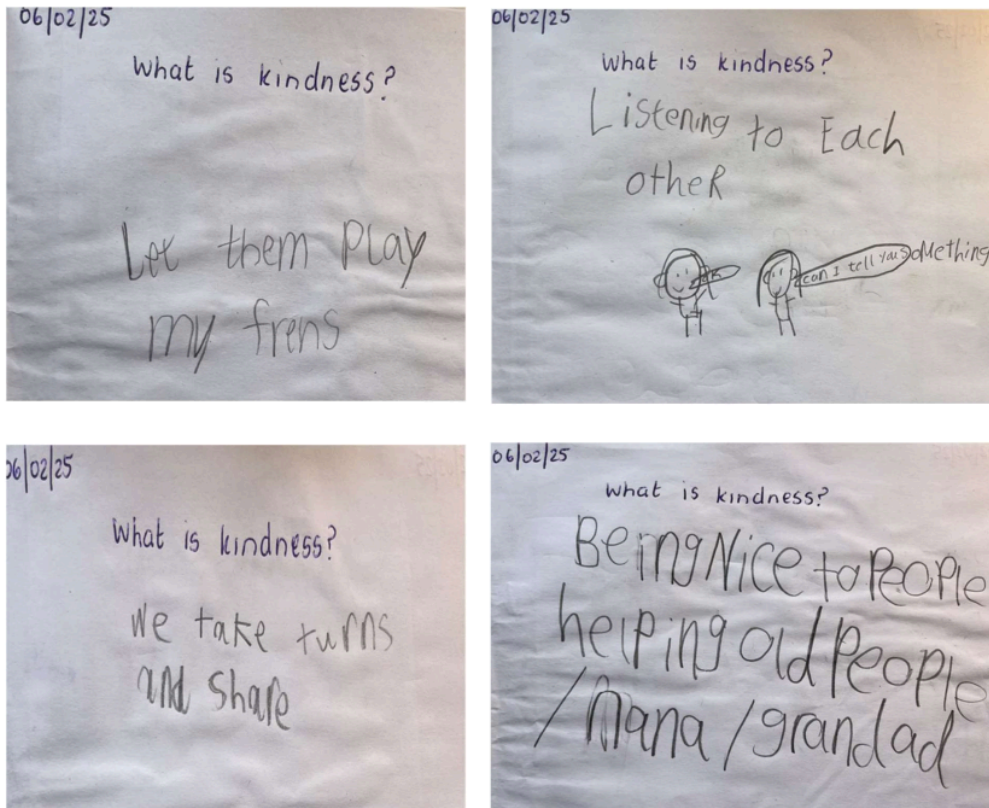


Figure 4.6: Entries from Student Reflective Journal 06/02/25

This flexibility in planning allowed me to understand the children’s current abilities and determine which skills I could teach them in the intervention. The morning meetings were planned to suit the needs of the children and the skills that were important for them to learn.

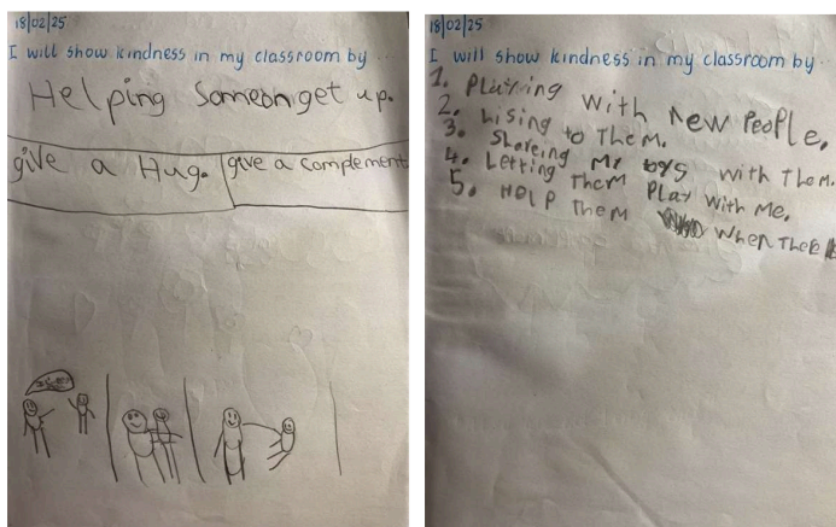
4.3.3 MAKING CONNECTIONS

During the first action research cycle, the children started to connect the content with their own personal experiences. I reflected in my journal as I observed the children making these connections on the first week of morning meetings being introduced to the class.

Reflective Journal Entry 21/01/25: “The children were focusing on scenarios that are ‘respectful’ and ‘disrespectful’. It was interesting to see the children react to ‘disrespectful scenarios’ however I remind them that these scenarios happen in

the class and on yard. 'I have seen people push each other in the line' 'I have seen people call each other names'. Many children nodded their heads as they recognise that this happens in their class"

The children also began to make connections in their student reflective journals in the first action research cycle. After each theme was taught, the children recorded in their student reflective journals. An example of the children's responses can be seen in (Figure 4.7), where the children recorded what they will do in the classroom. A report by Jones & Bouffard (2012) mentioned in chapter two emphasises the importance of embedding social-emotional learning into the core culture of the classroom. The report highlights the need for social-emotional skills to be meaningful and sustained for the children. The children were beginning to make connections with what they could do in their own classroom or even outside of school.



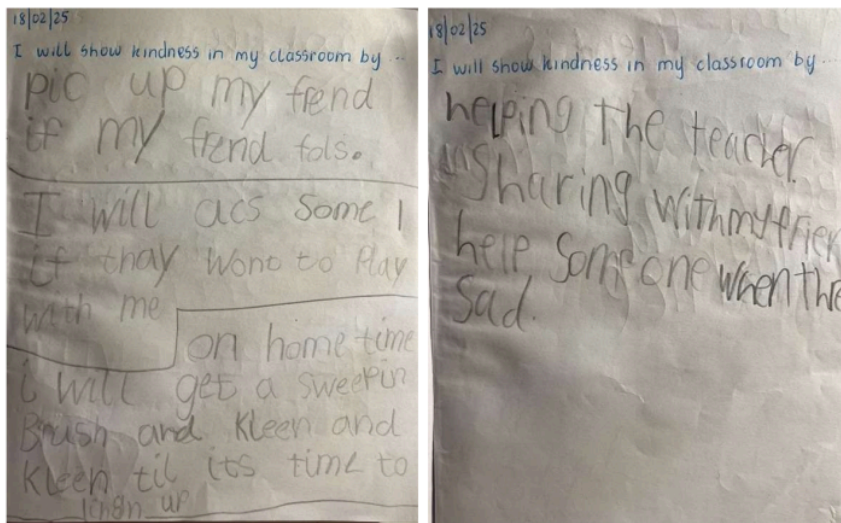


Figure 4.7: Entries from Student Reflective Journals 18/02/25

4.3.4 MEANINGFUL CONTENT

As the children were making these connections I realised the importance of making the content meaningful for the children. In the first action research cycle, I planned lessons in advance which were structured around the theme of the morning meeting. Through critical reflection in my journal, I realised the importance of the children's contributions to the study and their connections with each lesson. During the morning meetings, I listened to the children and took a record of their engagement. The children were also observed in class and on yard to bring these observations into morning meetings.

Reflective Journal Entry 25/02/25: "The statements were relatable for the class. For example, one statement spoke about a child 'leaving their bottle at home and another child giving them a drink'. One child said 'Maybe their Mum or Dad are working'. Another child said 'They keep leaving it at home'. The statements made them think about their own lives".

In cycle two, the children were consistently making connections in morning meetings with experiences that happened in their own lives in school or at home. This reflective journal entry depicts the connections that the children made with a story during a morning meeting.

Reflective Journal Entry 26/02/25: "The children were able to make their own connections with the story. One child spoke about when it happened at swimming 'I felt lonely on the bus'. Another child made the connection when a new boy joined the class for a couple of weeks 'I wonder how the boy felt joining our class'"

Other times the children recorded these in their student reflective journal as part of activities. An example of some of these meaningful responses are pictured below (Figure 4.8).

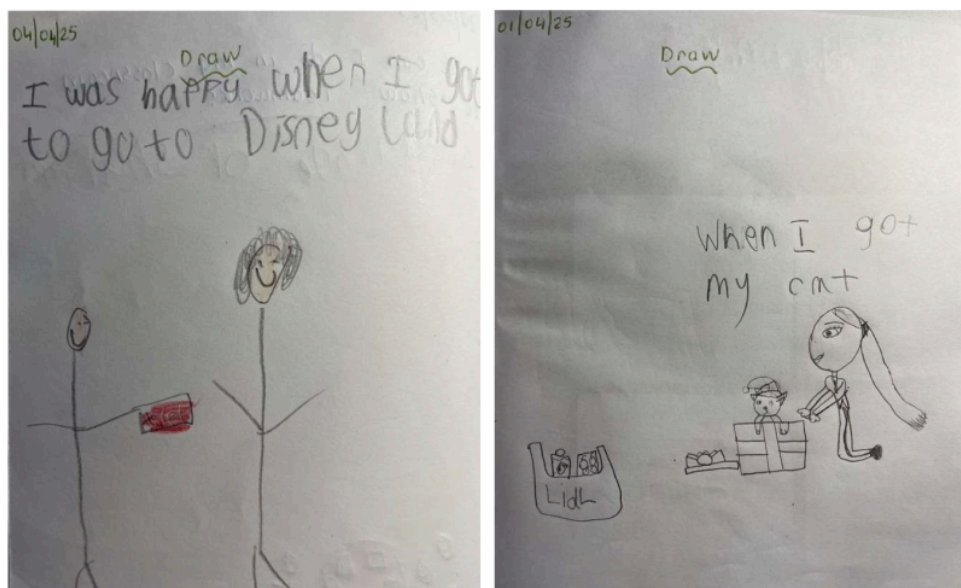
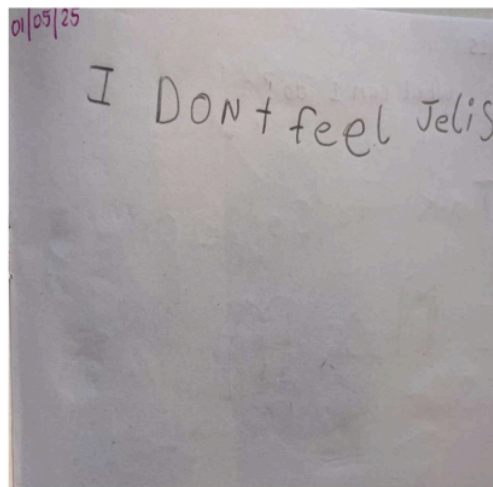
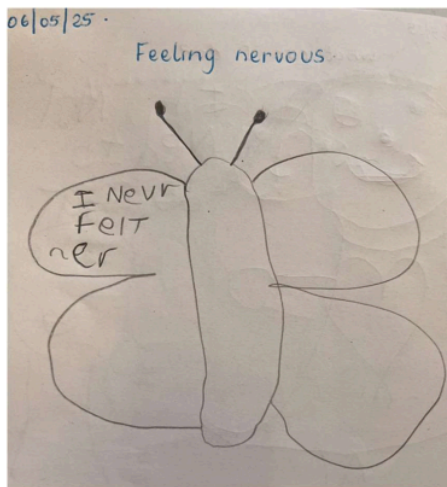




Figure 4.8: Entries from Student Reflective Journals 01/04/25

The data in this study also reveals instances where children found it difficult to make meaningful connections to the skills being taught to them. These moments were crucial for the study as they revealed the importance of ensuring that the children were able to connect meaningfully with the data. The following examples (Figure 4.9) illustrate when the children found it difficult to engage with a particular theme being taught to them in a morning meeting. The children wanted to record in their journal at these particular times, however, they were unable to make a meaningful connection.



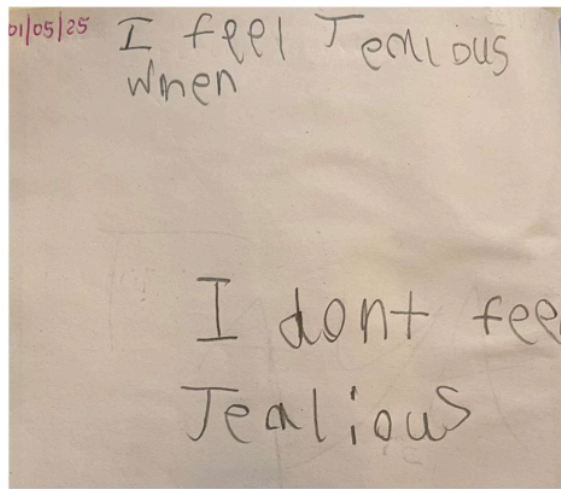


Figure 4.9: Entries from Student Reflective Journals

The data in this study demonstrated the significance of delivering social-emotional interventions with content that is meaningful and relevant to the children. At the beginning of the research the flexible approach allowed me to plan morning meetings that suited the needs of the children. Through critical reflection, I observed that this had an impact on the content being taught to the children as they could connect with it. The connections that the children made with the content positively influenced the children's ability to engage with and apply the social-emotional skills being taught to them.

4.5 THEMATIC FINDING 2: RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

4.5.1 INTERACTIONS BETWEEN THE CHILDREN

A key aim of this research was to explore the effectiveness of morning meetings as an intervention to improve social-emotional skills. As stated in chapter two research undertaken by Abry *et al.* (2017) found that emotional interactions were higher quality in classrooms that used morning meetings. My research correlates with this as I found that there were more positive interactions between the children in my classroom after morning meetings were implemented. There are several entries in my teacher reflective journal at the beginning of the year that reflect the relationships between the children. The entries depict the difficult conversations that I had with the children outside my classroom after yard or from situations

that happened in the classroom (Figure 4.10). The pre-cycle survey also indicated that more than half of the class chose 'a little like me' when asked whether they feel happy in school (Figure 4.11).

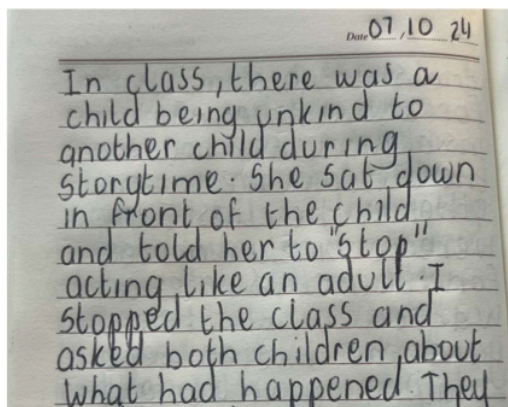


Figure 4.10: Reflective Journal Entry 07/10/24

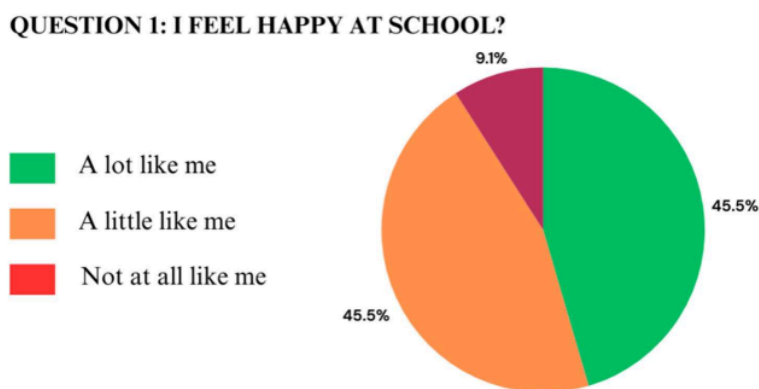


Figure 4.11: Pre-Cycle Questionnaire

The interactions between the children on yard was similar. In the pre-cycle questionnaire, the majority of children chose the answer 'a little like me' when asked about whether they had someone to play with on yard (Figure 4.12).

QUESTION 5: I HAVE SOMEONE TO PLAY WITH AT SCHOOL?

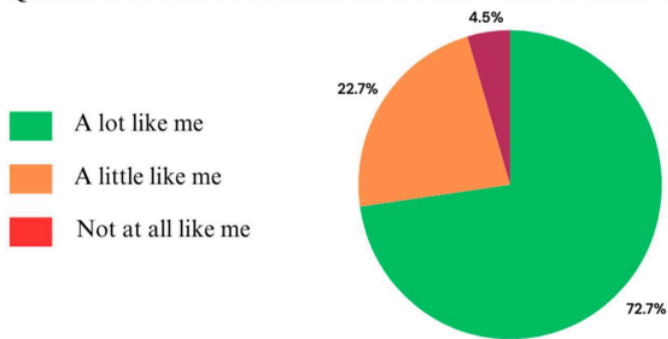


Figure 4.12: Pre-Cycle Questionnaire

At the beginning of the year reflective journal entries recorded incidents which reflected this situation in the class and on yard. Children were being left alone on yard and they were being excluded from class games. My own observations alongside observations from critical friends revealed a pattern of exclusion for some children.

Reflective Journal Entry 12/09/24: "On yard a girl was being left out by other children. The children weren't letting her play the game on yard. They were also saying that the child was pushing them".

Critical Friend 18/09/24: "One child appears to be jealous if other children try to play with her friend on yard. She pushed a child on yard and called another child a name".

4.5.2 BUILDING CONNECTIONS

In the first cycle of this study, the findings of the data highlighted the improvement in the classroom culture when morning meetings were implemented. Data in my reflective journal

and from my critical friends depicted the relationships that the children were building with one another. As mentioned in chapter two, The Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (Department of Education, 2018) outlines guiding principles to implement wellbeing in schools. One of the key principles of the framework is that wellbeing initiatives should foster a sense of belonging in the school community. Allen & Bowles (2012: 108) emphasised that ‘schools have an important role in building social networks for individuals and offer unique opportunities for influencing belonging’. My research correlates with this as there was a shift in classroom culture when morning meetings were implemented in the first cycle of the study.

The skills that the children learnt in morning meetings were visible in the class and on the yard. The children were motivated to use the skills that they were learning in each theme. The extracts shown below (Figure 4.13) are an example of how the children expressed their intentions to show kindness in the classroom.

Prompt: I will show kindness in my classroom by ..
“I will help someone” (Child L, 18/02/15)
“I will stand up for my friend” (Child G, 18/02/25)
“Sharing with others” (Child O, 18/02/25)
“Give a compliment” (Student S. 18/02/25)
“Let people join your game” (Student I, 18/02/25)
“Clean without being asked” (Student T, 18/02/25)

Figure 4.13: Entries from Student Reflective Journals 18/02/25

4.5.3 DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

This finding was notably evident in action research cycle two as I used Brookfield's Four Lenses of Critical Reflection (2017) in my teacher reflective journal. It revealed the relationships that were developing among the children from four different perspectives. A critical friend made an observation about the children on yard which affirmed this development.

Critical Friend 26/02/25: "I have noticed an improvement with the children's behaviour on yard. Student X and Student J were constantly telling on each other at the start of the year. I have noticed that they rarely tell on each other now"

Critical Friend 24/03/2025: "I noticed that Student J stood up for Student D on yard. Student J asked for a ball back from a boy who had taken it from Student D.

Wow that wouldn't have happened at the start of the year"

Another observation from a morning meeting revealed the way that the children were intentionally using their skills in the classroom.

Reflective Journal Entry 28/02/25: "One child who would be regularly left out in the class and on the yard had brought in her sisters toy from home for the ten star reward. Her sister came to collect the teddy as she took it from her but Student D was very upset about this. A child stood up during the morning meeting to share her teddy that she had brought in for the reward"

A child made a comment that resonated with the children in a morning meeting in cycle two (Figure 4.14). The children were talking about a trusted friend or adult that they could talk

to if they were upset. This highlighted the meaningful relationships that were developing between the children from the perspective of the children.

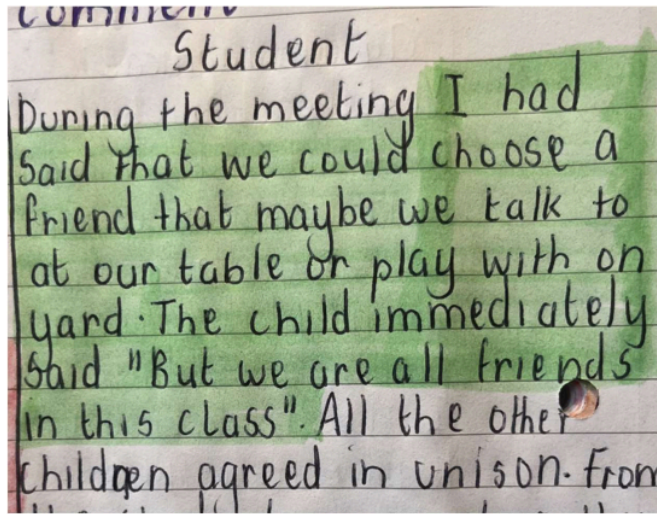


Figure 4.14: Reflective Journal Entry 02/04/25

When the data was compared in action research cycle one and two, it demonstrated that the children were actively building positive relationships with one another. Using Brookfield's Four Lenses of Critical Reflection (2017) allowed me to consider this from four different lenses. This finding was supported by insights from critical friends and students as they observed similar behaviours in the class and on the yard. This affirmed that the relationships between the children changed noticeably when they had participated in morning meetings.

4.6 THEMATIC FINDING 3: USING THE CHILDREN'S VOICE

4.6.1 THE IMPORTANCE OF THE CHILDREN'S VOICE

A key aim of this research was to enrich my understanding and teaching of social-emotional learning to children. One of the findings of the study revealed the importance of the children using their voice during the study. Lundy (2018), who developed the Lundy model, emphasises that children have the right to have their views taken seriously and given

appropriate consideration when decisions affect them. This study aligns with my value of respect as I ensured that the children's voices were heard throughout the intervention. The children were valued as co-participants at all stages of the study. The children were listened to during morning meetings, they used student reflective journals as part of the intervention and questionnaires were utilised to measure the effectiveness of the intervention.

4.6.2 Creating a safe environment

The structure of the morning meetings allowed the children to use their voice. The children were never pressured if they didn't feel comfortable speaking in front of others. In Chapter two, Bondy & Ketts (2001) describe the structure of the four components of morning meetings. In each component of morning meetings they highlight the use of the children's voices as they develop crucial skills. An example of this is the sharing element of the meetings as children develop listening skills, turn taking and are encouraged to ask questions that are relevant. This aligns with my study as the children were given the opportunity to use their voice in the study to develop their skills. It took time for the children to become confident in using their voice in the intervention.

At the beginning of the study, I observed that children were more reluctant to use their voice in morning meetings. Many children felt uncomfortable or found it difficult to share in front of the class. The children were asked to share 'two stars and a wish' (See Appendix M) at the end of action research cycle one. The responses from this depict that many children felt uncomfortable speaking in front of others in the morning meetings

"I'm uncomfortable around other people"
"I don't like saying hi"
"I don't like talking"
"I get uncomfortable"
"I wish I could go outside"

“I don’t like sitting on the floor”

Figure 4.15: (Anonymous) Two Stars and a Wish: Morning Meetings

In action research cycle two, the children began to gain more confidence when using their voice in morning meetings. An inciteful moment occurred when the children were taking their post-cycle two survey. One child spoke about how her perspective changed on morning meetings highlighting how she felt more confident speaking out and using her own voice.

Reflective Journal Entry 07/05/25: “One child gave an insightful observation today.

‘At the start I didn’t like talking in morning meetings. I even wrote that I feel uncomfortable talking once. Now I don’t mind talking at all’”

4.6.3 DEVELOPING CONFIDENCE

The voice of the children was an important factor for allowing the children to decide whether their social-emotional skills had improved. The children were given a questionnaire before and after the intervention was implemented. The questionnaires were responded to anonymously as I felt that the children would give more honest answers to the questions. In chapter three, I considered the power dynamics that may exist in this intervention. The children may be more inclined to agree with any responses that the teacher proposes as they feel that it what the teacher wants to hear (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). The children were able to respond to the questionnaires more openly and truthfully when they were given anonymously.

In an anonymous questionnaire, the children responded to the same twelve questions in a pre-cycle one and post-cycle two. An example of the responses from one of the questions from pre-cycle one (Figure 4.1.1) and post-cycle 2 (Figure 4.1.2) are shown below. The responses show that more children responded with ‘a lot like me’ in the post-cycle

questionnaire. The questionnaire gave the children the voice to express whether they felt that they had developed their skills.

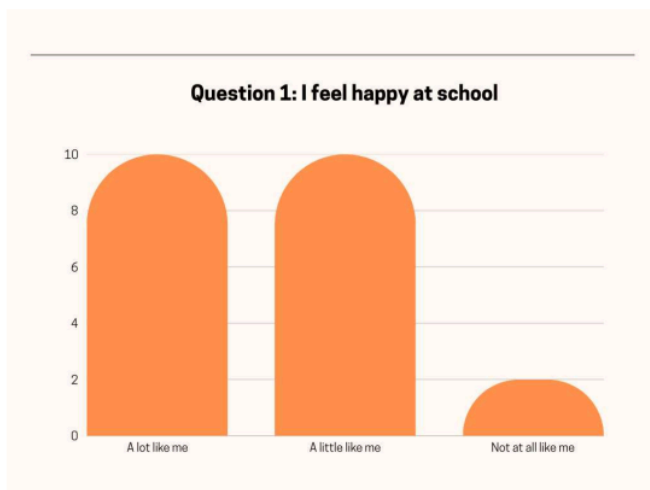


Figure 4.16: Pre-Cycle Questionnaire – Question 1

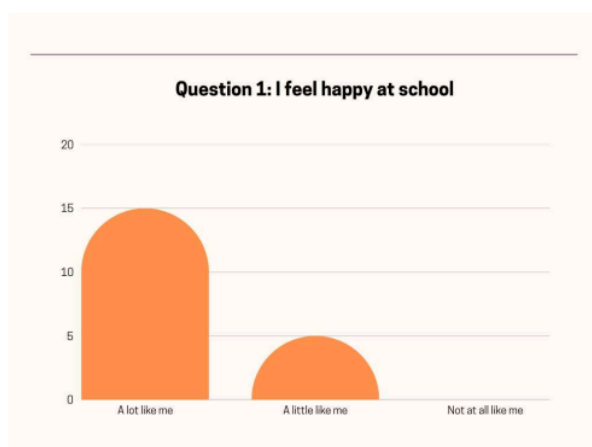


Figure 4.17: Post-Cycle Questionnaire – Question 1

The children were honest with their responses as there were children that felt that they hadn't improved their skills (Figure 4.18 and Figure 4.19). The example shown below revealed the

difference in the responses when asked the question ‘If someone hurts my feelings I know what to do?’. More children responded with ‘Not at all like me’ in the post-cycle survey.

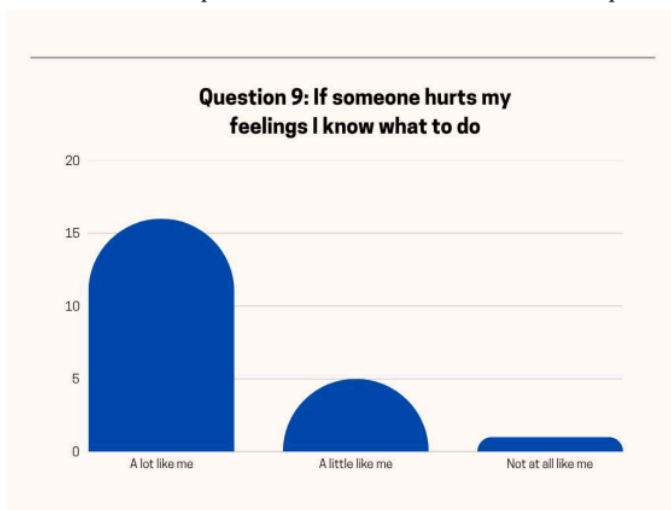


Figure 4.18: Pre-Cycle Questionnaire

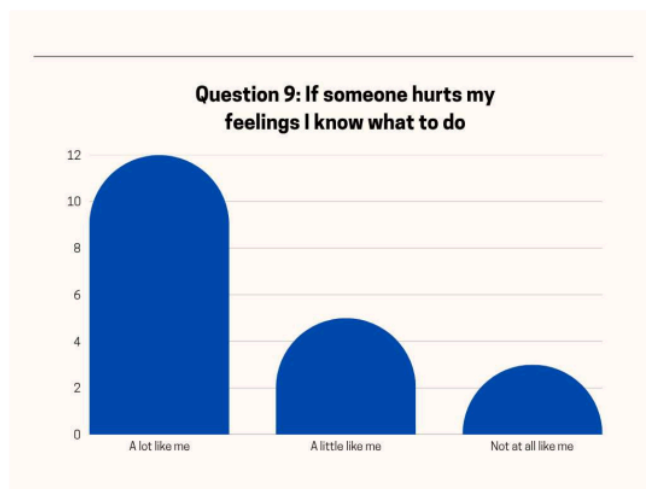


Figure 4.19: Post-Cycle Questionnaire

When the children were given this agency to use their voice in the study, it revealed whether the children had improved their skills from their own perspective. They became increasingly confident in using their voice, and they became more engaged in action research cycle two.

I could see that the children's social emotional skills were improving from the observations that I made in the class and on yard. I found that giving the children the voice to decide whether their skills improved contributed to the validity of the research findings.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter presented and discussed the findings from this self-study action research. The findings presented here demonstrate the effectiveness of meaningful content when teaching social-emotional learning. The data revealed that the children were more likely to improve their social-emotional learning when they could connect with it in their lives. The study also highlights the relationships that develop between pupils when they engage in morning meetings. The data alluded to the importance of the voice of the children in the study and how it shaped the study. Through reflection, I gained an insight into the effectiveness of teaching the children social-emotional skills using morning meetings as an intervention. This study supported me in recognising the extent to which I value care, respect and relationships in my practice. It allowed me to implement a practice that aligns with these values. The conclusion and recommendations for this study will be explored in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This self-study action research was carried out with the aim of enhancing the social-emotional skills of primary school pupils in my classroom. The intervention of morning meetings was implemented to investigate the strategies examined in this study. Glenn *et al.* (2023) suggest that a research idea emerges from the values of a researcher and what they recognise is important to them. This study was guided by my core values of care, respect and relationships. Action research deemed a suitable approach to this study as one of the key principles is to ensure that it is guided by ones values. This chapter will summarise the research of this study and explore the limitations that arose as I carried out the research. I will outline my claim to knowledge and the impact of this study on my professional practice, my school community and the wider community. The final part of this chapter will conclude with a short reflection on my experience of this entire study. Engaging in action research has deepened my personal and professional practice, which was enlightened by my commitment to enhance my teaching as part of my Masters journey.

5.2 SUMMARY OF RESEARCH

A self-study action research approach was chosen as it enabled me to conduct research in my own classroom. It also gave me the autonomy to carry out an intervention in my classroom with the pupils being co-participants in the study. The study was shaped by my own personal values which aligns with one of the core principles of action research. My values of care, respect and relationships were used to validate the progress throughout each cycle. Prior to this study, I felt that my classroom environment embodied the values that I hold as an educator. There were classroom displays that promoted positive relationships among the children in my class. I also used teaching approaches that aligned with the values

I wanted to model for my pupils. I realised as I reflected on my teaching practice that this was not enough in my practice. I was experiencing myself as a living contradiction (Whitehead, 1989) as I could see that my values were not living out in my practice. I decided to implement an intervention that focused on improving the social-emotional skills of primary school pupils in my classroom.

This study required two cycles which were distinguished by the reflective approach used in each cycle. Initially, I wanted to change the intervention in each cycle but as I reflected on my practice I knew that the morning meetings were working well in the study. This is when I decided to change the reflective approach and in the first cycle Schöns model of reflection (1983) was adopted. In the second cycle, Brookfield's Four Lenses of Critical Reflection (2017) were used to facilitate a deeper reflection. As I changed my reflective approach, it revealed which aspects of the intervention were working effectively. My reflection shifted towards the perspective of others rather than focusing on my own observations of the morning meetings.

As I reviewed the literature, morning meetings presented as a suitable intervention that could be used in the study. I recognised that I could use this structure to teach the children specific social-emotional skills every morning. Data was collected through my reflective journal, a student reflective journal, observations and student questionnaires (baseline and endline). This study found that teaching the children social-emotional skills improved their relationships with other children in the class. There were more positive connections between the children when comparing the data at the beginning and end of the study. Another finding which would be very important when teaching social-emotional skills is that the content must be meaningful to the children for them to connect and use the skills. Lastly, the use of the children's voice was important for this study as the children became increasingly

confident when sharing in morning meetings. It also determined the skills that were taught to the children and the content for each morning meeting.

5.3 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

There were some challenges associated with this study, which could be considered for future research in this area. Firstly, self-study action research was the chosen research paradigm for this study. Self-study action research allows a researcher to illuminate their classroom showing others an insight into their practice (McDonagh *et al.*, 2019). This research was carried out with my own class due to the nature of this research. The exploration of enhancing the social-emotional skills of pupils was not explored further than my own classroom. The findings in this study are related to a first-class age group within the mainstream class setting. A future exploration in this area may yield different results at another class level.

Another limitation was that there was a large absenteeism rate in the class at the time of the study. Many children missed participating in morning meetings as they were absent on sporadic days. There were also children taken out for learning support at the same time as the morning meetings. These are normal circumstances and the reality of my classroom but this would have had an impact on the findings of the study. There were children in the class who didn't participate in all of the morning meetings.

The final limitation of this study is related to the literature surrounding this area of research. This study was a unique approach that is not well researched in an Irish context. There is a multitude of literature on using morning meetings as an approach in a classroom. Although, there is a lack of literature on explicitly teaching social-emotional skills through morning meetings. The validity of this research is deeply rooted in my values and through Brookfield's Four Lenses of Critical Reflection (2017) from the participants of this study. There has been a particular focus on Wellbeing in educational policy development in recent

years (Meegan, 2023). With the introduction of the New Primary Curriculum framework (2023) there is a need to research Wellbeing in an Irish context. One of the competencies 'Being Well' focuses on developing social and emotional skills. There appears to be a lack of knowledge on approaches that can be used to promote Wellbeing in an Irish classroom. This study draws upon literature from United States and United Kingdom classrooms which is an important factor to take into account.

5.4 PERSONAL SIGNIFICANCE

This study has had an impact on both my personal and professional practice. The aim of action research is to 'show personal and collective processes of learning' with the potential to generate a living theory (McNiff, 2016: 21). I believe that this self-study action research has changed my practice in the classroom for the better. As part of this study, I had to become a reflective practitioner which was a new experience for me as a teacher. I used two reflective approaches in this study namely, Schön's reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action model (1983) and Brookfield's Four Lenses of Critical Reflection (2017). Using these lenses, it revealed that I was in fact experiencing myself as a 'living contradiction'. I believed that I was living close to my values of care, respect and relationships in my practice. As I reflected on my practice, it was evident that these values were not as prominent in my practice as I had expected. This study allowed me to implement an approach that lives more closely to my values. I will continue to use a teacher reflective journal on a weekly basis using these reflective approaches. This study allowed me to gain deeper insight into my teaching approaches and improve my teaching practices. This is an area that is important to me and I can see how becoming a reflective practitioner will constantly improve my teaching. Another significance of this study is that I have become more confident to share with my colleagues. I was working alongside two colleagues as part of this study who gave me advice and gathered observations as part of this research. I was able to share my results and the

benefits of this study with these teachers at the same class level. This study gave me the opportunity to share with others as I knew that I had grasped a good understanding from this study.

5.5 PROFESSIONAL SIGNIFICANCE

This self-study action research has also enhanced my professional practice. In my approach to teaching, I will adopt morning meetings at the beginning of each day. This study explored the impact of implementing morning meetings over a twelve-week period. I am intrigued to see the benefits of adopting morning meetings in my class from the start of the year. It is apparent that morning meetings can be used at any class level in a primary school setting. There will be a change to my practice next year and I will be teaching at a different class level where I can explore this in my practice. Another significance of this study has shown me the importance of prioritising Wellbeing in the classroom. When there was a designated time allocated for morning meetings the children began to value the importance of communicating with one another and learning new skills. I began to see changes in the children's behaviour and their relationships with one another in the class. Prior to this study I observed that this was not valued within my classroom. My approach was different as I taught a thirty-minute SPHE lesson on a weekly basis. It was also based on informal conversations with the children as situations arose in the classroom.

5.6 RECOMMENDATIONS

5.6.1 FUTURE RESEARCH

Reflecting on this self-study action research which centred on enhancing the social-emotional skills of primary school pupils I can see that there are opportunities for future enquiry and development. With the introduction of the New Primary Curriculum Framework (Department of Education, 2023) as mentioned above, teachers must be aware of the most

effective strategies for teaching wellbeing in schools. I suggest that research is carried out on effective interventions and strategies to teach social-emotional skills to children in Irish schools. An emphasis must be placed on researching both the short-term and long-term effects of these interventions within the Irish educational context. The research findings should be disseminated to teachers and educators in primary schools. Based on these findings, targeted funding should be allocated to schools so that teachers are given comprehensive training and essential resources to deliver interventions.

5.6.2 FUTURE PRACTICE

I have seen the significance that this study has been on my own practice and I would love to share this with others. I would recommend that teachers consider using morning meetings in their own classroom to teach social-emotional skills. I plan to share my findings with colleagues in my school community as this is an approach that can be used at all class levels, I also aspire to share my findings as part of a Continuing Professional Development (CPD) training course and highlight the benefits of using morning meetings in an Irish classroom. I want to explore this further by writing a journal article for the Irish Educational Studies. This will share the findings with other educators across Ireland.

5.7 CONCLUSION

This chapter gave an insight into the journey of this research and the development of this study in my classroom. I explored the significance of this study for both my personal and professional practice. This study has had great significance that will change my practice even as I explore teaching at other class levels. There are recommendations highlighted in this chapter that should be considered for future practice. There was a focus on both professional and personal recommendations as part of this. To conclude this chapter, I want to allow you as a reader to consider this one final thought.

5.8 FINAL REFLECTION

As I bring my self-study action research to a close, I recognise that this study has changed my future practice for the better. This study made me realise the possibilities that reflection can bring to an educators practice. It was only through critical reflection of my practice that this study became possible. As I continued to reflect on my practice throughout the study it illuminated my values of care, respect and relationships which I will continue to embody in my practice. I hope to continue to provide a classroom whereby each child feels safe and supported.

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Appendix A: Letter to the Board of Management



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

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

23/10/24

Dear Members of the Board of Management,

I am a student on the Master of Education programme at Maynooth University. As part of my degree I am doing an action research project. I am writing to you to request approval to carry out this research in ***** during this academic school year. The focus of the research is based on improving my teaching of social-emotional skills. The overall aim is to find out if morning meetings can support and expand the children’s social-emotional learning and development in school.

In order to do this, I intend to carry out research in my classroom by implementing morning meetings to develop the children’s social-emotional language and skills. The research I am hoping to carry out will meet the objectives of the SPHE curriculum in First Class. I believe this research will have many benefits including professional development and benefit the pupils within my class.

The data will be collected using observations, surveys, a reflective teacher journal, pupil reflective journals, lessons plans and evaluations. I will seek the permission of the children, parents and any other participants in the next step of ethical approval. 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. I will be carrying out my research in accordance with the Ethical Guidance from the University and adhering to strict GDPR guidelines. I will keep all information regarding the school and participants anonymous. Your approval to conduct this study will be greatly appreciated. If you have any queries on any part of this research project, feel free to contact me by email at chloe.mather.2025@mumail.ie

Warmest regards,

Chloe Mather

Approved by:

Print your name and title here

Signature

Date

Appendix B: Letter to Parents/Guardians



*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 my teaching of social and emotional learning in the classroom.

In order to do this, I intend to carry out research in the classroom by implementing Morning Meetings.

The data will be collected using observations, a daily teacher journal, surveys and a student journal. The children will be asked to share their opinions on the Morning Meetings and whether they feel the meetings have helped with their learning.

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. No identifiers will be used in the research to ensure anonymity. It is difficult to guarantee anonymity but every effort will be made. Your child will be allowed to withdraw from the research process at any stage.

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

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

If you have any queries on any part of this research project feel free to contact me by email at chloe.mather.2025@mumail.ie

Yours faithfully,

Chloe Mather

Chloe Mather

Appendix C: Information Sheet for Parents and Children



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

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

Information Sheet Parents and Guardians

Who is this information sheet for?

This information sheet is for parents and guardians.

What is this Action Research Project about?

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

What are the research questions?

- How can I improve the social and emotional learning skills of 1st class pupils in a primary school setting?

What sorts of methods will be used?

- Observations, Reflective Journals, Surveys, Lessons Plans.

Who else will be involved?

The study will be carried out by me, the class teacher as part of the Master of Education course in the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education. The thesis will be submitted for assessment to the module leaders, Prof. Marie McLoughlin and Dr Suzanne O'Keefe and will be examined by the Department staff. The external examiners will also access the final thesis.

What are you being asked to do?

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

Contact details: Student: Chloe Mather

E: chloe.mather.2025@mumail.ie

Appendix D: Parent/Guardian Consent Form



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

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

Parental/Guardian Consent Form

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

Parent / Guardian Signature _____

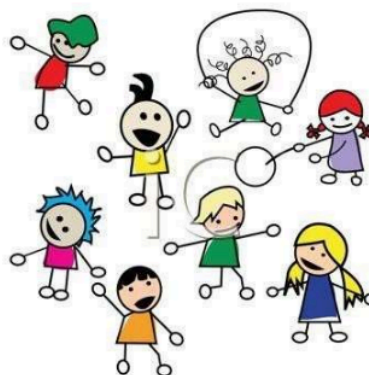
Date: _____

Name of Child _____

Child's signature _____

Date _____

Appendix E: Child Assent Form



Child's assent to participate

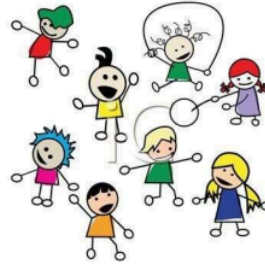
My parent/guardian has read the information sheet with me and I agree to take part in this research.

Name of child (in block capitals): _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix F: Child Information Sheet



Child's name

I am going to be holding Morning Meetings in our classroom. I would like to see if this will help improve our social and emotional skills, for example giving us tools to help respect one another. I would like to work with you and gather your opinions and thoughts when we are in school and write down some notes about our meetings.

Would you be ok with that?

Circle one. **YES** **NO**

I have asked your Parent(s) or Guardian(s) to talk to you about this. If you have any questions I would be happy to answer them. If you are happy with that could you sign the form that I have sent home? If you change your mind after we start, that's ok too.

Appendix G: Student Questionnaire

School Life Questionnaire

Please answer the following questions by circling the smiley face of your choice.



= A lot like me.









= A little like me.



= Not at all like me.

1.	I feel happy at school.			
2.	I listen to my teacher.			
3.	I listen to children in my class.			
4.	I am kind to other people.			
5.	I have someone to play with at school.			
6.	I ask for help in school.			
7.	I know when my friend is happy or sad.			
8.	I get excited when my friend is excited.			
9.	If someone hurts my feelings I know what to do.			
10.	I want to do well in school.			

11.	I join in on all activities.			
12.	I know what to do when I feel sad.			

Appendix H: Morning meeting: Schedule of themes

Morning Meeting: Schedule of Themes

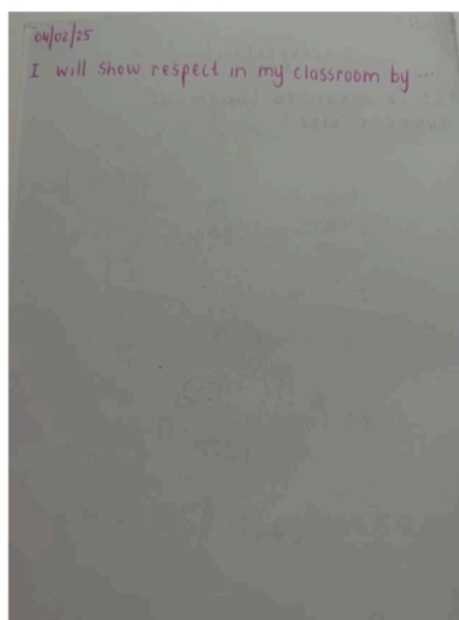
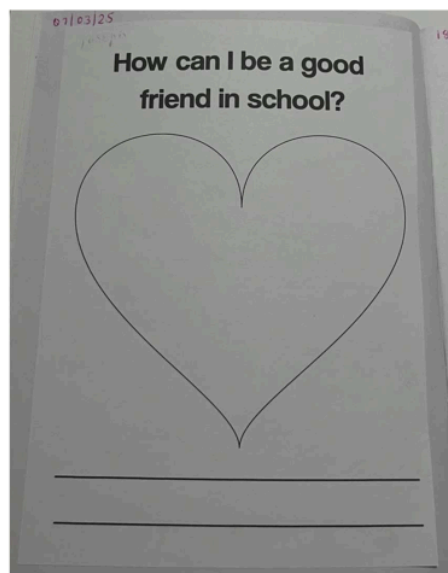
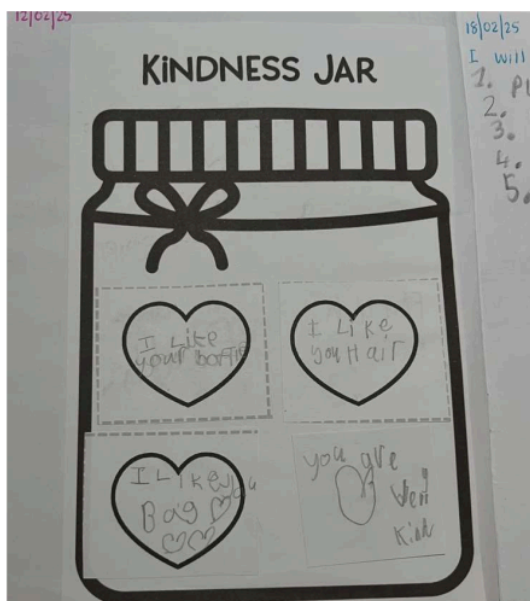
<u>Date</u>	<u>Theme</u>
20 th January – 31 st January	Respect
04 th February – 17 th February	Kindness
18 th February – 05 th March	Friendship
06 th March – 21 st March	Teamwork
24 th March – 04 th April	Emotional Skills (Happy, sad, angry, jealous)
07 th April – 02 nd May	Self-Regulation

Appendix I: Morning Meeting Plan (Theme: Friendship)

Week 1 Friendship	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Greeting	Whats the News? Children take turns greeting each other and ask 'Whats the News?'. Every child shares one piece of news around the circle.	Saying "Hello" in a different language: Greet each other in another language.	Pinky Shake All children sit in a circle and greet each other by saying 'Good Morning' and shaking pinkies.	Say Your Name: Say your name and the class will chant back. "Melanie" Class "Melanie"	Non-verbal greeting: Walk around the room and greet using non-verbal gestures.
Sharing	Mindful Monday What makes you laugh?	This or That Tuesday Twin Sister Or Twin Brother	Wednesday Wishes I wish I was ... years old because ...	Talkative Thursday What is the best outdoor game?	Favourite Friday What is your favourite dessert?
Activity	Friendship Create a poster 'What a friend looks like?' as a whole class. Record the ideas on a large poster of a person.	Good Friend Vs. Bad Friend Read out friendship scenarios to the class. After each scenario ask the children to think about it and move to the correct side of the room labelled 'Good Friend' / 'Bad Friend'.	Are you my Friend? Read a story 'Are you my Friend?'. Ask the children about the feelings of the characters throughout the story.	Roleplay Feeling Lonely Ask the children to hold hands for a game. Tell them that you are going to walk around the outside of the circle and that they shouldn't let you enter. Then try it again and allow the children to applause when you enter the circle. Discuss the feeling of being left out by a friend.	Roleplay Discuss what we can do when we feel left out or lonely. Ask children to come into the circle and roleplay what they would do if they felt lonely. Ask the rest of the class to give some suggestions. Record ideas in their student journal.
Message	Good Morning! Happy Monday! I have a new quote for you on this Monday morning "The only way to have a friend is to be one!". Remember that throughout the day.	Good Morning! Inniu an Mháirt. We have a very busy day today so let's get ready to learn a lot of things. And remember "The only way to have a friend is to be one!"	Good Morning! Inniu an Chéadaoin. We are half way through the week now and we have a very busy day with art on our timetable today. Remember "The only way to have a friend is to be one!"	Good Morning! Inniu an Deardaoin. Let's have a great day today. We are heading down to do PE very soon so let's get our work done and we'll be ready. Remember today that "The only way to have a friend is to be one!"	Good Morning! Happy Friday! We are only a few hours away from the weekend now. Let's get ready to work hard and it'll be golden time in no time. Ans remember "The only way to have a friend is to be one!"

Week 2	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Friendship					
Greeting	Whats the News? Children take turns greeting each other and ask 'Whats the News?'. Every child shares one piece of news around the circle.	Find a Friend "Find a friend who has the same colour shoes as you". Ask the children to greet that person.	Funny Face Make a funny face and then cheerfully say "Good Morning ____" to the person beside them.	Ball Toss Choose one child to start and ask them to roll the ball to another child to greet them. Repeat until all children have been greeted.	Shhhh ... All children hold hands in a circle. Choose a child to start and pass a squeeze around the circle. The last person will stand when it has been passed to everyone.
Sharing	Mindful Monday Who do you talk to when you have a problem?	This or That Tuesday Sleep in darkness Or Sleep with a night light	Wednesday Wishes I wish I lived inside ... (book)	Talkative Thursday What kind of trophy or prize would you like to win?	Favourite Friday What is your favourite book?
Activity	Resolving Conflict Discuss how we can sometimes have conflicts with our friends. Share ideas as a class on ways to resolve conflict. Create a poster as a class with each solution to resolve conflict to remind the children.	Hotseat Ask small groups of children to join the middle of the morning meeting. Describe a conflict between friends and ask them to act them out. Give them time to choose a solution from the previous morning meeting and share it to the class. Repeat this activity with a other groups.	I can make new friends Divide the children into small groups of three and four. Give each group a friend card of different situations "I meet my cousins for the first time" "I go to a new school and see other children playing together" "I move house and there are some children living next door" Each group will roleplay making new friends in these situations.	Friendship Dilemmas Read out friendship dilemmas to the class. Discuss each dilemma with the class and ask them what they would do in each situation.	Student Journal Answer the sentence prompt I can be a friend in my class by ...
Message	Good Morning! Happy Monday! Let's get ready for a great week. And remember "The only way to have a friend is to be one!".	Good Morning Everyone! Happy Tuesday! We have a busy day planned today with PE later on! And remember "The only way to have a friend is to be one!".	Good Morning! Inniu an Chéadaoin! We are half way through the week now! Let me see everyone working hard and trying their best! And don't forget "The only way to have a friend is to be one!".	Good Morning! It's Thursday! We have almost made it through the week! Remember today "The only way to have a friend is to be one!".	Good Morning! Happy Friday! We have a half day today so don't forget we don't have big lunch today. And remember "The only way to have a friend is to be one!".

Appendix J: Pre-designed Tasks for Student Journal



Appendix K: Observation Notes

Observation Schedule					
Week	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
10/02/25	10/02/25	11/02/25	12/02/25	13/02/25	14/02/25
Morning Meeting	<p>Sharing activity "Adults will not believe us anymore"</p> <p>"It is not kind"</p> <p>"It is not being respectful"</p> <p>TC "Words that stick to our hearts can be mean"</p> <p>EO "we would feel sad"</p> <p>HR "we need to think before we say anything"</p>	<p>*All children could identify times that a kind or unkind situation happened</p> <p>TC "That happened when someone took my ring"</p> <p>ED "Everyone laughed at me yesterday when I asked to spell a word"</p>	<p>*For the activity, we came up with some ideas for compliments</p> <p>"I like your hair"</p> <p>"You are good at soccer"</p> <p>"You're a good friend"</p> <p>"You are kind"</p> <p>"You are really nice to me"</p> <p>-The children wrote other ones too (see copies)</p>	<p>*Favourite activity</p> <p>"AB" "I like colouring"</p> <p>WK "colouring"</p> <p>LDB "Swimming"</p> <p>EO "I like art. It keeps your brain active"</p> <p>"DM" "Triactive"</p> <p>FB "Ten star"</p>	<p>TC "a Stanley"</p> <p>"puppy"</p> <p>"Squishmallow"</p> <p>"Football"</p> <p>"mansion"</p> <p>"new Jersey"</p> <p>"stitch"</p> <p>"new runner"</p> <p>"headband"</p> <p>"football"</p> <p>"stitch led dy"</p> <p>"pokemon"</p> <p>"dog"</p> <p>"h"</p>

Observation Schedule					
Week	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
03/02/25	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Morning Meeting	<p>*Bank holiday</p>	<p>*The children completed a piece of work in the in student journal- how they will show respect in the classroom.</p> <p>*DM couldn't think of an idea for the prompt.</p> <p>*All children came up with an idea-drew a picture/wrote a sentence.</p>	<p>*What are qualities in a friend:</p> <p>"They stick up for you"</p> <p>"They say nice things"</p> <p>"Be kind"</p> <p>"They play with me"</p> <p>"Let them join in"</p> <p>"They are funny"</p> <p>"They help me when I'm hurt"</p> <p>"Play together nicely"</p>	<p>*For the activity "I see would like —"</p> <p>to sit beside me</p> <p>I was surprised by the children that were picked to sit beside one another.</p> <p>-AW and TC normally never interact in the classroom.</p> <p>-BS was chosen by many boys in the class.</p>	<p>*All children thought about each statement</p> <p>*Only moved when the statement referred to them.</p> <p>*All children moved for at least one statement</p> <p>*All children moved for "I have shared with someone"</p>

Appendix L: Layout of Morning Meeting



Appendix M: Two Stars and a Wish

